

# BALANCING ACT

AN EDUCATION HISTORIAN ARGUES THAT TOO MUCH FOCUS ON TESTING MAY SEND SCHOOLS ON A RACE TO THE BOTTOM.



**D**iane Ravitch must like to swim upstream. The education historian and prolific author does not take the easy route when it comes to the sharp elbows debate about the right path to reform the nation's schools.

Ravitch was an assistant secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush and led federal efforts to promote the creation of voluntary state and national academic standards. During the Clinton administration, she was appointed to the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the

National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal testing program.

But her perspective has changed and she has had some biting observations about both Bush's No Child Left Behind approach and the Obama administration's ideas for K-12 education reform.

"President George W. Bush signed a law called No Child Left Behind, which required constant improvement" in schools, she wrote in a March article on The Huffington Post. "The Obama administration wants to rename the law but they too reject any excuses for

low performance and low graduation rates."

She was reacting to the news that the school board in Central Falls, R.I., had fired all 93 staff members at their low-performing high school, a move applauded by both the president and Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

"The strategy of closing schools and firing the teachers is mean and punitive. And it is ultimately pointless. It solves no problem. It opens up a host of new problems. It satisfies the urge to purge. But it does nothing at all for the students."

This evolution of her views on education



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is spelled out in her most recent book, “The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education.” A largely laudatory review in *The Washington Monthly* noted that Ravitch has become a leading critic of relatively centrist ideas such as charter schools, testing and merit pay for teachers.

It also references her tart retort to critics who question why she has moved away from conservative educational policies. She, in turn, points to the response of British economist John Maynard Keynes, who, when asked why he had reversed himself on an issue, responded: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

Ravitch spoke with State Legislatures about current federal education efforts.

**STATE LEGISLATURES:** Do you support the common core standards movement?

**DIANE RAVITCH:** I have taken a wait-and-see approach to the common core standards

because I’d like to see them tried out somewhere before I conclude that they are ready to be adopted nationally. Standards are only words on paper until they are implemented. I hope these are good curriculum standards, but the nation really does need to see some demonstration of their effectiveness. If they prove their value, states will willingly and eagerly adopt them.

I have been involved in supporting strong curriculum standards since the mid-1980s, when I was one of the primary writers of the California K-12 history framework. When I worked in the first Bush administration, I oversaw awards to professional groups to write voluntary national standards. All of this is meant to demonstrate that I have a long history in support of a strong, coherent curriculum, especially one that includes history, the arts, science, mathematics, literature, geography, civics, foreign languages and physical education.

**SL:** What do you see as the appropriate role of the federal government in this area?

**RAVITCH:** We have seen with the Race to the Top that the federal government is quite willing to take a muscular role, certainly more muscular than any U.S. Department of Education in history. I would like to see a requirement in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that stipulates public schools must offer a full curriculum, including the arts, science, history, geography, literature, foreign language, geography, civics and physical education. Because of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*, states and school districts have great incentives to teach only reading and math. Some districts, especially in affluent areas, have been able to maintain a balanced curriculum, but many schools and districts have pared away essential subjects, especially the arts, because they are not tested. If we test everything, there would be no time for instruction. So I would like to see a requirement that every school provide the essentials of a good education.

**SL:** Did you always feel this way and, if not, what has changed your thinking?

**RAVITCH:** I have always believed all children should have a full, balanced, rich curriculum in the arts and sciences. Until now, I never thought it was necessary to put federal support behind doing the right thing. But the federal government, since the passage of *No*

*Child Left Behind*, has been pushing so strenuously for basic skills testing that the curriculum has gotten warped and diminished. Under the Obama administration’s *Race to the Top* approach, the focus on testing will become only more intense. Now that *Race to the Top* has persuaded so many states to base teacher evaluations on test scores, the pressure to teach to the test and narrow the curriculum will grow even more. If we don’t create a counterforce to these demands, we will see U.S. education dumbed down and intolerably narrowed even more than it has been for the past eight years. We will find ourselves trapped in a race to the bottom.

**SL:** What do you see as the correct federal-state balance?

**RAVITCH:** I believe that the federal government has used the stimulus money to expand its role in an unprecedented and unwarranted fashion. Over the past 45 years, since passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, elected officials of both parties understood that education was primarily a state and local function. After all, the federal government supplies less than 10 percent of the cost of schooling. Now the federal government is using *Race to the Top* to dictate basic policy changes to the states. Since none of the U.S. Department of Education’s preferred policies have a strong basis in research or evidence, this strikes me as an inappropriate use of federal power.

In my view, the federal role should be, first, to fund its mandates (especially special education); second, to promote equitable funding, especially for schools and districts with concentrations of poor students; third, to provide accurate and timely information and valid research about American education (including the valuable National Assessment of Educational Progress); fourth, to protect the civil rights of vulnerable children; and fifth, to provide a “bully pulpit” for the secretary to advance sound ideas.

The U.S. Department of Education has no unusual fund of knowledge or experience about school reform. The federal government should not impose its policy preferences on states and localities, most especially when those preferences have not been presented to congressional hearings and received specific congressional authorization.

States and localities have the primary responsibility to finance and direct education.

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Ideas about how to remedy poor performance and how to reform schools should be initiated and implemented by states and localities.

**SL:** What is the appropriate role of the state in setting standards, in this instance versus the local role?

**RAVITCH:** States should set standards and administer tests. Local districts should design improvement strategies tailored to needs of individual schools. The states have traditionally set their own academic standards. In many subject areas, however, the state standards have proved to be inconsistent and often very vague and inadequate. I can see a valid federal role in gathering information about strong standards in every subject area, not only math and reading. I could see a valid federal role in financing experimentation and demonstration of standards by states. Bear in mind that I see standards not just as a decision about where to set the bar, but as a grade by grade description of content knowledge and skills. Standards should be used aspirationally, to support good instruction, not as a high bar that is used to measure students

and find them wanting and to punish teachers because their students didn't meet the standard.

**SL:** Do you think the mobility of our population is an argument in favor of common standards?

**RAVITCH:** Yes, I do. Our children take international assessments of mathematics and science that assume a shared body of knowledge and skills across many different nations and cultures. Students take national examinations that assume a shared body of knowledge. It ought to be possible to be explicit about our shared expectations.

**SL:** If not standards, what do you think ought to be the cornerstone of education reform right now?

**RAVITCH:** I believe there is value in common standards, although I know how hard it will be to reach them, to demonstrate their value, and to implement them. But I don't think that standards alone will address some of the fundamental problems that get in the way of high academic performance and of narrowing

the achievement gap.

The current emphasis on "proficiency," as defined by No Child Left Behind, causes schools to ignore students who reach proficiency. In other words, we are doing far too little now to encourage high academic performance. We ignore not only gifted children, but children who are in the upper half of the achievement distribution.

At the same time, there is a tendency today to assume common academic standards will narrow the achievement gap. This is not necessarily the case. In fact, academic standards, no matter how solid, are no substitute for nutrition, health care and a host of other issues that get in the way of improving the performance of the students who are poor. There is evidence poverty and income inequality have increased in the past several years. Academic standards do not address those problems, and despite assertions to the contrary poverty weighs heavily on children and prevents them from reaching their full potential. As a nation, we must not only improve our schools, but we must work to improve the lives of children and families. ■■■