

# Reviving Our Neighborhood Schools



**P**ublic education is in peril. Not because of the actual problems our schools face—like students in poverty, inadequate standards, unwieldy textbooks, weak teacher training, unhelpful assessments, and too many unsupportive administrators—but because of two movements gone awry: accountability and choice. Both movements have the potential to be helpful, but both have been taken to extremes and now defy common sense. Accountability for everyone involved in education, from communities and students to teachers and school boards, makes sense. The popular notion that test scores alone can be used for major decisions (such as whether a student moves to the next grade, whether a teacher is fired, or whether a school closes) does not. Choice for students whose needs or interests are not met by their neighborhood schools makes sense. The idea that the neighborhood school is unnecessary and that market forces will result in all schools being good schools does not.

Today, what we really need is a renaissance, not another hollow reform. Will those of us who value *public* education come together and revive our neighborhood schools?

In this issue of *American Educator*, education historian Diane Ravitch issues a call to action (see page 10). Once an advocate for get-tough accountability and market miracles, Ravitch has watched these movements play out—and she doesn't like what she has seen. Having carefully considered her core principles, how she was led astray, and what our schools really need, she has written an extraordinary book: *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. Part memoir, part treatise, it has been a best-seller since its release in March. We are pleased to publish an excerpt here, but we implore you to read the whole book. Ravitch, as one teacher put it, is “a real friend to teachers.”

Ravitch arrived at her conclusions by reviewing research and visiting schools—seeing students drilled in test-taking strategies

instead of conducting science experiments or reading great literature, seeing charter and voucher schools pulling in the most motivated students while pushing out those most likely to drag down test scores.

For readers unable to spend significant amounts of time in schools, we open this issue with an excerpt from a neglected book that deserves to be on your summer reading list: *Tested*, by education reporter Linda Perlstein. It chronicles the everyday reality of a high-poverty school that, unfortunately, demonstrates the difference between high scores and a high-quality education.

Though both Ravitch and Perlstein lament the unintended consequences of our current accountability movement, both are strong supporters of standards, testing, and accountability. What they do not support is the belief that tests measure all—or even most—of what makes a good education. They do not support the notion that high scores necessarily indicate that teachers have done a good job or students have acquired important knowledge and skills. And they do not support the fantasy that 100 percent proficiency on a test would actually mean the achievement gap has closed.

Where we stand today is perilous indeed. With copious research and clear logic, Ravitch concludes that the nation's two most popular reform movements—accountability and choice—are undermining public education. They are simply today's versions of the long line of fads and supposed silver bullets that have prevented this country from committing to the incremental improvements and rich curriculum that actually result in great schools. In her words, “Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival. We must turn our attention to improving the schools, infusing them with the substance of genuine learning, and reviving the conditions that make learning possible.” We heartily agree.

—EDITORS