



A CONTRARIAN IN SEARCH OF TRADITION: POST-WAR AMERICAN EDUCATION AND THE CAREER OF DIANE RAVITCH

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ABSTRACT

This thesis assesses the career of Diane Ravitch (born 1938) who has influenced American school education in a range of ways — as an historian, commentator and adviser, and as a government official — since the 1960s. Based on a chronological chapter structure, the thesis argues that during her working life, Ravitch has retained certain ‘traditionalist’ ideas, based on support for public schools, the teaching profession, a liberal arts curriculum, and shared American values, but that the way in which she has upheld these ideas has evolved in response to shifts in politics, culture and intellectual life. Having been a liberal Democrat believing in the statist, pro-labour principles of the New Deal, she responded to the challenge to her views posed by the countercultural New Left by joining forces with the right-of-centre neoconservatives. She remained associated with neoconservatism for 40 years, playing an active part in its work on school standards, but refrained from adopting the pro-market ideas increasingly popular among neoconservatives and promoted vociferously by neoliberals until — in what proved to be an exceptional episode in her career — she endorsed the 1990s ‘reform agenda’ of standardised testing, teacher/school ‘accountability’ and ‘school choice’. Realising in the late 2000s that the radical neoliberalism inherent in ‘reform’ was alien to her core principles, and displaying the contrarian instincts which led her to challenge fashionable ideas of the day, she turned away from her neoconservative allies and lent her vigorous support to the centre-left activists fighting for public education and teachers’ rights. The thesis argues that, in defending her traditional ideas first against the left and more latterly against the right, Ravitch has displayed an underlying consistency and continuity in a period of major change.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFT	American Federation of Teachers
AHA	American Historical Association
ALEC	American Legislative Exchange Council
ANAR	<i>A Nation at Risk</i>
CBE	Council for Basic Education
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DLC	Democratic Leadership Council
EEN	Educational Excellence Network
EFD	Education for Democracy
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
HEW	Department of Health, Education, and Welfare
IASA	Improving America's Schools Act
ICS	Institute for Community Studies
IS	Intermediate School
NAE	National Academy of Education
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NAGB	National Assessment Governing Board
NCEST	National Council on Education Standards and Testing
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NEA	National Education Association
NEH	National Endowment for the Humanities
NGA	National Governors Association
NPE	Network for Public Education
OERI	Office of Educational Research and Improvement
RTTT	Race to the Top
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
UFT	United Federation of Teachers

INTRODUCTION

The career of Diane Ravitch exemplifies the strong link between American school education policy and political and intellectual life more generally. Ravitch first made her name as an educational historian and soon established a base in Teachers College, Columbia University's graduate school of education. From the start of her career however, she engaged with political and cultural developments extending beyond the educational sphere, from the early 'culture wars' and the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s, through the rightward shift in American politics in the 1980s, to the polarised intellectual landscape of the 2020s. In using her status as an educational policy expert as a platform to address broader issues and distinct audiences, Ravitch also demonstrates a shift in the range of forums in which intellectuals could contribute. Her involvement with educational policy has been as a writer, aiming much of her work at a non-specialist readership, a think tank member and even a government official in the George H.W. Bush administration; her advice has been sought — though not always followed — by every subsequent president except Donald Trump. Spanning the roles of public intellectual, academic and policy adviser, she has made a major contribution towards raising the public profile of school education. Despite the involvement which Ravitch has had in the last half-century in a range of developments concerning American schools, there is no monograph on her life and career. This thesis aims to fill that gap, analysing how she has been affected by political and intellectual debates and arguing that she has helped shape those debates in the field of education policy.

Many of the animating ideas that have influenced Ravitch's career date back to the period before the mid-1960s, including her time at school and Wellesley College, and reflect her attachment, forged at that time, to a range of political and cultural traditions. Growing up in a successful Jewish immigrant family, she inherited its belief in New Deal liberalism which endorsed the American democratic system and the idea of individual progress and upward mobility but tempered this with statist policies (such as welfare and the Federal Housing Administration's favourable mortgage terms) and support for trade unions. She assimilated successfully at high school into the largely white Anglo-Saxon Protestant world of 1950s middle-class Houston and became a strong believer in the value of public schools, and their role in fostering what was idealistically promoted as a 'common culture', regardless of religious, racial or ethnic background. Repulsed by the racial segregation she observed in her local community, she came to espouse not only the commitment of the early civil rights movement to eliminating discrimination against blacks but also its universalist approach involving the theoretical endorsement of equal legal rights for all rather than identity-based policies furthering the interests of particular groups. She encountered the effects of McCarthyism at high school, where library books were censored, and such experiences informed her lifelong commitment to the principle of free speech. Inspired by an English teacher, she became a devotee of the academic 'liberal arts' subjects, especially the humanities, with a particular love for classic literature, and formed a strong respect for the teaching profession.

In early adulthood, Ravitch continued to evidence her broad attachment to these traditional principles as a centre-left Democrat. They remained a vital influence in her work but her position within the political and intellectual spectrum shifted in

response to the changing landscape as the 'New Deal Order' which had dominated American politics throughout her life came under attack and ultimately collapsed. As a result, she upheld her ideas first against the left and ultimately against the right.

Ravitch first perceived a challenge to her belief in traditional ideas and institutions in the emergence of the New Left, in the early stages of what became known as the culture wars. Her early educational writing, including *The Great School Wars* (1974), was inspired by the pressure in the late 1960s for black community control of schools in New York City, and the battle in Ocean Hill – Brownsville between the local school leaders and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). The New Left supporters of community control rejected the American political system, along with tenets of New Deal liberalism such as the efficacy of government spending and support for trade unions, as well as the common culture and the public school's role in furthering it. In vigorously affirming those principles, Ravitch became aligned with neoconservatism, which resisted the countercultural ideas of the New Left whilst at this point giving support (albeit qualified) to government programmes and the labour movement and emerged as a highly influential right-of-centre movement in American political life, with which Ravitch was associated for most of her career up to 2010. From the mid-1970s, her work reflected a concern, common among neoconservatives, about the threat to universalism contained in measures designed to achieve racial balance in schools, such as the busing of black children, and the emphasis on group rights for non-English speakers and women. She argued

that “group-based concepts” conflicted with the “efforts of the civil rights movement to remove group classifications from public policy.”¹

By the mid-1980s, as Ravitch recognised the public concern about the performance of American schools, she became involved in the efforts to achieve ‘excellence’ in education, focusing particularly on the merits of the liberal arts as against vocationally based progressive curricular ideas. There were other neoconservative advocates for excellence who helped usher in a pro-market view of school education, embraced more fully by neoliberals. Ravitch initially resisted this, remaining firmly committed to the existing public school system. From the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, however, Ravitch deviated from some of her long-standing principles as a leading figure in the movement for ‘reform’ in school education, which promoted a bipartisan political consensus culminating in the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. Under this measure, the federal government aimed to improve K—12 education by a system based on the testing of pupils’ skills in reading and mathematics and holding schools and teachers accountable for student performance, whilst allowing greater scope for the private sector.

Ravitch’s support for market-based reform was however exceptional in relation to the larger trajectory of her career. After 2010, she distanced herself from her former neoconservative allies and attacked reform from the left. She re-embraced ideas which were reflective of her mid-century centre-left liberalism, even though the New Deal Order in which those ideas were formed had long since ceased to exist,

¹Ravitch, “Color-Blind or Color-Conscious?”, *The New Republic*, 180, no.8 (5 May 1979), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 250.

fighting energetically for well-funded public schools and the teaching profession. In this latest phase of her career, she has maintained her firm support for the humanities, which she viewed as being threatened by the bias towards basic skills within NCLB and Barack Obama's subsequent Race to the Top initiative. She has also continued to affirm her belief in the common culture and has highlighted the contemporary threats to American democracy, and the challenge to free speech posed by the banning from schools of books on race and sexuality.

Ravitch's intellectual biography is therefore characterised by a central paradox: her lifelong appeal to the value of political and cultural tradition, alongside her vigorous endorsement of educational reform. Reasons for this paradox can be found in the development of her career from the early 1990s. She was constantly exposed in government to free market ideas like 'school choice'. She subsequently became involved in right-of-centre think tanks promoting reform which provided her with intellectual stimulation and substantial financial benefits. She also came to appreciate the benefits of remaining close to the centres of power, which helps to explain her opportunistic endorsement of the policies of right-wing Republicans during their mid-1990s ascendancy.

There is also a more general explanation which illuminates Ravitch's overall viewpoint. Speaking in 2011 about her liking for institutions, she said that "society needs them and needs to continually reshape them, not blow them up." She has a firm belief in long-established institutions, notably the public school. This is however accompanied by a conviction that such institutions are not exempt from criticism and may need to change in order to achieve their full potential. Her preference has been

for change which itself reflects her broader affection for tradition, such as an increased emphasis on the liberal arts for which she has argued consistently from the 1980s. In the 1990s however, she credulously accepted that the improvements to public education she desired would be best achieved by the package of market-based reform initiatives, which increasingly received broad political support; she later said that she “had fallen for the latest panaceas and miracle cures.”²

Some previous works have considered particular aspects of Ravitch’s career. Her involvement from the mid-1980s in the efforts aimed at improving school and student performance, and particularly her defence of traditional history against social studies, was strongly criticised by the left-of-centre social studies academic Ronald W. Evans in *Schooling Corporate Citizens* (2015), whilst her role in debates about multicultural history was vigorously challenged in Cornbleth and Waugh’s *The Great Speckled Bird* (1995). A broader analysis of Ravitch’s career was provided by Maurice R. Berube in his substantial essay “The Education of Diane Ravitch” (2001), which praised her skills as a historian but contested some of her ideas, particularly on race; this however pre-dates the major shift in her views in 2010, when she turned against school reform. A number of articles were published around that time — for example, Kevin Carey’s critical “The Dissenter” (2011), David Denby’s more favourable “Public Defender” (2012), and Dana Goldstein’s relatively nuanced “Diane Ravitch, the Anti-Rhee” (2011); whilst these look back over her career, they do so largely through the lens of her change of mind. The existing writing on Ravitch

² Ravitch quoted in Dana Goldstein, “Diane Ravitch, the Anti-Rhee,” *Washington City Paper* (24 June 2011); Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; revised and expanded paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2016), 4.

therefore provides only a partial view. This thesis considers her career as a whole and in depth, so providing a comprehensive context for an appraisal of her life and work.³

Much of the importance of Ravitch's career lies in what it reveals about the politics of American school education, and particularly the increasing role of the federal government, since the mid-twentieth century. Federal policy from the mid-1960s aimed to promote 'equity' for disadvantaged groups but later emphasised the need to improve the performance of students and schools. By focusing on Ravitch, the thesis provides a fresh perspective on the various policy developments affecting American schools, which have been the subject of a number of books published since the turn of the century.

One such work is Maris A. Vinovskis's *History and Educational Policymaking* (1999). Vinovskis's overarching theme is that educational policymaking would have benefitted from the application of a historical perspective. He argues however that most writing by educational historians does not have relevance to contemporary policy issues and that government has been reluctant to employ historians in policy-based roles.⁴ The thesis demonstrates that Ravitch's career provides a marked exception to this general rule. Her historical writing has consistently reflected an underlying policy-related viewpoint, from her defence of the public school system in

³ Ronald W. Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens: How Accountability Reform Has Damaged Civic Education and Undermined Democracy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015); Catherine Cornbleth and Dexter Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird: Multicultural Politics and Education Policymaking* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1995); Maurice R. Berube, "The Education of Diane Ravitch" in *Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Essays on the Politics of Culture* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Bergin and Garvey, 2002), 43-67; Kevin Carey, "The Dissenter," *New Republic* 242, no. 19 (15 December 2011): 14-18; David Denby, "Public Defender: Diane Ravitch Takes On A Movement," *New Yorker* (19 November 2012): 66-74; Dana Goldstein, "Diane Ravitch, the Anti-Rhee."

⁴ Maris A. Vinovskis, *History and Educational Policymaking* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), see particularly 239-247.

The Great School Wars to her endorsement of strong curriculum content when analysing twentieth-century educational reforms in *Left Back* (2000), and it provided the foundation of her advisory work. In addition, between 1991 and 1993, Ravitch served — albeit with limited success — in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) within the Department of Education, where she recruited Vinovskis to her staff.

In *Political Education* (2004), Christopher T. Cross argues that the complex nature of the American political system, particularly within Congress, has generally hindered the passage of major federal educational measures, and that the enactment of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 (providing federal funding for poorer children), and NCLB in 2001, were only possible because of highly effective presidential leadership. He also believes that supplementary programmes supporting sectional interests are often retained — thus weakening the focus on broader systemic reform — because they are advanced by energetic lobbying groups which establish powerful congressional constituencies; at the same time, Congress supplies insufficient resource to enable the Education Department to provide guidance and support for major initiatives.⁵ The thesis will add colour to this analysis by considering Ravitch's time at OERI, where her major priority was the development of curriculum standards and testing systems. It will highlight her first-hand experience, as a newcomer to government, of Congress's tendency to maintain

⁵ Christopher T. Cross, *Political Education: National Policy Comes of Age* (2004; updated ed., New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2010), see particularly 144-149.

favoured programmes whilst resisting systemic change and fiercely challenging budgets for departmental research and development.

A different slant on the growth of federal involvement in school education is provided by Jesse H. Rhodes in *An Education in Politics* (2012). He argues that a key factor in the progress of federal initiatives, ultimately leading to NCLB, was the work of groups he describes as “political entrepreneurs” who helped to overcome the constraints imposed by congressional opposition and a range of entrenched programmes and institutions. Rhodes is right to stress the importance of such groups but states that the most influential among them were the ones representing business, and those civil rights supporters who believed that tackling educational inequality required a focus on student achievement as well as resources. He underplays the significance of Ravitch and her long-term colleague Chester Finn, locating them among the “educational conservatives” who in the mid-1990s were ambivalent at best about standards-based reform.⁶ The thesis will demonstrate that, whilst Ravitch (with Finn) did associate herself at times with right-wing Republicans opposed to federally-led reform, the overall thrust of her work for over two decades was towards encouraging the consensus which resulted in NCLB.

Another work which reviews the federal government’s role in promoting educational improvement is *Carrots, Sticks, and the Bully Pulpit* (2011), edited by Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly. Many of the contributions reflect the view of educational reform prevalent by the time of the Obama administration and

⁶ Jesse H. Rhodes, *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind* (Cornell Paperbacks ed., Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), see particularly 1-24.

particularly the emphasis on the role of the private sector and the associated challenge to the established framework of school education. There is however also a broad theme within the book which argues that the federal government is well placed to enforce statutory requirements (such as anti-discrimination provisions) and to facilitate progress at state and local level (for example, by establishing consistent measurement systems and providing technical support) but is not itself equipped to effect operational improvements in schools.⁷ The thesis, by examining Ravitch's change of mind from strong supporter to fierce opponent of school reform, provides an illuminating and highly individual view of these arguments. It charts and analyses her growing belief that the greater role of business was threatening the essence of the public education system, and that the interventionist approach of the federal government in the running of schools, which had increasingly formed the bedrock of reform, was also proving harmful.

In analysing Ravitch's career, the thesis will highlight the nuances and complexities in her views and their relationship with contemporary political and intellectual movements and ideas. Prominent amongst these is neoconservatism, which has been the subject of several major works, from Peter Steinfels' *The Neoconservatives* (1979) to more recent books such as Murray Friedman's *The Neoconservative Revolution* (2005) and Justin Vaisse's *Neoconservatism* (2010), and which features prominently in other historical interpretations of American politics and culture in this period such as Hartman's *A War for the Soul of America* (2015). It

⁷ Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly, "Reflections on the Federal Role: A Half-Century of Hard-Won Lessons" in *Carrots, Sticks, and the Bully Pulpit: Lessons from a Half-Century of Federal Efforts to Improve America's Schools*, ed. Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Education Press, 2011), 273-283.

evolved over time; Vaisse wrote of the three “ages” of neoconservatism, encompassing the ‘first age’ starting in the 1960s when its major focus was on domestic policy and the later ‘ages’ in which foreign policy themes became increasingly important, based on opposition to detente in the ‘second age’ and the interventionist policies promoted by ‘third age’ neoconservatives from the mid-1990s.⁸

Ravitch has said that she regarded herself as a neoconservative by the early 1970s, during the ‘first age’ of neoconservatism. As Hartman has explained, neoconservatism emerged in this period in opposition to the countercultural New Left. It was marked by its devotion to what the early neoconservative Irving Kristol described as “traditional values and institutions” including American liberal democracy and the Western cultural tradition, with a distaste for the emphasis on group rights which became known as identity politics. Ravitch’s early work was very much in line with these specific neoconservative ideas as they were articulated in the late 1960s. In her writing on Ocean Hill – Brownsville, her challenge to the ethnic separatism in community control, which she treated as a manifestation of identity politics, tapped into the views of neoconservative intellectuals including Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the authors of *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1967).

⁸ Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Origins of a Movement* (1979. Republished edition with new foreword. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and New Delhi: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013); Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (First Harvard University Press paperback edition. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011) - on the “three ages” of neoconservatism, see pp.1-20; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Her defence of the public school and its role in inculcating American values such as democracy and the common culture reflected neoconservatives' belief in tradition.⁹

Ravitch's support for government spending on schools and her defence of the UFT were also consistent with contemporary neoconservatism. By the early 1970s, neoconservatives were increasingly critical of government intervention and some — notably Irving Kristol — had begun to embrace free-market economics. Yet as Steinfels has noted, some of those regarded as 'first age' neoconservatives, for example Glazer and Daniel Bell, did not condemn all the government programmes of the 1960s Great Society, and early neoconservatives were generally on good terms with much of the labour movement.¹⁰ Ravitch's early writing, aimed at an educated general readership, constituted an important contribution to the formulation of neoconservative ideas on school education but has been largely overlooked in studies of neoconservatism, even those such as Vaisse, Friedman and Hartman who recognised the importance of Ocean Hill – Brownsville. As a result, this thesis will argue, Ravitch's larger intellectual significance has therefore been greatly undervalued by historians.

Ravitch's intellectual stance in the 1980s has been prominently covered in specialist histories which focus on contemporary political and cultural developments affecting American schools. In *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, Evans describes her as one of the "intellectual core" of neoconservatives actively involved in K–12 education policy, and refers to her frequently in connection with neoconservative-led

⁹ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 38; Irving Kristol, "What Is a 'Neo-Conservative'?", *Newsweek* (19 January 1976): 17.

¹⁰ Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives*, 230, 174-175, 9-10.

initiatives. Joel Spring's *The American School 1642-1990* (1990) characterised her view of post-war American education in *The Troubled Crusade* (1983), which encapsulated the ideas informing her work in the 1980s, as a "neoconservative interpretation."¹¹

Ravitch was a key figure in the efforts to encourage the use of federal government power to raise achievement in schools, alongside neoconservatives such as Chester Finn, her close colleague in the advisory Educational Excellence Network (EEN) from 1982, and William Bennett, the Education Secretary in the mid-1980s, but there were important differences between her views and theirs. Ravitch's primary focus was on strengthening curriculum content, particularly in the humanities. Whilst neoconservative educationalists generally shared that concern, most of them (including Finn and Bennett) had by the 1980s become supporters of market-based ideas and joined the Republican party, and they began to promote the wider reform agenda with its emphasis on accountability for schools and teachers and its openness to school choice, including vouchers for private schools. Ravitch did not adopt these ideas until after her period in government in the early-1990s and strongly defended teachers against what she regarded as unfair criticism. Until the mid-1990s therefore, she was an energetic member of the neoconservative movement for change in school education without embracing all its views. Writers like Evans have tended to lump her with other neoconservatives such as Finn and have therefore failed to identify her distinctive role.

¹¹ Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 16; Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642-1990: Varieties of Historical Interpretation of the Foundations and Development of American Education* (2nd ed., New York and London: Longman, 1990), 322.

After 1993, Ravitch did actively promote the neoconservative reform agenda. She continued to argue strongly for the humanities but also advocated vouchers for poorer students and charter schools outside the conventional public school system. Further, she accepted the principle of accountability, which caused her to cross swords with her long-time ally the American Federation of Teachers leader Albert Shanker. Even here however, the position is more complex than it seems. Ravitch was clear that, despite her endorsement of educational ideas popular with Republicans, she did not view herself as a figure of the political right, and she appeared to enjoy the intellectual company of long-standing liberals like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, with whom she worked regularly in the late twentieth century.

Ravitch's career, and particularly her disavowal of the reform agenda after 2010, also highlights in the context of school education another feature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American political landscape — the relationship between neoconservatism and neoliberalism. The stated educational ideal for neoliberals, as expounded by John Chubb and Terry Moe in *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* (1990), envisaged the effective dismantling of the existing public school system and its replacement by a private market with only the lightest government oversight. By contrast, neoconservatives looked to the federal government to bring about comprehensive improvements in schools incorporating enhanced content and traditional values.

In practice however, as Philip Mirowski has argued in *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (2013), neoliberals were prepared to use the power of government to promote opportunities for business; at the same time, neoconservatives became

increasingly willing to embrace market-based principles in order to achieve their aims. The synergies between neoliberalism and neoconservatism that this created were powerfully illustrated by Melinda Cooper in *Family Values* (2017). Cooper points to the 1996 welfare legislation, where neoliberals eager to reduce the tax burden of payments to single parents and neoconservatives committed to family values joined forces to endorse a measure which used federal government power to restrict welfare benefits by reviving the “tradition of private family responsibility.” NCLB represented a similar fusion of neoconservative and neoliberal ideas; it involved a central role for the federal government in improving schools but aimed to do so by holding teachers and schools to account and creating openings for the private sector, and it was focused on the testing of basic skills likely to benefit business, rather than the study of the humanities. Ravitch’s career illuminates this development because a key factor driving her rejection of reform was her ultimate aversion to the pro-market neoliberal principles she perceived in NCLB, which she came to view as an attack on public schools and the teaching profession marked by a significant neglect of the liberal arts and which she said “began to feel too radical for me.” She started her career defending her traditional ideas against the radicalism of the left before going on to defend them against the radicalism of the right.¹²

Ravitch’s involvement in the culture wars illustrates both her own view of the humanities and the divisive nature of cultural debates in the late twentieth-century United States. She sought to promote the study of literature and history in a way

¹² Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 18-19, 80; Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn, New York: Zone Books, 2017), 313; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 14.

which defused the culture wars. In literature, she consistently argued for a canon which clearly acknowledged the value of the Western literary tradition. Her view of the common culture and the writing which forms part of it did however differ from that of conservatives such as the high-profile writer Allan Bloom and the neoconservative William Bennett, because she believed that this evolved over time, reflecting the diversity within American society. In 1988, she argued that the historic literary canon should be broadened to become a “larger, newer, and better mirror” of American society. Her collection *The American Reader* contained contributions by black writers including Langston Hughes and Martin Luther King, Jr., albeit nothing which clashed with her fundamental optimism about the underlying merits of the American democratic system and her belief in the existence of shared values.¹³

Similarly in history, Ravitch advocated an approach under which curriculums were based on support for liberal democracy and shared values reflecting the Western cultural tradition but acknowledged that the United States had not always lived up to its ideals, particularly in relation to women and racial minorities, and included a substantial element of world history. She emphasised that there should be “no attempt to paper over the failings of Democracy.”¹⁴ Through her work on the 1988 Bradley Commission on History in Schools and the 1987 California History-Social

¹³ Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (First Perennial Library ed., New York, Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco, London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney: Harper & Row, 1988), 11; Ravitch, *The American Reader: Words That Moved a Nation* (1990. Second Perennial ed., New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 449, 450, 530, 531, 568-576, 578-583. On Bloom and Bennett’s view of the Western canon, see Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 226-237.

¹⁴ Ravitch quoted in AFT Press Conference, World History Textbooks Review, July 1987, 41, American Federation of Teachers Archives, Office of The President, Albert Shanker, electronic copy supplied by Archivist.

Science Curriculum Framework, she managed to secure a substantial degree of consensus about the history curriculum across the intellectual spectrum.

Even when Ravitch found common ground with other educationalists however, as she did on history curriculum content in the 1980s, they might ultimately take opposing stances in the increasingly polarised landscape of the culture wars. She joined forces with UCLA professor Charlotte Crabtree to produce the California Curriculum Framework, but in the mid-1990s, at the point where she was most closely associated with the forces of the right, she challenged the proposed National History Standards in which Crabtree played a leading role. The tribalism of the culture wars finally proved too strong to accommodate attempts at compromise.

A major concern for Ravitch in the National History Standards and also in the New York history curriculum, which she strenuously opposed, was the ethnic separatism she perceived in their treatment of multiculturalism. This reflects her firm belief in a common culture, which she continues to uphold. Even in the 2020s, while speaking out strongly against racism and particularly political efforts to suppress teaching about it, she has stated unequivocally that “Americans share a common culture.” There is a danger that, as recognised by the proponents of the New York curriculum, the focus on a common culture will tend to marginalise the contribution of racial and other groups in American society. For Ravitch however, a greater danger is that the divisiveness of identity politics will weaken social cohesion and shared values, including belief in the political system which she views as increasingly under threat in contemporary America. In 1991, she argued that “appeals to race

consciousness, group pride and a multi-racial, multi-ethnic society are socially divisive.”¹⁵

Another major feature of Ravitch’s ideas has been her liberal universalism. It illustrates her tendency on occasion to build arguments based on general principles without giving due weight to the evidence, particularly the political and social realities. On race, her universalist support for colour-blindness stemmed, as she has acknowledged, from the fact that she was a “naïve optimist” who believed that racism would wither away. Berube correctly argued that she became “seriously out of step with the long march towards civil rights” by placing her faith in the legal rights conferred on blacks by the 1960s civil rights legislation. Ravitch expressed personal admiration for the black intellectual Derrick A. Bell, Jr., the driving force behind the development of Critical Race Theory, in the 1980s. She has however recognised only much later the force of Bell’s argument that substantial improvements in the education of African Americans were not possible without action to address the underlying inequality in the funding of schools serving predominantly black students and in American society more generally.¹⁶

An enduring example of Ravitch’s universalism has been her relationship with feminism. She has consistently drawn a distinction between the removal of legal barriers to female progress and a broader feminist agenda; writing in 2022 about Kathrine Switzer, the first woman to run in the Boston Marathon, she emphasised

¹⁵ Ravitch and Nancy E. Bailey, *EdSpeak and Doubletalk: A Glossary to Decipher Hypocrisy and Save Public Schooling* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2020), 48; Ravitch quoted in Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 100. On the New York curriculum and the common culture, see *ibid*, 104-105.

¹⁶ Ravitch, “*Washington Post*: What is Critical Race Theory and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools?”, *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 7 June 2021; Berube, “The Education of Diane Ravitch”, 55.

that Switzer denied that she was a “crusader” and said that she was “just trying to run.”¹⁷ Although Ravitch’s stance is a reflection of her commitment to universalism, it can also be explained in terms of her personal biography. She has forged a successful career in a man’s world largely by dint of her own determination and without apparent reliance on feminist ideas.

Ravitch made her name initially as an educational historian. This has remained an important part of her work, and a key element within it has been her response to the ideas of child-centred progressivism in school education. The Teachers College professor Laurence Cremin, who was her academic mentor, was one of the post-war historians responsible for moving U.S. educational history away from the inward-looking pedagogic focus of earlier writers such as Ellwood P. Cubberley and recognising the wider societal importance of schools; he applauded the role of the public school and acknowledged the vital contribution of progressivism. In *The Revisionists Revised* (1977), Ravitch defended Cremin’s ideas against attacks from left-wing ‘revisionists’ such as Michael Katz, Paul Violas, and Clarence Karier who disputed the merits of progressivism, the public school, and the American political system more generally.¹⁸ After that her view of progressive education changed, mirroring her broader political and intellectual trajectory. As she focused on school

¹⁷ Ravitch, “The First Woman to Run in the Boston Marathon, in 1967,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 18 April 2022.

¹⁸ Cubberley’s major work was *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (Boston, New York, and Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919). Cremin’s writing included *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876 – 1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1964). For examples of revisionist work, see Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (1968; reissued with new introduction, New York, and London: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2001); Paul C. Violas, *The Training of the Urban Working Class: A History of Twentieth Century American Education* (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1978); Clarence J. Karier, *Shaping the American Educational State: 1900 to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

standards, her historical writing became increasingly critical of progressivism, particularly its alleged aversion to a disciplined classroom environment and its emphasis on vocational education rather than the liberal arts. This culminated in *Left Back* where she unfairly laid all the blame for the perceived failings of American education on progressive ideas. Since 2010 however, Ravitch has returned to a more favourable view of progressivism, as she has found allies among present-day progressive educators, such as Deborah Meier, in her opposition to reform.

Ravitch's career developed to encompass the range of options open to intellectuals in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Inspired by encounters with public intellectuals such as Irving Howe and Daniel Bell at the *New Leader* in the 1960s, she developed a clear and effective writing style targeted at the non-specialist reader but combined this with faculty roles first at Teachers College and then New York University, which enhanced her academic credibility. She recognised the increasing scope for intellectuals to become involved in advisory forums targeted at particular audiences and undertook roles first in EEN and, after her spell in government, in a variety of think tanks. Becoming adept at media appearances, she evolved into what Berube described as the "first crossover educational historian."¹⁹

Ravitch was not the first public intellectual to adopt a wider role. Daniel Patrick Moynihan was an early neoconservative intellectual who had a significant influence on her career, for example as the co-author of *Beyond the Melting Pot* and the writer of the 1965 government report *The Negro Family*; from the 1950s to the 1970s, he

¹⁹ Berube, "The Education of Diane Ravitch", 43.

moved between academic positions, in institutions including Syracuse and Harvard, and government roles under the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations, before ultimately becoming a member of the U.S. Senate. Ravitch however eagerly grasped the opportunities presented to her and exploited them to great advantage. Since 2010 she has used her blog as a key element in communicating her ideas. She has displayed an entrepreneurial streak, redolent of her family background and her editorship of *Wellesley College News* where sustaining advertising revenue was a major consideration.²⁰ She has built on the synergies between the various strands in her career and used whatever tools have been available to her to promote both her work and the causes in which she believes.

Ravitch has been prepared to encourage consensus and her major historical works have been notable for their measured tone. Her intellectual style has however generally been marked by assertiveness and her desire to write “with the intent to persuade the reader.” This dates back to her adoption of an argumentative persona in school and college, and it was sharpened by her efforts to establish a career in an environment unfavourable to women and reinforced by encounters with pugilistic figures like Sidney Hook and Albert Shanker. She has also displayed a contrarian mentality, writing in 2006 that “I tend by habit to question whatever passes as conventional wisdom.”²¹ Ravitch’s contrarian instincts provided the impetus behind her appeal to traditional conceptions of education, which she has defended against political and intellectual fashions of the day. She displayed this first in her challenge

²⁰ *Wellesley College News* Manual, 1, Wellesley College Archives, ISD, 1912-1969, Box 4 Publicity Office, Folder 4.3.

²¹ Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve*, 18; J. Wesley Null and Diane Ravitch, eds., *Forgotten Heroes of American Education: The Great Tradition of Teaching Teachers* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing, 2006), foreword by Ravitch, xiii.

to community control, which was supported by the New York elites as well as the New Left. When the traditional ideas and institutions to which she remained committed, particularly the public school, later proved to be threatened by NCLB, she brought a polemical toughness and a willingness to challenge the new orthodoxies of reform to her outspoken defence of them. Ravitch's contrarianism, although it manifested itself in shifts in her political stance over time, enabled her to maintain an underlying continuity and consistency in her search for tradition.

The thesis is structured chronologically, so enabling the presentation of Ravitch's career against a political backdrop which has changed over time. Chapter 1 demonstrates how her career was largely influenced by experiences from her early life. Her family background and education engendered many of her enduring ideas and she also acquired her strongly assertive streak. In 1960s New York, she honed her writing skills at the *New Leader* and witnessed the early culture wars between the New Left and the neoconservatives. Chapter 2 highlights important developments from the late 1960s in both Ravitch's political position and her career. It explains how she became opposed to black community control of New York schools and found her ideas increasingly influenced by contemporary neoconservatism. She also established herself as a writer, particularly with the publication of *The Great School Wars*. Chapter 3 shows how Ravitch continued to defend the idea of the public school, and other traditional principles, against leftist attacks in *The Revisionists Revised*. It then analyses her increasing focus on two major themes which dominated much of her career from the late 1970s; first, her aversion

to group-based rights, which led to her adoption of 'colour-blind' ideas, and second, her belief in the need to improve school and student achievement levels.

Chapter 4 evaluates Ravitch's contribution from the early 1980s to the educational 'excellence' movement. It charts her work with other neoconservatives like Finn, and her focus on the humanities, particularly history where she achieved curricular successes but became embroiled in disputes about multiculturalism. It also analyses her limited success within government in promoting national standards. Chapter 5 explains how, from the mid-1990s, Ravitch became a firm supporter of the 'reform agenda' which led to NCLB, and continued to support national curriculum standards, whilst initially opposing the National History Standards. It considers the factors — practical and ideological — which turned her against 'reform' from the mid-2000s. Chapter 6 analyses Ravitch's career since her break from the reform movement, noting her vehement opposition to NCLB and Obama's Race to the Top and her emphatic support for public schools, teachers' rights, and higher school funding. It explains how she has become increasingly associated with the political left and progressive educators but remains culturally conservative. Finally, the conclusion re-examines some of the guiding principles which have dominated Ravitch's career. It also considers her overall contribution which, it is argued, establishes her as the pre-eminent figure among public intellectuals working in the field of American school education since the mid-twentieth century.

CHAPTER 1 – THE SEEDS OF A CAREER, 1938-1967

The traditional ideas and values which were the foundation of Ravitch's work were formed during her childhood and early adulthood. Her Jewish immigrant family background fostered her belief in the American political and economic system and the politics of Roosevelt's New Deal. Her family's desire to assimilate into American society and her own positive experience of public education led to her support for the common culture and the socialising role of the public school. Her experience of segregation in Houston was the basis of her belief in the universalist conception of civil rights, and her encounters with censorship at school, and later at college, fuelled her lifelong devotion to freedom of speech. Further, her natural love of reading was nurtured by her high school English teacher, leading to her commitment to the humanities. Ravitch's ability to pursue her career successfully was also the result of her personal determination and competitiveness. Undeterred by her experience of discrimination against women in journalism, she found a role at the *New Leader* where she mixed with prominent public intellectuals who helped her learn how to write for an educated general readership and to develop a strong argumentative style in her work. The final element in the formative phase of Ravitch's career was her exposure to the early culture wars between the countercultural New Left and the neoconservatives, who vehemently defended traditional values and institutions, and at this point were not uniformly hostile to the New Deal-era ideas in which Ravitch strongly believed. She became personally acquainted with several prominent neoconservatives, and her association with neoconservatism provided the context for the evolution of her views from the late 1960s.

Home, School and College, 1938-1960

Ravitch was born Diane Rose Silvers in Houston, Texas on 1st July 1938, the third of eight children. The Silvers family epitomised the progress achieved by many Jewish-Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. Ravitch's father, Walter 'Cracker' Silvers, was the child of Polish immigrants, whilst her mother Anna had come to America from Bessarabia with her mother and sister following World War I. By the time of Ravitch's birth, the Silvers were a middle-class family, and her father owned a chain of liquor stores. This was typical of upwardly mobile Jews from an Eastern European background in the inter-war years who tended to be small business owners rather than managers in large corporations, from which they were largely excluded at the time by discrimination against Jews and other immigrants. Despite the limitations on Jewish advancement affecting her father, which did reduce after World War II (though anti-Semitism was not eliminated entirely), Ravitch's childhood affirmed her belief in social and economic mobility within the United States, and this has remained one of her enduring ideas. She dedicated her 1978 book *The Revisionists Revised*, in which she strongly defended the idea of mobility against an attack from leftist writers, to her grandparents and parents.¹

Another important feature of the Silvers family was that, as described by David Denby in a 2012 *New Yorker* article on Ravitch, they "venerated Franklin Delano Roosevelt." Support for Roosevelt's Democratic administration was common amongst Jewish-Americans, many of whom prospered under his presidency. They benefited

¹ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (1998; seventh paperback printing, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 33, 35-37; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978), xii.

from New Deal initiatives such as the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which provided access to affordable suburban housing on favourable mortgage terms to white Americans, including Jews and other ethnic immigrants, but not blacks, and more generally from the reduction in discrimination against Jews during and after World War II. The fact that she grew up during, and in the aftermath of, the Roosevelt administration, was an important influence on Ravitch's future ideas. Writing on the 75th anniversary of Roosevelt's 'Economic Bill of Rights', included in his 1944 State of the Union address, she recalled wistfully the "America of my childhood", when the country had "a national leader with a vision of a just and fair society" and was "motivated by ideals of the common good." Ravitch has remained a firm supporter of the Democratic Party for most of her life. Whilst believing in individual mobility and enterprise, she continued to couple this with a commitment to the principle of federal government intervention, if not always the particular policies of the day, even when she was later regarded by herself and others as a neoconservative, and many other neoconservatives voted Republican and were highly critical of the role of government.²

The Silvers were strong believers in the assimilation of immigrant ethnic groups into American tradition and culture. This evidently made a strong impression on Ravitch, who wrote in 2020 that "I used to love the Fourth of July and the surge of national pride and optimism that went with it," adding that "having grown up in the middle of World War II, I have always been patriotic." Because, as she has recounted,

² David Denby, "Public Defender: Diane Ravitch Takes On A Movement," *New Yorker* (19 November 2012): 69; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 44-47; Ravitch, "FDR: His Economic Bill of Rights," *Diane Ravitch's blog*, 11 January 2019.

her parents very much wanted to be seen as “real Americans”, and her mother believed that “real Americans celebrated Christmas”, the family had a Christmas tree, and she herself greatly enjoyed the carol services at her school. Ravitch has throughout her career retained a positive view of assimilation and a belief in an American common culture, together with a corresponding aversion to ethnic separatism.³

Ravitch differed from the other Silvers children in having strong intellectual interests. She has said that she was “alone in having a love of books” and had to climb a tree to read because of the noise and activity generated by her siblings. Her belief in the pleasure and mental stimulation provided by reading has been an important thread running throughout her career, and she has produced anthologies of American and English writing. At the same time, Ravitch could not be pigeonholed as a dreamy intellectual. She was a tomboy who loved drag racing and had been in three accidents by the age of 16. Even as a teenager, therefore, Ravitch was displaying two traits which marked her career as a writer: first, a refusal to be constrained by conventional female stereotypes, and second, a highly competitive streak, even when faced by obstacles.⁴

Ravitch’s schooldays, and particularly the time she spent at San Jacinto High School in Houston, were also an important formative influence on her ideas. She has explained how her parents, and particularly her mother, were strong believers in the

³ Ravitch, “Celebrating July 4,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 4 July 2020; Ravitch, “Growing Up Jewish in Texas: Christmas,” *Huffington Post* (25 December 2013), reprinted in *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch* (New York: Garn Press, 2019), 147-149.

⁴ Ravitch, interview by author, Brooklyn, 30 September 2019. The anthologies produced by Ravitch were *The American Reader* (1990) and *The English Reader* (with Michael Ravitch, 2006). Dana Goldstein, “Diane Ravitch, the Anti-Rhee,” *Washington City Paper* (24 June 2011).

benefits of a public-school education. Writing in 2019, Ravitch recalled that her mother's proudest achievements were "learning perfect English" and "her high school diploma." Her parents did in fact consider placing her, aged five, in the private Kinkaid School across the street from their house. The school rejected her, and her parents believed that this was based on anti-Semitism. Ravitch said that her parents were thereafter "passionate advocates of public education", considering private education an "appropriate alternative only for those kids who failed to behave or succeed in public school" — such as two of Ravitch's brothers who were dispatched to military school. Describing her own experience of public education in Houston, Ravitch has said that all the children in her area went to the same schools, and they "cheered for the same teams" and "went to the same after-school events." She has continued to uphold the benefits of a public-school education, particularly the socialising role of the public school in relation to ethnic minority students. Her own favourable experience was a reflection of the post-war assimilation of Jews and other white ethnics into white middle-class suburban America, from which blacks were effectively excluded.⁵

Although Ravitch has retained a generally positive view of her time at public school, she has said that San Jacinto High School was "a typical American public school, which was to say it that was...not highly intellectual." She has criticised some

⁵ Ravitch, "Joe Batory: The American Dream is Alive and Well in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania," *Diane Ravitch's blog*, 26 May 2019; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; revised and expanded paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2016), 117-118. Ravitch's high school experience had parallels in that of another Jewish-American writer, Karen Brodtkin, who has said that, in Long Island in the 1950s, "our ethnic backgrounds seemed so irrelevant to high school culture." Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 36. For an endorsement of the socialising power of the public school in Ravitch's early writing, see *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (1974; Johns Hopkins University Paperbacks ed., Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 402.

of her teachers — for example her eleventh-grade history teacher who “used every incident in American history to support her own cranky political bias.” At the same time, she has recognised the encouragement she received from a few teachers, notably her senior year English teacher Mrs. Ruby Ratcliff. In her English class, Ravitch, already an avid reader, studied “the greatest writers of the English language”, including Shakespeare, Keats and Shelley. Whilst inculcating a love of literature, Mrs. Ratcliff also placed a strong emphasis on accurate, well written English. She was an influential figure, for both Ravitch’s own life and career and her views on school education. Ravitch has said that “in times of stress or sadness, I still turn to poems that I first read in Mrs. Ratcliff’s class” and she has identified the insistence on good grammar and syntax as a vital factor in her success as a writer. She has also emphasised the importance for students of clear and accurate writing and has consistently stressed the benefits of in-depth study of literature, including the historic classics.⁶

The influence of Ravitch’s high school years extended beyond the classroom. The early 1950s were a period of extreme anti-communism in the United States, marked by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s leadership of the Senate’s anti-communist investigations and associated restrictions on freedom of speech and ideas. Ravitch has spoken of the activities of a Houston-based group within the right-wing John

⁶ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Ravitch, “From History to Social Studies: Dilemmas and Problems,” in *Challenges to the Humanities*, ed. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch and P. Holley Roberts (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 80; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 177. For Ravitch on the dangers of neglecting reading and writing skills, see “The Schools We Deserve,” *The New Republic*, 184, no.16 (18 April 1981), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 48-49. For her advocacy of a liberal arts curriculum, see *The Schools We Deserve*, 24-25.

Birch Society, known as the Minute Women, who would “sit in classes and monitor teachers to make sure that they didn’t say anything that sounded vaguely socialist or left-wing.” She has recalled that her ninth-grade history teacher, Mrs Nelda Davis, fell foul of this group, because she wished to attend the convention of the National Council for the Social Studies — an organisation which the Minute Women considered left-wing, along with the United Nations and the NAACP. Ravitch also discovered, whilst working as an assistant in the school library, that there were “forbidden books” about communism and the USSR kept hidden under the circulation desk, and she read all of them. These experiences made a strong impression on her: throughout her career, she has been a forceful opponent of restrictions on free expression, whether in the form of censorship or the imposition of sanctions on individuals based on their beliefs. Ravitch has retained a particular concern about the censorship, from left and right, of textbooks and other material provided for students, as exemplified by her 2003 book *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*.⁷

The other key factor during Ravitch’s time at San Jacinto High School was the racially segregated nature of Houston generally, and its public schools in particular. Writing in June 2021, she described how in 1950s Houston “everything was segregated, including movie theaters...churches, restaurants, public transit...[even] newspaper ads.” Ravitch’s high school was not desegregated by the time she graduated in 1956, despite the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education* which declared state-sanctioned racial segregation of schools to be

⁷ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 182-183.

unconstitutional. She went to ask the school principal the reason for this, receiving the response that “if we desegregated all the black teachers and principals would lose their jobs.” She has said that she left school with a sense that the racism she had experienced was wrong, and that she was strongly in favour of black civil rights. Ravitch’s rejection of segregation was a key element in her early writing, from her time at college onwards, and she remained a supporter of the principle of desegregated schools. At the same time, she continued to adhere to the universalist ideals of the early civil rights movement which, she argued, stood for equal treatment for all and the absence of group preference. Ravitch’s decision to raise her concerns with the principal was also a reflection of another consistent character trait throughout her career – her assertiveness and willingness to challenge authority.⁸

The themes which had emerged at high school — support for free speech and civil rights, and an anti-authoritarian streak — were also evident in Ravitch’s four years as an undergraduate at Wellesley, the elite women’s college near Boston. She was encouraged to apply by the rabbi at her local reformed synagogue, and his wife, who had attended Wellesley but had dropped out to marry. The college had been challenged in the past about the number of Jewish students it admitted, and how they were treated. In April 1938, the then-President Mildred McAfee Horton, writing to a University of Chicago economist about the proportion of Jewish students, accepted that “there is a sense in which...we have a quota”, and said that the college aimed to keep the number of Jewish undergraduates at around ten per cent of the total. She justified this policy by arguing that the student body should not be “broken

⁸ Ravitch, “My View of the 1619 Project,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 6 June 2021; Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019.

up into racial groups”, and that in an earlier period, when a larger proportion of Jews had been admitted, this “made the Jewish students race conscious” and led to “bitterness” on campus. Horton added that she had been told by a Jewish alumna that “the Jews do not want to go to a predominantly Jewish institution.” These issues were still live in November 1954; President Margaret Clapp, replying to a Poughkeepsie, NY resident, stated that during her time at Wellesley she had “heard no one who knows the College comment on anti-semitism”, and that if evidence of it came to light, she would “do my best to combat it.”⁹

Ravitch however does not appear to have suffered from anti-Jewish sentiment whilst at college. Her misgivings about Wellesley, and the challenges to authority that stemmed from them, related primarily to the college rules, which she has said “now seem antiquated, because they were.” Ravitch has described how she and some of her friends were irritated by the strict requirement not to miss classes on the day before vacation, so went to visit some men at Yale, and returned to Wellesley shortly before the first class began “in very poor physical condition.” She has also highlighted the dress code requirement for some meals, to which she and her friends responded by buying formal gowns and big hats from a thrift shop “so we could meet the letter of the rule while looking ridiculous.” She has said that she was a “very silly rebel.”¹⁰

Whilst Ravitch may have adopted a somewhat flippant response to college restrictions which she found personally irksome, she was much more focused in upholding civil rights and freedom of ideas. Her first college paper was in political

⁹ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Mildred McAfee Horton to Mary B. Gilson, 2 April 1938; Margaret Clapp to Mrs. Arthur L. Samuel, 15 November 1954; “Jewish Problems, 1938-1954,” Wellesley College Archives, President’s Office, IDB, 1899-1966, Box 24, Folder 24.9.

¹⁰ Ravitch, email to author, 9 December 2019.

science (which became her major) and was about her school days in segregated Houston. Later she joined the editorial staff of *Wellesley College News*, and in her junior year wrote a series of articles about the South and the challenge of desegregation. In her piece published on 2 October 1958, Ravitch described the “legal maneuvers” used by Southern states to maintain segregation and contrasted “Southern decisiveness” with the “wavering, sometimes timorous policy of the federal government.” Her articles stood out because writing on race and civil rights was not common at that time in *Wellesley College News*. Ravitch’s work also provides an insight into the development of her ideas on desegregation and the role of federal government in securing it. In calling for “federal determination to enforce court orders” in the absence of compliance by Southern states, she was at this point urging Washington to turn its fire against the deliberate maintenance by the South of segregated public schools, and the refusal of the states to enforce black citizens’ legal rights, granted by *Brown*, to attend desegregated schools. Whilst Ravitch in her writing continued to be highly critical of the slowness of the South to dismantle segregation, she was by the late 1970s a firm opponent of federal action initiated by the Johnson administration and designed to achieve particular levels of integration within schools across the country.¹¹

In March 1959, Ravitch became Editor-in-Chief of *Wellesley College News*, a position for which she was elected by the members of the editorial staff. In her first issue as Editor-in-Chief, she was quoted as saying that the newspaper’s major aim in

¹¹ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Ravitch (as Diane Silvers), “Indefatigable Southerners Still Stymie North With Rigid Opposition to Integrated Schools,” *Wellesley College News* 52, no.9 (2 October 1958): 1.

the coming year would be “maintaining its high standard of accuracy, while stimulating a heightened awareness of activity on and off campus.” The *News* under Ravitch’s leadership did contain stories about the college rules (which were being slowly liberalised by this point), but also covered a range of political topics including the Cold War, political conservatism and John F. Kennedy’s views on Catholic schools. One of the subjects to which it returned on several occasions, both in the context of the college and more generally, was press censorship and the wider issue of freedom of thought and expression. The 19 November 1959 issue carried an editorial criticising an “eminent nuclear physicist” who had insisted that his opinions on nuclear testing, expressed at a well-attended student meeting, be treated as “off the record”, and asserting that the *News* should have been allowed to print his comments. The following month, an editorial challenged the refusal of the faculty’s Academic Council to answer questions from the *News* about the reasons for its decision on the content of student classes, on the basis that this information was “confidential”. This followed on from two earlier editorials criticising the absence of a comparative literature course and is indicative of Ravitch’s keen interest in curricular matters, particularly in relation to literature, which has remained a feature of her career as an educational writer.¹²

A topic which extended beyond Wellesley was the provision in the National Defense Education Act 1958 under which academic institutions receiving funds to be

¹² *Wellesley College News* Manual, 4, Wellesley College Archives, ISD, 1912-1969, Box 4 Publicity Office, Folder 4.3; “Silvers Elected Editor-in-Chief of ’59-’60 College *News* Board,” (author unnamed), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.1 (5 March 1959): 1; “Off The Record,” (editorial), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.19 (19 November 1959): 2; “Confidentially,” (editorial), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.21 (10 December 1959): 2; “No Substitutions, Please,” (editorial), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.16 (22 October 1959): 2; “It’s a Tragedy,” (editorial), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.18 (10 November 1959): 2.

distributed as student loans were required to obtain a 'loyalty oath' from the students concerned, confirming their allegiance to the United States and their rejection of leftist ideologies. Although this did not directly affect students at Wellesley, which had ample funds of its own, it was roundly condemned in a March 1959 *News* editorial headed "McCarthy Revisited", which described the requirements of the Act as "unfairly discriminatory against students." An article in December that year drew attention to two Harvard professors who had been dismissed from the faculty for refusing to sign a loyalty oath. These editorial preoccupations of the *News* during Ravitch's tenure as Editor-in-Chief raised echoes of her high school experiences, but also presaged her later writing. In *The Troubled Crusade* (1983), her history of post-1945 American education, Ravitch devoted a chapter to "Loyalty Investigations", providing a highly critical account of the efforts in the decade after World War II to exclude from schools and higher education institutions those faculty members who refused to affirm their loyalty to the Constitution and reject any connection with communism.¹³

Ravitch had decided, unsurprisingly in view of her active involvement in *Wellesley College News*, that she was interested in a career in journalism, and she was an intern at the *Washington Post* during the summer of 1959. This discouraged her from working in the newspaper industry; she has recalled that most women in the newsroom were engaged in "making copies and fetching coffee, which seemed boring." Her experience was a reflection of the prevalent assumption in the late

¹³ "McCarthy Revisited," (editorial), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.3 (19 March 1959): 2; Nancy Briska, "Two Harvard Professors Refuse Oath, Lose Jobs," *Wellesley College News* 53, no.21 (10 December 1959): 7; Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 81-113.

1950s that women graduates would be unable to achieve senior management positions within the media and other professions and would be mainly restricted to roles as assistants to men in these sectors. *Wellesley College News* carried advertisements for secretarial colleges. In June 1959, it also reported on the Commencement speech by Secretary of Defense Neil H. McElroy, which envisaged a leadership role for women in the “cultural, philanthropic, civic and educational progresses of their communities” – implying that they would be largely excluded from the world of paid work.¹⁴

Underlying this view of Wellesley graduates’ career prospects was the fact that a very substantial proportion of them married before, or shortly after, graduation. Ravitch has said that most of her fellow high school students married straight after leaving school. She has added that there was family pressure, which she felt personally, to get married as soon as possible, in part because young women were being asked “who’s going to support you?” In May 1959, the *News* included an article based on an interview with a psychoanalyst, Dr. Andree Royon, in which it did not challenge her assertions that “it is not easy for marriage and career to co-exist successfully” and that the “tragedy” of the female graduate was that “she has to make a choice.” Expanding on her general proposition, Royon was reported as saying that in some cases a woman would “take up a career before marriage”, to which she could return “following her duties as a young mother.” Speaking at the 1960 Commencement, *New York Times* education editor Fred H. Hechinger argued that

¹⁴ Ravitch quoted in Goldstein, “Diane Ravitch the Anti-Rhee”; “McElroy Urges Graduates To Foster Educational Aims,” (author unnamed), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.11 (8 June 1959): 1. It was not uncommon for Wellesley undergraduates to serve as interns in Washington, particularly to members of Congress.

graduates should be assertive in pursuing a career after Wellesley but added that “the real question” was “how to make it possible for women, with a minimum waste of time and loss of effectiveness, to resume their careers after they have raised their families.”¹⁵

During Ravitch’s internship in Washington, she met her future husband, and the following year she joined the ranks of Wellesley alumnae who married shortly after graduation. Richard Ravitch, who was five years older than her, was a New Yorker who had been working in Washington since 1958 in a congressional staff role. In the summer of 1959, he was dating a Wellesley classmate of Ravitch who asked him to “look after” her during her internship. In the event he was attracted to the “liberal Southern woman” with “enormous talent and ambition”, who, like him, was a strong Democratic Party supporter. The couple married in June 1960, two weeks after Ravitch’s Wellesley graduation. Richard Ravitch had already decided to move back to New York City, to take up a role in his family’s building business, HRH Construction. After a European honeymoon, the Ravitches moved into an apartment on East 35th Street and Second Avenue.¹⁶

New York City: The Early Culture Wars and the *New Leader*, 1960-1967

In the autumn of 1960, as the newly married Ravitch set up home with her husband in New York City, she busied herself as a volunteer at the headquarters of the

¹⁵ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; “Marriage or Career? Conflict Forces Choice,” (author unnamed), *Wellesley College News* 53, no.10 (21 May 1959): 6; Fred H. Hechinger, Speech at 82nd Annual Commencement Exercises, 6 June 1960, page ADD 2, Wellesley College Archives, ISD, 1912-1969, Box 4 Publicity Office, Folder 4.6. Over two decades later, Hechinger wrote a *New Republic* review of Ravitch's *The Troubled Crusade*.

¹⁶ Richard Ravitch, *So Much To Do: A Full Life of Business, Politics and Confronting Fiscal Crises* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 10-16.

Kennedy presidential campaign. She was a strongly pro-civil rights liberal and has said that she viewed John F. Kennedy as “the voice of my generation.” She had met Kennedy at Wellesley in 1958, and had been “smitten with his charm, his intelligence, his humor, and his keen grasp of national and international issues.”¹⁷ Over the next few years however, her ideas were subject to a number of influences that laid the foundations for her repositioning as a self-described neoconservative in the period after 1967. Ravitch encountered individuals and ideas through her marriage and her work at the liberal anti-communist *New Leader*, and these influences were reinforced by other experiences in her personal life.

Between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s, a liberal consensus dominated American political discourse. This involved a broad continuation of Roosevelt’s New Deal principles to which Ravitch had been attached since her childhood, combining support for American capitalism with a major role for the state, and a strongly anti-communist international perspective. This ‘New Deal Order’ evolved in the mid-1960s as Lyndon B. Johnson pursued his vision of ‘Great Society Liberalism’. At the core of this was the War on Poverty, incorporating a range of initiatives aimed at disadvantaged groups covering policy areas such as employment, housing, and health care. In school education, the major enactment was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act 1965 (ESEA), Title I of which directed federal funds towards the education of poorer students.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ravitch, “A Graduate Education at the New Leader,” *The New Leader* 89, no.1 (January 2006), Ravitch’s typescript draft: 2.

¹⁸ On the dominance of the ‘New Deal Order’, see for example Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989). The ideas of post-war consensus liberalism were epitomised by Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (1960).

During the 1960s however, the liberal consensus came under attack as the seeds were sown for what became known as the culture wars. Lined up on one side were the movements collectively described as the New Left. Early manifestations of this arose among white student radicals in the early 1960s and were encapsulated in the 1962 Port Huron Statement of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Tom Hayden, the author of the Statement, later wrote that a key objective of SDS was to shift the country from its Cold War focus to the vigorous pursuit of civil rights and anti-poverty measures. Todd Gitlin, another SDS activist, argued that the New Left represented a reaction against those consensus liberals who believed that poverty and racism could be tackled within the existing political system. The Statement questioned the democratic credentials of that system, arguing for a “participatory democracy”, which would bring people “out of isolation and into community.” It also challenged American middle-class materialism, stating that “work should involve incentives worthier than money or survival.” Many student activists rejected the conventional norms of American life and adopted the values of the counterculture. The profile of the New Left increased following 1965, with the escalation of the Vietnam War. By 1967, SDS numbered some 30,000 members, though New Left radicalism became increasingly fragmented, with the growth of the stridently countercultural Yippies and the violent Weathermen.¹⁹

¹⁹ Tom Hayden, *The Port Huron Statement: The Visionary Call of the 1960s Revolution* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2005), 12-15; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (Bantam revised trade ed., New York, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam, 1993), 60-61; Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), *The Port Huron Statement* (1962; repr. in *The Port Huron Statement* by Tom Hayden), 53-54; Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: the U.S. Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 136-149, 156-160.

New Left ideas could also be found in the work of a range of intellectuals. Radical writers on school education, for example, mounted a withering attack on public schools. Paul Goodman, in *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) and *Compulsory Mis-Education* (1964), rejected the socialising role of the school, in which Ravitch strongly believed, and argued that the regimentation produced by the existing educational system was harmful to children's development. The idea of an enriching 'liberal' education, which Ravitch had valued at school and college, was challenged in books such as Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* (1967). Kozol condemned the content of the school curriculum, which he viewed as particularly irrelevant to the black students he taught during his three years at an inner-city Boston elementary school. The New Left critique of American education extended to universities and colleges. During the riots at Columbia University in summer 1968, Tom Hayden stated that the objective of the student activism was to transform the university into an institution "standing against the mainstream of American society."²⁰

The 1960s also saw a significant growth of radicalism in the political ideas of black Americans. The increasing pressure for black civil rights was initially focused on the non-violent campaign of Martin Luther King, the aims and values of which were most clearly expressed in the August 1963 March on Washington. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) however spearheaded a more radical approach from the mid-1960s. The black freedom movement broadened its focus from legal rights to an attack on the continued existence of black inequality, and its increasing militancy was manifested in the 1967 Newark and Detroit riots, and the

²⁰ Hayden quoted in Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 205.

emergence of the Black Panther party. Black-led groups and predominantly white organisations such as SDS influenced each other, and in some cases developed common themes. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, for example, in *Black Power*, built on the idea of ‘community’ to state that “group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.” They argued that blacks should adopt a black identity separate to that of white society and work together to challenge racial inequality. In education, this was the basis of the black support for community control of schools. Carmichael and Hamilton asserted that white run boards of education which failed to address the needs of black people “must be challenged forcefully and clearly.” They went on to say that “if this means that black parents must gain control over the operation of the schools in the black community, then that must be the solution.”²¹

The opposition to the New Left from the mid-1960s was led by the figures who became known as the neoconservatives. They were often Jewish, and – having in several instances begun as 1930s Marxists – had supported Roosevelt’s New Deal and the post-war liberal consensus and were generally Democrat voters until the early 1970s. In a 1976 *Newsweek* article, Irving Kristol, often styled the ‘godfather’ of neoconservatism, attempted to define the ideas of neoconservatives in the late 1960s and early 1970s during what Justin Vaisse has described as the “first age” of neoconservatism. At the core of Kristol’s definition was respect for “traditional values and institutions.” Encapsulated within this was an endorsement of the American

²¹ Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 132-136, 96-100; Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (1st British ed., London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 44, 42-43.

liberal-democratic process, emphasising civilised political discourse (with a consequent distaste for the views of those such as student radicals who resorted to direct action), an aversion to the growth of group power which later became known as ‘identity politics’, and a defence of conventional lifestyles and the Western cultural tradition against the challenge of the counterculture. Kristol also affirmed the neoconservatives’ belief in “equality of opportunity”, but not “egalitarianism” — which he defined as “everyone end[ing] up with equal shares of everything” — and their strong anti-communism. These views — signalling a challenge to the ideas of the New Left — made up the shared values of neoconservatives.²²

There was less unanimity among neoconservatives in relation to the role of the state. Kristol, in his *Newsweek* article, argued that whilst neoconservatism was not hostile to “the idea of a welfare state”, it was critical of the “Great Society version” of it, as implemented under the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson. Kristol’s opposition to big government grew from the early 1970s. In 1972, having openly supported Richard Nixon for the presidency, he became a writer for the strongly pro-free enterprise and anti-New Deal *Wall Street Journal*. Later he was influential in promoting supply-side economics, whose key goals he regarded as restricting government spending and avoiding “needless government regulations.” The emphasis on free-market economics, generally coupled with support for the Republican Party, became over time an increasingly significant element in neoconservative thinking. Murray Friedman’s *The Neoconservative Revolution* (2005)

²² Irving Kristol, “What Is a ‘Neo-Conservative’?,” *Newsweek* (19 January 1976): 17 ; Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (First Harvard University Press paperback edition. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 6-8.

contains a chapter on “Irving Kristol and a New Vision of Capitalism.” Another important strand in late twentieth-century neoconservatism, highlighted by Friedman, was foreign policy. Neoconservatives such as Jeanne Kirkpatrick were instrumental in developing the approach of the Reagan administration, based on rejection of detente and support for right-wing authoritarian regimes in order to resist the spread of communism.²³

There were however influential figures within neoconservatism, particularly during its early battles with the New Left, who did not share Kristol’s support for the Republican Party or his views on the role of the state and who remained focused on domestic policy issues. Nathan Glazer, whose ideas are reflected in much of Ravitch’s early educational writing, was clearly a major figure in framing the neoconservative response to the New Left; for example, his views on race, ethnicity and culture were a key element in the neoconservative attack on ethnic separatism. Yet Glazer argued in 1973 that the Great Society was “clearly not a uniform failure”, and Andrew Hartman in *A War for the Soul of America* (2015) contended that Glazer “never became a full-blown neoconservative” because “unlike Kristol...he continued voting Democratic.”²⁴

Similarly, Daniel Bell, although he did not accept the neoconservative label and left *The Public Interest* (which he had co-founded with Kristol) in 1972 after its

²³ Kristol, “What Is a ‘Neo-Conservative’?”: 17; Kristol, “An Autobiographical Memoir,” in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo and Singapore: The Free Press, 1995), 35-37; Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 177-184, 151-176.

²⁴ Nathan Glazer, “Nixon, the Great Society, and the Future of Social Policy: A Symposium,” *Commentary* 55, no.5 (May 1973): 35; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 55.

rightward shift, is generally regarded as an important figure in the development of neoconservative ideas; Peter Steinfels' *The Neoconservatives* (1979) devotes a chapter to him. Bell famously described himself as "a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture." His political liberalism, stressing support for the rule of law and the importance of individual achievement based on "the criterion of merit", and his cultural conservatism, with its emphasis on "tradition in culture, and judgment in art (and a coherent curriculum in education)" were both in tune with Kristol's view of neoconservatism. At the same time, Bell was a firm believer in the welfare state, arguing that the state should ensure "work for those who seek it, a degree of adequate security against the hazards of the market, and adequate access to medical care."²⁵

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Ravitch's political and intellectual ideas were evolving, she would have been aware of individuals within neoconservatism who adopted a vigorous anti-New Left stance, based on strong support for liberal democracy and a firm rejection of the counterculture, but who also voted Democrat, and countenanced the retention of a significant role for the state, which chimed with her own long-standing attachment to the principles of Roosevelt's New Deal. The New Left was also attacked by some intellectuals who could not be described as neoconservatives. For example, Irving Howe, whose work Ravitch encountered at the *New Leader* magazine, was a democratic socialist, who accepted the merits of a strong welfare state of the kind envisaged by European social democracy. Writing in

²⁵ Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: the Men Who Are Changing America's Politics*, (1st Touchstone ed., New York: Touchstone, 1980), 161-187; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, (1976; Twentieth Anniversary ed., New York: Basic Books, 1996), xi, xiv-xv, xii-xiii.

1965 however, he criticised the New Left for its rejection of “the intellectual heritage of the West, the tradition of liberalism at its most serious, [and] the commitment to democracy as an indispensable part of civilized life.”²⁶ The teachers’ union leader Albert Shanker, whose views became familiar to Ravitch in her early career as an educational writer, also accepted many of the ideas associated with neoconservatism, but fought strongly for increased spending on public education. Ravitch herself was a major contributor to neoconservative ideas on education from the early 1970s and was instrumental in the formulation of a neoconservative approach to school reform in the 1980s, driven in part by respect for the Western cultural tradition and the desire to promote liberal democracy and the American common culture. At the same time however, she remained a registered Democrat, who believed in the continuation of government social programmes such as welfare.

Ravitch’s ultimate decision to concentrate on school education was a significant factor in reinforcing her views on the role of the state. The American school system, with its emphasis on public funding and control, largely at district and state level (though with increased federal support following the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act), had been subjected to strident attacks by New Left writers from the mid-1960s. Neoconservatives by contrast viewed the public school, from which the many Jewish-Americans among their number had obtained particular benefits, as one of the ‘traditional institutions’ which they valued. They continued to uphold the principle of a publicly run school system with significant intervention by the federal government, whilst calling for major reforms in its operation, during the

²⁶ Irving Howe, “New Styles in ‘Leftism’”, *Dissent* 13 no.3 (Summer 1965), reprinted in *Selected Writings 1950 -1990*, (1st Harvest/HBJ ed., San Diego, New York and London: Harvest/HBJ, 1992), 204.

1980s, when the largely religious ‘New Right’ argued for the abolition of the government role in school education.²⁷

Ravitch’s exposure to political and intellectual ideas in New York City arose first from her marriage to Richard Ravitch, who was active in Democratic Party politics. She has said that her husband, who had been raised in New York City and was more attuned to its political and social milieu, had a large influence on her political evolution, and she met some important figures through their shared interest in politics. She and her husband formed friendships in the late 1960s with Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, the editor of the then strongly neoconservative *Commentary* magazine, and their respective wives, the writers Gertrude Himmelfarb and Midge Decter. Ravitch has said that by the early 1970s, she considered herself a neoconservative.²⁸

Another vital influence for Ravitch was her employment at the *New Leader* magazine. Despite the financial security of her marriage, she “needed to work”; because she was intellectually curious and ambitious to become a writer, she was not prepared, like many graduate women at that time, to be someone’s “gal Friday.” Displaying the enterprise and chutzpah which she had demonstrated since her schooldays, she identified the *New Leader* as a prospective employer from a January 1961 *New York Times* obituary of its long-standing editor Sol Levitas and telephoned to offer herself as an editorial assistant — a position she secured at \$10 per week. Ravitch worked there until 1967, except for a year in 1961-62 when her husband (an

²⁷ On the distinction between the neoconservative and New Right views on school education, see Ronald W. Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens: How Accountability Reform Has Damaged Civic Education and Undermined Democracy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 13-16.

²⁸ Ravitch, email to author, 9 December 2019; Denby, “Public Defender”: 71.

Army reservist) was sent to Georgia following the Berlin crisis. She encountered an environment very different from the *Washington Post* newsroom, which she had found extremely uncongenial. The then-editor Mike Kolatch has said that she “learned how to write” at the *New Leader*, where she authored occasional pieces and met writers who called in to deliver their copy. She was exposed to the world of public intellectuals, whose writing was designed for an educated general readership rather than the academic community. Her own work, particularly her popular but scholarly educational histories, would be very much in this tradition of the public intellectual.²⁹

The *New Leader* contributors Ravitch met included figures who became prominent in neoconservatism, such as Kristol and Bell, and veteran intellectuals like Sidney Hook, who, she recalled, “urged me to be more argumentative.” Hook wrote widely on educational matters. A pre-war Marxist, he was an admirer and former graduate student of the philosopher and progressive educationalist John Dewey, who promoted radical ideas about the role of education in relation to the development of the individual and democratic society. By the mid-1960s however, Hook was becoming increasingly critical of the attacks on the public school by New Left writers, who he believed were misrepresenting Dewey’s ideas. He also argued for the contribution of the existing public school system to social mobility and the strength of American democracy. Ravitch’s vigorous endorsement of the value of the public school in her writing was in tune with Hook’s views, and she worked with him on the

²⁹ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Ravitch, “A Graduate Education at the New Leader”: 1, 3-5, 7, 10, 11; Kolatch quoted in Kevin Carey, “The Dissenter,” *New Republic* 242, no. 19 (15 December 2011): 14.

‘Education for Democracy’ initiative in the 1980s. Writing to Ravitch in 1979, Hook praised her for her toughness and her readiness “not only to speak up for your convictions but to defend them.”³⁰

In a retrospective article published in 2006, Ravitch wrote that the *New Leader* gave her a “graduate degree in world and national politics, as well as American literary culture.” She is clear that her experience there “indelibly marked” her political and intellectual development. She argued that it “never had a party line” and “was not for or against any ideas or policies, other than a clear, unwavering commitment to democratic politics.” In fact, the *New Leader* was an organ of so-called Cold War liberalism, being strongly anti-communist and one of several publications which were subsidised by the CIA. Cold War liberals (and subsequently neoconservatives) tended to view ‘democracy’ in more normative terms — reflecting the existing American political system — than the New Left critics. Ravitch has also said that the magazine’s writers were “relatively conservative about culture.” As she has noted, there was a “Democratic socialist” strand within the *New Leader*, which had started life in the 1920s as a socialist newspaper. By the mid-1960s however, contributors who could be described as social democrats were typically writers such as Irving Howe and Michael Harrington (the author of the 1962 anti-poverty work *The Other America*) who shared at least some of the neoconservatives’ critique of the New Left. The *New Leader* did encourage lively debate, but Ravitch also took

³⁰ Ravitch (re: Hook) quoted in Maurice R. Berube, “The Education of Diane Ravitch,” in *Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Essays on the Politics of Culture* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Bergin and Garvey, 2002), 45. For Hook on the benefits of the public school system, see “Modern Education & Its Critics,” 1954; rev. version in *Education & the Taming of Power*, (British ed., London: Alcove Press, 1974), 34-36; for his attack on the New Left critics of school education, see “John Dewey & His Betrayers,” 1971; rev. version in *Education & the Taming of Power*, 89-107. Hook, letter to Ravitch, 5 November 1979, Diane Ravitch Papers Box 46, Folder 7.

away its “distrust of ideologues, zealots and utopians” which would have circumscribed the terms of such debates and would have tended to reinforce in her a strong belief in liberal-democratic values and a sceptical view of the counterculture.³¹

Ravitch’s views were also affected by aspects of her personal life. One of her earliest *New Leader* pieces was a 1963 review of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. This criticised Friedan’s analysis for its “pervasive glibness of thought”, arguing that it “blames the housewife for almost every conceivable blemish on the American character.” Ravitch at the time was combining her job at the *New Leader* — which she had obtained despite the general pigeonholing of women into secretarial roles — with marriage and a young child. It seems that she felt she had been able to avoid the suffocating fate of the college educated suburban homemaker as described by Friedan. Her reluctance to embrace the feminist cause was in part an indication of her universalist belief in securing progress through equal legal rights for all rather than the exercise of group power. In *The Troubled Crusade*, she wrote of the concern about the threat to academic freedom caused by the growth of affirmative action in the 1970s on behalf of women working in higher education and she was dismissive of the efforts to combat gender stereotyping in school textbooks and challenge sexist terminology.³²

³¹ Ravitch, “A Graduate Education at the New Leader”: 9-10; email to author, 9 December 2019. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 62.

³² Ravitch, “Mama in Search of Herself,” review of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, *The New Leader* 46, no.8 (15 April 1963): 29; Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 292-305. Ravitch’s apparent assumption in the early 1960s that she could succeed without the help of Friedan’s feminist theories was shared by Stephanie Coontz; see *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), xvii-xxiii.

A more general aversion to the counterculture stemmed from an incident in 1966, when her second child was fatally ill, and what she has described as a group of “hippies” set fire to a flower bed near to her home in Central Park West. She has explained how she reacted against their “defiance of convention and...lack of any sense of responsibility.” In a 1970 letter to her academic mentor Lawrence Cremin, she explained that during the 1960s she had doubted the merits of “middle-class morality”, and this incident clearly helped restore her faith in the conventional mores which were contemptuously dismissed by the New Left.³³

Another negative experience of the countercultural forces within American society arose at a rally organised by Ravitch in New York City during the 1968 presidential campaign, in support of the Democratic Party candidate, Hubert Humphrey. Writing about the event in the *New Leader*, Ravitch recalled that it was invaded by Yippies shouting pro-Ho Chi Minh slogans. She described how two Yippies jumped naked on to the stage, where one of them “strode directly to Ambassador [John Kenneth] Galbraith and presented him with the head of a pig on a platter.” This episode also provides an insight into Ravitch’s position on the Vietnam War and Democratic Party politics in this period. She has said that from the mid-1960s she was opposed to the War — a view shared by Galbraith and the other liberal intellectuals she assembled at the rally. In the 1968 presidential election however, she worked actively for the incumbent Vice-President, a member of the administration responsible for the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam, in his efforts to garner votes, including from those on the left who had previously

³³ Ravitch, email to author, 9 December 2019; Ravitch to Lawrence Cremin, 1 December 1970, Lawrence Cremin Papers, Box 21, General Correspondence N-T, 1969-70.

supported the strongly anti-war candidacies of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Interviewed in 2012 by David Denby, she said that after the Yippie invasion of the rally, she knew that the Democratic Party — which she continued to support — was “hopelessly divided and incapable of governing.”³⁴

By the late 1960s, Ravitch had acquired both the combative motivation and the skills needed to battle for the traditional ideas and values which were decisive in the formation of her intellectual viewpoint. The political and cultural schisms caused by the culture wars however provided a very different context to that in which Ravitch had become a centre-left Democrat in the late 1950s. In that changed landscape, she came to look for support for her principles within the ideas of neoconservatism.

Ravitch had used her time at the *New Leader* to expand her understanding of politics and culture and had become acquainted with the work of public intellectuals, which provided a model for her own career. Having acquired that experience, she was keen to seek out opportunities that matched both her talent and her ambition. She found them with a topic that combined two subjects close to her heart — black civil rights and public schools — namely the fight for community control of schools in New York.

³⁴ Ravitch, “See How Dick Ran,” review of *The Selling of the President 1968* by Joe McGinniss, *The New Leader* 52, no. 21 (10 November 1969): 19; Ravitch, email to author, 9 December 2019; Denby, “Public Defender”: 71.

CHAPTER 2 – THE MAKING OF A NEOCONSERVATIVE EDUCATIONALIST, 1967 – 1974

The movement for community control in New York City, and in particular the 1968 dispute in Ocean Hill – Brownsville between the local school board and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), provided the catalyst for the evolution of both Ravitch's political and intellectual ideas and her career as a writer. As a long-time supporter of civil rights, she was initially sympathetic towards the work of black community schools, but later opposed community control, particularly its invocation of New Left ideas that challenged the traditional principles to which she had become strongly attached. Community activists' support for participatory democracy focused on a distinct ethnic group, and their attacks on the due process rights of UFT members, ran contrary to her belief in shared civic values, particularly faith in the American liberal democratic system, and the public school's role in promoting them, as well as New Deal-era principles such as the beneficial role of government and the defence of labour rights. Whilst Ravitch's thinking reflected her own upbringing and experience, much of it also chimed with the views of contemporary neoconservatives; for example, her fears about the growth of ethnic group consciousness were very much in line with those of Nathan Glazer. In her writing, and particularly her first book *The Great School Wars*, she made an important early contribution to the development of a neoconservative viewpoint on school education. The publication of that book also exemplified her tenacity, as she overcame resistance from individuals who discouraged her ambition to write educational history, and challenged the advice of her mentor Lawrence Cremin, to produce a successful work aimed at a general readership.

Community Control, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and Ravitch's Early Educational Writing

Ravitch had continued to be a firm believer in black civil rights since her time as a high school student in Houston. Whilst living in Georgia with her husband, she regularly travelled in the blacks only area of public buses, and she later attended the March on Washington.¹ She also became associated with Preston Wilcox, a black social work professor at Columbia and community leader in Harlem. Her relationship with Wilcox formed a very significant influence on her political and intellectual development, fuelling her interest in the efforts to secure the desegregation of schools, and the other initiatives regarding black students, both nationally and in New York City.

'De jure' segregation, involving state action to place black students in separate schools — which had never applied in New York City — had been outlawed in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, but the Southern states were slow to implement *Brown*, and 'de facto' segregation continued even outside the South. The pressure for desegregation increased nationally from the mid-1960s, in part because of the prevalence of the theory known as 'the culture of poverty' or 'cultural deprivation', which held that the culture and values of the poor, resulting from their marginalisation within society, made it almost impossible for them to achieve upward mobility. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in his 1965 United States government report, *The Negro Family: the Case for National Action*, applied this theory particularly to blacks. James S. Coleman, the author of the 1966 report *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, related the culture of poverty specifically to

¹ Ravitch, email to author, 9 December 2019.

black educational underachievement, by arguing that inequality of educational opportunity arose “first in the home itself and the cultural influences immediately surrounding the home.” He suggested that this should be counteracted not by higher school spending, but by increasing the exposure of black children to the educational environment and reducing the “social and racial homogeneity” of schools — essentially an argument for desegregation.² Cultural deprivation could also be applied — as it was in national initiatives such as the preschool Head Start — to justify the principle of ‘compensatory education’, under which special programmes were implemented with the objective of raising the educational achievement of poor (usually black) children.

In New York City, the educational landscape in the post-war period was influenced by developments affecting the various ethnic groups within the population. Many descendants of earlier white immigrants moved into the middle class, benefiting from increased access to higher education. Jewish Americans did particularly well, especially in teaching, where public spending increased rapidly and recruitment was based on the ‘merit system’, involving competitive examinations. Although a black middle class evolved in 1960s New York, the economic deprivation affecting blacks generally led to reduced housing options, resulting in residential — and consequently educational — segregation. Chronic school overcrowding and less experienced teachers (senior teachers were able to transfer to white schools) meant

² James S. Coleman, “Equal Schools or Equal Students?”, *The Public Interest* no. 4 (Summer 1966): 73-74.

that black students enjoyed far worse facilities than whites, and by the early 1960s the average difference between black and white reading ages was two years.³

In the 1960s, under pressure from black community representatives, the New York Board of Education introduced various initiatives aimed at securing desegregation, which failed to achieve their objective. Added to white population shifts to suburban neighbourhoods, there was active hostility from white ‘Parents and Taxpayers’ (PAT) groups, as in Jackson Heights, Queens, whose campaigns caused desegregation programmes to be cut back. New York-specific compensatory education programmes, introduced on a limited scale from the late 1950s, were no more successful and, in any event, black leaders regarded compensatory education as no substitute for meaningful desegregation. By 1966, therefore, pro-integration organisations had lost faith in the ability of the Board of Education to deliver desegregated schools. They therefore turned to the idea of community control, the seeds of which lay in Title II of the Economic Opportunity Act 1964. This provided for Community Action Programs, designed to encourage communities to “mobilize their resources...to combat poverty” and based on the doctrine of “maximum feasible participation” of the poor. When this measure was enacted, little attention was paid to the implications of participation. As the political environment became more heated however — particularly in the racial context — groups involved in fighting poverty and discrimination made full use of the maximum feasible participation

³ Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 12-20, 181-182.

provision. The rise of the New York community control movement was a clear manifestation of this.⁴

Whilst there was broad consensus about the need to improve black students' achievement levels, strong disagreement arose about how this should be done. The UFT, basing its arguments on cultural deprivation, continued to support desegregation, and promoted a compensatory education scheme, known as 'More Effective Schools', which involved reduced class sizes and extended hours for schools in disadvantaged areas. It also believed that teachers required increased powers to exclude disruptive children. By contrast, the proponents of community control accepted the argument of black social psychologist Kenneth Clark that the problem lay with white teachers who used cultural deprivation as an "alibi" and did not teach black children effectively because they "do not expect them to learn." This implied the need for UFT members to change their methods or be replaced by teachers more sensitive to the needs of black students – which in turn threatened long-established teachers' rights, based on the test-based merit system of appointment, and due process (protecting teachers against arbitrary dismissal).⁵

The arguments for community control were, however, more than purely educational; they raised themes which resonated with the cultural politics of the New Left. Preston Wilcox, who was the driving force behind community control in East Harlem's Intermediate School 201 (IS 201), channelled the idea of the community, arguing that a community-centred school would be "sympathetically

⁴ Ibid, 22-30; Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 34-35, 90-92.

⁵ Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 55-56, 91; Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*, British ed. (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1965), 127, 132.

responsive to the customs and values of the community it serves” and “committed to utilizing these values as a resource for education.” This approach was not new; as Wilcox recognised, it had been employed by Leonard Covello, the principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in the 1930s and 1940s, in relation to the mainly Italian–American local community. In addition, community control reflected the New Left’s rejection of white middle-class materialism — Carmichael and Hamilton, for example, who supported black control of schools, associated it with the rejection of values “based on material aggrandizement, not the expansion of humanity.” As well as receiving black teacher support, the cause of community control was adopted by a small but committed group of radical white teachers, many of whom had participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer to secure black voting rights in Mississippi.⁶

Sympathy for the idea of community control in New York was not, however, restricted to political radicals — it also encompassed the white elites. Mayor John Lindsay and the city’s business community were anxious that New York should not experience the racial violence which had scarred other American cities. They viewed community control as a means of heading off this threat by reaching out to black New Yorkers. Business-based not-for-profit organisations such as the New York Urban Coalition and the Ford Foundation were actively involved in supporting black control of schools. The Ford Foundation employed Mario Fantini and funded Marilyn Gittell of the Institute for Community Studies (ICS); both Fantini and Gittell played a

⁶ Preston Wilcox, “The Controversy over I.S. 201,” *Urban Review* (July 1966): 14, 13; Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (1st British ed., London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 40; Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 40.

prominent part in developing community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. UFT member Patrick Harnett expressed concern about the alliance between black communities, and upper middle-class elites “outside...the conflict of black insurgency”, who were united in their opposition to the lower middle-class UFT.⁷

Ravitch met Preston Wilcox through a mutual friend and has said that “I was very attracted to him because he was an exciting and vibrant man and totally different from the well-manicured, well-behaved world in which I lived.” She attended community meetings at his invitation and recalls that “I don’t think I ever spoke, just listened.” In a January 1969 letter, she wrote of her “few years of fairly close contact with the schools, with black activists, with community groups.”⁸

Ravitch’s exposure to the issues of concern affecting black Americans was critical to the development of her career over the period to the mid-1970s, as she focused on the New York City schools and the events in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Initially this manifested itself in the tension between her admiration for Wilcox and her increasing anxiety about what she came to regard as the extremist and separatist nature of community control, which was first evident in her writing whilst working for the Carnegie Corporation from early 1967.

Ravitch has described the death of her second child from leukaemia in 1966 as a “horrible life changing experience.” After that she decided that she did not wish to

⁷ Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 36-40, 129-131; Patrick Harnett, “Why Teachers Strike: A Lesson for Liberals,” *The Village Voice* (31 October 1968), repr. in *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville: The New York School Strikes of 1968*, ed. Maurice R. Berube and Marilyn Gittell (New York, Washington and London: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 209.

⁸ Ravitch, email to author, 9 December 2019; Ravitch to Lawrence Cremin, 20 January 1969, Lawrence Cremin Papers, Box 21, General Correspondence N-T, 1969-70. In a nod to the connections made through her marriage, Ravitch also referred in the letter to her contact with the “political establishment”.

continue as an employee of the *New Leader* and wanted a different challenge, so (following a suggestion from a Wellesley friend) she contacted the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Ravitch encountered the world of grant-making foundations when she became involved with the Corporation in 1967. It is clear from the early correspondence between Ravitch and her designated Carnegie contacts that she was keen to advance her writing career and had developed a particular interest in the education of disadvantaged (and especially black) children. By February 1967, she had already sent the Corporation a draft article on community action in East Harlem, and a document entitled “Notes Toward a Study of the Community School: Can It Make a Difference for Underachievers?”⁹

The Notes indicate that Ravitch, aided by her relationship with Wilcox and consequent experience of IS 201, had acquired extensive knowledge of the issues affecting black education, and was at this point reasonably open-minded about them. Her review of the suggested causes of student underachievement included “bad home environment” (reflecting the culture of poverty principle), but also mentioned teachers’ “lack of...capacity to teach slum students” and a “curriculum formulated on supposed uneducability of ghetto youth.” In a section headed “The Lessons of I.S. 201”, she was critical of the New York Board of Education for “listening without hearing”, and later in the document she asked whether community schools were feasible without a “major rehauling of the present overcentralized educational bureaucracy.” Throughout the twentieth century, the Board of Education had

⁹ Ravitch, interview by author, Brooklyn, 30 September 2019; Ravitch to Margaret Mahoney (and reply), February 1967, Carnegie Corporation of New York Records, Series IIIA, Box 787, Folder 12.

presided over a highly centralised school system, without the local school boards found elsewhere in the United States.¹⁰

In addition, Ravitch recognised that the success of the community school depended on overcoming the hostility of teachers, who were “zealous about protecting their professionalism”, but also required the support of parents who “no longer trust the professionals.” She foreshadowed her future concerns about community control by arguing that “frustration and cynicism” within the “ghetto” had caused activists to believe that quality education could only be achieved “if they themselves ‘control’ the school” and that the inadequacy of the Board of Education “turns many towards...extremism.” Overall, however, the Notes reflect the range of viewpoints on the subject and represent a balanced and well-informed contemporary analysis of community schools.¹¹

Ravitch impressed the officials at the Carnegie Corporation sufficiently to be hired as a consultant in March 1967. She constantly sought opportunities to write throughout 1967 during which she gave birth to another child, and she was eager to use reports prepared for the Corporation as the basis for published articles. One such report, focussing particularly on compensatory education, led to her contacting *Urban Review* (a journal specialising in urban public education, for which Wilcox had written), and in October 1967 it accepted for publication her article “Programs, Placebos, Panaceas”.

¹⁰ Ravitch, “Notes Toward a Study of the Community School: Can It Make a Difference for Underachievers?” February 1967 (Carnegie Corporation of New York Records, Series IIIA, Box 787, Folder 12).

¹¹ Ibid.

In the article, Ravitch challenged two “basic assumptions” about compensatory education: first, that it involved “special services for culturally disadvantaged children”, and second, that it was “temporary, lasting only until the child has been ‘compensated’.” She argued that “compensatory education in small doses has little or no impact” and “permits educators to blame the students who don’t respond to their programs”, stating that “only sustained quality education makes a difference.” She also stressed the importance of parental involvement, arguing that parents demanded “veto power” only where they believed schools were failing to “provide quality education.” In taking this stance, involving a clear challenge to the cultural deprivation principle, Ravitch appeared to be siding with black pro-community control writers like Kenneth Clark. The article also considered the role of school systems. Writing in terms which echoed her earlier Notes, Ravitch argued that most urban systems were “saddled with overcentralized bureaucracies, zealously guarding their power and effectively throttling change”, and she concluded by advocating “radical decentralization of school systems” — a phrase which implied the movement of power to the local community. In late 1967 therefore, Ravitch continued to show a substantial measure of support for some of the ideas underlying community control. Before the publication of the article in April 1968 however, her views had shifted significantly.¹²

Three ‘demonstration districts’ — Two Bridges, IS 201, and Ocean Hill-Brownsville — were established by the Board of Education in May 1967, with Ford Foundation backing, as experimental projects to examine the effectiveness of

¹² Ravitch, “Programs, Placebos, Panaceas,” *Urban Review* (April 1968): 8-11.

community control. Ravitch was instructed by the Carnegie Corporation in early January 1968 to visit the districts and report on the local boards, following a request from the Ford Foundation for Carnegie involvement in the projects. In some respects, the tone of Ravitch's preliminary report was similar to her Notes from a year earlier; for example, she stressed the need to overcome the "hostility between parents and professionals." She also displayed some sympathy towards the project in IS 201, which she knew through her involvement with Wilcox. She acknowledged that the IS 201 Governing Board felt the Board of Education and the UFT were "sabotaging them at every opportunity." She also referred to "public opinion, as represented by the media" which "leaps on any reverses as evidence of the absurdity of community control, and by inference, black power", and spoke of "whites' unconscious hope that blacks will come to their senses and revert to a state of unquestioning dependency."¹³

At the same time, there are clear signs of Ravitch's increasing concerns about the way in which community control was unfolding. She referred critically on several occasions to the militancy within the projects, asking if they would "politicize ghetto education without improving it" and whether it was "desirable to give legitimacy to black separatist groups." Ravitch's personal viewpoint was even more clearly expressed in a letter to her Carnegie contact commenting on funding proposals from two community education programmes based in East Harlem. The Chambers Memorial Baptist Church proposal, she said, presupposed "highly sensitive, vigilant

¹³ Ravitch, "The Decentralized Demonstration Districts: A Preliminary Report," 6 February 1968 (Carnegie Corporation of New York Records, Series IIIA, Box 733A, Folder 11), 2. Ravitch's reference to the media is noteworthy because it suggests that she empathised with the sensitivity of community groups about negative reporting. Much of the mainstream media was in fact sympathetic to community control; see Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 40-41.

parents” who would “picket, boycott or do whatever else is necessary” to confront “the villains” — in other words, “the system, the UFT, the bureaucracy.” Ravitch argued that community action “creates political power” but could not “be said to lead to better education.”¹⁴

Ravitch had reached a position in which she apparently accepted the principle of community-based movements, even if they used the language of black power, but believed that in practice community control had become dominated by militant, separatist ideology to the detriment of improved student attainment. There were individuals within the districts who could be described as militant and separatist — for example the Black Panther Herman Ferguson, who was employed as a consultant in Ocean Hill–Brownsville. Equally however, there were influential community control activists, such as the parents’ leaders Elaine Rooke and Dolores Torres, who simply believed that improved student outcomes required the community to have the ultimate decision-making authority, particularly over the choice of school principal. Ravitch by contrast appeared to view decentralisation as a joint enterprise in which power was shared with others, particularly the teachers.¹⁵

In advocating the primacy of the local black community, activists were following principles endorsed by Preston Wilcox, who was a hugely influential figure in the community control movement. Writing in 1966, Wilcox had accepted the value of substantial teacher involvement in the running of community schools, but envisaged

¹⁴ Ravitch, “The Decentralised Demonstration Districts,” 4-5; Ravitch to Barbara Finberg, 18 January 1968, Carnegie Corporation of New York Records, Series IIIA, Box 787, Folder 12.

¹⁵ Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 74-77; Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*, (1st Anchor Books ed., New York: Anchor Books, 2015), 142-146, 162-163.

major decisions being made by a School-Community Committee chosen by the parents. Ravitch however sought to distinguish his stance from that of the leadership in the demonstration districts. In the final paragraph of her report, she encouraged Carnegie representatives to meet with Wilcox, whom she described as “an advocate of Black power, though not a racist or an extremist.” Ravitch held Wilcox in very high personal regard, and although her viewpoint on community control came to diverge sharply from his, they remained friends.¹⁶

There were several factors contributing to Ravitch’s reaction against what she perceived as extremism and separatism within community control. The call to direct action which she identified in the projects would have clashed with her belief in civilised political discourse, which had been reinforced at the *New Leader*, although, as she had herself recognised, conventional lobbying of the Board of Education had proved ineffective. There were however also influences specific to Ravitch’s own school education. In criticising the vigilantism of the Chambers parents, Ravitch drew analogies with the “parent vigilantes” from the right-wing extremist John Birch Society who audited classes in Houston public schools in the 1950s.¹⁷ Her aversion to separatism can also be explained in part by her positive experience as a Jewish student in Houston who (unlike the blacks, in segregated schools) had benefited from assimilation into a white Protestant-dominated school. In any event, Ravitch’s

¹⁶ Wilcox, “The Controversy over I.S. 201”: 15,13; Ravitch, “The Decentralised Demonstration Districts,” 5. The continuing friendship between Ravitch and Wilcox is illustrated by a manuscript note from Wilcox to Ravitch in August 1977 beginning “Dearest Diane” and signed “Love PW”, and a 1991 letter from Ravitch to Wilcox, headed “My Dear and still much-loved Preston”, and ending “Thanks for standing by our friendship!” Preston Wilcox Papers, Box 4, Folder 12.

¹⁷ Ravitch to Finberg, 18 January 1968. Ravitch has confirmed that her personal experience of community control was crucial in changing her mind. Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019.

exposure to the demonstration districts appears to have been pivotal in turning her against community control.

The shift in Ravitch's views was reflected in her 1969 *Center Forum* article "Foundations: Playing God in the Ghetto". She implied that the Ford Foundation's funding of the projects had been "a mistake" and asked if black and Puerto Rican community control aspirations should "rightfully take precedence over all other [educational] priorities." Ravitch drew attention to the racial issue, which she had identified in her Carnegie report (particularly in the form of the stand-off in Ocean Hill–Brownsville between white teachers on one side and black teachers and the black community on the other). She argued that this could have been defused by the inclusion of white districts and that "the rhetoric on both sides has transformed decentralization into an instrument of black separatism."¹⁸

Community control provided a further impetus to the development of Ravitch's career as a writer. Following her visits to the demonstration districts, she became interested in how the New York City school system was centralised in the first place. Her research at the New-York Historical Society revealed that this had occurred in the late nineteenth century when school reformers had pressed for centralisation to rid the system of political interference. Noting that reformers now favoured decentralisation, Ravitch decided that the historical background to New York City school reform would form the basis of an interesting article. She offered the story to Mike Levitas at the *New York Times* magazine, who dismissed her idea, saying that he

¹⁸ Ravitch, "Foundations: Playing God in the Ghetto," *Center Forum* 3 (15 May 1969): 27; Ravitch, "The Decentralised Demonstration Districts," 2.

would be more interested in a story called “I danced with my dentist.” Ravitch’s response to this slight was to resolve to write a book on the subject, and in December 1968, she contacted the Carnegie Corporation with a proposal for “New York City’s Public Schools: A Political History”.¹⁹

Although the Corporation was not willing to fund the writing of the book, it referred Ravitch to Lawrence Cremin, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a preeminent figure among American educational historians. Cremin’s view was that Ravitch was not currently equipped to write a book. He suggested that she should concentrate on essays or articles, whilst enrolling in a graduate programme, and Ravitch indicated that she had accepted this advice. Yet six months later, she wrote to Cremin, announcing that she had developed her ideas for a book on the New York schools, and had signed a contract with a publisher. Ravitch said that her aim was not “to write a new history, as you might use the term” but to “present the history of the schools in a popular fashion.” From her schooldays, Ravitch had been unintimidated by figures of authority, and it is clear that she was determined that even a distinguished mentor like Cremin would not deflect her from her aim to develop her career as a writer of books as well as articles. In addition, she was from the outset focused on the idea of writing for a popular, rather than an academic market. Ravitch did in fact write further articles while she was working on

¹⁹ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Ravitch to Margaret Mahoney, 5 December 1968, Carnegie Corporation of New York Records, Series IIIA, Box 787, Folder 12.

the book which became *The Great School Wars*. In particular, she concentrated on the fallout from the events in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.²⁰

Although the UFT was initially involved in the planning for community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, its relationship with the local activists deteriorated during 1967. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Planning Council blueprint envisaged full local board control over a range of matters including money, curriculum and personnel. Underlying its proposed recruitment policy was a plan to appoint principals and assistant principals (generally black) without meeting the requirements of the existing test-based merit system of school appointments and promotions. This was agreed by the Board of Education, but opposed by the UFT, which joined a legal challenge to the plan. Relations were further soured by the September 1967 UFT strike (for wage increases, expanded 'More Effective Schools' funding, and 'disruptive child' provisions), when the local board and non-UFT teachers kept the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools open. The divide between the two sides was also accentuated by the UFT's attack in December 1967 on the school decentralisation recommendations in the Bundy Report, commissioned by Mayor Lindsay. On 9 May 1968, Ocean Hill-Brownsville unit administrator Rhody McCoy sent a letter on behalf of the local board to nineteen teachers and principals/assistant principals purporting to "end your employment in the schools of this District." This action was viewed by the UFT as a challenge to due process, and a walkout of 350 UFT members in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in May was followed by three city-wide strikes in the autumn,

²⁰ Margaret Mahoney, memorandum of telephone conversation with Lawrence Cremin, 14 January 1969, Carnegie Corporation of New York Records, Series IIIA, Box 787, Folder 12; Ravitch to Cremin, 12 August 1969, Lawrence Cremin Papers, Box 21, General Correspondence N-T, 1969-70.

culminating in an agreement for the removed teaching staff to return to work. As a result, the debate about community control came increasingly to be defined by the battle of ideas between the Ocean Hill-Brownsville local board and the UFT. In that battle, Ravitch lined up firmly behind the UFT.²¹

The first signs of this were in Ravitch's January 1970 *New Leader* review of Robert Bendiner's *The Politics of Schools* (1969), tellingly entitled "Community Control Fails the Test." Describing Bendiner's book as "excellent", Ravitch expounded his thesis, which was that local control of schools had been tried but was "withering away" because local boards lacked the skills and resources to provide equal educational opportunity irrespective of race or income. Bendiner advocated metropolitan school districts, incorporating the suburbs, and controlled by a central board; this would, he argued, be the only way of achieving integrated education, which black parents overwhelmingly preferred. He was particularly hard on the New York community control experiments, describing them as a "desperate throwback" to an earlier era of small school districts.²²

Bendiner's arguments about decentralisation, which Ravitch strongly endorsed, reflected the stance of the UFT and its leader Albert Shanker in the debate which it had been conducting for over two years with the advocates of radical school decentralisation. The Bundy Report had proposed that the city be divided into 30 to 60 independent school districts with wide powers over personnel, curriculum and funding. The UFT argued that small districts would increase administrative costs, thus

²¹ Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 79-94, 101-102, 2.

²² Ravitch, "Community Control Fails the Test," review of *The Politics of Schools: A Crisis in Self-Government* by Robert Bendiner, *The New Leader* 53, no.2 (19 January 1970): 22-23.

starving the schools of the funding they needed to improve achievement levels. This argument was strongly contested by community control supporters such as the former teacher, Maurice R. Berube and CUNY academic Marilyn Gittell, both of the Institute for Community Studies, who advocated community participation in decision making, and criticised those “reactionary liberals” who were “nostalgically yearning for the Roosevelt era” and believed “the root cause of poverty to be merely a lack of money.” The UFT also stated that the narrowing of school boundaries would “reinforce segregation.” The pro-community control Fantini, Gittell and Magat countered this by pointing out that “ten years of efforts to reduce racial imbalance under the...New York City school organization had failed.” Community control activists also argued increasingly that desegregation was actually counter to black interests. Placards carried by community control supporters stated that “Black Children Need Black Culture.”²³

In June 1970, Ravitch addressed a range of issues arising directly from the events in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in her review of Miriam Wasserman’s *The School Fix, NYC, USA* (1970). She first defended the merit system of teacher recruitment and promotion, which Wasserman had described as racist. Tapping into her historical research, Ravitch stated that the system was established in 1896, during a period of decentralised control by local school boards when “a great many teachers were wholly incompetent, and...the basis of appointment and promotion was entirely

²³ United Federation of Teachers (UFT), *Policy Statement on Decentralization*, 20 December 1967 (excerpts), in Berube and Gittell, *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville*, 219; Berube and Gittell, *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville*, 9; Mario Fantini, Marilyn Gittell and Richard Magat, *Community Control and the Urban School* (New York, Washington and London: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 128; Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 85.

political.” She firmly rejected Wasserman’s view that the merit system encouraged “bookish...cautious, conforming, detail-loving individuals.”²⁴

By dismissing Wasserman’s criticisms of the merit system, Ravitch was endorsing a principle which was a key article of faith for the UFT. The Jewish teachers who were dominant within the union, and the New York public schools generally, had benefited from the system of competitive testing, which had enabled them to avoid the obstacles to advancement still faced by Jews in the private sector and to facilitate their progression to the middle class. The UFT was also able to use the system to bolster its standing as a ‘craft union’, by excluding those — notably blacks and Puerto Ricans — who could not meet the testing requirements. The system was however challenged vigorously by supporters of community control and others. Wilcox criticised it as a “test of one’s ability to take a test”, and asked “what good is an impartial system to blacks when the system appears to be partial to whites?” As far back as 1963, a study of the system by Dean Robert Griffiths of the New York University School of Education had found evidence that teachers were becoming obsessive about tests, and Griffiths argued that the system benefitted those with narrow traits similar to those identified by Wasserman. Even Shanker, as a result of his own Jewish accent, had problems initially with the oral element of the test, under which examiners were prone to eliminate non-white candidates for poor pronunciation.²⁵

²⁴ Ravitch, “Attacking the School ‘System’,” review of *The School Fix, NYC, USA* by Miriam Wasserman, *The New Leader* 53, no.13 (22 June 1970): 23.

²⁵ Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 50-51, 155-156; Preston Wilcox, “The Merit System: Special Privilege or Equal Opportunity? One View,” *Issues and Insights* 1, no.1 (Spring 1967), Wilcox’s typescript draft: 33-34, Preston Wilcox Papers, Box 13, Folder 16; Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 87. On the UFT as a ‘craft union’, see Stephen Brier, “The Ideological and Organizational Origins of the United

Ravitch also focused on the other critical issue for the UFT membership — the question of due process. She noted that a court had found that the educators removed from the Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools had been denied due process. though the local board had “refused to accept the judge’s verdict.” Ravitch said that Wasserman believed that due process was a “put-up job” and a “‘historical curiosity’ to protect the powerful from the rightful demands of the powerless”, and that the UFT’s real objection was to “allowing parents, especially of poor dark children, to control their schools.” She countered this by arguing that it was a “constitutional guarantee and the poor’s most effective shield against oppression.”²⁶

The divide between Ravitch and Wasserman mirrors closely that between the UFT and those who backed the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board, often from a New Left perspective. Berube and Gittell, firmly in the latter camp, argued that whilst “the protection of workers was a major social priority in the 1930’s”, the current priority was “the right to hold public groups — even labor unions — accountable to an urban alienated poor.” Less predictably, the UFT view was also challenged by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) which argued that the UFT had “used ‘due process’ as a smoke screen to obscure its real goal...to discredit decentralization and sabotage community control.”²⁷

Federation of Teachers’ Opposition to the Community Control Movement in the New York City Public Schools, 1960-1968,” *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 186-188.

²⁶ Ravitch, “Attacking the School ‘System’”: 24. It is probable that the local board could in fact have secured valid transfers of the staff concerned and that tactical errors caused it to be exposed to due process claims; see Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 103-109.

²⁷ Berube and Gittell, *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville*, 5; New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), *The Burden of the Blame: NYCLU Report on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Controversy*, in *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville*, 104.

Much of the support for the UFT in its assertion of due process rights came from figures who opposed the New Left from a pro-labour viewpoint. An example of this was the Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the Right to Teach; this was co-chaired by Michael Harrington, the leader of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), which maintained close links with the UFT. The Committee placed an advertisement in the *New York Times* in September 1968, stating that the issue was not decentralisation, but job security and the accompanying rights, including due process. There was also some initial backing from black labour leaders, though by late 1968 this had largely dissipated, leaving as Shanker's only prominent black trades unionist supporters A. Philip Randolph (the former Head of the Sleeping Car Porters' Union), whose research and lobbying institute was funded by the UFT, and his institute director Bayard Rustin. Randolph and Rustin (then an adviser to Martin Luther King) had promoted the 1963 Freedom March, in which Shanker participated, as a call for 'jobs and freedom', and they continued to believe that black progress involved matters of class and economic equity which could only be pursued effectively alongside the labour movement.²⁸

Another area of contestation between the UFT and the supporters of community control, which Ravitch considered in the review, was that of anti-Semitism. Ravitch described as a "vicious diatribe" an article referred to by Wasserman, written by a "militant black teacher", saying that it "advanced the thesis that Jews and Uncle Toms are guilty of educational genocide" and noting that Wasserman had dismissed

²⁸ Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the Right to Teach, "The Freedom to Teach," *New York Times* (20 September 1968): 29; Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 134-135; Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 54-56; Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, (Paperback ed., New York and London: The New Press, 2012), 59-61.

the article's "verbal violence" as "mere hyperbole." Arguments about the significance of anti-Semitism were an important part of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville dispute. In late 1968, the UFT obtained copies of material, allegedly being circulated in an Ocean Hill-Brownsville school, which stated that it was impossible for the "Middle East Murderers of Colored People" to teach African-American history and culture. Berube and Gittell described the material as the work of "black extremists" but argued that it did not represent the views of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board. The UFT however circulated 500,000 leaflets incorporating the material in New York, thus manipulating the situation to its advantage. Ravitch's vigorous rebuttal of Wasserman's views was in line with the UFT's combative response to any expression, no matter how marginal, of black anti-Semitism. It also reflected the concerns of Jewish neoconservatives like Earl Raab, who warned Jews not to be comforted by reassurances that the current manifestations of "political anti-Semitism" were merely "poetic excess."²⁹

Although Ravitch had clearly turned against the projects in the demonstration districts at the time of her Carnegie report, she had by 1970 moved to a much stronger position, becoming a vigorous opponent of community control and an unequivocal supporter of the UFT. To some extent this reflected the views held generally by neoconservatives, amongst whom Ravitch increasingly numbered herself; as early as January 1969, a lengthy article by Maurice J. Goldbloom, defending the UFT's position, appeared in *Commentary*. There were elements within

²⁹ Ravitch, "Attacking the School 'System'": 23; Berube and Gittell, *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville*, 168, 163-164; Earl Raab, "The Black Revolution and the Jewish Question," *Commentary* 47, no. 1 (January 1969):29.

the dispute which resonated particularly with neoconservatives, many of whom were Jewish Americans. As well as anti-Semitism, these included the association of the merit system with wider Jewish-American support for meritocracy. Nathan Glazer wrote in 1964 that blacks who attacked the meritocracy principle were “challenging the very system under which Jews have done so well.” At this point moreover, neoconservatives had no reservations about supporting unions whose leaders, like Shanker, shared their dislike of New Left ideas.³⁰

Certain issues, however, chimed with Ravitch’s own long-standing views and personal experiences and increased her enthusiasm for the UFT cause. The New Left supporters of community control, in questioning the value of public funding and trade unions, challenged the New Deal-era ideas to which she subscribed. Her support for the merit system would have been reinforced by the advancement she had obtained because of her own test scores; she has said that at this time she thought that “my test scores made my life.” Ravitch’s commitment to the viewpoint of Albert Shanker is also likely to have been influenced by personal connections. Whilst she did not begin working with him until after 1974, her husband Richard met Shanker, whom he described as a friend, and worked with his close associates A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, in the late 1960s, whilst serving on the board of a training organisation for black building industry apprentices based in the UFT’s New York headquarters. It seems inevitable therefore that Ravitch would have been

³⁰ Maurice J. Goldbloom, “The New York School Crisis,” *Commentary* 47, no.1 (January 1969): 43-58; Nathan Glazer, “Negroes & Jews: the New Challenge to Pluralism,” *Commentary* 38, no.6 (December 1964): 32; Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: the Men Who Are Changing America’s Politics*, (1st Touchstone ed., New York: Touchstone, 1980), 9.

regularly exposed to the ideas of Shanker and his supporters during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville dispute.³¹

By 1970, Ravitch had begun to develop her career as an educational writer, building on her work for the Carnegie Corporation and aided by her experience of the black community movements. Although a former advocate of school decentralisation, she had joined forces with those who championed the UFT against the supporters of community control. In doing so, she had given an early indication that she was happy to adopt a contrarian stance, since community control had become a fashionable cause among the New York political and media establishment. By securing a publishing contract for *The Great School Wars*, she had also positioned herself to broaden the scope of her work and to heighten her profile as a writer. Over the following four years, she achieved both of these objectives.

The Great School Wars: A Neoconservative View of School Education

Ravitch had largely completed *The Great School Wars* by 1972, although its publication was postponed by two years because the original publishers (the small firm of Outerbridge and Dienstfry) sold the manuscript to the much larger Basic Books. Despite the delay, Ravitch appears to have actively supported the change and was evidently pleased to be able to benefit from the new publisher's greater resources and status.³² Whilst awaiting publication, she continued to write articles and reviews. These included several pieces for *Commentary* — a strong indication of

³¹ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Richard Ravitch, *So Much To Do: A Full Life of Business, Politics and Confronting Fiscal Crises* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), 27-29.

³² Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (1974; Johns Hopkins University Paperbacks ed., Baltimore, and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), xiv.

her engagement with ideas favoured by neoconservatives, which (along with her historical research) informed *The Great School Wars* and her other work in this period.

There was clear evidence of this in Ravitch's writing on the relative significance of race and class. In the Wasserman review, she had argued that a slum was defined "not...because of the race of its inhabitants, but because of their poverty." Ravitch developed this theme by considering the relative experience of black and white ethnic groups in an April 1972 letter to the *New Republic*, commenting on an article by Francis Fox Piven. She disputed Piven's contention that New York City's political leaders had treated blacks less favourably than previous white immigrant groups, contrasting the nineteenth-century Irish, who had mostly "lived in abject poverty" with little help from the city, with post-World War II black immigrants, who had obtained "vast outlays in municipal services." Turning specifically to education, Ravitch challenged Piven's assertion that city bosses historically "dispensed jobs to placate...newcomers", arguing that the political patronage system for teacher appointment had once served to exclude Jews. She pointed to 1970s Chicago and Detroit, where blacks made up around forty per cent of teachers' union membership, and asserted that even in New York, the proportion would rise (from around ten per cent) "because the number of black graduates from City University is increasing." Advancing a pro meritocracy argument, Ravitch stated that "upwardly mobile" blacks and Puerto Ricans would benefit from increasing public sector opportunities and

claimed that the upward progress of blacks in New York had been “at least as rapid...as that of any previous immigrant group.”³³

Ravitch’s analysis was in line with that of contemporary neoconservative writers. Nathan Glazer pointed to the slow rate of advancement of many white immigrants and challenged the narrative of swift political and economic progress for European ethnic groups by comparison with blacks. He argued that although urban blacks were currently clearly worse off than other ethnic groups considered as a whole, they were “in some respects perhaps better off than some” with for example “more college graduates than Polish Americans” and “more clout in the mass media than Italian Americans.” Moynihan — an influential figure among 1970s neoconservative intellectuals — drew analogies in *The Negro Family* between the struggles of black immigrants and those of the nineteenth-century “wild Irish”, and Irving Kristol argued that, whilst blacks had suffered greater prejudice than Irish immigrants, they had received more public support. Ravitch’s view that the experience of blacks was not significantly inferior to that of earlier white immigrants therefore had a strong neoconservative pedigree. At the same time, it paid insufficient regard to the systemic racism suffered by blacks. The racial bias in housing largely excluded blacks from the suburbs, and they became trapped in ‘red lined’ areas deserted by whites, with inadequate schools and poor employment prospects. In the early 1970s the great majority of urban blacks experienced a strongly racialised form of poverty.³⁴

³³ Ravitch, “Attacking the School System”: 22-23; “City Pies” (letter), *The New Republic* 166, no. 14 (1 April 1972): 33-34.

³⁴ Nathan Glazer, “Blacks and Ethnic Groups: The Difference and the Political Difference It Makes,” 1971; rev. version in *Ethnic Dilemmas 1964-1982* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 83-88, 90; U.S. Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965), 17;

A different class-related argument informed Ravitch's February 1972 *Commentary* article "Community Control Revisited". This set out to review the educational performance of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community control experiment, which had been ended by a 1970 New York state decentralisation measure falling well short of community control. Ravitch countered the positive views of several (generally leftist) writers such as I.F. Stone and Nat Hentoff, noting that when reading tests were administered in 1971, the results were worse than those achieved in 1967, before the experiment. More generally however, she focused on the criticisms levelled by community control supporters at conventional cognitive learning, with its emphasis on reading scores. Demonstrating an early attachment to educational standards, which reflected the emphasis on reading and writing skills she had absorbed at high school, Ravitch responded by asserting that "schools exist, in the first instance, to provide basic literacy." Adding the class dimension to her argument, she stated that parents were generally "more middle class, and more bound to traditional approaches than most professional educators."³⁵

Ravitch was by this time displaying a strong personal commitment to what she described as "middle-class morality", arguing that it was right to "teach the virtues of honesty, thrift, industry, and the relationship of effort to achievement." Whilst this was a stance taken by neoconservatives generally, Ravitch's argument in the context of Ocean Hill–Brownsville was closely aligned with Shanker's views. He criticised community control leaders who "say forget middle-class virtues and...try to convince

Kristol quoted in Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 79-80. On discrimination against blacks, particularly in housing, see Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 15-16.

³⁵ Ravitch, "Community Control Revisited," *Commentary* 53, no. 2 (February 1972): 69-70, 74.

parents that reading and writing don't count", arguing that schools should "teach children...*to make it* within our society." This contrasted with the views of Charles Hamilton, who argued that reading scores reflected white middle-class educational priorities and did not recognise black "normative values", including "respect for Afro-American culture." Ravitch was clearly challenging the view of the purpose and class basis of education held by community control activists and their New Left supporters. More generally, she viewed the path to black progress as lying in the individual advancement to the middle class previously achieved by white ethnic minorities, particularly Jewish Americans.³⁶

"Community Control Revisited" is also significant in the context of Ravitch's career. Bruno Bettelheim, an academic acquaintance of Cremin, suggested after reading the article that she should obtain a doctorate "for credibility." Notwithstanding Cremin's disagreement, Ravitch decided to do so, and persevered despite being rebuffed by the Columbia history department on account of her age (34), sex, and area of research. She was accepted by Cremin to study for her PhD with him at Teachers College; there she used *The Great School Wars* as her dissertation, despite initial resistance from Cremin and the fact that it had never accepted a published work for that purpose. She was awarded her PhD in 1975, shortly after the publication of the book.³⁷

³⁶ Ravitch to Cremin, 1 December 1970, Lawrence Cremin Papers, Box 21, General Correspondence N-T, 1969-70. Shanker quoted in Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 173; Shanker interview, in *Why Teachers Strike: Teachers' Rights and Community Control*, ed. Melvin I. Urofsky (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 180. Shanker praised Ravitch's article in two of his paid-for *New York Times* "Where We Stand" columns in February 1972. Hamilton quoted in Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 62.

³⁷ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, xiii-xv.

On the face of it, *The Great School Wars*, as a historical work, represented a break from Ravitch's earlier educational writing, which had focused on contemporary issues. Yet by constructing the book as a series of "wars" and titling it "A History of the Public Schools as Battlefield of Social Change", Ravitch created a framework which was consistent with the themes of her earlier writing and reflected her experience of the events in Ocean Hill–Brownsville. Some of the descriptions of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "wars" would in fact have struck a chord with readers of Ravitch's previous work. For example, she dealt with the late nineteenth-century reform and centralisation of the corrupt, locally run system outlined in her Wasserman review and her response to Piven. She also drew analogies between Preston Wilcox and the 1840s Irish Catholic leader Bishop John Hughes, arguing that both were concerned with school value systems: "Hughes wanted the schools to reinforce Catholicism; Wilcox wanted IS 201 to affirm the strengths of black culture."³⁸

The final "war", incorporating the post-World War II period, is the largest section of *The Great School Wars*. The 1965 – 73 period alone, covering the emergence of decentralisation and the events in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, makes up a quarter of the book. In reviewing this period, Ravitch explored in greater depth some of the themes from her earlier writing. The tone of the book was more balanced and less opinionated than her previous articles and book reviews. Ravitch acknowledged black activists' efforts to secure school integration before they turned to radical

³⁸ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 107-158, 297. The "battlefield of social change" subtitle of the book was removed in the 2000 edition; there Ravitch stated (consistently with the contemporary emphasis on educational standards) that schools should be "centers of learning" (*The Great School Wars*, xvii).

decentralisation. When analysing the 1968 teachers' strikes, she stated that the UFT members "believed that they were standing up for the rights of every present and future teacher in the city", but also recognised that the UFT's success in defeating community control damaged its "idealistic and socially progressive" image. She also numbered among the "benefits" of the 1970 reforms the broadening of the teacher recruitment process, with a reduced role for test scores.³⁹

Despite the generally measured tone of the book, however, it left the reader in no doubt about Ravitch's opposition to community control and her criticism of its supporters. She described the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board as a "partisan advocate of one view only" and wrote of community activists' "intransigent spirit" and "scorn for compromise and negotiation." She revisited the due process theme, claiming that the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board elections in summer 1967 were tainted by voting irregularities. Developing an argument she had first raised in "Community Control Revisited", Ravitch criticised white New York elite groups. She censured NYCLU for failing to uphold the UFT's due process rights and fears of anti-Semitism, and the members of the business-based New York Urban Coalition, who, she argued, supported community control "since it assured the continuation of the all-white neighborhoods where they lived." She also returned to the theme of her "Foundations" article by challenging the role of the Ford Foundation in Ocean Hill–Brownsville.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid, 251-286, 371, 378, 398.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 391, 349, 322-324, 365-366, 370 note, 349-350, 357. Ravitch's analysis of the white elites' support for community control against the largely Jewish UFT was as an example of the 'Jew as Middleman' argument, i.e., that Jews were "becoming the middlemen between a white Protestant establishment and an increasingly agitated Black militancy"; Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind*, 199.

Ravitch did not however limit herself to the issues explored in her earlier work. Reflecting on the lessons of Ocean Hill–Brownsville, she developed — particularly in the final chapter “The Search for Community” — some general principles concerning education and the role of the school. In doing so, she again drew on the ideas of neoconservative intellectuals and other anti-New Left figures, as well as on her own historical research.

Ravitch considered a range of subjects raising issues of race, ethnicity, and culture. Addressing the question of cultural pluralism in schools, she stated that “the thrust of public school history has been to reject different manifestations of separatism — whether religious or racial — and to evolve, however fitfully, in the direction of pluralistic, multi-cultural participation and control.” She accepted that the public school operated on behalf of the community but argued that children lived “simultaneously in many communities”, reflecting their ethnic group, race and/or religion but also where they lived and their parents’ occupations and interests. Challenging the idea of the school as a key institution dedicated to developing a sense of community in black areas, which had been strongly advocated by Wilcox, she asserted that “to suggest that the school serve one community and reject others is...to limit children’s potentialities instead of expanding them.”⁴¹

Ravitch had expressed concerns about separatism in schools as far back as her Carnegie reports. Her challenge to the primacy of the ethnic group was however also a reflection of the views of Glazer and Moynihan, as expressed in the second (1970) edition of their analysis of ethnicity in New York City, *Beyond the Melting Pot*. They

⁴¹ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 402.

argued that the “ideal” was that “individual choice...determines the degree to which any person participates, if at all, in the life of an ethnic group”, though they acknowledged that “prejudice and discrimination often force people into closer association with groups than they wish.” Implicit in this was a more general support for the individual over the group. Glazer argued in *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975) that “the individual and the individual’s interests”, rather than group consciousness, were “the test of a good society.” This viewpoint, which Ravitch increasingly espoused, was consistent with her universalist vision of civil rights, namely that government should ensure equal treatment for all individuals before the law, rather than introducing measures favouring particular racial groups. It contrasted sharply with the views of many black leaders; for example, the National Committee of Negro Churchmen stated that blacks would not apologise for the existence of group power because “we have been oppressed as a group, not as individuals.”⁴²

Ravitch extended her argument beyond the conflict between the individual and the group and sought to uphold the idea of common values and common humanity. Again challenging the principles underlying black community control, she stated that “the school that exalts only one race or class or locality denies the common humanity of its pupils.” The principle of commonality was also part of Glazer and Moynihan’s “ideal” under which “each group participates sufficiently in the goods and values and social life of a common society so that all can accept the common society as good and fair.” They argued particularly that “Negroes who want to be part

⁴² Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (1963; 2nd ed., Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1970), xxiv; Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975), 220; National Committee of Negro Churchmen, “Black Power,” *New York Times* (31 July 1966): E5.

of a common society" (the large majority, in their view) "must be given every aid and encouragement." Andrew Hartman has summarised Glazer and Moynihan's view as postulating that "recognition of ethnic difference, no matter how enduring, was politically possible only under the umbrella of a muscular national identity." Ravitch was endorsing that argument in the context of the school. The idea of the public school as a vehicle for socialisation was an enduring principle of American education, which Ravitch strongly supported, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities. She wrote in 2001 that her parents "learned to be Americans" at public school.⁴³

Ravitch's advocacy for commonality implies support for a common culture in America. She did not use this term in *The Great School Wars*, but in *The Revisionists Revised* (based on work completed shortly afterwards) she argued that one benefit of public education was that it "makes possible the formation of a common culture, accessible to all." There was a debate on ethnicity and the common culture in *Commentary* during 1972, when Ravitch was writing for the magazine, prompted by the publication of several works which extended the idea of ethnic consciousness to white ethnic groups. Robert Alter criticised Michael Novak's book *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971) for its "implicit tendency to view everything through the prism of ethnic origins." Alter upheld the principle of a common culture, challenging

⁴³ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 402; Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, xxiii-xxiv; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 61; Ravitch, introduction to Part Two, *School, the Story of American Public Education*, ed. Sarah Mondale and Sarah B. Patton (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 63. On the general principle of the socialising role of the school, see Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642-1990: Varieties of Historical Interpretation of the Foundations and Development of American Education* (2nd ed., New York and London: Longman, 1990), 206-211.

the idea that “individual autonomy and personal authenticity are Wasp concepts”, and arguing that they were “key concepts of modern culture in general.”⁴⁴

Ravitch had therefore built on her experience of Ocean Hill–Brownsville, prevailing neoconservative ideas about race, ethnicity, and culture, and the wider historical context to frame the general proposition that “the school can applaud individual and cultural diversity without resorting to the extremes of separatism and chauvinism.” She implicitly accepted Albert Shanker’s view that, whilst black children needed black culture, they also needed American culture. Alongside this principle, Ravitch developed another related theme in *The Great School Wars*, by defending the idea of the public school itself. She noted that “during the middle 1960s, criticism of public schooling was unusually intense”, with both black activists and white intellectuals lining up to attack the system from the left, and she set out to uphold her vision of the role of the public school in the face of those attacks.⁴⁵

Community control was in Ravitch’s view “a direct assault on the idea of the common school, that is, a school which is supported by all, controlled by all, and which propagates no particular religious, ideological, or political views.” This statement did not acknowledge that the view of the conventional public school championed by Ravitch, based on a Eurocentric, liberal–democratic perspective, was as ideological as that of the schools in the community control districts; even the UFT had previously recognised the need to alter the curriculum content to include more black history material. In the same vein, Ravitch asserted that the common school

⁴⁴ Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1978), 6; Robert Alter, “A Fever of Ethnicity,” *Commentary*, 53, no.6 (June 1972): 71, 73.

⁴⁵ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 402, 329; Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 85.

idea “presumes that children should be taught those values which are basic to a free and just society.” These values, she argued, included respect for an individual’s rights and a “devotion to comity” which “permits groups to compete without seeking to crush one another.” The latter point appears to contrast the ethos of community control with the historical experience of white ethnic groups, such as Jews and Italians, who had found ways of coexisting in New York City. It again reflected Glazer and Moynihan’s “ideal” under which “there is competition between groups...but it is muted, and groups compete not through violence but through effectiveness in organization and achievement.”⁴⁶

Ravitch also stressed the importance of the public school as an element in the democratic process. Implicitly challenging the Afrocentric emphasis of black community control, she stated that the common school idea presumed that education was “not an indoctrination process”, adding that society required individuals who were “capable of voting, deciding, and acting as free agents.” Her idea of the role of the public school in promoting the development of good citizens reflected the views of Sidney Hook, who had written in 1954 that “the American school and educational system has been the prime agency of achieving a unified democratic nation out of diverse ethnic groups of varied national origins.” Ravitch’s defence of the public school system by reference to its role in nurturing American liberal democracy placed her in direct opposition to the New Left ideas behind

⁴⁶ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 397, 402; Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 67-69; Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, xxiii-xxiv.

community control, with their emphasis on “truly democratic alternatives to the present”, based around participatory democracy.⁴⁷

Ravitch regarded the public school as an engine of mobility. She praised the “monumental accomplishments” of the New York public school system, pointing to its vital role in raising the descendants of poor European immigrants to the “prosperous middle class.” This positive view of the public school had long been prevalent among Jewish intellectuals. Hook, for example, had argued in his 1954 article that “the American educational system has provided an educational ladder on which millions have climbed to a better social life.” Ravitch however also expanded on her earlier class-based argument, emphasising her belief that blacks and Puerto Ricans had not been treated less favourably than white immigrants. She said that the New York public schools were “pinioned by their own legend”, under which, it was said, they had successfully educated the children of poor white immigrants. Ravitch asserted however that the rate of failure among first-generation European immigrant children had been high and that, generally speaking, “Jews, with their tradition of learning, had done very well”, whereas “other groups, such as Italians, had performed poorly.” Developing the idea of Jewish-American exceptionalism, Ravitch wrote approvingly about the sacrifices made by Jews to educate their children, which “produced economic results in a relatively brief period.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 402; Sidney Hook, “Modern Education & Its Critics,” 1954; rev. version in *Education & the Taming of Power*, (British ed., London: Alcove Press, 1974), 34; Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), repr. in *The Port Huron Statement: The Visionary Call of the 1960s Revolution* by Tom Hayden (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press), 48.

⁴⁸ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 403, 310-311, 180; Hook, “Modern Education & Its Critics,” 34.

By *The Great School Wars*, therefore, Ravitch had reached a carefully nuanced position, effectively firing a double-barrelled shot at the New Left. She countered the allegations from community control activists of anti-black bias in public schools, by stressing the limitations on what schools had been able to achieve with previous white immigrants. At the same time, she challenged the radical intellectuals' general attacks on the public school system. In *The Great School Wars*, Ravitch did in fact return to the optimistic, meritocratic view of black progress contained in her response to Piven, pointing to the "steady rise in educational level" among blacks and Puerto Ricans, which had been "accompanied by the growth of an ambitious and energetic middle class."⁴⁹

Ravitch's view of public education would have seemed logical to her as a Jewish American who had been successfully educated, and assimilated, within the established school system. In relation to the education of black children however, particularly in New York City, it did not give due weight to the level of institutional racism, not least within the educational bureaucracy and the teaching profession, which had helped to drive the demand for community control in the first place. Moreover, the values which Ravitch ascribed to an effective public school reflected a largely white viewpoint and did not acknowledge the growth of a strong and distinctive black culture.⁵⁰

Whatever the limitations of Ravitch's conclusions however, the success of *The Great School Wars* was significant. It was the Education Writers' Association book of

⁴⁹ Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 403.

⁵⁰ For contemporary criticisms of white UFT members, see Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 64-65; Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars*, 153.

the year for 1974, and in the wake of its publication Ravitch secured several writing commissions (including articles for the *New York Times*) and conference speaker invitations. The book attracted publicity by polarising debate in the fraught context of the era's education controversies. Fred Ferretti, a consistent supporter of community control, described it as "UFT Right-Think" and "so one-sided that it has no value either as a history or a reference", whilst Elliott Abrams in *Commentary* focused approvingly on Ravitch's description of the failings of community control. For the most part however, critics noted Ravitch's efforts to provide a measure of scholarly objectivity. George Levine's *New York Times* review said that the book was "meticulously detailed" and "strains for fairness and impartiality." More recently, Maurice R. Berube, whilst stating unequivocally that Ravitch's stance on community control was "directly opposite to...mine", described the book as "an evenhanded account of the three great educational conflicts in New York City history" and "an admirable case study from the opposite side."⁵¹

Writing in 1985, Ravitch stressed the objectivity of her histories, including *The Great School Wars*, saying that "I do not write about the past in order to divine guideposts for the future or policy counsel for the present." She contrasted her essays, saying that some of these were "obviously polemical" and that most were "written with the intent to persuade the reader or at least to make the reader critically reexamine the conventional wisdom." An examination of *The Great School*

⁵¹ Fred Ferretti, "When the schoolbell rings, come out fighting," review of *The Great School Wars*, *Chelsea Clinton News* (30 May 1974): 3; Elliott Abrams, "Education & Social Change," review of *The Great School Wars*, *Commentary* 58, no.2 (August 1974): 88; George Levine, "Education as a Reflex of Politics," review of *The Great School Wars*, *New York Times* (12 May 1974): 341; Maurice R. Berube, "The Education of Diane Ravitch," in *Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Essays on the Politics of Culture* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Bergin and Garvey, 2002), 47-48.

Wars indicates that she underplayed the political element in her historical writing and that the contrast with her other work is to a considerable degree one of tone. There is however a clear distinction between the book and her earlier writing. It can be accounted for partially by the influence of Cremin. Whilst Ravitch was not afraid to disagree with him, she received his guidance during the writing process and later described him as the teacher who “had the deepest influence on my life.” Another factor was her decision to write the book for a popular market. She clearly did not regard her writing as a purely academic exercise and told her Carnegie contact that “I...believe the book will sell.” She judged correctly that the combative tone of a *Commentary* piece would not sit comfortably with a wider readership.⁵²

The book’s reputation has remained consistently high; a 1995 *New York Times* article listed it among the “10 Best Books About New York”. More recent scholarship, particularly on the culture wars and neoconservatism, has in fact tended to view *The Great School Wars* as an accessible, balanced work of reference, disregarding its significance (along with Ravitch’s other early work) as a totem in the early phase of the culture wars. For example, Hartman’s *A War for the Soul of America* mentions Ravitch’s contribution to neoconservative ideas only in connection with her later work and does not refer to *The Great School Wars* except to cite it as a source on Ocean Hill–Brownsville. A likely explanation for this lies in Ravitch’s specialisation in school education, which at this point did not generate a substantial amount of writing by neoconservatives. *Commentary* included only ten articles with schools as

⁵² Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 18; “Lawrence A. Cremin,” *The American Scholar* 61, no.1(Winter 1992): 83; Ravitch to Barbara Finberg, 31 October 1969, Carnegie Corporation of New York Records, Series IIIA, Box 787, Folder 12.

their main subject matter between 1965 and 1974. (Of the four articles from 1972 onwards, Ravitch contributed two, plus two book reviews.) Some contemporary school-related articles received a high profile, such as Glazer's "Is Busing Necessary?", which formed part of a broader neoconservative debate on affirmative action. Generally, however, Ravitch stood out in focussing on the importance of neoconservative ideas and values within school education, and particularly in affirming the role of the school as a vehicle for socialisation, by inculcating in pupils the ideals of liberal democracy and the common culture. This explains in part why her work was so much in demand in the period around the publication of *The Great School Wars*.⁵³

Ravitch did not seek to cover the wide range of issues spanned by neoconservative intellectuals such as Kristol and Glazer, comprising ideological battles between capitalism and socialism, economics, foreign policy, and broader racial and cultural concerns. By consciously limiting herself to school education, she filled an important gap in the neoconservative analysis of contemporary America. Ravitch's particular skill was as a communicator, employing what Cremin described as the "rat-a-tat Ravitch style", exemplified in *The Great School Wars* by clarity of argument, absence of jargon and eye-catching chapter headings such as "The Best Men to the Rescue." Because she channelled political ideas through a popular

⁵³ Sam Roberts, "The 10 Best Books About New York," *New York Times* (5 February 1995): CY 1 & 14; Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 265-266, 273; Nathan Glazer, "Is Busing Necessary?" *Commentary*, 53, no.3 (March 1972): 39-52. *The Great School Wars* has in fact been criticised more recently by Ashley T. Erickson, who argued that it did not give a sufficiently rounded picture of the experience of black students and teachers in New York schools. Ashley T. Erickson, "How/Should We Generalize?," *History of Education Quarterly*, 60, no.1 (February 2020): 94-95.

educational history, she provided an additional dimension to neoconservative/anti-New Left writing and widened its potential readership.⁵⁴

Ravitch's work in this period represented the first staging post in her intellectual journey, as she strove to uphold her traditional ideas whilst the New Deal Order under which they had been formed came under challenge and she increasingly adopted a neoconservative viewpoint. Many of the themes that featured strongly in her early writing remained at the forefront of her work. At the core of these was her belief in the public school, and particularly its importance in promoting a common culture based on democratic values. As a corollary to this, she acquired an enduring distaste for ethnic separatism, later manifested in her opposition to bilingual education and an ethnocentric focus in the history curriculum.

Ravitch pursued her career with a laser-sharp focus, driven by strong self-belief and a determination not to be diverted from her chosen path. She has recalled how the *New Leader* editor Mike Kolatch "told me to find a subject that I cared deeply about, learn everything I could about it, and make it my own." With the publication of *The Great School Wars*, she had achieved this, becoming a successful neoconservative educational writer in a male dominated world and acquiring a strong reputation on which she could build in the future.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019. Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 134.

⁵⁵ Diane Ravitch, "A Graduate Education at the New Leader," *The New Leader* 89, no.1 (January 2006), Ravitch's typescript draft: 11. Of around fifty contributors recruited by Norman Podhoretz to write for *Commentary* in the early 1970s, only six (including Ravitch) were women. Nathan Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons* (New York & London: Continuum, 2010), 97-98.

CHAPTER 3 – SHAPING A POINT OF VIEW: 1974 – 1983

The intellectual stance which Ravitch developed in the decade after 1974 was, as she later explained, a response to her need to “shape an educational point of view” and reflected her enduring commitment to traditional principles and her attachment to neoconservative ideas.¹ Ravitch’s first book in this period, *The Revisionists Revised*, built on themes in *The Great School Wars* by defending the public school and the American political and economic system against attacks from the radical left — in this case the ‘revisionist’ historians who had challenged the ideas of her mentor Lawrence Cremin. After that her work, particularly *The Troubled Crusade*, was a response to the contemporary high-profile issues in school education. She supported ‘colour-blind’ policies, rejecting the emphasis on group rights exemplified by the busing of black children and bilingual education, in line with her universalist view of civil rights and the neoconservative aversion towards affirmative action. She also acknowledged the emerging public concern about the alleged decline in student performance by focusing on school standards, emphasising her personal commitment to structured learning and the humanities and signalling her increasing scepticism about progressive educational ideas. Ravitch however distanced herself from other right-of-centre opponents of progressivism such as the religious New Right, advocating a key government role in improving standards, which became the preferred approach of neoconservative educationalists generally.

¹ Ravitch, “A Writer’s Life,” speech to 6th Annual Authors Dinner, University of Alabama, 7 April 1992, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 9, Folder 5.

The Revisionists Revised

Ravitch had benefited from Lawrence Cremin's guidance — even though she had not always followed it — during the writing of *The Great School Wars*, and she remained close to him. In 1975, she was appointed Adjunct Assistant Professor of History and Education at Teachers College, where Cremin was then President. He was clear that there was “every indication she will remain a part-time professor” and that she was “essentially a writer-scholar” who was “making her own career line.” Ravitch did in fact use her position at Teachers College to enhance her personal profile and reputation, for example by organising a 1980 lecture series on “roots of contemporary educational issues”, featuring Daniel Bell and the future Secretary of Education William J. Bennett. Whilst working with Cremin however, she had become aware of the contemporary debates between historians of American school education which formed the central theme of her next book, *The Revisionists Revised*.²

Until the 1960s, American educational history had been studied mainly in schools of education and did not engage the interest of mainstream historians. The prevailing orthodoxy was exemplified by the Stanford University Professor of Education, Ellwood P. Cubberley, in *Public Education in the United States* (1919). Cubberley praised strongly the mid-nineteenth century common school movement, and the subsequent contribution of progressivism, which included support for non-academic vocational education, the increased role of experts and centralised

² Lawrence Cremin to Patrick Suppes, 26 February 1976, Lawrence Cremin Papers, Box 17, National Academy of Education, 1973 - (3 of 3); “Roots of Contemporary Educational Issues,” Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 38, Folder 3.

bureaucracies, and the 'Americanisation' of immigrants. This approach to American educational history was initially challenged by Cremin, and the Harvard history professor Bernard Bailyn. Bailyn criticised the existing historiography, saying that it should consider "not only...formal pedagogy but...the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across the generations." Similarly, Cremin described Cubberley's exclusive focus on the schools themselves as "parochialism", and characterised his idealised view of the common school movement as "evangelism". He did not however depart from his broadly positive interpretation of the history of common schools, contained in *The American Common School* (1951). Cremin also rejected Cubberley's racist view of ethnic minority immigrants, which drove his support for Americanisation, but acknowledged the beneficial aspects of progressivism in education, saying that it began as "a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals." Bailyn and Cremin represented a clear departure from the narrowly focused, celebratory view of American public education, which is why Ravitch, in *The Revisionists Revised*, identified their writing as the first example of revisionism in the historiography of education. At the same time, they did not challenge the essential validity of the public school ideal.³

³ Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History*. (Boston, New York and Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), 155-200, 354-362, 365-379, 407-421, 441-482, 332-338; Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 14; Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley: An Essay on the Historiography of American Education* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1965), 43; Cremin, *The American Common School: An Historic Conception* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1951); Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876 – 1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1964), 67-69, viii; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978), 20-28. The careers of Bailyn and Cremin were very largely focussed on their academic work. Although their historical writing was challenged by the radical revisionists from a leftist viewpoint, they did not themselves engage in wider contemporary intellectual and political debates.

The left-wing academics who emerged from the late 1960s however — generally labelled as ‘the radical revisionists’ or simply ‘the revisionists’ — mounted a vigorous attack on the idea of the public school as a democratic vehicle for social and economic progress, and on the positive view of American social reform movements. They were, as a retrospective review written in 2000 explains, “self-consciously engaged in a scholarship of myth shattering” about American public education. The revisionists were mostly young academics who completed their graduate studies in the mid-1960s. One such writer, Michael B. Katz, later described his book *The Irony of Early School Reform* (1968) as “very much a reflection of its era.” They did in fact represent a wide range of strands among leftist political thought. As Ravitch herself recognised, the anarchist perspective of Joel Spring differed hugely from the Marxist analysis of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.⁴

There were however several clear themes in the revisionist writing. In challenging what Colin Greer described as the “rosy picture” presented by Cremin and others, Katz argued that the common school movement represented the imposition of reform by social elites and professional educators upon “an often skeptical, sometimes hostile, and usually uncomprehending working class.” The benevolent role of progressivism in school education was challenged by revisionists, including Spring, who described the school as “*the* agency charged with the responsibility of maintaining social order”, and Clarence J. Karier, who argued that the Wasp community viewed immigrants as a threat, which had to be “made safe”

⁴ Ruben Donato and Marvin Lazerson, “New Directions in American Educational History: Problems and Prospects,” *Educational Researcher* 29, no.8 (November 2000): 6; Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts*. (1968; reissued with new introduction, New York and London: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2001), xx; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 36.

for the major cities “so that a better, more efficient American might emerge.” Writers such as Paul C. Violas viewed vocational education as being designed to fit the working class for their role in the workplace. They also rejected the idea of schooling as a vehicle for social mobility, Karier describing this as “one of the central myths of the twentieth century.”⁵

The revisionist writers provided a sharp contrast to the views of earlier educational historians, including Cremin. They also saw themselves, in Katz’s words, as taking a “hard, critical look at the vast, self-protective educational establishment.” In the preface to *The Revisionists Revised*, Ravitch implied that the revisionists constituted a powerful group, which had effectively stifled criticism of its work within the academic community. The critique of the revisionists therefore, initiated by Cremin and executed by Ravitch, was not part of a civilised academic debate between historians sharing common ground. It constituted a forceful response to a fundamentally different view of public-school education, and American society generally, presented by a group of young radical historians who had set out to challenge the proponents of the current orthodoxy.⁶

In the preface to *The Revisionists Revised*, Ravitch explained that the book arose from an invitation by the National Academy of Education (NAE) in late 1975 to review

⁵ Colin Greer, *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education* (New York and London: Basic Books, Inc., 1972), 13-22; Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform*, 214; Joel Spring, “Education as a Form of Social Control,” in *Roots of Crisis : American Education in the Twentieth Century*, by Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas and Joel Spring (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1973), 30; Clarence J. Karier, “Liberal Ideology and the Quest for Orderly Change,” in *Roots of Crisis*, 89; Paul C. Violas, *The Training of the Urban Working Class: A History of Twentieth Century American Education* (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1978), 135; Karier, introduction to *Shaping the American Educational State: 1900 to the Present*, ed. Clarence J. Karier (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 2.

⁶ Michael B. Katz, “An Apology for American Educational History,” review of *The Revisionists Revised*, *Harvard Educational Review* 49, no.2 (May 1979): 257; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, x- xi.

the works of the revisionists. Katz later queried why Ravitch, rather than “one of the more obviously established scholars in the field”, was chosen to write the review. Cremin appears to have had a crucial role in the decision. Writing in 2010, Ravitch explained that he “persuaded me to write [the] critique.” In an October 1975 letter to the then President of the NAE, Patrick Suppes, regarding the choice of writer, Cremin said that “of the several people you mention, Diane Ravitch would be by far the best.” Cremin had been close to Ravitch since the beginning of her career as an educational historian and was fully aware of her views and the quality of her writing — both of which would have influenced his recommendation.⁷

The central theme of *The Revisionists Revised* is a defence of the ideas of Cremin and Bailyn against the revisionist attacks. Ravitch’s arguments were also a reflection of the wider historiographical debates of the period. The concluding chapter of the book, subtitled “Limitations of the Ideological Approach”, is an endorsement of the objectivist view of historiography, which held that history should be written without any preconceived political frame of reference, and which was dominant in the two decades after 1945. Bailyn had explicitly supported the idea of objectivism, affirming the possibility of “historical interpretation where partisanship is left behind.” Ravitch wrote approvingly of historians (such as Cremin and Bailyn, though she did not name them at this point) who undertook a “political analysis of history”, which sought to “understand causes and effects in their historical context.” She contrasted the

⁷ Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, xi (Ravitch’s review in its initial shorter form was first presented to the NAE in May 1976, and parts of it in different form were published in *The American Scholar* and *Teachers College Record*); Katz, “An Apology for American Educational History”: 257; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; revised and expanded paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2016), 6; Cremin to Patrick Suppes, 27 October 1975, Lawrence Cremin Papers, Box 17, National Academy of Education, 1973 - (3 of 3).

approach of the revisionists, who, she argued, were guilty of the “politicization of history”, which “imposes a particular interpretation on past events.”⁸

The revisionists did reject the objectivist view of historical writing. As Peter Novick however argued in *That Noble Dream* (1988), “schools of historical interpretation are never politically neutral.” In practice, post-war historians had coupled objectivist aspirations with a ‘consensus’ view of American history. This challenged the emphasis of the pre-war progressive historians on progress achieved through conflict, arguing that American political history was characterised by a consensus, consisting of a shared belief in a liberal-democratic system based on support for individual rights, and specifically property rights. Not all historians who agreed that this consensus existed believed that it had been beneficial for American society, but many did, including Bailyn, who wrote approvingly that American education from the days of Benjamin Franklin had encouraged “American individualism, optimism, and enterprise.”⁹

The viewpoint of the historians who applauded the effect of the historic consensus mirrored the consensus liberalism prevalent in American political life in the early Cold War period, as epitomised by Daniel Bell’s *The End of Ideology* (1960). Bell regarded the operation of American liberal democracy, with its emphasis on

⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 320-321; Bailyn quoted in Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 467. For a discussion of Bailyn’s educational writing in the context of the contemporary historiographical debates, see Thomas D. Fallace et al., “Reconsidering Bailyn: Author Roundtable”, *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no.3 (August 2018): 315-360. Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 165.

⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 458. The seminal works in the consensus historiography were Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (1948), Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (1953) and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). Of these, Hofstadter initially criticised the effect of the consensus from a left of centre position. Later however his viewpoint became more conservative, and he praised the “comity” and “civility” within the American political system. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 332-334, 323. Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society*, 49.

compromise, as a bulwark against ideological politics, which was characterised by “wars-to-the-death” over matters of principle.¹⁰ By implication therefore, he considered that liberal democracy should not itself be regarded as an ideology. Ravitch shared this view and, even though liberal democracy was in fact as much an ideology as the ideas of the revisionists, she was prepared to defend it in a book which was highly critical of ‘ideological’ writing.

Ravitch made her position clear in the first chapter, “The Democratic-Liberal Tradition Under Attack.” She stated that liberals believed that the American political system resulted in a society which became “more open, more inclusive, and more democratic”, whereas radicals regarded American history as “unremittingly racist, bureaucratic, exclusive, and undemocratic.” Opting firmly for the liberal viewpoint, and arguing that “there is an integral, reciprocal relationship between education and politics”, Ravitch endorsed liberal – democratic values and the common culture, and the vital role of the public school in promoting them. In doing so, she was restating her analysis from *The Great School Wars*, in which she also argued that the public school should promote “no particular...ideological or political views”, indicating again her view that liberal democracy ought not to be tainted by being classed as an ideology.¹¹

Ravitch went on to argue that since public schools were democratically controlled, through the election of local school boards or the officials who appointed

¹⁰ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (1960; revised paperback ed., New York: The Free Press, 1965), 121.

¹¹ Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 7, 4, 6; Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (1974; Johns Hopkins University Paperbacks ed., Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 402, 397.

them, they “generally reflect the society” because “an electorate will not long support a school system that openly subverts its wishes, values, and interests.” In fact, the dissatisfaction of black community groups with the school system in New York City had led to the community control movement which Ravitch had so roundly condemned. She had however argued that a key failing of the community control activists had been their refusal to compromise. In *The Revisionists Revised*, echoing the language of Daniel Bell, Ravitch praised educational politics as part of the broader “consensual political process” and contrasted liberal democracy’s belief in “means and ends in relation” with the radicals’ “exclusive preoccupation with ends.” The political divide which Ravitch described illustrated the rejection of the liberal consensus by the leftist politics of the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular the left’s loss of faith in the workings of representative democracy.¹²

Ravitch argued that the revisionists’ work represented “the radical perspective of their times”, and she was right to say that they all had fundamental objections to the idea of the existing public school system and the nature of contemporary American society. She consciously excluded historians such as David B. Tyack, Carl F. Kaestle and Marvin Lazerson, who had accepted the merits in principle of the public school system, but had examined its deficiencies, and had initially been identified by Cremin for possible inclusion in the NAE review of revisionist writing. She argued that their work “includes some of the radical themes” but that “each has criticized central elements of the radical analysis.”¹³

¹² Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 16, 17. Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, 349.

¹³ Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 35, 36. (The main revisionists identified by Ravitch were Michael B. Katz, Colin Greer, Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas, Joel Spring, Walter Feinberg, Samuel

Ravitch did accept in *The Revisionists Revised* that schools were not a “great panacea”.¹⁴ This was again consistent with her viewpoint in *The Great School Wars*, as well as the ideas of Bailyn and Cremin. She did not however set out in the book to provide a rounded examination of the workings of the public school system, for which the work of Tyack, Kaestle and Lazerson would have been highly relevant; rather she based her arguments on broad issues of principle. *The Revisionists Revised* was subtitled “A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools” and because the choice of revisionists was limited to the radicals, she was able to establish a polarised debate with strongly ideological leftist opponents. She employed vigorous, though not always convincing, arguments about the benefits of the public school, including its positive contribution to the immigrant experience and to social and economic mobility, and, more generally, a defence of the merits of liberal capitalism.

In this vein, Ravitch addressed the revisionists’ arguments which she accurately characterised as claiming that the public school was “an instrument of coercive assimilation, designed to strip minority children of their culture and to mold them to serve the needs of capitalism.” In considering the Americanisation of late nineteenth-century immigrants, she accepted that this was “frequently...crudely chauvinistic” but — reflecting her own firm belief in the common culture and the socialising role of the public school — sought to deflect the revisionists’ case by pointing out that immigrants themselves sponsored many assimilation programmes, whilst maintaining their own cultural institutions. Tyack’s detailed analysis of

Bowles and Herbert Gintis). Ibid, 176 (chapter 3, note 2); Cremin to Patrick Suppes, 27 October 1975, Lawrence Cremin Papers, Box 17, National Academy of Education, 1973 - (3 of 3).

¹⁴ Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 171.

Americanisation however, though explaining that the process was a complex one, argued that for many contemporary educators “nothing less would satisfy them than assaulting all forms of cultural difference.”¹⁵

Ravitch also argued that there had been “significant upward mobility in American society”, and that education had contributed substantially to this. She quoted several secondary sources from the preceding decade to support her conclusion but did not undertake an analysis of the revisionists’ detailed claims. As Katz explained in his 1979 review of *The Revisionists Revised*, the revisionists argued that the major factor driving mobility had been structural change, as economic growth generated increased opportunities for employment in well-paid, skilled roles, and the extent to which children benefitted from education was largely a function of their class. Ravitch went on to claim that schooling continued to contribute to mobility, employing an argument which was largely based on the recent experience of blacks, particularly their increased access to educational opportunities (especially at college level), and was in some instances selective in its use of sources, without proper reference to their context. She stated that “blacks who are under thirty-five, well educated, and middle-class have achieved virtually full economic equality with their white peers.” Contemporary census reports in fact indicated that the black middle class made up a very small minority (around 6 per cent) of black families,

¹⁵ Ibid, 57, 68, 69; David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 235.

whilst the disparities for blacks as a whole remained stubbornly high — black unemployment was generally about twice as high as that for whites.¹⁶

Whilst Ravitch's focus as a writer remained firmly on school education, *The Revisionists Revised* revealed her broader political stance, based on belief in liberal democracy coupled with support for contemporary American capitalism and a clear rejection of communism. In rejecting the views of Christopher Jencks, who in *Inequality* (1972) had stated his preference for equality of outcomes, she argued that this would result in "the destruction of privacy, liberty, and individualism" experienced in the communist bloc. Ravitch did however accept that a modern liberal democracy required equality of opportunity to be accompanied by an element of government intervention, particularly in the form of social programmes such as welfare. Marc F. Plattner's generally supportive review of *The Revisionists Revised* in *Commentary* criticised this strand in her argument, referring to the "apologetic tone" of her defence of equality of opportunity. Ravitch's statist stance provides a strong indication that her views remained much closer in the neoconservative spectrum to Nathan Glazer or even Daniel Bell (who refused to be labelled as a neoconservative) than to Irving Kristol, who was by this time highly critical of the role of government and a strong advocate of the market economy.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 90, 73-88, 91-93, 112; Katz, "An Apology for American Educational History": 262-263. Census data qtd. in Walter Feinberg, "Dewey as a Cultural Symbol: A Response to Diane Ravitch," in *Revisionists Respond to Ravitch*, by Walter Feinberg et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Education, 1980), 8, 10.

¹⁷ Christopher Jencks et al., *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (British ed., London: Allen Lane, 1973), 3-15; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 93 – 98, 99; ibid, 98; Marc F. Plattner, "Education & Equality," review of *The Revisionists Revised*, *Commentary*, 66, no.4 (October 1978): 94.

The contemporary reviews reflected the chasm between Ravitch's viewpoint and that of the revisionists. Plattner's *Commentary* review said that "American public schools not surprisingly reflect the values prevalent in American society as a whole, and those who oppose those values will continue to deplore their transmission through our educational institutions." The revisionists themselves by contrast were understandably vehement in their criticism of Ravitch's analysis. Katz described her tactics as "precisely those of which she accuses the radical revisionists: omission, distortion, the creation of straw men, ideological bias, and unjust and unwarranted impeachment of motive" and challenged her view that "progress can be continued through a steady application of the democratic-liberal tradition of reform." *The Revisionists Revised* was however also criticised by historians who identified themselves with the liberal-democratic tradition, if not Ravitch's version of it. David Tyack described it as a "polemic attack on polemics" and an "ideological defense of history against 'ideologists'." Joseph Featherstone viewed the polarised debate between her and the revisionists as an example of a "highly ritualized intellectual confrontation", in which the arguments of a "sectarian academic left" were countered with a "defensive liberalism that spends most of its energy policing radical excesses, rather than attacking corporate privilege."¹⁸

The ideas expressed in *The Revisionists Revised* largely mirrored Ravitch's vision of public education, with its implicit endorsement of the American political and social system, as set out in *The Great School Wars*. There is however a marked difference in

¹⁸ Plattner, "Education & Equality": 93; Katz "An Apology for American History": 260, 256; David Tyack, "Politicizing History," review of *The Revisionists Revised*, *Reviews in American History* 7, no. 1 (March 1979): 14; Joseph Featherstone, "The Politics of Education," review of *The Revisionists Revised*, *New York Times*, 18 June 1978: 26.

tone between the two books. In *The Revisionists Revised*, Ravitch adopted an aggressive, often personal style which reflected her passionate support for the views and historiographical method of her mentor Lawrence Cremin and also her own deeply held values. She wrote much later that the revisionist viewpoint was “contrary to my own understanding of the liberating role of public education”; and she dedicated the book to “my grandparents and parents, who would have found it difficult to comprehend the issues raised in the following pages.” It is also clear that Ravitch continued to hold to her view of the revisionist arguments. In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first published 2010) she reaffirmed her stance in *The Revisionists Revised*, restating her belief that the schools “were never an instrument of cultural repression”, but were rather “a primary mechanism through which a democratic society gives its citizens the opportunity to attain literacy and social mobility.”¹⁹

Ravitch remained interested in the question of historical objectivity, and its relationship with the defence of liberal democracy, for example during her involvement with the Education for Democracy project in the late 1980s when she argued that the view of democracy in history teaching should be based on “objectivity” but not “neutrality.” She did not however revisit the revisionist arguments about public education raised in *The Revisionists Revised*. This can be explained in part by her distaste at the fallout from its publication. The NAE published a collection of critical essays in 1980, entitled *Revisionists Respond to Ravitch*, with a somewhat defensive introduction by its then President Stephen K.

¹⁹ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 6; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, xii.

Bailey, who stated that the selection of Ravitch to review the work of the revisionists “was not dictated by any malice of Academy members towards various authors or...a particular historical point of view.” Ravitch has also said that she learned that Cremin, when pressed at a meeting about the revisionists, “defended them and did not defend me.” She has compared herself to Cremin by saying that she courted controversy whereas he hated it and she was stung by the fact that her vigorous efforts to uphold his reputation had left her personally exposed.²⁰

There were however more general developments in both the historiography and politics of school education, which contributed to Ravitch’s decision to cease writing about the revisionist challenge to the public school. As Milton Gaither has explained, historians of American school education increasingly followed the approach developed by writers such as Tyack, Kaestle and Lazerson, building arguments based on “complexity and sophistication”, and accepting revisionism’s “concern with historically marginalized voices” and its “broadly critical outlook” but rejecting its “ideologically driven presentism.” In the wider political sphere, attacks on public education came increasingly from those on the right who favoured small government (including reduced federal education spending) and privatisation-based measures such as vouchers and tax credits for school fees. Leftist intellectuals who had previously raised fundamental objections to public schools were now therefore more likely to defend them against such attacks.²¹

²⁰ AFT Press Conference, Education for Democracy Project, 19 May 1987, 10, American Federation of Teachers Archives, Office of The President, Albert Shanker, electronic copy supplied by Archivist; Stephen K. Bailey, introduction to *Revisionists Respond to Ravitch*, 1; Ravitch, interview by author, Brooklyn, 30 September 2019.

²¹ Milton Gaither, “The Revisionists Revived: The Libertarian Historiography of Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 52, no.4 (November 2012): 488-489. The revisionist Michael B. Katz wrote in

The Revisionists Revised did provide Ravitch with an opportunity to affirm and refine her ideas on the value and role of the public school and more generally on the merits of the American political and economic system and the common culture, and this constitutes its most enduring significance for her career. It is however a polemical work dominated by an academic dispute and therefore represents a departure from her chosen career path as a writer focusing increasingly on contemporary educational topics, and with an eye to the popular market. The book is a reflection of the rancorous arguments between historians of school education which characterised the late 1960s and early 1970s, but which had largely ended when it was published. It does not take account of the change in the political climate which altered the nature of the criticisms of public education. In particular, it does not address two major areas of contention in American school education — the growth of group-related government initiatives and the pressure for improvement of school standards. Following the publication of *The Revisionists Revised*, Ravitch focused her attention firmly on these subjects.

Equity v. Excellence: Ravitch's Challenge to Race- and Group-Based Initiatives

In May 1976, when Ravitch presented her initial critique of the revisionists to the NAE, she had already begun to develop her ideas about the relationship of race, ethnicity, and culture with school education policy, and she concentrated on this theme throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. Ravitch believed that the federal government's equity-based initiatives intended to benefit blacks and other groups,

2001 about how he had reconsidered his position in his later books, because "any history of state failure seems dangerous in an era characterized by hostility and skepticism toward the capacity of government to deal with social needs"; Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform*, xxviii.

such as mandatory school desegregation and bilingual education, were misconceived and imposed an excessive burden on schools, contributing to a decline in standards (manifested in low student achievement) which was already being fuelled by progressive educational ideas on pedagogy and curriculum content. Her writing in this period culminated in *The Troubled Crusade*, the introduction to which quoted Thomas Jefferson's 1786 call for a "crusade against ignorance", so that the new American republic could avoid the perils of an uneducated electorate. Ravitch argued that in the period since the end of World War II, "more than at any other time...the crusade against ignorance was understood to mean a crusade for equal educational opportunity."²²

Although Ravitch retained her belief in the desirability of racially integrated schools, she was from the mid-1970s a strong critic of the steps taken by the federal government, and supported by the courts, aimed at securing mandatory desegregation. She became a forceful advocate for the idea of 'colour-blindness'. Until 1965, this had dominated the thinking of the civil rights movement, which contained among its supporters many white Americans, including Ravitch. It was a reflection of Martin Luther King's "dream" that his children would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" and was the basis of the Civil Rights Act 1964. Colour-blind policies did not however solve the underlying problem of racial inequality in American society, a fact recognised by Lyndon Johnson, who argued in 1965 for not just "equality as a right and a theory", but

²² Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), xi. For an example of Ravitch's early writing on this subject, see, "Integration, Segregation, Pluralism," *The American Scholar* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1976), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 208-225.

“equality as a fact and as a result.” Johnson backed up his words with a range of colour-conscious measures, focused particularly on employment and higher education.²³

In relation to schools, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision had outlawed ‘de jure’ segregation — state action to decide children’s schools on the basis of their colour — but did not, when delivered, appear to require action to combat ‘de facto’ segregation. This interpretation of *Brown* was enshrined in the Civil Rights Act 1964, which provided that policies for assignment of students to public schools did not have to be designed “in order to overcome racial imbalance.” The Act did however allow for federal funding for education to be withheld in the case of non-compliance with its provisions by local school districts. This was important because of two other initiatives – the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act 1965 (ESEA), which substantially increased the amount of federal aid available for the education of blacks and other poor students, and the creation in 1965 of a specialist civil rights unit in the Office of Education within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW).

The HEW officials responsible for civil rights displayed a fierce commitment to their task. In particular, they adopted a strongly pro-integrationist stance, issuing guidelines for the desegregation of school districts, and used the financial muscle of ESEA to drive home their agenda, by withholding federal funding in the case of non-compliance with these guidelines. Initially their target was Southern school districts,

²³ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 102-107.

which had taken advantage of the 1955 *Brown II* decision, allowing them to end de jure segregation “with all deliberate speed”, to obstruct the process of school integration. The guidelines issued by HEW however came to have much wider scope, effectively requiring school districts to achieve prescribed levels of social mixing, and with potential application outside the South. In the late 1960s, the courts were increasingly active in enforcing integration in line with the HEW guidelines. So strong was the combined force of the guidelines and the court decisions that even Richard Nixon, despite his aversion to pro-integrationist action, was unable to resist it during his presidency.²⁴

Ravitch acknowledged that many Southern school districts had failed to take any meaningful action to eliminate state-segregated schools but was strongly critical of the mandatory desegregation measures adopted. She stated that the courts, in decisions based on the HEW guidelines, instructed local officials to “do whatever was necessary...including the use of racial quotas, the gerrymandering of districts, [and] busing...to redistribute white and black pupil populations into the same schools.” She was particularly exercised by the growth of demanding integration ‘performance criteria’, even in non-Southern cities, where, she argued, there was no evidence that local officials had sought to maintain segregated schools. In Ravitch’s view, the HEW guidelines, when linked to federal ESEA funding, “translated the mandate of the Civil Rights Act from color-blindness to color-consciousness.” She argued that the government should “assure equal access to housing and schools and...remedy

²⁴ On the growth of federal and judicial action to secure desegregation, see Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 105-140.

particular instances of discrimination” but should not “require specific percentages of racial mixing in neighborhoods or schools.”²⁵

Ravitch’s stance was to an extent a logical consequence of the views she had expressed in *The Great School Wars*. In praising the pre-1965 civil rights coalition for its belief that “everyone should be considered as an individual without regard to social origin” and its rejection of “group-based concepts”, Ravitch was echoing the universalist language she had used to frame her earlier ideas on race, ethnicity and the role of the public school. Her writing up to 1974 had however not contained any significant challenge to school desegregation initiatives — indeed one of her earliest educational articles praised Robert Bendiner’s *The Politics of Schools*, which expressed strong support for integrated education. In part this was because Ravitch’s early work was dominated by her strenuous opposition to the community control movement, which vehemently rejected the integration of schools. She also became sympathetic to the views of UFT leader Albert Shanker, whose objections to the 1967 Bundy Plan for decentralisation of the New York City school system included his belief that it would damage efforts to achieve desegregation.²⁶

By becoming a strong critic of colour-conscious initiatives, Ravitch can be viewed as reinforcing the neoconservative position which had emerged in the early 1970s, now that she was no longer focusing on the particular issues raised by community

²⁵ Ravitch, “Color-Blind or Color-Conscious?”, *The New Republic* 180, no.8 (5 May 1979), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 255; Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 176, 165; Ravitch, “Integration, Segregation, Pluralism,” 221.

²⁶ Ravitch, “Color-Blind or Color-Conscious?”, 250; Ravitch, “Community Control Fails the Test,” review of *The Politics of Schools: A Crisis in Self-Government* by Robert Bendiner, *The New Leader* 53, no.2 (19 January 1970): 22-23; United Federation of Teachers (UFT), *Policy Statement on Decentralization*, 20 December 1967 (excerpts), in *Confrontation at Ocean Hill-Brownsville: The New York School Strikes of 1968*, ed. Maurice R. Berube and Marilyn Gittell (New York, Washington and London: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 219.

control. Neoconservatives opposed affirmative action, including mandatory school desegregation initiatives; Nathan Glazer for example had been consistently critical of busing. The growth of Ravitch's opposition to such measures is also likely to have been fuelled by her increasing association with Shanker and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), of which he was elected President in 1974. Shanker became highly sceptical about affirmative action, arguing (as he had during the Ocean Hill–Brownsville dispute) that the emphasis on race caused issues of class to be disregarded. He criticised busing schemes, particularly the Boston plan in which black children were bused to schools containing mainly working-class white students, along with the HEW guidelines requiring prescribed levels of racial mixing in schools.²⁷

In addition, however, there was a wider debate about desegregation initiatives, which formed an important influence on Ravitch's ideas and writing. Social scientists argued about the effectiveness of measures such as busing in increasing black student achievement and self-esteem. A particularly high-profile development was the 1975 decision of James S. Coleman, the author of the report which first suggested the benefits of integration for black students, to argue against court-mandated busing. Coleman claimed that busing led to the 'white flight' to the suburbs which in turn prevented the integration of blacks into majority white schools — a problem which was exacerbated by the refusal of the Supreme Court in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) to allow the formation of metropolitan school districts

²⁷ On Glazer and busing, see "Is Busing Necessary?" *Commentary* 53, no.3 (March 1972): 39-52. Another important strand in the neoconservative opposition to affirmative action in education related to the use of racial preferences in university admissions, which Ravitch also considered in *The Troubled Crusade* (285-292). Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 194-197.

incorporating the suburbs. In a 1975 article on busing in the *New York Times*, for which she had written regularly since the publication of *The Great School Wars*, Ravitch reflected the complex nature of the debate in a nuanced and well-balanced way, and she later provided a scholarly analysis of the issues in *The Troubled Crusade*. She did not however hide her personal opposition to colour-conscious initiatives, which she underscored in articles in journals such as *The New Republic* and *The American Scholar*.²⁸

Although she challenged mandatory desegregation initiatives, Ravitch remained highly critical of the community control movement, which, she argued, had “failed politically because it was perceived as a vehicle for black nationalism and racial separatism, thus threatening the fundamental notion of public schooling.” By contrast, she wrote approvingly of “black critics of dispersionist policies”, such as the civil rights lawyer Derrick A. Bell, Jr., who “preferred substantial improvement of their neighborhood school...to participation in a systemwide busing plan.” Ravitch said that Bell and his associates were “not separatists”, arguing that they were “trying to evolve a pluralist position...that grants black institutions and organizations the same legitimacy accorded those of other ethnic groups, without in any way diminishing the

²⁸ Ravitch, “Busing: The Solution That Has Failed To Solve,” *New York Times* (21 December 1975): 177; Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 174-181. For the debate between social scientists, see for example David J. Armor, “The Evidence on Busing,” *The Public Interest* 28 (Summer 1972): 90-126, and Thomas F. Pettigrew et al., “Busing: a Review of ‘The Evidence’,” *The Public Interest* 30 (Winter 1973): 88-118. On Coleman’s change of mind on busing, see Paul Delaney, “Long-Time Desegregation Proponent Attacks Busing as Harmful,” *New York Times* (7 June 1975): 25. On *Milliken v. Bradley* as a reflection of the limits on the Supreme Court’s support for desegregation, see George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 33-35.

opportunity for full interracial contact.” In her 1975 *New York Times* article on busing, she quoted Bell as describing busing as “a right without a remedy”.²⁹

Ravitch’s praise for the ideas of black intellectuals such as Bell had echoes of her support for the work of Preston Wilcox in East Harlem in the mid-1960s, before (as she viewed it) the movement for black community schools became tainted with extremism. It was also representative of a more general strand in neoconservative thought — the idea of ‘black self-help’. In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Moynihan had envisaged a “period of self-examination and self-help, in which the increasing income and resources of leadership of the [Negro] group are turned inwards.” It was however unclear that the black-led schools praised by Ravitch would in themselves provide an effective solution to student under-achievement. In her *New York Times* article, Ravitch quoted Bell as advocating judicial action to address the comparative lack of resources provided to black schools. Generally, Bell took a pessimistic view of the prospects for black racial equality, arguing that it would “be accommodated only where it converges with the interests of whites.” He was a key figure in the foundation of Critical Race Theory and as such was prominent in mounting a challenge to the idea of colour-blindness. Writing in her blog in 2021, Ravitch said that Bell was “prescient” in arguing that racism was “as virulent as ever”, and that she was “a naive optimist” in believing that it would fade away.³⁰

²⁹ Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 174, 180, 181. Ravitch, “Integration, Segregation, Pluralism,” 224. Ravitch, “Busing: The Solution That Has Failed To Solve”: 177. Ravitch and Bell both presented papers on topics concerning desegregation initiatives and the legacy of the *Brown* decision at a 1978 Harvard Law School symposium, the contents of which were later published as *Shades of Brown*, edited by Bell. Bell became in 1971 the first tenured black law professor at Harvard, but was an increasingly radical force there, challenging as ‘tokenism’ the small number of black appointments within the faculty. Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 109.

³⁰ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (1963; 2nd ed., Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT

Maurice J. Berube, discussing *The Troubled Crusade* in 2001, observed that Ravitch became “seriously out of step with the long march towards civil rights.” There are in fact signs within Ravitch’s writing that she recognised the limitations of an approach based entirely on colour-blindness. In her 1979 *New Republic* article, “Color-Blind or Color-Conscious”, she stated that a policy of “strict neutrality”, which did not seek to address prior discrimination, would “leave many blacks right where they are, at the bottom.” She believed that black self-help initiatives should be supported by programmes which “[prepare] blacks to succeed without racial preferences”, quoting as an example the New York-based Recruitment and Training Program for black building trade apprentices. Such programmes could however only compensate to a limited degree for the chronic underfunding of schools attended by black students. As Derrick Bell had recognised, the system of school funding, based very largely on the ability of local districts to raise funds through property taxes, grossly disadvantaged the poorer areas where most blacks lived, whilst efforts to secure more equitable funding had received a setback in the Supreme Court’s decision in *Rodriguez v. San Antonio* (1972).³¹

Ravitch also reaffirmed her support for the principle of school integration “to the extent that it is demographically feasible.” Demonstrating again her relatively statist

Press, 1970), 84; Ravitch, “Busing: The Solution That Has Failed To Solve”: 177; Derrick A. Bell, Jr. “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no.3 (January 1980): 523. On Bell’s intellectual contribution, see Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 108-112. Ravitch, “*Washington Post*: What is Critical Race Theory and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools?”, *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 7 June 2021.

³¹ Maurice R. Berube, “The Education of Diane Ravitch” in *Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Essays on the Politics of Culture*. (Westport, Connecticut and London: Bergin and Garvey, 2002): 55; Ravitch, “Color-Blind or Color-Conscious,” 258. On school funding and attempts to reform it, see Davies, *See Government Grow*, 194-217. The Recruitment and Training Program was housed in the UFT headquarters (courtesy of UFT President Albert Shanker), and Ravitch’s husband Richard served on its board.

viewpoint, she suggested that government agencies could develop “long-range policies to encourage and maintain stable, integrated neighborhoods.” In practice however, the scope for such integration was severely limited by the federally endorsed racial bias in housing, which had largely excluded blacks from the white suburbs by restrictions on sales and mortgage loans to non-whites and reduced the value of housing in black areas through the policy of ‘red lining’ those areas. Ravitch’s views on race and school education were idealistic in principle — a point acknowledged by Bell in friendly correspondence from the late 1970s — but did not provide an effective remedy for the continuing educational inequality. She believed however that contemporary colour-conscious initiatives posed a threat to the “sense of common humanity” of the early civil rights movement, because they represented the “sharpening of group consciousness and group conflict.” Ravitch based her argument on a broad principle — her universalism — and failed to pay due regard to the evidence of the enduring impact of racism.³²

Ravitch’s aversion to the emphasis on the group also manifested itself in her opposition to the initiatives concerning bilingual education. From the late 1960s, the position of non-English-speaking students attained a higher profile for several reasons. Pressure groups, such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), emerged, seeking to advance the interests of ethnic minorities. At the same time, politicians came to appreciate the electoral importance of minority groups, particularly Latinos; for this reason, the Nixon administration

³² Ravitch, “Integration, Segregation, Pluralism,” 222; Derrick A. Bell, Jr. to Ravitch, 12 March 1979, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 38, Folder 3; Ravitch, “Color-Blind or Color-Conscious,” 259. On the racial bias in housing, see Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 5-7, 25-33.

supported reforms in the education of non-English speakers. Crucially, as with mandatory school desegregation, civil servants responsible for civil rights in HEW were instrumental in initiating change. With added impetus from the Supreme Court following the 1974 *Lau* decision, HEW required school districts to “take affirmative steps to rectify...language deficiency.”³³

There was also a change in the priorities underlying the teaching of non-English speakers. Historically, the emphasis had been on methods such as courses in English as a second language and ‘immersion’ (effectively prohibiting teaching in languages other than English), with the objective of incorporating students within mainstream classroom teaching. By contrast, the primary aim of bilingual education as promoted by HEW, which incorporated classroom teaching in native languages, was to preserve ethnic language and culture rather than to improve English language skills. Bilingualism became a divisive issue and remained so well into the 1980s. A 1985 *New York Times* article explained the disagreements between those who praised it as a key element in the education of non-English speakers, and critics who argued that bilingual education classes had become “the pawns of educators and politicians seeking to bolster their own positions through appeals to ethnic pride.”³⁴

Ravitch criticised bilingual education for its lack of effectiveness in the classroom. She argued that it had not demonstrated its success in raising educational achievement among non-English speakers, quoting as evidence the 1977 report prepared for the Office of Education, which indicated an absence of improvement

³³ HEW requirement quoted in Davies, *See Government Grow*, 153.

³⁴ Edward B. Fiske, “The Controversy over Bilingual Education in America’s Schools; One Language or Two?” *New York Times* (10 November 1985): A.1. On the development of bilingual education initiatives generally, see Davies, *See Government Grow*, 141-165.

except in ability to read Spanish. She wrote disparagingly about the practice of retaining Latino students in Spanish-speaking classes even where they had become competent in English and considered that the operation of bilingual education imposed a further undesirable burden on teachers. More generally, Ravitch was concerned that bilingualism represented an additional example of race-consciousness, although, unlike mandatory school desegregation, the driving force was separation not integration. She viewed bilingual education as a manifestation of ethnocentrism, which was marked by its failure to “see each person as a person.” Ravitch regarded this ethnocentric trait within bilingualism as a characteristic shared with the black community control movement, and her opposition to bilingual initiatives was entirely consistent with her arguments in *The Great School Wars*. In particular, bilingualism ran contrary to her belief in the common culture and the socialising role of public schools.³⁵

As on other ethnic and racial issues, Ravitch was in agreement with Nathan Glazer, who was concerned that bilingual–bicultural education would “hamper the assimilation of new immigrant groups”, and questioned whether ambitious minorities such as Vietnamese Americans, who (like earlier Jewish immigrants) “want[ed] to learn English fast”, wished the public schools to adopt bilingualism. Albert Shanker was also in tune with Ravitch’s ideas, arguing before the Senate Education Committee that federal funds should not be provided to “maintain a separate Spanish-speaking subculture rather than helping move Hispanic students

³⁵ Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 277-279, 311, 270; Ravitch, “Politicization and the Schools: The Case of Bilingual Education,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 129, no.2 (June 1985), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 267.

into the cultural mainstream.” Ravitch’s aversion to ethnocentrism was an enduring theme, manifesting itself again for example in her work on history curriculums in the late 1980s.³⁶

Ravitch argued that “the lesson of the federal categorical programs...was that each interest group had to look out for itself...regardless of the effect on the institution.” She viewed in this light for example the 1970s initiatives involving disabled students, saying that a “brilliant political campaign” by lobbying groups resulted in legislation requiring the education of disabled and non-disabled students together, which was costly, caused practical difficulties, and was unpopular with some parents of disabled students (who preferred special schools) as well as parents of non-disabled students, and teachers. Similarly, Ravitch expressed substantial concerns about the effects of lobbying by feminist groups. In relation to schools, her particular focus was on the pressure to counter gender stereotyping, in guidance provided to teachers and in textbooks. She argued that since girls’ achievement levels in school and college were at least as high as those of boys, it was “impossible to demonstrate that girls were, in fact, ‘damaged’ by textbooks that quoted men more often than women or by readers that showed mothers as housewives.”³⁷

The conclusion she reached was that “lost in the new order of things was any conception of the common interest, the idea that made common schooling possible.”

University of California professor Laurence Veysey’s review of *The Troubled Crusade*

³⁶ Nathan Glazer, “Bilingualism: Will it Work?” 1980; rev. version in *Ethnic Dilemmas 1964-1982* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 151, 154; AFT Press Release, 4 November 1977, American Federation of Teachers Archives, Office of the President, Albert Shanker, Box 63, Folder 28.

³⁷ Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 316, 307, 309-310, 298-299, 300.

noted that to Ravitch “the notion of a society as a mosaic that retains permanently distinct groups...within it seems alien and threatening.” She also had a particular concern about the effect of initiatives involving blacks and other interest groups on the operation of schools. She argued that these measures “diminished the authority of educational administrators” and that “the public schools did not adjust easily or quickly.” Ravitch regarded the emphasis on equality driven measures, based on group consciousness, as harmful to school standards, which became a major focus of her work.³⁸

Equity v. Excellence: Ravitch’s Early Interest in School Standards

The origins of the growing interest in school standards in the mid-1970s lay in the so-called ‘Literacy Crisis’, sparked by the 1975 announcement that scores in the SAT tests, used as a basis for college admissions, had declined in the previous decade. A *Newsweek* article in December 1975, entitled “Why Johnny Can’t Write”, argued that “willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semi-literates.” This concern however raised an underlying question — which has continued to feature in debates about educational achievement — as to whether the evidence did in fact support the conclusion that American schools were failing. The SATs affected only a limited part of the student population (the college-bound) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), based on a representative sample of all students, indicated that performance in mathematics and reading improved, albeit modestly, from its inception in 1969. More generally, overall data can mask socio-

³⁸ Ibid, 316, 311; Laurence Veysey, review of *The Troubled Crusade*, *The Public Historian* 7, no.3 (Summer 1985): 77.

economic factors which are outside the control of schools. These include the effects of poverty, which were exacerbated in the quarter century from the mid-1960s by the growth of immigration, particularly among Latinos. Nonetheless, the response to this perceived crisis in the school system was a call, particularly from the right, for fundamental reform. The nature of the proposals for change did however vary among conservative critics of school performance.³⁹

A key theme in criticisms of school education was that pedagogical innovations in the 1960s were responsible for the decline in standards, and that there was a need to return to the 'basics'. Whilst there was no single statement of 'back-to-basics', it encompassed calls for strict academic standards (including a ban on automatic advancement to the next grade), strong classroom discipline, and the promotion of traditional values respecting religion, the family and the nation. Ravitch agreed that school education had lost its "dedication to excellence" in the 1960s, citing as contributing factors the increase in disciplinary problems caused by the anti-authoritarian mood of the times, and innovations such as 'open education', which involved a highly informal and individualised learning environment. She viewed this as part of a historic pattern in which post-1945 school education policy had been "pulled from extreme to extreme" in succeeding decades, in response to political and social change; for example, in the 1950s, she argued, the fear of increasing Soviet power had led to a sharp rise in academic requirements. She believed that a major

³⁹ "Why Johnny Can't Write" quoted in Ira Shor, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969-1984* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 63. On debates regarding measures of school achievement, see Maris A. Vinovskis, "The Past Is Prologue? Federal Efforts to Promote Equity and Excellence," in *Carrots, Sticks, and the Bully Pulpit: Lessons from a Half-Century of Federal Efforts to Improve America's Schools*, ed. Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Education Press, 2011), 19-20.

threat to standards came from the dominance of progressive educational principles, a topic to which she devoted a substantial proportion of *The Troubled Crusade*.⁴⁰

Ravitch stated that pedagogical progressivism meant the rejection of a disciplined school environment, with an emphasis on book learning and the “traditional subjects” (such as history, English, science and mathematics), in favour of an approach designed to prepare students for the activities of life, based around child-centred ideas and learning through personal experiences. She asserted that by the 1940s, “the language and ideas of progressive education permeated public education”, and she argued that the tenets of progressivism dominated into the 1950s, with a subsequent revival through the radical programmes which appeared in the mid-1960s. Ravitch’s argument is open to challenge on the basis that it overstates — in relation to teaching methods, if not curricular content — the extent to which progressive ideas actually impacted on the day to day operation of American schools. Veysey’s review of *The Troubled Crusade* identified the dangers of Ravitch’s emphasis on “official statements” rather than evidence of teaching practice. Larry Cuban’s *How Teachers Taught*, based on a detailed analysis of pedagogical methods, revealed a variety of practices, but his general conclusion was that, although progressive ideas had a high profile, particularly within schools of education, their impact on teaching practice, especially in high schools, was much more limited.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For a statement of the “most conservative and comprehensive formulation” of back-to-basics, see Shor, *Culture Wars*, 78-79. Ravitch, “American Education: Has the Pendulum Swung Once Too Often?” *Humanities* (November 1982), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 84, 85-88, 89, 93, 80-82.

⁴¹ Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 44, 43, 45-80, 233-256; Veysey, review of *The Troubled Crusade*, 78; Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1990* (2nd ed., New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1993), 142-144, 202-204. Ravitch herself recognised that the extent to which progressive practices were adopted in the classroom was “another issue”; *The Troubled Crusade*, 43.

Ravitch's analysis was reflective of the tendency of the right to lay the blame for the alleged decline in standards on the prevalence of progressive methods. It was also another representation of her contrarianism; in 2006, she said that whilst writing *The Troubled Crusade* she started to challenge what she described as the "mainstream consensus" among educational academics which upheld the principles of progressive education. Her critique of progressivism represented a significant shift of opinion for someone who had studied under Lawrence Cremin at Teachers College, which she considered to be the "High Temple" of progressive education and had defended his ideas in *The Revisionists Revised*.⁴²

Ravitch's first target was what she regarded as a lack of rigour within the learning process. At the core of this, she argued, was progressivism's child-centred approach to teaching, which manifested itself in the practice of 'social promotion' to the next grade irrespective of academic progress, the reduction in allotted homework and the "retreat from thoughtful reading and careful writing." Ravitch had supported conventional learning methods from her work in the early 1970s, which criticised the educational effectiveness of the community control experiments. She did not however adopt the most extreme elements within the basics movement such as very rigid teacher-centred classroom discipline, including corporal punishment, arguing that the American belief in schooling was not based on "a love of the hickory stick and the three Rs." The progressive icon John Dewey was the subject of extensive criticism from the right for his child-centred ideas, but Ravitch praised Dewey for his

⁴² J. Wesley Null and Diane Ravitch, eds., *Forgotten Heroes of American Education: The Great Tradition of Teaching Teachers* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing, 2006), foreword by Ravitch, xiii.

rejection of formal rote-learning practices. She also argued that his ideas had been misunderstood by his progressive followers and that his vision of child-centred learning involved a crucial role for the teacher in directing the child's study. In her 1982 article, "American Education: Has the Pendulum Swung Once Too Often?", Ravitch envisaged a classroom in which the teacher would "kindle intellectual joy without neglecting the necessity of disciplined study."⁴³

Another of Ravitch's major concerns was that the dominance of progressivism had led to the academic liberal arts curriculum being supplanted by an emphasis on vocational education. She opposed the placing of students within different curricular 'tracks', arguing that "all children who are capable of learning" should have a "broad liberal education", including history, literature and science, and she focused increasingly on the replacement of history courses by social studies. Ravitch was particularly critical of the 'life adjustment education' in vogue from the 1940s, which, she believed, "took the utilitarian, vocational thrust of progressivism to its logical extremes", and involved substituting "radio repair for physics" and "business English for the classics."⁴⁴

The stance which Ravitch took on curriculum content, particularly the humanities, remained an enduring feature of her work and formed a key element in her contribution to the neoconservative viewpoint on school education in the 1980s.

⁴³ Ravitch, "The Schools We Deserve," *The New Republic*, 184, no.16 (18 April 1981), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 49; Ravitch, "Forgetting the Questions: The Problem of Educational Reform," *The American Scholar*, 50, no.3, Summer 1981, reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 30; Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 47; Ravitch, "American Education: Has the Pendulum Swung Once Too Often?", 89. Albert Shanker shared Ravitch's view of Dewey on this point; Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 323.

⁴⁴ Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve*, 14-15; Ravitch, "American Education: Has the Pendulum Swung Once Too Often?", 82.

Such ideas were not the exclusive preserve of the right. Vocational education had been a target of the revisionist writers in the 1960s and 1970s. Robert M. Hutchins had disapproved of life adjustment education in the 1950s, because he believed it encouraged children to adapt to socially conservative mores, such as gender roles; and Arthur Bestor, writing at the same time, had defended liberal arts subjects as the building blocks of critical thought. In *The Troubled Crusade*, Ravitch praised the work of Hutchins and Bestor, whilst describing some of the 1950s opponents of progressive education as “extremists” who “tapped a current of right-wing paranoia” to attack progressivism for undermining anti-communism and religious belief. The debate about values and culture between the different groups opposing progressive curricular ideas continued into the 1980s. In that debate, Ravitch’s views reflected the liberal intellectual tradition represented by Hutchins and Bestor, and she distanced herself from the pro-religious and strongly anti-communist ‘New Right’.⁴⁵

Ravitch expressed her concerns about the ideas of the New Right in a 1982 article written for the AFT journal *The American Educator*. She explained that it was reacting against what it perceived as the efforts of “secular humanists” to undermine student moral values, and highlighted its pressure to amend the curriculum, by introducing scientific creationism, and to ban books it considered unsuitable from classrooms and school libraries. Ravitch’s opposition to the New Right’s views on the curriculum stemmed from her firm commitment to the constitutional principle that public schools should not promote religious ideas. She was equally critical of the

⁴⁵ Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 70. On the post-World War II challenge to progressive ideas, with particular reference to Hutchins and Bestor, see Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (Paperback ed., New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 117-136.

proposal to reintroduce prayer to public schools, which was championed by Ronald Reagan during his presidency, but failed to gain congressional approval. In condemning the attack on intellectual freedom implicit in book-banning, she referred to the anti-Communist fervour she had witnessed in her 1950s Houston High School.⁴⁶

Despite her disapproval of the New Right's viewpoint however, Ravitch was clear that "parents and the public expect the schools to teach values." She believed that students should acquire the skills to think for themselves, but also contended that they should do so within a recognisable framework of shared values, including belief in the importance of democracy and citizenship, as well as "respecting cultural diversity without sacrificing...[the] commitment to the best values of the common culture" — a principle which built on her view of the role of the public school set out in *The Great School Wars* and *The Revisionists Revised*. She considered that a liberal education, especially history and literature, provided the most appropriate tools to achieve these objectives. This line of argument however raised a number of questions, such as which literary works should be studied in schools, from what perspective history should be taught, and how far different cultural and ethnic viewpoints should be reflected within the curriculum. These questions, and the wider arguments about values-based teaching, were a vital part of Ravitch's work, and debates about school education generally, in the decade following the publication of *The Troubled Crusade*.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ravitch, "The New Right and the Schools: Why Mainstream America Is Listening to Our Critics," *American Educator* (Fall 1982): 11, 9, 10-11.

⁴⁷ Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve*, 22, 23; Ravitch, "Forgetting the Questions," 41, 42; Ravitch, "The New Right and the Schools": 9.

Ravitch's ideas differed in other respects from those of the New Right, which rejected the existing secular public school system and promoted private Christian schools and even home schooling. She continued to rebut the argument that the idea of the public school was fundamentally flawed. The revisionist Michael B. Katz, writing in 1987, argued that in the period between *The Revisionists Revised* and *The Troubled Crusade*, she had "shifted from apologist to critic" of the public school. In the concluding paragraph of *The Troubled Crusade* however, Ravitch said that "in the crusade against ignorance, there have been no easy victories, but no lasting defeats." She believed that the public school was an institution worth preserving, and that by addressing the problems caused by what she regarded as misguided post-war policies, it could be restored to its full potential — an illustration of her general view that society needs traditional institutions but should be prepared to remodel them.⁴⁸

Ravitch also distanced herself from those on the right who denied the value of a federal government role in education. Whilst reprising in the closing pages of *The Troubled Crusade* the mistakes she believed the federal government had made in the preceding two decades, she recognised that the changed relationship between education and government was a "new fact of life" which would not go away. Rather than suggesting that this relationship was an unqualified evil, Ravitch — noting the "active dedication of the federal government and the courts to the rights of all children" — described it as a "challenge to critical intelligence", to be "studied, debated, criticized, and acted on." Ravitch's statist position was the basis of the

⁴⁸ Katz, *Reconstructing American Education* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 152; Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 330. On the New Right rejection of public schools, see Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 213-215.

approach to school education which she, along with other neoconservatives — notably William Bennett and Chester E. Finn, Jr. — adopted in the following quarter-century.⁴⁹

The Troubled Crusade, the book which encapsulates most comprehensively Ravitch's ideas in the late 1970s and early 1980s, attracted substantial critical attention in contemporary reviews and subsequently. Following the combativeness of *The Revisionists Revised*, its style represented a return to the approach of *The Great School Wars*, with potential appeal to an educated popular audience. Berube, whilst critical of Ravitch's treatment of race, described *The Troubled Crusade* as her "finest book", and said that he had taught it in his doctoral classes for nearly twenty years. Veysey commented on its generally "calm, judicious tone" and "clear effort...to be fair-minded", and William Lowe Boyd noted Ravitch's "lucid and engaging style". Like *The Great School Wars* however, *The Troubled Crusade* generated sharply divided responses. It was praised by Nathan Glazer and *New York Times* education editor Fred M. Hechinger, writing respectively in the *New Leader* and *New Republic* — both then generally sympathetic to neoconservative thinking. Katz was by contrast highly critical, referring to the book's "illusory mantle of objectivity." Boyd, whilst acknowledging that to most contemporary readers Ravitch's analysis would "seem to be quite well balanced", said that it reflected "the current zeitgeist in education, to which the author in her capacity as educational critic and essayist has been an

⁴⁹ Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 320.

important contributor”, and argued that “in the future it may not seem so well balanced after all.”⁵⁰

By the early 1980s, Ravitch had formed the views about school education which would influence her work for the rest of the century and beyond. Her adoption of colour-blindness was consistent with her long-standing principles and reflected the overly optimistic view of the decline of racism which she retained until much later in her career. Her interest in school standards, and particularly the humanities, became her major preoccupation, as she began to distance herself from the broad acceptance of progressive educational ideas she had acquired from Cremin. She joined the group of neoconservatives seeking to work with government to improve public schools, though she showed signs that she had retained a wider belief in New Deal-era statism which would mark her place among neoconservative educationalists.

Ravitch’s commitment to standards provided the impetus for the broadening of her role, as she became actively involved in school education policy. In 1982, she co-founded the Educational Excellence Network (EEN), which aimed to coordinate the efforts of those who shared her vision of how public schools should be improved. In

⁵⁰ Berube, “The Education of Diane Ravitch”, 52; Veysey, review of *The Troubled Crusade*: 78; William Lowe Boyd, review of *The Troubled Crusade*. *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no.5 (March 1986):1265-1266; Nathan Glazer, “Politics and the Public School”, review of *The Troubled Crusade*, *The New Leader* (12 December 1983):21-22; Fred M. Hechinger, “Learning Disabilities”, review of *The Troubled Crusade*, *The New Republic* 189, no.16 (17 October 1983):33-36; Katz, *Reconstructing American Education*, 152.

doing so, she pointed the way to her career, as an adviser, government official, and think-tank member, for the next quarter of a century.

CHAPTER 4 – EXCELLENCE, HISTORY AND MULTICULTURALISM, 1983-1993

EEN, which Ravitch co-founded with Chester Finn, promoted the neoconservative viewpoint she had helped to shape, based on working with government to improve school standards. She however distanced herself from the pro-market neoliberal ideas which underpinned the politics of the Reagan administration and were increasingly accepted by neoconservatives, including Finn, as part of their programme for school improvement. She expressed scepticism about market-based initiatives like private school vouchers and tax credits, as well as defending the teaching profession. Ravitch's prime focus was on improving curriculum content, particularly in the humanities, which she defended in a series of books co-edited or co-authored with Finn — *Against Mediocrity*, *Challenges to the Humanities*, and *What Do Our 17 Year Olds Know?* Whilst she continued to uphold traditional principles, such as the merits of shared values, liberal democracy, and the Western cultural tradition, she also strove to avoid taking an uncompromisingly conservative stance in the culture wars about the humanities. In history, she managed to achieve broad agreement on a number of curricular initiatives, for example by avoiding an uncritical view of American democracy and embracing the inclusion of world history, though her enduring abhorrence of ethnic separatism caused her to attack the New York curriculum and dented her consensual image. Ravitch's period in government in the early 1990s was personally frustrating. She achieved only limited success in her work for national standards and left office with a negative view of Congress, particularly the Democrats, and an increased awareness of pro-business ideas.

The Formation of EEN, the Early Excellence Movement, and the Reagan Presidency

Concerns about American school education had been recognised — not least by Ravitch — from the mid-1970s. There was a perception, particularly on the political right, that schools needed to resume what Ravitch described as their “pursuit of excellence.” ‘Excellence’ became a key word in contemporary educational politics, epitomised by the establishment of a federal Commission on Excellence in Education, though for left-wing educationalists like Ira Shor it was part of the conservative “restoration” aimed at reversing the progress towards equality in the 1960s. The search for excellence comprised the rejection of progressive pedagogy and its replacement with a disciplined, teacher-centred classroom environment focused on the ‘basics’ such as literacy and numeracy, and it also included a call for the study of traditional academic subjects, particularly the humanities. This provided the background to Ravitch and Finn’s establishment of EEN in 1982.¹

Chester Finn had originally planned to pursue a career as an educator but was mentored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan at the Harvard School of Education in the late 1960s and subsequently worked with Moynihan in various roles, as well as spending three years at the Brookings Institution. By 1980, he had switched his political allegiance from the Democrats to the Republicans, motivated by his admiration for neoconservative intellectuals such as Irving Kristol and his concern that Democratic equity-based schools programmes were failing to address student

¹ Ravitch, “American Education: Has the Pendulum Swung Once Too Often?” *Humanities* (November 1982), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 84; Ira Shor, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969-1984* (Boston, London, and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 7-9.

underachievement. He was part of the Reagan education transition team following the 1980 presidential election, but his appointment to the administration was vetoed because of his previous relationship with Moynihan, and in 1981 he took up a position as a professor of education at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.²

Ravitch's acquaintance with Finn was also a result of the connection with Moynihan. She met him because her then husband Richard, who was active in the Democratic Party, was a member of what Finn described as Moynihan's "kitchen cabinet" during the period when Finn was part of Moynihan's Senate team. Finn has recalled that few members of the Vanderbilt faculty "saw the education issues of the day as I did", and that Ravitch "was having a similar experience" with her colleagues at Teachers College — an institution closely associated with the ideas of progressive education — so by 1980, they had "begun to compare notes." They decided that they should try to bring together those individuals who shared their view about the need for school reform and this led to the formation of EEN.³

EEN set out to perform two main functions: first, to distribute regular "compilations of articles, clippings, research findings and notes" of interest to members, and second, to establish a process enabling it to refer government officials, educational groups and journalists to appropriate "education experts". Its energetic efforts enabled it to establish a leading position in the movement for educational excellence as that movement began to take shape. It was established with what Finn described as a "small seed grant" which included a contribution from the right-wing

² Chester E. Finn, *Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform since Sputnik* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 26-30, 41-55, 59-64, 87-93.

³ *Ibid*, 118.

John M. Olin Foundation, and in 1986 its total grants, mainly from foundations, were over \$75,000. Ravitch did not however appear to feel inhibited by the sources of funding; she has written that Olin and the other conservative foundations “never sought to influence anything I wrote.” EEN was not the only organisation involved in promoting excellence. Extensive lobbying for school improvement initiatives was undertaken from the 1980s onwards by business groups which associated better education with economic progress, such as the Business Round Table, and civil rights organisations which advocated higher standards, as well as increased funding, to benefit disadvantaged students, like the Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights. At this time, however, and for the following quarter-century, Ravitch and Finn, and the organisations like EEN with which they were involved, were highly significant figures in the evolving movement to enhance school and student achievement.⁴

Ravitch’s role in EEN demonstrated her keen understanding of the broadening range of opportunities within intellectual life, particularly those presented by the growth of research and lobbying organisations and of audiences seeking their output. Displaying her characteristic business acumen, she welcomed the chance to broaden her activities beyond her role as a writer, and in particular to increase her opportunities for paid speaking engagements. In 1983, she entered into an exclusive agency agreement with the Leigh Bureau for “the booking of live presentations”, on the basis that the minimum fee would be \$2,500, but that the agency would “try, in

⁴ “The Educational Excellence Network: 1988-1991,” 2, Chester E. Finn, Jr., Papers, Box 120, Diane Ravitch Folder; Finn, *Troublemaker*, 119; “Status of EEN grants as of April 1, 1986,” Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 18, Folder 10; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; revised and expanded paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2016), 12; Jesse H. Rhodes, *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind* (Cornell Paperbacks ed., Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 44-52.

fact, for \$3,500.” Her speeches generally reflected the themes that were exercising her mind at the time; for example, a set of draft speech notes from the early 1980s outlined the growth of ‘back to basics’ as a reaction against the “pedagogical innovations” of the 1960s.⁵

The formation of EEN also reflected the growing political debates in the U.S. about the direction of school education policy. The major priority from the mid-1960s had been ‘equity’, involving federal intervention including financial aid through ESEA for disadvantaged students and support for colour-conscious initiatives such as busing. By the early 1980s, two broad approaches had emerged on the political right, both of which challenged the focus on equity. One of these approaches, which was epitomised in the work of EEN, represented the ideas of neoconservatism. The other driving force in the education policy debates of the period was neoliberalism.

The early proponents of neoliberalism, such as the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman, clothed their free-market views in the language of individual freedom and personal responsibility and argued against government intervention. As Philip Mirowski has noted however, neoliberals generally have not accepted what he described as the “comic-book version of laissez-faire”, and they have “plot[ted] to take over the state” by lobbying for “an alternative set of infrastructural arrangements.” From the late 1970s, neoliberal think tanks such as the Cato Institute argued for the privatisation of roads, parks, and prisons. A guiding principle of neoliberalism in practice was that government would cease to be actively

⁵ Bill Leigh to Ravitch, 19 September 1983, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 51, Folder 1; “What’s behind the ‘Back to Basics’ Movement?”, undated speech notes, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 51, Folder 2.

involved in certain cases, such as social provision and regulation, but would intervene where necessary to promote the interests of business.⁶

The neoliberal approach to school education provides an illuminating example of this principle. Neoliberals mounted a fundamental challenge to the existing public school system; they believed that ‘school choice’ would place the responsibility for children’s education firmly with their parents, and that the growth of private education would promote opportunities for business. By 1982, Samuel L. Blumenfeld was arguing in *Is Public Education Necessary?* that “schools are necessary, but they can be created by free enterprise today as they were before the public school movement achieved its fraudulent state monopoly in education.” At the same time, school choice in practice involved government intervention. Groups such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) were committed to assisting state governments to introduce legislation to facilitate parental choice, including vouchers and tax credits. Neoliberals were therefore content to use the power of government to drive forward the choice agenda. They did not accept that government should become involved in the detailed process of improving school standards. Blumenfeld argued that “competitive market forces” would produce “far better education.”⁷

By the early 1980s, a set of neoconservative ideas on school education had also emerged, based largely on principles which Ravitch had enunciated in her writing,

⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19-22; Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 14, 80, 18; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 189.

⁷ Blumenfeld quoted in Ronald W. Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens: How Accountability Reform Has Damaged Civic Education and Undermined Democracy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 53-54. On the role of ALEC, see *ibid*, 52-53.

aimed at securing improvements to public schools by working with government, including the federal government. As Ravitch had also recognised, some of neoconservatism's culturally conservative agenda for schools was shared by other right-of-centre movements, notably the religious right — which however believed that the public school system should be replaced by private provision, and in that sense was aligned with the ideas of neoliberalism.

Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 with a platform of a substantially reduced role for the federal government. Rather surprisingly therefore, Reagan appointed Terrel H. Bell, a moderate Republican who had pursued a career in education, as his first Education Secretary. Bell was opposed to the president's plans and wished to "preserve the traditional federal role in education." Despite resistance from the president, Bell appointed a cabinet-level National Commission on Excellence in Education. Its 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) argued that public schools were underperforming, and students' levels of achievement were lower than those of foreign students. Its remedy was not neoliberal school choice, but rather a range of measures designed to strengthen public schools, such as enhanced standards and curriculums. It also advocated a major role for federal government, arguing that it should identify and promote the national interest in education.⁸

ANAR received a generally enthusiastic media response, though it was opposed by the largest teaching union, the National Education Association (NEA) — but not by

⁸ Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 41- 43; Bell quoted in Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 54. It has been argued that Reagan's appointment of Bell can be explained by his belief that the Education Department would shortly be abolished, see Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow: Education Politics from Johnson to Reagan* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 260.

Shanker's AFT — and was perceived by Ira Shor as a further manifestation of the conservative restoration in American schools. ANAR's recommendations were very much in tune with the ideas of neoconservative educational thinkers such as Ravitch and Finn, who were clearly eager to endorse the report. In a *Washington Post* article shortly after its publication, Ravitch referred to the "admirable report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education" and said that it had "already raised the level of discourse about education across the country."⁹

Ravitch's view of ANAR was highly perceptive. From the mid-1980s, school education became an increasingly important issue for state governments. This was driven by the American economic crisis which began in the 1970s and was marked by the decline of traditional industries and concerns about the international competitiveness of the economy. State leaders became convinced that the skills needed to respond to these developments required a greater contribution from schools. Several governors, including the Republican Lamar Alexander in Tennessee and the Democrat Bill Clinton in Arkansas, became strongly focused on school reform, and in 1986 the National Governors' Association (NGA) produced *Time for Results*, a report containing recommendations for state action to improve school performance. Alexander, in his summary of the report, stated that "To meet stiff competition from workers in the rest of the world, we must educate ourselves and our children as we never have before."¹⁰

⁹ Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 41; Shor, *Culture Wars*, 104-108; Ravitch, "Is Education Really a Federal Issue?", *Washington Post* (5 June 1983), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 153.

¹⁰ Rhodes, *An Education in Politics*, 42-43; Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 51-52; Alexander quoted in *ibid*, 52.

Polls indicated growing public concern about the state of American schools and a broad rejection of the administration's desired reduction in the federal role in education. Although Reagan achieved modest real-terms cuts in education spending, he did not succeed in abolishing the Department of Education, encountering congressional opposition from members of both parties. His administration was however able to require school districts to assess the effectiveness of ESEA Chapter I funding for disadvantaged students and produce school improvement plans where necessary — an early indication of the shift from a purely equity-based federal school education policy.¹¹

Ravitch and Finn continued to promote ANAR's call for excellence in American schools during the remainder of the Reagan administration. Finn's role was the most substantial; he was appointed Assistant Secretary, Office of Educational Research and Improvement by the new Secretary of Education William J. Bennett during the second Reagan term from 1985 to 1988 and was primarily responsible for the preparation of the report *What Works* which contained research-based guidance on a range of issues related to school performance. That report however also referred to the idea of choice, which Bennett had indicated would be achieved through measures promoted by neoliberals such as tuition tax credits and vouchers.¹²

Finn later distinguished his view of choice from that of the most zealous neoliberal advocates, stating that the belief of "choice enthusiasts" in "the market's invisible hand" led them to the false conclusion that "quality will inexorably follow."

¹¹ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 46-47; Davies, *See Government Grow*, 254-267.

¹² Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 55-56.

This was representative of a general trait among neoconservatives; Irving Kristol, although he became associated with ideas such as supply-side economics, expressed reservations about the more enthusiastic free-market neoliberals, arguing that a “healthy society” involved more than the “correct economic prescriptions.” Finn did however display other evidence of his engagement with pro-business, market related concepts popular with neoliberals. He became actively involved in the Department of Labor’s Working Group on Human Capital, promoting education as a force for ‘human capital’ development. He also argued that the excellence movement had a “keen sense of accountability” — a principle, he believed, not generally shared by the teaching profession, of which he was highly critical.¹³

Ravitch also maintained her support for measures to enhance school performance. In the introduction to *The Schools We Deserve* (1985), she praised the action taken by states since ANAR to improve public schools, and referred to the need to “sustain the momentum for school reform.” Her article “A Good School” (1984) lauded the work of a Brooklyn high school providing all students with a “strong basic curriculum and a diversity of learning opportunities”; this had added significance since it was prompted by a meeting with Mary Butz, a teacher at the school, who became her partner following her divorce from Richard Ravitch in 1986. Unlike Finn however, Ravitch did not employ the language of business and the market. In her *Washington Post* article applauding ANAR for example, she stressed that the federal government’s role had “nothing to do with...private school subsidies”

¹³ Finn, *Troublemaker*, 271; Irving Kristol, “An Autobiographical Memoir,” in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo and Singapore: The Free Press, 1995), 35-37; Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 56-58; Finn, “The Challenges of Educational Excellence,” in *Challenges to the Humanities*, ed. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch and P. Holley Roberts (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 195.

but rather involved “assist[ing] localities to improve the quality of education available to all children.”¹⁴

The differing language which Ravitch and Finn used to frame the excellence debate was in part a reflection of their respective political allegiances. Finn was a Republican able to find a place in the Reagan administration, whilst Ravitch remained a registered Democrat, who had continued in her writing to evince some support for welfare-based federal intervention characteristic of the New Deal Order. There were specific points on which they disagreed. Ravitch was for example uncomfortable with Finn’s association of ‘accountability’ with his critique of teaching standards, which sat uneasily with her view that attacks on teachers “smack[ed] more than a little of scapegoating” and her close connection with the AFT. She has said that in works which she and Finn co-authored, she strove to remove his negative comments about teachers. Despite these differences, however, Ravitch and Finn’s partnership was harmonious and mutually advantageous. Ravitch provided the credibility of a respected educational writer, whilst Finn brought experience derived from closeness to the centres of power. Ravitch welcomed the opportunity to hunt in an intellectual pack; from her early work on race and ethnicity, she had placed herself in the neoconservative camp. Her main priority within EEN was its work to advance the humanities, and particularly history and literature, within the school curriculum.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve*, 4-5; Ravitch, Ravitch, “A Good School”, *The American Scholar* 53, no.4 (Fall 1984), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 294; Ravitch, “Is Education Really a Federal Issue?”, 153, 154-155.

¹⁵ Ravitch, “Scapegoating the Teachers,” *The New Republic* 189, no 19 (7 November 1983) reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 91; Ravitch, interview by author, Brooklyn, 30 September 2019.

Promoting the Humanities

The prime focus of the excellence movement following ANAR — certainly as measured by the media response — was on the need to address the perceived threats to national interests caused by declining school performance. *Newsweek's* front cover on 9 May 1983 stated emphatically “Saving Our Schools: A Scathing Report Demands Better Teachers And Tougher Standards.” ANAR did call for stronger high school graduation requirements for the ‘five new basics’ including English and social studies (comprising history) but the humanities achieved a relatively low profile in debates about reforming school education.

In the early 1980s, Finn cultivated his connection with William Bennett, another vigorous neoconservative advocate of the humanities who was then Chair of the NEH. Building on this, and Ravitch’s status as a writer, EEN secured funding from the NEH for three projects in the mid-1980s designed to promote the humanities, and, more generally, to emphasise the importance of content-based pedagogy, focusing on history and literature. There were two sets of conferences which led to the publication of the collections of essays *Against Mediocrity* (1984) and *Challenges to the Humanities* (1985), and a joint project (‘Foundations of Literacy’) with the federally funded National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), based on an assessment of high school seniors in history and literature, which formed the basis of *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* (1987). All three books were co-edited or co-authored by Ravitch and Finn, who presented an idealistic view of the humanities, expressly rejecting the suggestion that they were matters fit only for the wealthy and college bound. They argued that knowledge of the humanities would aid individuals

in their daily lives, not least in resisting anti-democratic forces. Writing in her own name in the introduction to her 1985 collection of articles *The Schools We Deserve*, Ravitch stated that literature aided the understanding of “the connections between...ideas and actions” whilst rejecting the idea that knowledge should be “subjected to a strict criterion of utility.”¹⁶

Ravitch and Finn’s viewpoint was however also a reflection of the culturally conservative ideas which they as neoconservatives (and the political right more generally) upheld. They argued that the humanities could prepare students to “make important choices”, but “with the prior understanding that not all of the options are equally sound.” This was consistent with Ravitch’s assertion in *The Schools We Deserve* that the public desired the teaching of “simple verities.” Underlying this line of argument was an outright rejection of the relativistic views advanced in the 1980s by academics like Stanley Fish, who wrote that the humanities had “no inherent meaning because all meaning is subjective and relative to one’s own perspective.” Ravitch and Finn argued particularly that humanities teaching needed to reflect a “common cultural heritage” including “the Western cultural tradition and its intellectual achievements.” A strong defence of Western civilisation was a hallmark of right-leaning intellectuals in the 1980s. Bennett for example — contrary to figures

¹⁶ Finn, *Troublemaker*, 120; Finn and Ravitch, “Conclusions and Recommendations,” in *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America’s High Schools*, ed. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch and Robert T. Fancher (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1984), 241-243; Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and P. Holley Roberts, eds., *Challenges to the Humanities* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 5; Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve*, 23, 25. The utopian view of the humanities was shared by other contemporary writers, including Mortimer Adler, a veteran proponent of the study of ‘great books’, in *The Paideia Proposal* (1982) and the progressive educationalist Theodore R.Sizer in *Horace’s Compromise* (1984).

such as Fish — defended the Western literary canon, arguing that “our society is the product of...Western civilisation.”¹⁷

Pursuing these arguments further, Ravitch and Finn in *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* became involved in the debate on the literary canon to be taught in schools. They stated that until the 1960s, the high school literature curriculum had maintained a “modicum of coherence”, being “centered on major works by renowned British and American writers”, but that this had been lost under pressure from groups such as blacks and feminists who criticised the exclusivity of the curriculum and from “those who on principle opposed the very idea of a canon.” They agreed with Bennett about the value of a canon but were more open to its expansion to encompass previously excluded groups, arguing that “the canon of the past no longer provided a sufficient mirror to show us what we had become” but had not been replaced by the “larger, newer, and better mirror that we needed.” This desire to widen the content of the humanities presaged Ravitch’s efforts from the mid-1980s to avoid taking an extreme position in the culture wars afflicting history and literature.¹⁸

Ravitch and Finn however tellingly summarised their views about what had gone wrong with the school literature curriculum by stating that “instead of admitting new members to the old boys’ club, the club was disbanded”; in other words, they

¹⁷ Finn and Ravitch, “Conclusions and Recommendations,” in *Against Mediocrity*, 248-249; Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve*, 22; Fish quoted in Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 227; Finn, Ravitch and Roberts, *Challenges to the Humanities*, 9, 5; Bennett quoted in Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 226.

¹⁸ Ravitch and Finn, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature*, (First Perennial Library ed., New York, Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco, London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore and Sydney: Harper & Row, 1988), 9-11.

advocated incremental change to the historic curriculum. Underlying the book's approach to the literature and history curriculums was Ravitch's view of the common culture, namely that it was a unifying force transcending differences of race, ethnicity, and gender. This issue was a feature of the debates on multicultural history from the late 1980s in which Ravitch was a key participant. In relation to literature, it was reflected in Ravitch's collection *The American Reader* (1990); this contained contributions from black leaders such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King who, despite their struggles against white oppression, broadly endorsed the principle of black progress within the American political system but excluded separatist figures such as Stokely Carmichael.¹⁹

Ravitch and Finn's support for the humanities was also underpinned by a belief in the importance of content-based pedagogy. As Ravitch had explained in her own writing, the argument that content in education was less important than skills was generally associated with progressive educators — a target for the right because of their perceived child-centrism and relativistic ideas. Ravitch and Finn wrote approvingly of the pro-content ideas of E.D. Hirsch Jr., who contributed an essay to *Challenges to the Humanities*. Hirsch set out his views more fully in *Cultural Literacy* (1987) in which he argued that "to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world." Hirsch included a 64-page appendix in which he set out his own list of facts described as "what literate

¹⁹ Ibid, 11. The black writers in the assessment included Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, and feminists were represented by Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem.

Americans know.” In the acknowledgements he said Ravitch provided the “single greatest impetus” for the book.²⁰

Ravitch and Finn were unimpressed by students’ factual knowledge as revealed by the NAEP assessment in *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* They called for a “solid core curriculum of history and literature [for] all students at every grade level”, stressing the importance of “chronology” in history and a “hefty dose of good literature.” “At the same time, they rejected the idea that a choice had to be made between “facts” and “concepts” or between “content” and “skills”. Ravitch privately recognised the danger that a very strong emphasis on factual knowledge would cause her more balanced views to become obscured. Writing to Shanker in 1990, she said that Hirsch’s “list of facts” was “not cultural literacy”, and in her history-related projects, she was eager to avoid taking a polarised position, emphasising that students should learn to think critically as well as acquiring information.²¹

Ravitch and Finn also indicated that they had accepted the use of multiple-choice tests in the NAEP assessment only because it was preferable to “the absence of *any* reliable data.” They argued in *Challenges to the Humanities* that the focus on excellence might give “cause for alarm” since subjects more readily measured by standardised multiple-choice tests were likely to prosper at the expense of the humanities. That concern was justified by the implementation in 2001 of the No

²⁰ Finn, Ravitch and Roberts, *Challenges to the Humanities*, 18; E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (First Vintage Books ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1988), xiii, 146-215, viii.

²¹ Ravitch and Finn, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, 224, 208, 218, 15-21; Ravitch to Albert Shanker, 21 October 1990, American Federation of Teachers Archives, Office of The President, Albert Shanker, Box 43, Folder 22.

Child Left Behind regime, based on standardised testing in reading and numeracy, under which the role of the humanities was marginalised.²²

Notwithstanding the nuances within her views however, Ravitch was clear that she regarded the results of the NAEP assessment as disappointing. She was unmoved by the criticism of writers such as William Ayers who argued that *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* had not acknowledged the effects on test scores of the underlying inequality affecting American schools. She wrote that knowing the half-century during which the Civil War occurred (which only 32% of the students did) was “not the possession of any particular social class.” Ravitch firmly believed that there was a pressing need to improve the teaching of the humanities, and she focused particularly on raising the profile of history in schools.²³

Reviving History

Ravitch set out her view of the case for history in “From History to Social Studies”, a contribution to *Challenges to the Humanities*. She asserted that if “properly taught”, history would awaken students to the “universality of the human experience.”

Ravitch explained that her belief in the benefits of history was rooted in her personal experience. At Wellesley she had majored in political science but became increasingly disillusioned with its focus on contemporary issues which she viewed as

²² Ravitch and Finn, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, 13; Finn, Ravitch and Roberts, *Challenges to the Humanities*, 7.

²³ William Ayers, “‘What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?’: A Critique,” *Education Week* (27 November 1987): 24; Ravitch, “A Response to Michael Apple,” *Teachers College Record* 90, no.1 (Fall 1988): 129.

having only ephemeral importance and turned to the study of history because she “could not understand the present without studying the past.”²⁴

Ravitch was clearly concerned about high school students’ poor grasp of historical facts. She flagged this as early as 1985 in her *New York Times* article “Decline and Fall of History Teaching”, describing her experience at a Minnesota university where none of the ethnic relations students were aware of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Noting also that the number of college history majors had declined in the 1970s from nearly 45,000 to under 20,000, she argued that there was a general malaise affecting the teaching of history.²⁵

In Ravitch’s view, the main factor contributing to the decline of history in schools was the growth of social studies, which was meant to encompass history but had weakened its position within the curriculum. She traced this back to the turn-of-the-century curricular debates when reports from academic groups such as those issued by the Committee of Ten (1893) and Committee of Seven (1899) had recommended curriculums based on the study of history (including non-American topics) by all students, whilst rejecting the rote memorisation of facts and advocating a range of teaching methods involving student participation, backed up by improved textbooks and better trained teachers. By 1915, she argued, high school history teaching largely reflected these ideas, but this state of affairs was transformed by the adoption of progressive educational ideas encapsulated in the so-called ‘Cardinal Principles’ (1918) under which ‘social efficiency’ became the curricular test, and the guiding

²⁴ Ravitch, “From History to Social Studies: Dilemmas and Problems,” in *Challenges to the Humanities*, ed. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch and P. Holley Roberts (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 94, 81.

²⁵ Ravitch, “Decline and Fall of History Teaching,” *New York Times* (17 November 1985): A50.

principle was that historical topics studied should reflect students' "present life interests" or benefit their "present processes of growth."²⁶

Ravitch saw clear evidence of this progressive approach in the current state of history in schools. She argued that most states required only one year of American history for high school graduation, and that in practice social studies had been invaded by "curricular fads" such as "consumer education". She was concerned that utilitarian courses had also supplanted history teaching in the early grades. In a 1987 article entitled "Tot Sociology", she was highly critical of the 'expanding environments' programme in grades K-3 in which children studied social relationships in their home, school, and locality and called for a return to the pre-1930s curriculum under which, she said, young children heard "exciting stories of important events and significant individuals" and acquired a "basic historical and cultural vocabulary."²⁷

Ravitch's attack on social studies was an aspect of her contrarian challenge to what she regarded as the entrenched ideas of progressivism. Her argument about the displacement of history by social studies courses was rejected by supporters of social studies such as education professor Ronald W. Evans who was, and remains, a critic of Ravitch's views on the decline of history. Critiquing Ravitch's arguments in 1989, Evans argued that history remained dominant within social studies and that its low status could more properly be attributed to deficiencies in its teaching. In 2015, he quoted the head of a 1975 Organization of American Historians (OAH) committee

²⁶ Ravitch, "From History to Social Studies," 84-90, 91. The Committee of Ten included Woodrow Wilson, then a Princeton professor.

²⁷ Ravitch, "Decline and Fall of History Teaching"; Ravitch, "Tot Sociology: Or What Happened to History in the Grade Schools," *The American Scholar* 56, no.3 (Summer 1987): 343, 350.

on school history, who admitted that history courses were “narrow and almost exclusively factual”, comprising “tedious lectures” and “uninformed discussions.”²⁸

Ravitch countered this line of argument by accepting that the quality of history teaching was inadequate but indicating that this was caused by the failure of progressive educators to adhere to the quality curriculums advocated by the Committees of Ten and Seven. In responding to Evans’s 1989 article, she asserted that “history as it is presently taught is deadly boring.” Elsewhere, she said that many teachers found standard textbooks “boring and bland”, driven by publishers’ guidelines which aimed to “offend no one while including almost everything.” She argued that students did not learn content because “exciting events” and “vivid personalities” had been reduced to a “long train of meaningless facts”, quoting the historian Henry Steele Commager who stated that it was vital for history to “tell a story.” She also said that history in schools would be improved if it was taught by people who had majored in it at college.²⁹

Ravitch’s efforts to promote her vision of a revitalised version of school history teaching were therefore driven in part by her belief that the social studies approach failed to generate what she described as “historical-mindedness” among students. They were however also a reflection of her concern that social studies courses tended to adopt a relativistic, leftist viewpoint which weakened students’ belief in the effectiveness of liberal democracy. Writing in 2015, Evans accepted that there were “some elements of truth” in this analysis. In his 1989 Ravitch critique, he

²⁸ Ronald W. Evans, “Diane Ravitch and the Revival of History: A Critique,” *The Social Studies* 80, no.3 (May/June 1989): 87; Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 79.

²⁹ Ravitch, “The Revival of History: A Response,” *The Social Studies* 80, no.3 (May/June 1989): 89, 90; Ravitch, “Decline and Fall of History Teaching”.

argued that conventional history courses did “little to promote social criticism” and “serve[d] to perpetuate our system and its flaws.”³⁰

Ravitch’s commitment to history as a vehicle for upholding liberal-democratic values was most clearly manifested through her major involvement in the work of Education for Democracy (EFD). This project originated in a 1984 *Commentary* article by Sidney Hook entitled “Education in Defense of a Free Society.” Hook argued that it was important to aid students’ understanding of democracy by “learning its history, celebrating its heroes, and noting its achievements”, whilst also studying “contemporary totalitarian societies”, particularly the human rights record of communist countries. Albert Shanker was attracted by Hook’s article, and established EFD, which was co-sponsored by the AFT, EEN and Freedom House, a federally funded pro-democracy organisation. In May 1987, EFD issued its statement document, praising democracy as “the worthiest form of government ever conceived.” The statement was emphatic in its rejection of relativistic ideas about democracy and at the press launch, Shanker firmly rebutted the suggestion that “all cultural practices are equally worthy.”³¹

Ravitch had a crucial role in forming EFD’s ideas on school history, and its recommendation of in-depth history and other humanities teaching from the early grades was a close reflection of her ideas. She recommended teaching on non-

³⁰ Ravitch, “Decline and Fall of History Teaching”; Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 85; Evans, “Diane Ravitch and the Revival of History: A Critique”: 87.

³¹ Sidney Hook, “Education in Defense of a Free Society,” *Commentary* 78, no.1 (July 1984): 21; American Federation of Teachers, *Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles* (Washington, D.C., AFT, 1987), 8; AFT Press Conference, Education for Democracy Project, 19 May 1987, 2, American Federation of Teachers Archives, Office of The President, Albert Shanker, electronic copy supplied by Archivist.

Western cultures but with the focus of study on “under what conditions can people enjoy rights, freedom...[and] those things we associate with the democratic form of government.” Ravitch was particularly concerned that textbooks should communicate positive messages about democracy. At a press conference announcing the results of an AFT textbook review, she referred to the need to avoid relativistic writing which was “neutral among all the systems.”³²

The coupling of pro-democratic sentiments with clear criticism of communist systems was a marked feature of neoconservative ideas, particularly on foreign policy, from the mid-1970s. A striking feature of EFD was however the breadth of support for its principles. The signatories to the statement encompassed former presidents Ford and Carter and congressional figures from both parties together with high profile sporting celebrities such as Arthur Ashe and Martina Navratilova. The National Association of Evangelicals gave its backing, but so did People for the American Way, an organisation established by writer Norman Lear to combat religious bigotry.³³

Ravitch’s work within EFD to prioritise the teaching of democratic principles in history recognised and reflected the range of support across the political spectrum. She avoided any calls to patriotism or American interests, which might have made the message less palatable to centre-left adherents of EFD. She was also clear that

³² AFT Press Conference, Education for Democracy Project, 9-11; AFT Press Conference, World History Textbooks Review, July 1987, 8, American Federation of Teachers Archives, Office of The President, Albert Shanker, electronic copy supplied by Archivist.

³³ American Federation of Teachers, *Education for Democracy*, signatory list. On the development of neoconservative views on foreign policy, see Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 110-148.

there should be “no attempt to paper over any of the failings of Democracy.” In her 1989 exchange with Evans, she amplified her views on how a historian could combine objectivity with a firm belief in liberal democracy. Evans criticised Ravitch for using claims of objectivity to clothe her support for “dominant interests in our society” and praised the unashamedly relativist and presentist Marxist historian Howard Zinn who, he said, had suggested that historical knowledge be applied “to solve the problems of human life.” Ravitch responded initially by firmly rejecting Zinn’s approach, asking “who decides which problems to ‘solve’?” She was unapologetic about her belief that teachers needed to instil democratic values in students but argued that “beyond that” they must “teach youngsters...to think for themselves.”³⁴

In relation to Evans’s broader challenge regarding objectivity, Ravitch accepted that this was “very difficult or perhaps impossible” to achieve but argued that in practice it meant that historians with a particular viewpoint must “do [their] level best to be honest” even when “heroes turn out to have warts and clay feet.” At the EFD press launch, she summarised her position by stating that history should be “taught with objectivity, not with neutrality.” Ravitch was adopting a more nuanced position than in *The Revisionists Revised*, accepting that the defence of liberal democracy was ideological but arguing that it was consistent with objectivity provided it did not become uncritical propaganda.³⁵

³⁴ AFT Press Conference, World History Textbooks Review, 41; Evans, “Diane Ravitch and the Revival of History: A Critique”: 87; Ravitch, “The Revival of History: A Response”: 91.

³⁵ Ibid: 90; AFT Press Conference, Education for Democracy Project, 10. Ravitch’s stance on objectivity resembles that of Thomas L. Haskell in his 1990 essay “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric versus Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*,” *History and Theory* 29 no.2 (May 1990): 129-157.

Ravitch's contribution to EFD, whilst consistent with her neoconservative viewpoint on school education, also reflected her desire to reach out to those who did not associate themselves with the right but wished to reaffirm their commitment to democratic principles. She remained involved in the work of EFD which AFT developed further following the breakdown of the communist bloc. She visited Eastern European countries to talk to educators preparing for life in a liberal-democratic environment, produced a booklet titled *Democracy: What It Is, How to Teach It* (1990) and co-edited *The Democracy Reader* (1992), a collection of pro-democratic speeches, essays and other documents.

Ravitch was also heavily involved in projects to promote curricular change affecting the teaching of history more generally. In 1987, EEN established the Bradley Commission on History in Schools to carry out a survey of history courses required for high school graduation in each state and make recommendations for action. The Commission was funded by the right-wing Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, Ravitch had a leading role, and her EEN colleague, former University of Massachusetts professor Paul Gagnon, was the 'principal investigator'. It is therefore legitimate to view the Commission as a neoconservative project. As with EFD however, the picture was more complex than this.

The membership of the Commission comprised a range of educators from schools and colleges. Along with Ravitch, there were five public school history teachers and eleven university academics. The Chair Kenneth T. Jackson was an established Columbia professor focussing on urban history and the other professional historians covered a variety of specialisms, including William H. McNeill,

a veteran University of Chicago professor who had argued extensively for the cultural contribution of non-Western societies. The Commission's recommendations received the support of the incoming president of the American Historical Association and the OAH and were announced at the 1988 OAH annual conference. It is true that there was no involvement of leftist, iconoclastic historians such as Zinn and social studies academics were also absent from the Commission. Overall however, there are clear signs that Ravitch was eager to secure a broad base of support for the work of the Commission, as had been achieved with EFD.³⁶

The Commission's recommendations, announced in March 1988, epitomised Ravitch's campaigning for history over the preceding three years. They included the call for a major expansion in the volume of history in schools, including in the early grades, and proposed improvements in teacher training. They emphasised the principle, affirmed by EFD, that the study of history was "indispensable to the education of citizens in a democracy." The recommendations however also gave considerable weight to Ravitch's idealistic vision of the role of history which extended beyond the battle with social studies. They proposed a significant role for world history, as well as the "history of women, racial and ethnic minorities and men and women of all classes and conditions." Further they stressed that historical study should "reach well beyond the acquisition of useful information" and provide

³⁶ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools: Resolutions of the Commission, adopted 24-25 March 1988, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 45, Folder 15; Robert Rothman, "History Instruction Is 'In Crisis', Panel Says," *Education Week* (5 October 1988): 7. Jackson had been part of the Review Committee for Ravitch's PhD dissertation.

“training in critical judgment based upon evidence” — a point which Jackson, as Chair, emphasised in the launch of the Commission’s report.³⁷

As with EFD, Ravitch continued to be involved with the ideas promoted by the Bradley Commission. She used it as a springboard for the formation of the National Council for History Education (NCHE), designed to continue the Commission’s work including through the production of a magazine entitled *History Matters!* NCHE remains in existence and provides a forum for a wide range of historical debates, without any evident political bias, whilst *History Matters* is still issued as a webcast. The Commission also produced a report intended to help local educators revise their history courses in line with its recommendations, and advocated changes to textbooks. Ravitch urged the Commission to “provide support for work that has already been done” to draft model curriculums. She referred specifically to the “new California Framework for History and the Social Sciences” in which she and UCLA early years education professor Charlotte Crabtree (another Commission member) had been heavily involved.³⁸

Ravitch has explained how Bill Honig, the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, invited her in 1985 to become involved in the drafting of a revised state social studies curriculum framework in which history had a substantially increased role. The committee charged with formulating the revised framework produced a draft report in 1986, which retained much of the existing social studies-based approach. Honig then handed the drafting responsibilities to Ravitch and

³⁷ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools: Resolutions of the Commission; NCSS, “History Teaching Examined,” *The Social Studies Professional* (May/June 1988): 5.

³⁸ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools: Minutes of Meeting, 17 October 1987, 6, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 45, Folder 15.

Crabtree, aided by state education official Diane Brooks. The final version of the framework, which was unanimously adopted by the State Board of Education in July 1987, after field testing by teachers, administrators and university and college academics, bore the clear imprint of Ravitch's ideas.³⁹

The framework stressed the need for the "chronological study" of history and a "sequential curriculum" as well as the idea of "history as a story well told." Like the subsequent Bradley Commission recommendations, it echoed EFD by emphasising democratic values and "the fundamental principles embodied in the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights." It also provided for the replacement of the 'expanding environments' programme in grades K-3 with studies which included historical and geographical content and followed this with required history courses in every year except grade 9, which was reserved for electives. The framework however contained some key elements which indicated a strong desire to appeal to a broad range of viewpoints. It called for the teaching of "controversial issues" viewed "through the different perspectives of participants" and prescribed a full three years of world history. It also aimed to reflect the "unfinished struggle to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution", particularly in the context of "different racial, religious, and ethnic groups." Ravitch clearly remains proud of the degree of acceptance which the framework secured within California, noting in 2016 that it "remains in place with only minor revisions."⁴⁰

³⁹ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 7; Catherine Cornbleth and Dexter Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird: Multicultural Politics and Education Policymaking* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1995), 68-70.

⁴⁰ California State Board of Education, *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade 12* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education,

Ravitch's key role in three major history-centred initiatives of the mid-1980s, together with her writing, mark her out as the dominant figure in the 'revival of history' movement. Evans described this as the "citizenship wing of the conservative restoration", and Ravitch was clearly a culturally conservative individual who viewed the expansion of content-based, narrative history as a necessary antidote to the relativistic progressive ideas which she identified within contemporary social studies courses. There is however a common thread in Ravitch's work which reflects her efforts to build a broad base of support for revised history curriculums encompassing more than factual knowledge and support for Western values. In part this was doubtless a tactical move to marginalise the advocates of existing social studies and left-wing historians such as Zinn; California State University professor Duane Campbell wrote that "when you place the Far Right and moderates together, without progressives (the Left), you get a tilt to the Right rather than balance." Ravitch however appeared more comfortable at this point in approaching the excellence agenda from a centrist position which reflected her overall political inclinations. She had a strong distaste for the impact of the culture wars on history teaching, and her approach to history curriculum reform was designed to circumvent this. This has remained an important element in her ideas; in 2010 she expressed the hope (which has proved unfulfilled) that history could be "rescued from the culture wars." The leftist Michael Apple acknowledged that Ravitch, and even Finn, were "not merely

1988), 4-6, 31-32, 44-46, 75-77, 5-7; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 7.

far-right ideologues” but rather wanted schools to “focus on (a particular vision of) democratic institutions and culture.”⁴¹

By 1989, Ravitch had been largely successful in achieving a significant (though not universal) measure of agreement on her vision of a ‘revived’ history curriculum and had striven to establish herself as a consensus-builder. The seeds of a challenge to this position however lay in the statement within the California Framework that “our national history is the complex story of many peoples and one nation, of *e pluribus unum*.”⁴² In the 1990s, arguments over multiculturalism and its role in history teaching were to become a major feature in educational and cultural discourse, and particularly in Ravitch’s career.

Multiculturalism in California and New York

The California Framework was placed in the public spotlight by the state textbook adoption process initiated in 1990. The Houghton Mifflin textbooks proposed for adoption were strongly criticised, particularly for their treatment of multiculturalism. Stanford African Studies and Languages professor Sylvia Wynter produced a detailed critique, arguing that the textbook series, whilst promoting the idea of American cultural pluralism, paid insufficient regard to the structural inequality between races, and undervalued the contribution of blacks, Native Americans and Latinos. Another dissenting figure was state education commissioner Joyce E. King who expressed

⁴¹ Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 77; Duane E. Campbell, “California Framework” (Letter), *Social Education* (October 1988): 403; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; first paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2011), 234; Michael W. Apple, review of *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, *Teachers College Record* 90, no.1 (Fall 1988): 124.

⁴² California State Board of Education, *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools*, 5.

concern about the treatment of historic racism in the Houghton Mifflin series and the framework generally. King's memorandum setting out her views was publicised by journalist Dexter Waugh, and this led to the growth of opposition to the textbooks from a range of racial and ethnic groups across the state.⁴³

Ravitch was assiduous in supporting the efforts of California-based advocates of the textbooks, notably Honig and Crabtree, whose UCLA colleague Gary Nash was a substantial contributor to the series. Shortly before the State Board hearing to approve the textbooks, she wrote in praise of the Houghton Mifflin series and particularly its treatment of women and minorities. She was highly critical of the interest groups represented at the July State Curriculum Commission meeting, stating that they claimed "the power to judge and veto what is written about them" and presented history as a way to "raise...self-esteem." She affirmed the "bedrock principle of honesty" in historical study, without which there would be "no end to the clamor for politically correct 'history'" and dismissed the dissenters as groups who placed their own interests above the "common civic values that make us one nation, one society."⁴⁴

The State Board duly approved the textbooks which Ravitch had vigorously supported at its meeting in September 1990. For over a year previously however, Ravitch had been engaged in another battle about curricular treatment of multiculturalism, with much less success. This concerned the project to review the

⁴³ Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 61-62, 66-68, 79-83.

⁴⁴ Ravitch, "The Troubled Road to California's New History Textbooks," *Los Angeles Times* (2 September 1990): M5. Gary Nash was the author of *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (1974) which presented a view of black and Native American history broadly in line with the views of critics like Wynter.

New York state syllabuses and supporting materials in the light of the pluralism of American society, which was initiated in 1987 by the newly appointed Commissioner of Education, Thomas Sobol. The Task Force on Minorities appointed by Sobol produced its report *A Curriculum of Inclusion* in July 1989.⁴⁵

The New York social studies curriculum had been revised in 1987 and approved by a review committee including Eric Foner, the author of *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, which was highly critical of the treatment of formerly enslaved blacks in the Reconstruction era. *A Curriculum of Inclusion* however stated that the materials provided by this curriculum failed to “adequately and accurately reflect the cultural experience in America.” The report criticised what it viewed as the existing place of European culture as a “master” sitting at the “head of the table” and called for a “Round Table” with no master and “all cultures offering something to the collective good.” It also stated that blacks, Asian-Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos and Native Americans had been the “victims of a cultural oppression and stereotyping” which had long been prevalent in American educational institutions, and it comprised separate appendices containing analyses from the viewpoint of each of these four groups.⁴⁶ Ravitch was appointed a consultant to the Task Force but became one of the most strident opponents of its report, founding her criticism on arguments which reflected consistent themes in her work, dating back to her earliest writing on race and education.

⁴⁵ Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 95.

⁴⁶ *A Curriculum of Inclusion* quoted in Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 95-96.

Ravitch emphasised the need for curriculums to present a “sense of an American community” and argued that *A Curriculum of Inclusion* failed to do this because it “disparage[d] any common elements in our history, society and culture.” She asserted her belief in a “common culture that is multicultural” holding up figures such as Spike Lee and Aretha Franklin as “very much part of the common culture.” She expressed concern however that “multi-centrisms” within the curriculum would result in “ethnocentrism” and lead to “social fragmentation” and “unending racial antagonism.”⁴⁷

Ravitch was particularly exercised by the presence of Afrocentric ideas among some of the supporters of *A Curriculum of Inclusion* including Georgia State University professor Asa Hilliard III, whose version of “the truth” was, she said, that “everything that is now known as western civilization originated in black Africa.” She was also angered by what she regarded as the “strident racialism” directed against whites, especially Jews, which she identified in the Task Force. There is evidence that Ravitch herself was subjected to anti-Semitic slurs, notably by CCNY professor Leonard Jeffries, another Afrocentrist who was the chief consultant to the Task Force, and who was reported as describing Ravitch as a “sophisticated Texas Jew” and “Miss Daisy”, alluding to the elderly Jewish-American title character with a black chauffeur in the 1989 film *Driving Miss Daisy*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ravitch, “Multiculturalism in the Curriculum” (speech to Manhattan Institute, 27 November 1989), 11, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 19, Folder 3; Ravitch, “Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures,” *The American Scholar* 59, no.3 (Summer 1990): 339; Ravitch in Molefi Kete Asante and Diane Ravitch, “Multiculturalism: An Exchange,” *The American Scholar* 60, no.2 (Spring 1991): 273, 276.

⁴⁸ Ravitch, “Multiculturalism Redux,” *Network News & Views* IX, no.10 (October 1990): 77-78; Jeffries quoted in Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 133. Following Jeffries’s attacks on Ravitch, he was removed from his position at CCNY, though he was subsequently reinstated.

Alongside these concerns, Ravitch mounted a strong defence of Western culture. Whilst reaffirming her support for learning about other cultures, she challenged the Task Force's idea of the 'round table', arguing that "the table is the western democratic political tradition." She asserted that this "democratic ideology" had been shaped by the European Enlightenment but had become "a standard for human rights activists on every continent today."⁴⁹

Ravitch succeeded in garnering support for her opposition to *A Curriculum of Inclusion*. In June 1990, she and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (another consistent critic of the New York curricular reforms) co-authored a statement published in *Newsday*, endorsed by 22 other historians, including William H. McNeill, C. Vann Woodward and Robert Caro, on behalf of the "Committee of Scholars in Defense of History." This attacked the Task Force report for its "politicization" of history and its support for "ethnic cheerleading" and praised the "Western democratic philosophy." The report was also criticised by Albert Shanker who republished the statement in his "Where We Stand" column and by Charlotte Crabtree, the co-author of the California Framework. Catherine Cornbleth, who worked on the development of the New York curriculum after 1989 and was a strong critic of Ravitch's views on multiculturalism, referred in *The Great Speckled Bird* (1995) to a "neo-nativist network", extending beyond the political right, which was opposed to the stance of the Task Force.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ravitch, "Multiculturalism in the Curriculum," 19-21; Ravitch in Asante and Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: An Exchange": 275-276.

⁵⁰ Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "NY Should Teach History, Not Ethnic Cheerleading," *Newsday* (29 June 1990): 77; Charlotte Crabtree to Dr. Martin C. Barell, 14 February 1990, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 46, Folder 2; Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 14-15. Schlesinger developed his ideas on multiculturalism in *The Disuniting of America* (1991).

Ravitch's attack on *A Curriculum of Inclusion* reflected her sincerely held beliefs about race, the common culture and liberal democracy which she had upheld for over two decades, but she pursued it with a sustained vigour which placed her in a confrontational light. She appears to have placed undue emphasis on the challenge posed by the report. As she herself recognised, Sobol had by early 1990 begun to speak in measured terms about curricular reform, indicating that he did not accept "all the language of the report." He established a review committee to carry out further syllabus revision which (unlike the Task Force) had a substantial number of white members, including Nathan Glazer, with Schlesinger as a consultant. Although its June 1991 report *One Nation, Many Peoples* continued to advocate multiple ethnic perspectives, the guidelines within the state's subsequent "Understanding Diversity" document referred to "our common American culture" and the "roots of our society" in "the traditions of the West" whilst specifically disavowing "ethnic cheerleading and separatism" and "a curriculum of self-esteem." Over the following two years, Cornbleth became increasingly disillusioned with the lack of progress towards the "transformative multiculturalism" which she had hoped to see in the revised New York curriculum and resigned from the committee responsible for the implementation of "Understanding Diversity" in March 1994.⁵¹

There was a range of opinions within the Afrocentrism which so enraged Ravitch, comprising the vehemently anti-white (and anti-Semitic) Leonard Jeffries, whose views were disavowed by Sobol, and Temple University professor Molefi Kete Asante,

⁵¹ Sobol quoted in Ravitch, "Multiculturalism Redux": 80; Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 99, 101-103, 152-153; *One Nation, Many Peoples* and "Understanding Diversity" quoted in *ibid* 120, 128-129.

who in an *American Scholar* exchange with Ravitch in 1991 stated that he did not seek to “banish the Eurocentric view”, whilst eager to introduce new perspectives to challenge the “dominance and hegemony” of that view. In any event Afrocentrism (and ethnic separatism more generally) constituted only part of the impetus for change in the New York syllabus. A major driving force was the desire to give due weight to the contribution of non-white groups to U.S. history. Another key factor was concern about enduring racism. The first two principles contained in *One Nation, Many Peoples* said that racism had “marred U.S. society since its founding” and was the “fundamental schism in American society.” In a 1993 article, Glazer — by then cautiously supportive of the New York curricular reforms — argued that the call for measures such as the introduction of multiple ethnic perspectives into history teaching represented efforts by blacks in particular to find “anything that might help” in addressing “widespread educational failure” which was in turn the result of the ineffectiveness of civil rights reforms. Ravitch was clear that there should be “an unflinching examination of racism and discrimination in our history.” As evidenced by her earlier writing however, she believed that the legal rights established by the civil rights movement would eliminate racism and that calls for multiple ethnic perspectives in schools were a dangerous distraction.⁵²

Ravitch continued to argue against the proposed changes to the New York curriculum, even when she became a member of government. She had consistently advocated the teaching of non-Western culture in schools and had stated

⁵² Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 134; Asante in Asante and Ravitch, “Multiculturalism: An Exchange”: 268; *One Nation, Many Peoples* quoted in Cornbleth and Waugh, *The Great Speckled Bird*, 119-120; Nathan Glazer, “School Wars: A Brief History of Multiculturalism in America,” *The Brookings Review* (Fall 1993): 18-19; Ravitch, “Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures”: 340. For the various strands in Afrocentrism, see Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 126-133.

unequivocally that “racism is wrong”, quoting W.H. Auden’s line “we must love one another or die.” Yet by the early 1990s, she had been described by Glazer as one of the “leading critics of a multicultural curriculum” and characterised by California Department of Education staff critical of the state textbooks as “a person whom we consider to be extremely racist.” Through initiatives such as the Bradley Commission and the California Framework, Ravitch had striven to calm the culture wars in history teaching. The arguments over multiculturalism however, in which she was a key participant, had the effect of escalating those wars, anticipating further battles about history curriculums in the mid-1990s and helping to position her as a more divisive figure. They also placed her increasingly in the public eye, and her profile was raised further in 1991 when she joined the Department of Education in the Bush administration, where she remained committed to the agreement of improved curricular standards.⁵³

Ravitch in Government

George H.W. Bush, unlike Ronald Reagan, believed in the value of the federal role in education. Perceiving the demand for action to improve public schools following ANAR, he positioned himself during the 1988 presidential election campaign as the “education president”. Whilst he was clear that he did not “want the federal government taking over”, Bush advocated “using the bully pulpit to spell out excellence.” His approach was essentially that which neoconservatives such as Finn and Bennett had been promoting within the Reagan administration during the mid-

⁵³ Innerst, Carol, “Multiculturalism trips up Education Dept.,” *Washington Times* (11 October 1991): A3; Ravitch, “Multiculturalism in the Curriculum,” 22; Glazer, “School Wars”: 16; California Department of Education Staff to William D. Dawson, Chief Executive Officer to Superintendent, 12 March 1991, 3, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 48, Folder 3.

1980s. Bush however met resistance to his ideas within Congress. The Democrats, who continued to control the House of Representatives, argued that the federal role was to maintain, and wherever possible increase, spending on education programmes, and they were sceptical about efforts to focus on performance ‘outputs’ such as standards and testing. Bush also encountered opposition from those on the Republican right who rejected any increase in federal involvement and were strenuous advocates of choice-related measures like vouchers.⁵⁴

Failing to make progress with his early legislative proposals, Bush turned to the NGA, recognising that state governors had consistently shown themselves open to what Finn later described as the “results-oriented way of thinking.” In September 1989, Bush and the NGA agreed on the need to “establish clear, national performance goals” and in his 1990 State of the Union Address Bush announced the six goals to be attained by 2000. These however lacked precision, omitting for example any means for establishing curricular standards or measuring achievement against them. By the end of 1990, the administration had not moved the goals forward and Bush replaced Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos with Lamar Alexander, who had been active in promoting school standards as governor of Tennessee. The following April Bush launched his ‘America 2000’ plan.⁵⁵

The effort to implement America 2000 illustrated the fractured political landscape in which Bush sought to frame his school education policy. At its heart was a proposal for the development of curriculum standards in “core subjects”

⁵⁴ Bush quoted in *McGuinn, No Child Left Behind*, 53; *ibid*, 51, 58-59.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 60, 62, 63-65; Bernard Weinraub, “Bush and Governors Set Education Goals,” *New York Times* (29 September 1989): A10; Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 104.

(mathematics, science, history, geography and English) and “voluntary national tests” (known as “American Achievement Tests”) in grades 4, 8 and 12. Bush was at pains to stress the limited federal role, stating that whilst his approach involved a “national strategy”, much of the detailed work would take place at state and local level. This was designed in part to placate the Republican right with its dislike of federal control; as a further concession to this lobby, America 2000 also contained a voucher proposal based on “private school choice demonstration projects.” Vouchers were, however, unpopular with Democrats, who also feared that national tests would impose an accountability regime on schools and teachers without any increased funding. At a more technical level, the process for agreeing the national standards and tests remained unclear. In an effort to address those challenges, Alexander obtained congressional agreement in June 1991 to establish the bipartisan National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST). It was against this backdrop that Ravitch joined the Department of Education in July 1991 as Assistant Secretary, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and Counselor to the Secretary.⁵⁶

The move to Washington was in many ways a major shift for Ravitch. She had not previously worked at the heart of a large organisation, and, as she pointed out to Alexander when he asked her to join the Department, she had been a registered Democrat since 1960. Nevertheless, she was confident about her intellectual aptitude for the position. In a 1992 speech, she said that “far from being unprepared, it seems to me that everything I have done has prepared me for what I am doing now”, referring to her “research skills” and her abilities as “a writer, a synthesizer, a

⁵⁶ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 65-67; Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995), 139.

conceptualizer and a lecturer.” She also came to the role with a clear and idealistic view of the role of education. In March 1991, over four months before her confirmation, she expressed concern about a draft government plan she had seen which focused on what she described as the “utilitarian” benefits of education for adults, particularly job-related skills, whilst ignoring “positive values” such as citizenship and service.⁵⁷

Ravitch was however less comfortable with the personal and political requirements of her position. In an article published a few months after her appointment, she was quoted as saying that she was not used to “being part of a team” and “speaking with a unified voice”, and she also referred to the challenges of dealing with Congress. The article noted that she was working alongside colleagues from a very different background, notably Deputy Secretary David Kearns, a former Xerox CEO. She was reported as speaking alongside Kearns “hesitantly...as if the thoughts and words were a new language she was not quite familiar with” though in working with him she acquired personal experience of pro-business ideas in school education. Ravitch sought help from friends, particularly Finn, with experience of Washington D.C.; she also reached out to Daniel Patrick Moynihan (by then a long-serving senator) for advice on “how to present [ideas] to a Democratic Congress without running into partisan hostility.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ravitch to Lamar Alexander, 31 March 1991, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 31, Folder 2; Ravitch, “A Writer’s Life,” speech to 6th Annual Authors Dinner, University of Alabama, 7 April 1992, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 9, Folder 5; Ravitch to Bruno Mano, 13 March 1991, Chester E. Finn, Jr. Papers, Box 95, File 1 of 4.

⁵⁸ Karen DeWitt, “Education Scholar Finds Delight as Federal Official,” *New York Times* (19 November 1991): A22; Finn to Ravitch, 7 April 1991, 3 June 1991, Chester E. Finn, Jr. Papers, Box 120, Diane Ravitch folder; Ravitch to Moynihan, 26 August 1991, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 4, Folder 2.

Ravitch's main priority at OERI was the development of curriculum standards and a system of assessments to help test student knowledge, which fitted well with her focus over most of the previous decade. She was very much in tune with the administration's carefully crafted federalist message. In a November 1991 memorandum to Alexander, she emphasised that states would be encouraged to devise their own curricular frameworks which would in turn influence the national standards. Similarly, whilst championing American Achievement Tests, she stressed that states would be helped to "shape their own assessments", albeit "working from common national standards." Ravitch's view of the assessment process also reflected the idealistic strand in her writing on the humanities. She said that assessments would be "state-of-the-art" tests containing multiple-choice elements but also "demonstrations of ability and problem-solving skills."⁵⁹

Ravitch's views on standards and testing were in line with the proposals contained in NCEST's January 1992 report — understandably since NCEST was a key element in the administration's efforts to win support for America 2000 and Ravitch followed its deliberations closely. However, as she later explained, a statement expressing strong opposition to the report, and particularly the testing proposals, was issued by "fifty educators, leaders of civil rights organizations, and professors of education." This reflected the argument previously advanced, particularly by congressional Democrats, that tests would inevitably be used for 'high stakes' purposes (a possibility which NCEST had not excluded), so imposing further burdens on poorer students, especially minorities, and would be unfair without substantial

⁵⁹ Ravitch to Lamar Alexander, 21 November 1991, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 42, Folder 12.

additional expenditure. Advocates of more equitable school funding had come to argue that ‘content standards’ (what students would be expected to learn) should be accompanied by ‘school delivery standards’, in other words a requirement for states and districts to provide adequate resources to enable students to learn effectively. Ravitch noted that NCEST’s recommendations did receive broad support from the NGA and the business community, though they were opposed by the NEA, but not the AFT (Shanker was an NCEST member, as was Finn). Overall, a large and influential body of opinion had been unconvinced by the emollient words of NCEST, and figures like Ravitch, about the limited and devolved nature of national standards and assessments, and the desire to avoid reliance on multiple-choice tests.⁶⁰

Despite the opposition to NCEST’s report, Ravitch fought hard to defend America 2000. Ultimately however, her department was unable to overcome the opposition within Congress, particularly in the Democrat-controlled House which had the power to decide departmental funding. In April 1992, Ravitch expressed her anger with a House bill which proposed to prohibit the Department’s involvement in work on assessment. A later bill did provide for national curricular standards but linked these to school delivery standards; this rendered the bill unacceptable to the administration which regarded it as shifting the agenda from student performance to school funding. Bush’s presidency ended without congressional agreement on America 2000 or any other major legislation on schools.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ravitch, “NCEST: Where Do We Go From Here,” 16 September 1991, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 35, Folder 4; Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education*, 143, 142, 144.

⁶¹ Ravitch to Randy Hansen, Office of the General Counsel, 14 April 1992, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 41, Folder 2; *McGuinn, No Child Left Behind*, 67.

The failure to make progress in Congress deprived Ravitch's work on standards and assessments of both political momentum and funding. The extent of resistance to national tests effectively blocked progress on that subject. The Department did however have a small allocation of 'discretionary funds', not dependent on congressional authorisation, and used this to fund the development of voluntary national curriculum standards. Ravitch and her team gave grants (co-funded by agencies such as the NEH) to groups, comprising academics and teachers, charged with developing standards in America 2000's core subjects, plus arts, civics and foreign languages. In an article published immediately before she left office, Ravitch said that she "pointed with pride" at the projects she had helped to establish. In a cautionary note however she stressed the need for a "new body" which would ultimately ask "are these standards good enough?" No such body was established and some standards, notably those in history, became the focus for culture war battles later in the decade.⁶²

Although Ravitch's efforts at OERI did help to raise the profile of school standards, her specific achievements on national curriculum standards were modest and she failed to make any positive impact on testing. This was largely a result of the inhospitable political climate. Ravitch was seeking to effect substantial change affecting schools and teachers without major increases in funding, which ran flatly contrary to the views of most House Democrats, and she was also faced by congressional opposition from 'small government' Republicans. She was a powerful

⁶² Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 8; Ravitch, "Adventures in Wonderland: A Scholar in Washington," *The American Scholar* 64, no.4 (Autumn 1995): 513-514; U.S. Department of Education, Interview with Ravitch, *Department of Education Reports* 14, no.3 (18 January 1993): 3.

advocate for the administration's proposals; whilst the fears of America 2000's critics about the direction of the standards movement were largely confirmed by the policies of the 2000s, with their emphasis on high-stakes standardised tests and prescriptive curriculum standards, Ravitch worked hard to frame a positive message designed to allay those fears.

Ravitch's personal aversion to the workings of Washington D.C. however caused additional problems for her. She later wrote that she "brought...an outsider's perspective" and "left before I lost my capacity for outrage." She was frustrated by the machinations of Congress, particularly the budgetary stranglehold exercised by the House, speaking disparagingly of its tendency to maintain established programmes, supported by lobbyists for interest groups, whilst it "scrutinized every funding decision made by OERI." Her analysis was consistent with that of individuals with lengthy experience of Washington such as Christopher T. Cross. As a newcomer however, she had not become inured to the limitations of the system. In addition to her irritation at the resistance to America 2000, Ravitch was angered by her experience of the congressional reauthorisation of OERI (a process occurring every five years), especially a House proposal which she said would "wrest control of [OERI] from the Department, in all but name." She vigorously defended her office, and this made her vulnerable if there were any failings within it. This happened in 1992 when Ravitch, tiring of the complex 'peer-reviewed' process for awarding departmental grants, used recommendations from her own staff to reach a decision. A Senate Committee, whilst deciding that the decision was within her authority, criticised the process for lacking "safeguards to assure independence of reviews" and found other deficiencies within OERI. Generally, Ravitch's impatience with the Washington system

and her dislike of bureaucratic detail limited her willingness to make compromises to win over members of Congress.⁶³

Ravitch's relationship with Congress reflected what the *New York Times* in 1991 described as her "doggedness". It quoted *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan who referred to her as a "strong-willed person" and compared her to Margaret Thatcher. Ravitch described herself in the article as a "forceful advocate" who was "not afraid." Her uncompromising style also met opposition from some of her staff whom she viewed as resistant to her insistence on "quality" or, she believed, obstructed the publication of reports on contentious ideas she supported such as single-sex education. Whilst she praised the performance of most staff, she was clearly irked by some individuals, including a union activist who contributed to a "scurrilous" newsletter which said in late 1992 that Ravitch "continues her quest for mis-manager of the year." She also garnered unwelcome publicity for the Department by openly declaring her strong personal views. As well as her attacks on the New York curriculum, she became involved in a debate about an American Association of University Women report alleging bias against girls in school education. In an NBC interview, she contested the report in forceful terms and appeared to advocate girls-only schools which resulted in a complaint from over fifty members of Congress.⁶⁴

⁶³ Ravitch, "Adventures in Wonderland": 498-499, 505; Ravitch, "Up the Learning Curve at E.D.," *Education Week* (17 March 1993): 26; Ravitch to Randy Hansen, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 41, Folder 2; Report of General Accounting Office, 9 December 1992, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 43, Folder 2. On the workings of Congress, see Christopher T. Cross, *Political Education: National Policy Comes of Age* (2004; updated ed., New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2010), 144-149.

⁶⁴ DeWitt, "Education Scholar Finds Delight as Federal Official"; Ravitch, "Adventures in Wonderland": 508, 507, 512-513; American Federation of Government Employees, Local 2607, "Assistant Secretary Diane Ravitch Continues Her Quest for Mis-manager of the Year," *The New Word* 2, no.2 (December 1992): 2, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 33, Folder 10; Annette Licitra, "Congressional Letter Objects to Ravitch Comments on Sex Bias," *Education Daily* (22 June 1992): 3.

As the leading proponent of neoconservative ideas about improved curricular standards in the 1980s, especially in the humanities, Ravitch sought to adopt a pragmatic, centrist position, designed to broaden the appeal of those ideas. This accounted for her partial success in overcoming the divisive effect of the culture wars in history, which was limited by the dispute over the New York curriculum that highlighted the tension between her desire to promote the humanities and her devotion to the common culture. In her work on standards, she stood apart from ideas such as human capital theory, accountability, and choice advocated by more right-of-centre neoconservatives such as Finn. Her bruising experience at OERI however had a marked influence on her viewpoint. She had been exposed in government to pro-market ideas, and these were to feature strongly in her work over the next fifteen years.

CHAPTER 5 – TO REFORM AND BACK, 1993 – 2009

In the 1990s, Ravitch continued to press for improved school standards with a significant federal government role, as part of the reform agenda advocated by neoconservatives, but now accepted the market-based elements of that agenda, particularly school choice, on which they agreed with neoliberals. This resulted partly from her period in government and was reinforced by her involvement in a range of rightist think tanks. Neoliberal ideas became increasingly dominant in American politics generally, extending to 'New Democrats' like Bill Clinton. Ravitch strove to promote bipartisan consensus for standards-based reform in line with neoconservative ideas, and this seemed to have been achieved with the enactment in 2001 of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Whilst however NCLB did seek to improve standards through the power of government, its pro-business focus, emphasising basic skills rather than broader content and providing opportunities for privatisation, was more in line with neoliberalism. Ravitch remained committed to national curriculum standards, but support for these was severely weakened by the 1994 furore over the National History Standards, which she initially opposed, apparently influenced in part by her desire not to alienate the then rampant Republican right. Her belief in strong curriculum content was also reflected in *Left Back*, which represented the high-water mark of her campaign against progressive education. From the mid-2000s, Ravitch turned against reform, initially because of NCLB's operational failings but ultimately because she came to reject the radical, neoliberal principles underpinning it, which conflicted with her long-standing belief in the public school, the humanities and a respected teaching profession.

Embracing the Reform Agenda

After leaving the Department of Education, Ravitch widened the focus of her work beyond curricular standards and testing and joined other neoconservatives like Finn by becoming strongly attached to the range of ideas comprised within the reform agenda. In a 1995 speech, she gave clear signs of what she later described as her “ideological and political sea-change”, arguing for “accountability for students, teachers, administrators, schools, tied to student performance” with “incentives and sanctions” including a ban on graduation for underperforming students, the removal of inadequate teachers and the closure of failing schools. She also emphasised the financial benefits of education to individuals and the U.S. economy in a student address, quoting the management consultant Peter Drucker who stated that “knowledge is the resource of post-capitalist society.”¹

Ravitch’s period in government contributed to this shift in her views. Whilst her role at OERI, focused on curricular standards and testing, did not require her to engage at the time with the wider reform agenda, the views of her Education Department colleagues clearly had an impact on her. She later described the role of “business-minded thinkers” like Deputy Secretary David Kearns, saying that “having been immersed in a world of true believers, I was influenced by their ideas.” She explained how she became attuned to the views of “management gurus” such as Drucker and said that she began to “think like a policymaker”, viewing schools,

¹ Ravitch, “Second Thoughts: Reflections on Educational History and Policy,” undated draft speech, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 66, Folder 4; Ravitch, speech to Champion Commission, Virginia, 11 October 1995, 2, 3, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 67, Folder 2; Ravitch, “Reforming Education Today,” undated speech to Grove City College, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 66, Folder 9.

teachers and students as “objects to be moved around by big ideas and great plans, without their participation or consent.”²

Ravitch was also constantly exposed in Washington to the idea of school choice and has said that in many departmental discussions “the question was not whether to support choice, but how to do so.” Although the Bush administration’s proposals had focused on improving student achievement rather than choice, vouchers remained popular with most Republicans, and following the rejection of the standards-based America 2000, Bush proposed (without success) a federal programme for the widespread issue of vouchers. As Ravitch herself later acknowledged, the choice movement had been energised at this point by John Chubb and Terry Moe’s *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools* (1990) which presented an emphatically neoliberal viewpoint, asserting that “choice is a panacea” and arguing for a near-total removal of government oversight so that holding schools accountable would be a matter for “parents and students who...are free to choose.” Whilst there was no indication in the 1990s that this fundamental paradigm shift would be achieved, there were some local victories for choice — for example the authorisation of voucher schemes by the Wisconsin and Ohio legislatures.³

More generally, Ravitch’s bruising experience of the House Democrats brought her closer to her Republican colleagues in the Bush administration. She wrote that

² Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; revised and expanded paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2016), 9, 11.

³ Ibid, 8, 122-124; Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 68-69; John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990), 217, 226, 224-225.

the Democrats, having controlled the House for forty years, “exhibited the arrogance of uncontested power.” Notwithstanding her status as a lifelong Democrat, she was in 1994 part of the transition team for the newly elected Republican governor of New York, George Pataki. Ravitch’s involvement with the Republican cause was however generally a reflection of her personal pragmatism rather than firm political convictions. Some of her most emphatic endorsements of Republican ideas dated from the mid-1990s when it appeared that ‘small government’ Republicanism might achieve a dominant position in American politics, and she perceived the need to reflect this in her policy stance. For the most part, Ravitch was relatively sympathetic to the pro-reform policies of Bill Clinton — a Democrat whose approach she found greatly preferable to that of his congressional colleagues.⁴

Ravitch’s support for the range of reform-based ideas to which she had been exposed crystallised after 1993 with the resumption of her strong working relationship with Chester Finn in the growing world of political think tanks. In the 1990s, EEN became closely associated with right-wing Washington D.C.-based think tanks. It first came under the umbrella of the Hudson Institute, which had been influential in developing the idea of ‘human capital’ in education for the federal government during Finn’s time at the Education Department in the 1980s. Finn then became the head of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, endowed by a wealthy family from his hometown of Dayton, Ohio, which took over the work of EEN and used its resources to advance “radical changes in primary – secondary schooling” more powerfully than EEN had done previously, with Ravitch as a board member.

⁴ Ravitch, “Adventures in Wonderland: A Scholar in Washington,” *The American Scholar* 64, no.4 (Autumn 1995): 505.

Fordham's Washington base was owned by the Manhattan Institute, of which Ravitch became a fellow and on whose behalf she lobbied for privately-run schools. Later, Finn formed the Koret Task Force at Stanford, comprising a group of pro-reform academics including Ravitch; this aimed, in Finn's words, to promote the ideas of "standards, choice, and transparency." These think tanks provided Ravitch with a range of forums in which to display her expertise in school education policy; she remained in demand as an adviser, with clients extending from private colleges to former New York Mayor Ed Koch. The work also offered a congenial intellectual environment and was well paid — she has said that she received \$40,000 per year from Koret for "showing up for meetings" and "writing an occasional piece." In addition, it cemented her intellectual shift to a strongly pro-reform position.⁵

Ravitch became an enthusiastic advocate for school choice, as demonstrated by her 1994 *Brookings Review* article, "Somebody's Children", a fuller version of which was republished in *New Schools for a New Century* (1997), co-edited by Ravitch and NYU professor and education adviser Joseph P. Viteritti. She expressed concern about student underachievement, particularly among the poorest children who attended "failing" schools. While she accepted that such schools needed to be improved, she argued that parents "should not be expected to wait patiently" for change. She therefore proposed that "means-tested scholarships" be provided by city, state, or

⁵ Chester E. Finn, Jr., *Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform since Sputnik* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 199-200, 224-225, 299-300; Ronald W. Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens: How Accountability Reform Has Damaged Civic Education and Undermined Democracy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 110; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxi; Ravitch, interview with author, Brooklyn, 30 September 2019; Bob Moranto (Lafayette College) to Ravitch, 29 July 1993, Edward Koch to Ravitch, 19 January 2000, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 4, Folder 5/8.

federal government to “needy families”, to be used to send children to “the school of their choice.”⁶

Although Ravitch had been exposed to proponents of choice during her period in government, she acknowledged that she had not been convinced of its merits at that time. She indicated that an important element in her change of mind — particularly regarding vouchers — was her positive experience of overseas school systems. She recounted her visit to a girls only Catholic school in London with a largely ethnic student population, which had become one of the U.K.’s grant-maintained schools, funded by the national government. She said that this caused her to challenge the idea that public funds could not be applied to students in private or religious schools. Ravitch was in fact a long-standing admirer of Catholic schools. In “Somebody’s Children”, she referred to research which reached positive conclusions about their effectiveness, and later wrote that in the 1990s she “wanted to help Catholic schools.” Her partner Mary Butz was a powerful advocate of Catholic education, and has remained so, though without endorsing public funding for it.⁷

Ravitch’s voucher-based proposals, targeted on the poorest students and least effective schools, were much more limited than Chubb and Moe’s vision of schools largely free of government control, and she reaffirmed that she was a “supporter of public education.” She did however present strongly critical views about the existing

⁶ Ravitch, “Somebody’s Children: Educational Opportunities for All American Children,” in *New Schools for a New Century: The Redesign of Urban Education*, ed. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 253, 254.

⁷ Ravitch, “Somebody’s Children,” 259, 260, 261, 266, 256; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 132; Ravitch, “Mary Butz: Hedge Fund Managers and Foundations Should Fund Catholic Schools,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 26 September 2015.

public school system which she had previously so strongly defended, bemoaning the failings of the “big, anonymous comprehensive high school.” In the introduction to *New Schools for a New Century*, she and Viteritti also criticised the role of local school boards, which she had praised in *The Revisionists Revised*, and argued the case for school decentralisation. One major innovation she promoted was the establishment of charter schools, which ultimately became much more significant than vouchers in the choice movement.⁸

The idea of a charter school, publicly funded but outside the conventional school district system, was based on a proposal by education professor Ray Budde in the 1970s and was adopted in 1988 by Albert Shanker who envisaged charters as a flexible alternative to regular public schools, generally founded and run by teachers. By the mid-1990s however, Shanker had become disillusioned with the way in which charters had developed in practice. He was concerned at the influx of private investment which he believed would tend to generate standardisation rather than the innovation he desired, and the fact that some charters had strict admission policies or were strongly racially segregated. As the AFT leader, he was particularly exercised by the restriction on teachers’ legal rights and union influence which was evident in many charters. More generally he came to view privately-run charters as an attack on public education.⁹

Ravitch by contrast became an enthusiastic supporter of charters, arguing in 1998 that “unlike the bureaucracies from which they escape” they were marked by

⁸ Ravitch, “Somebody’s Children,” 259, 255, 256; Ravitch and Viteritti, eds, *New Schools for a New Century*, 14.

⁹ Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 311-316.

their “variety, flexibility, and responsiveness (sic) to local circumstances.” Sidestepping Shanker’s concern about privatisation, she described charters as “public schools that have their own board of trustees” and suggested that they could be formed from existing public schools or by “organizations like the Metropolitan Museum of Art or Teachers College” — though in practice the private sector came to have a major role. In 1998, she testified before the New York State legislature in support of legislation authorising charters.¹⁰

The publication of the original “Somebody’s Children” article generated a range of responses in the subsequent issue of *Brookings Review*. Shanker was highly critical, arguing that private schools would generally admit only higher achieving students with supportive parents and that such schools might in fact appear successful precisely because of their selective intake. Ravitch’s public disagreement with her long-term ally Shanker was an indication of the extent of her shift towards the reform agenda. Although she had identified in *The Troubled Crusade* the dangers of seeking to effect major change without recognising the complexities of the American school system, she had thrown herself firmly behind the broad and largely untested ideas of accountability and choice, reasoning from general principles (as in her universalist endorsement of colour-blindness) rather than the detailed evidence. She had reached the conclusion that the discipline of competition would generate

¹⁰ Ravitch, “Second Thoughts: Reflections on New York City’s Centennial,” speech 25 April 1998, 8, 9, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 66, Folder 8; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxi.

improvements in the public school system in which she continued to express her belief.¹¹

Finn set out his vision of reform in a contribution to *New Schools for a New Century*, in which he praised the “new paradigm” of public education, with its focus on “performance, efficiency, and accountability”, coupled with choice, decentralisation, efforts to “blunt the claws of...teachers unions”, and the “serious entry of private enterprise” into the school education market. He argued that this could be regarded as part of a “profound political and ideological shift” involving a major attack on the New Deal and the Great Society. Finn was clearly expressing his belief — now shared by Ravitch — that school education policy needed to reflect the changed political landscape by moving decisively away from the ideas of the New Deal Order. As Lauren McDonald noted in a 2014 article on the role of think tanks in education, much of this paradigm was shared by neoliberals. The neoconservative view in the mid-1990s however continued to be distinguished from neoliberalism by its belief that government (including the federal government) should be actively involved in promoting standards-based reform — in other words the improvement of student and school performance nationally, built on strong curriculum content and robust testing systems — and Ravitch’s efforts, along with Finn, became largely focussed on putting that principle into practice.¹²

¹¹ Albert Shanker, “Fresh Paint and Choice,” letter in *The Brookings Review*, vol.13, no.1 (Winter 1995): 2; Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 265.

¹² Chester E. Finn, Jr., “The Politics of Change,” in *New Schools for a New Century*, 247-248, 250; Lauren McDonald, “Think Tanks and the Media: How the Conservative Movement Gained Entry Into the Education Policy Agenda,” *Educational Policy*, 28 no.6, (2014): 848-849.

The Journey to Political Consensus and No Child Left Behind

Although Ravitch's voucher-based proposals in "Somebody's Children" were broadly aligned with the ideas of contemporary Republicans, most of the ideas promoted by her and her close associates were not the preserve of a particular party. The politics of U.S. school education in the 1990s and early 2000s were marked by divisions within both parties and the efforts of the presidents — Bill Clinton and George W. Bush — to garner broad congressional support for policies which incorporated many of the principles in which neoconservatives like Ravitch believed. A major feature of her work (alongside Finn) during this period was therefore the promotion of political consensus in favour of standards-based reform.

Bill Clinton's political viewpoint differed sharply from that of most of the congressional Democrats with whom Ravitch had clashed when in government. He had been a leading member of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) which distanced itself from the established Democratic 'tax and spend' policies redolent of the New Deal Order. In the 1992 presidential election, Clinton demonstrated his 'New Democrat' thinking on school education, arguing that whilst there was a case for further educational spending, the government must "insist on results" from schools, which led him to support national standards comprising curricular content and testing. He also advocated a pro-business 'human capital' approach, linking American economic performance with educational reform. Clinton's policy proposals reflected his work as governor of Arkansas, where he had focused on school and student performance and teaching standards, resisting opposition from the teachers' unions. Like George H.W. Bush in America 2000, Clinton aimed to use the influence of federal

government to build on existing state-level reforms and drive progress across the country.¹³

Clinton had the problem of steering his proposals through Congress, despite the Democratic majorities in both the House and the Senate. He encountered opposition from Democrats who rejected the linkage of federal funding to improvements in school and student achievement and right-wing Republicans who objected on principle to the federal role in education. Ultimately however, by accepting compromises (for example reducing the emphasis on testing) and building on the support of New Democrats and moderate Republicans, he was able to secure the passage of his legislation. In the 1994 re-enactment of ESEA, entitled 'Improving America's Schools Act' (IASA), states' receipt of Title I funding (the greatest part of federal support) was conditional upon the development of "school-improvement plans" incorporating robust curriculum standards in mathematics and reading/language arts and related testing, together with "corrective action" where schools failed to improve performance. Alongside this, Clinton obtained agreement to Goals 2000, a revised version of America 2000, which provided modest additional funding for states pursuing policies based on standards and accountability.¹⁴

IASA also included provision for school choice. It permitted school districts to use federal funds to facilitate so-called 'public school choice' (a move to another school in the district) and provided modest start-up funds (\$15m initially) for charter schools. One important difference from the policies which Ravitch had developed by

¹³ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 78-82.

¹⁴ Ibid, 83-98; IASA quoted in *ibid*, 96.

this time was that there was no provision for vouchers, and Ravitch continued to promote her scholarship plans, arguing in 1999 that federal Title I funding should be a “portable entitlement” which “follows the child, like a college scholarship.” Nevertheless, the overall approach of the Clinton administration in its first two years contained several elements of the reform agenda promoted by Ravitch. She in turn was clearly content to work with representatives of the New Democrat philosophy. The seminars that she and Viteritti organised at New York University which led to the publication of *New Schools for a New Century* were co-sponsored by the DLC.¹⁵

Clinton’s education policy was however challenged by the 1994 midterm election of Republican congressional majorities, and especially the resulting prominence of Rep. Newt Gingrich’s proposals for a ‘Contract with America’. In school education, this meant a vehemently neoliberal programme which entailed the rejection of standards-based reform and the abolition of the federal Department of Education. In fact, although the Republicans in Congress did reduce the federal involvement in the standards-setting process, their radical proposals misjudged the public mood, as opinion polls indicated support for a strong federal role in school education — a view endorsed by the business community. Clinton mounted a strong public defence of his school policy, whilst moderate Republicans increasingly distanced themselves from the stridently anti-federal government, pro-voucher approach advocated by the right

¹⁵ IASA quoted in McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 96; Ravitch, “Clinton’s School Plan is a Good Start. Let’s Go Further,” *Wall Street Journal* (20 January 1999), republished on Brookings Institution website; Ravitch and Viteritti, eds, *New Schools for a New Century*, viii.

wing of the party, and the majority of Clinton's school education reforms remained in place in 1996.¹⁶

In the months following the Republican midterm victories, there were signs that Ravitch, along with Finn, William Bennett and Lamar Alexander, might be hedging her bets in case Gingrich and his right-wing allies succeeded in implementing their anti-federal government agenda; at much the same time, she was vigorously promoting Republican policies as part of the Pataki transition team. A May 1995 article contained a quote from *Forbes* magazine in which Ravitch said of her time in government that "most of the [OERI] money was wasted" and called for the "euthanasia" of the Department of Education. These statements were untypical of the support which Ravitch and Finn gave to the broad thrust of Clinton's standards-based approach, even where they disagreed with the detail of his policies. Shortly after the midterms, Ravitch wrote that the repeal of Goals 2000 would "send an unfortunate message that the new Congress is against academic standards."¹⁷

In the 1996 presidential election, the Republican candidate Robert Dole ran on a 'small government', pro-voucher education platform and lost heavily to Clinton. The Republicans responded by accepting many of Clinton's ideas, as they sought to counter their 'anti-education' image. Despite the growth of a broad congressional consensus, Clinton was unable to secure his proposed 1999 ESEA reauthorisation which incorporated a strengthened federal standards and accountability regime

¹⁶ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 106-119. Opinion polls also indicated low support for vouchers; *ibid* 124.

¹⁷ Ravitch quoted in "Amnesia Strikes Former Feds: Ravitch, Finn, Latest to Succumb," unattributed article, May 1995, Charlotte Crabtree Papers, Box 8, Folder 16; Ravitch, "Goals 2000: Four Ways to Fix It," *Washington Post* (12 January 1995): A27.

because the Democrats and Republicans were not yet ready to abandon their respective agendas of increased funding and less prescriptive federal requirements. His second term however witnessed an increasingly bipartisan view of federal education policy.¹⁸

Ravitch continued to endorse reform-based ideas in her work. In a 1999 article, whilst continuing to argue for further “deregulation, choice and competition”, she was clear that the President had “pointed the national discussion about education in the right direction, toward standards and accountability.” She was prepared to work with Clinton to advance elements of the reform agenda and was one of a group of experts who attended a White House ‘Meeting on National Standards’ in March 1997. In the same year, she was appointed by Clinton to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) which was responsible for monitoring the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and which she argued should have a significant role in developing national tests. Ravitch also exercised her influence through another role she undertook from the mid-1990s — the Brown Chair in Education Studies at the Brookings Institution, from which she edited the Brookings Papers on Education Policy. McDonald’s 2014 analysis of think tanks described Brookings as “centrist”, but Ravitch felt able to use the 1998 Papers to affirm that education had been recognised as a “critical investment, both for society and for individuals” and that this had “fueled the national movement for higher academic standards.” This shows that Ravitch was prepared to associate herself with a range of individuals and organisations to promote the broad reform agenda as widely as

¹⁸ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 128-134, 137-145.

possible. It also emphasises the fact that support for school reform was not limited to those regarded as being on the political right. So-called 'centrists', like the New Democrats, were in practice increasingly open to ideas with a distinctly neoliberal flavour associated with the right — as evidenced for example by the Clinton administration's privatisation and deregulation measures.¹⁹

The culmination of a decade of pressure for reform-based policies came with the election of George W. Bush as president in 2000, following an election in which both he and his Democratic opponent Al Gore had made school education a major issue. Bush was able to achieve the consensus for his legislative proposals that had eluded Clinton for most of his presidency. It spanned right-wing Republicans who had fought for 'small government' policies in the 1990s but wished to throw their support behind a Republican president and 'liberal Democrats' such as Edward Kennedy who had been reluctant to accept a link between funding and accountability but recognised the strength of public opinion behind reform. Bush worked hard to forge a compromise which had wide bipartisan appeal, placating Democrats by removing voucher provisions from his proposals and accepting further increases in federal funding. His No Child Left Behind (NCLB) bill, aided by the mood of national unity following the 9/11 attacks, was finally passed in December 2001 by overwhelming majorities in the House (381-41) and Senate (87-10).²⁰

¹⁹ Ravitch, "Clinton's School Plan is a Good Start. Let's Go Further"; Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 156-157; Ravitch, "National Tests: A Good Idea Going Wrong," *Wall Street Journal* (26 August 1997), republished on Brookings Institution website; Ravitch, Introduction to Brookings Institution, *Brookings Papers on Education Policy 1998* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 1; McDonald, "Think Tanks and the Media": 870.

²⁰ McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 151-177.

NCLB went beyond Clinton's legislative enactments by establishing a framework which enabled the federal government — at least in principle — to enforce the delivery of standards by the states. In exchange for increased federal funding, states were required to administer annual testing in reading and mathematics for grades 3 – 8, aligned with content standards established by the state. They were expected to demonstrate “adequate yearly progress”, resulting in the achievement by 2014 of “academic proficiency” for 100 per cent of students. The requirements for “corrective action” if a school failed to make “adequate progress” included a range of accountability measures culminating in an “alternative governance structure”. This might mean “reopening as a charter school” and federal funding (\$300m in 2002) was provided “to help states and localities support charter schools.” Further ‘quality based’ measures were introduced including a requirement that all public-school teachers must be “highly qualified” by the middle of the decade.²¹

NCLB, as well as representing consensus between Democrats and Republicans, also reflected a de facto consensus between the neoconservative and neoliberal views of school education. It appeared to encapsulate neoconservative ideas based on using federal government power to drive improved achievement through strong content and testing. Yet although NCLB ran contrary to the purist neoliberal ideal of eliminating the federal role and moving to a system dominated by private provision, it was consistent with the pragmatic approach which marked neoliberalism in practice, and which aimed to use the power of government to advance the cause of business, particularly privatisation, by — in Wendy Brown's words — “remaking the

²¹ NCLB quoted in McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 180-181.

state” in the interests of the private sector. Putting aside their rhetorical opposition to ‘big government’, neoliberals were able to open the door to government-sponsored opportunities for business to profit from school education, notably via charters. At the same time, neoconservatives, including Ravitch at this point, were quite prepared to accept market mechanisms such as school choice as an element in the reform package. They did not believe that a market-based approach alone would bring about the improvements they desired; William Bennett argued that choice needed to be accompanied by two other “Cs” — “content” (a strong curriculum) and “character” (matters such as school discipline). They accepted however that public education could be improved by opening it up to market forces and the involvement of the private sector.²²

Whilst therefore neoconservatism and neoliberalism were in conception what Brown described as “distinct political rationalities” — one focused on institutional improvements and the other on the primacy of the market — their shared acceptance of government intervention and the use of market mechanisms helped to shade that distinction. As a result, Ravitch could join with neoliberals in endorsing NCLB. It is significant that the members of the Koret Task Force, which was a consistent supporter of the principles (if not all the details) of NCLB, included Ravitch and E.D.Hirsch Jr., whose main interest was in content and testing, but also John Chubb and Terry Moe, the most vigorous advocates in the early 1990s for ‘small government’ neoliberalism in school education.²³

²² Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, New York: Zone Books, 2015), 24; Bennett quoted in Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 55.

²³ Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism and De-democratization,” *Political Theory* 34, no.6 (December 2006): 691-692; Finn, *Troublemaker*, 300. For a

Ravitch was a firm supporter of NCLB in the period to the mid-2000s. She has said that her endorsement was based on the premise that no one could object to “ensuring that children mastered the basic skills of reading and mathematics” or the annual testing of those skills.²⁴ NCLB did not however advance the cause of national curricular standards, including those in the humanities, which had exercised Ravitch so much in the late 1980s and early 1990s and had continued to be a major concern for her.

National Standards and Testing and the History Standards Controversy

Ravitch emphasised her support for national curriculum standards and tests in *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen’s Guide*, which was completed in early autumn 1994. She described how, in his 1992 election campaign, Clinton had advocated national curricular standards and examinations. In the legislation passed in 1994, she explained, there was no provision for national testing; further, while states could have their own tests certified by an authorising body, the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC), such tests could not be used for ‘high stakes’ purposes, such as graduation or grade promotion. Goals 2000 did provide for national curricular standards, albeit expressly qualified to allow for state and local control. These were however severely dented by the controversy concerning the National History Standards.²⁵

similar example of neoliberals and neoconservatives agreeing on a policy while starting from different positions — the 1996 welfare legislation — see Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn, New York: Zone Books, 2017).

²⁴ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 17.

²⁵ Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen’s Guide* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995), 147-148, 155-156; McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 88-91.

The history standards were of particular relevance to Ravitch, who had worked energetically to promote school history in the 1980s. The standards project, run by the UCLA-based National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS), was led by Charlotte Crabtree, the co-writer with Ravitch of the California Framework. It had been established in 1991 during Ravitch's time in government, with funding from the Education Department and the NEH, then chaired by Lynne Cheney. The project team of Crabtree, Gary Nash and Ross Dunn worked hard to build a consensus and by late summer 1994 the decision-making National Council had agreed the standards for K-4, 5-12(U.S. History) and 5-12(World History). Along the way, the project received positive feedback from many quarters, including Cheney who wrote to Crabtree on receipt of the first draft of the U.S. History Standards that "the best grant I've ever given is to your standards-setting project."²⁶

On 20th October 1994 however, Cheney attacked the standards in a *Wall Street Journal* article headed "The End of History." She stated (misleadingly) that "not a single one of the 31 national [U.S. History] standards mentions the Constitution." Referring to the supplementary teaching examples rather than the core standards, she described the view of American history presented as "grim and gloomy". Alleging "political correctness", which she claimed had become more prevalent in academic history since Clinton's election, she noted that there were six references to Harriet Tubman, but only one to Ulysses S. Grant. On the World History Standards, she stated that the American Historical Association (AHA) "threatened to boycott the proceedings if Western civilization was given any emphasis." Cheney's criticisms

²⁶ Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 159-171; Cheney quoted in *ibid*, 214.

were taken up by Rush Limbaugh, who condemned the U.S. History Standards for their omission of white male heroes and described them as “p.c. crap.” Whilst the standards were praised by major newspapers like the *New York Times*, they were attacked in radio talk shows hosted by Oliver North and G. Gordon Liddy and by figures from the Christian right such as Phyllis Schlafly.²⁷

In January 1995, the standards entered the congressional arena. Republican senator Slade Gorton used a procedural device under Senate rules to attach to an important measure — in this case an unfunded mandates bill — an unrelated resolution which would have prohibited the certification of the National History Standards or other standards based on them. Realising that the Republican majority could carry the vote without their support, the Democratic leadership agreed to save the unfunded mandates bill by supporting the resolution on a non-binding ‘sense-of-the-Senate’ basis, and this led to its approval by a 99-1 majority.²⁸

Ravitch had written to Crabtree in June 1994 with some comments on the draft U.S. History Standards, which she had seen. She expressed concern about “political bias in some of the 20th century material”, mainly in the teaching examples, arguing for instance that Hoover and Eisenhower were presented less favourably than Franklin Roosevelt and Kennedy. She did however conclude a relatively short (2 ½ page) letter by emphasising that she made these points “with much reluctance” because she “greatly admire[d] the integrity of the overall effort.” Gary Nash (the project leader following Crabtree’s retirement that month) responded by

²⁷ Nash et al., *History on Trial*, 192-197, 218-220; Cheney and Limbaugh quoted in *ibid*, 3-6.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 231-237.

acknowledging “some subtle political bias” in the twentieth-century materials and explaining that the language had been “adjusted...to maintain neutrality.”²⁹

By November however, the mood had changed considerably. Crabtree wrote to Ravitch questioning comments attributed to her in which she claimed that the standards’ decision-making arrangements failed to achieve a true consensus, that the teaching examples suffered from a “malevolent America” syndrome and that problems had been caused by “academics’ dominance” of the process. Replying to Crabtree, Ravitch praised “the actual standards themselves” but argued that the examples displayed a “deeply troubling” political bias. She also raised further criticisms, accusing the project team of accepting too readily the “anti-western view” of the AHA. Further, Ravitch said that Crabtree had lumped her with the “racists, anti-Semites, and anti-pluralists” who had criticised the standards — a statement which is not supported by an examination of Crabtree’s letter.³⁰

Ravitch continued to criticise the standards, with particular reference to the teaching examples, in her writing over the next few months. Using language reminiscent of her attack on the New York curriculum, she said that the document “honors the nation’s diversities” and “aims to enhance the self-esteem of racial minorities and women” but “largely ignores the nation’s commonalities” and described its “implicit theme” as the “ongoing...struggle by the oppressed to wrest rights and power from selfish white male Protestants.” In a *Chronicle of Higher*

²⁹Ravitch to Crabtree, undated (June 1994), Diane Ravitch Papers Box 50, Folder 3; Nash to Ravitch, 17 June 1994, Diane Ravitch Papers Box 50, Folder 2.

³⁰ Crabtree to Ravitch, 29 November 1994; Ravitch to Crabtree, 2 December 1994; both Charlotte Crabtree Papers, Box 8, Folder 16.

Education article, she described the standards as too “politically correct” and said that they were “deeply flawed.”³¹

In the same article however, Ravitch was clear that she had not given up on standards, either in history or more generally. She distanced herself from many critics, including Cheney, by arguing that the existing history standards material should be “substantially revised, not abandoned”, and that there was a threat to the standards movement generally if the history standards were shelved. She explained that the history standards project team had agreed to a review of the existing draft; at a meeting in January 1995, she (as Nash, Crabtree and Dunn later wrote) “made constructive suggestions and worked to move the process ahead.” This led to the formation by the Council for Basic Education (CBE) of a review commission, and Ravitch was a member of its U.S. history panel. Ravitch’s strong support for the history standards (albeit with amendments), along with the general principle of national standards, does not appear to sit comfortably with the strident tone in which she had attacked them in the press. It reflects a conflict between her firm belief in curricular standards and her awareness of the wider political considerations, which caused her to use differing modes of argument depending on her audience and the political climate.³²

One explanation for Ravitch’s vigorous attacks on the history standards is that she wished to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with three figures close to her who had emerged in summer 1994 as vociferous critics of the World History Standards. Paul

³¹ Ravitch, “Standards in U.S. History: An Assessment,” *Education Week* (7 December 1994): 48, 40; Ravitch, “Revise but Don’t Abandon, the History Standards,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (17 February 1995): A52.

³² Ibid; Nash et al., *History on Trial*, 230, 241-244.

Gagnon, who had worked with Ravitch at EEN and OERI and in the Education for Democracy project, condemned what he regarded as the standards' diminution of Western civilisation in favour of other cultures. Gagnon's views were firmly endorsed by Albert Shanker (Gagnon was an AFT adviser) and Finn, who wrote to Crabtree and Nash "on behalf of the Educational Excellence Network", criticising the standards' endorsement of "multicultural correctness" and their failure to meet the "barbershop test" — in other words, acceptability to the general public. In the light of this critique, and particularly Finn's invocation of EEN, Ravitch would have found it difficult to abstain from an attack on the standards.³³

There was also a more general political factor which drove the aggressive approach of Ravitch and Finn. The history standards controversy erupted at precisely the same time as the Republican victory in the midterm elections. As shown by Ravitch's reported call for the abolition of the federal Education Department, she and Finn felt it necessary to demonstrate some support for the 'Gingrich revolution'. Crabtree wrote in summer 1995 about the "pure GOP propaganda" in Finn and Ravitch's EEN publication *Education Reform 1994-1995*, in which they repeated negative comments about the history standards, though they sought to "resurrect support for the Standards movement." Crabtree's disappointment with Ravitch, in particular, caused her to be highly cynical about the motives of Ravitch and Finn. There is however justification for her assertion that they were trying to "talk the Republican talk, without taking the Republican walk" by making attacks on the

³³ Nash et al., *History on Trial*, 185-186; Finn to Crabtree and Nash, 7 July 1994, Diane Ravitch Papers Box 50, Folder 3.

history standards, which ingratiated them with the right-wing Republican establishment, whilst maintaining overall support for national curricular standards.³⁴

In early 1996, the CBE's History Standards Review Commission produced its report, and a new 'Basic Edition' of the standards, taking account of its recommendations, was published in April. Much of the content in the original standards remained, though not the teaching examples which had generated so much of the negative feedback. There were some significant changes — for example a new section to "evaluate the continuing struggle for *e pluribus unum*", by reference to matters such as "group rights vs. individual rights." Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who also had reservations about the original edition, endorsed the revised standards warmly in a *Wall Street Journal* article, describing them as "rigorous, honest, and as nearly accurate as any group of historians could make them." (By this point, the impact of the 'Gingrich revolution' in educational policy was weakening, and Ravitch would therefore not have felt the need to continue appeasing the Republican right.) Although Crabtree, Dunn and Nash regarded the approval of two such influential figures as very helpful, these developments came too late to save the history standards as a government certified document. In September 1995, the Clinton administration — fearful of the electoral harm which might be caused by the Republican attacks on the standards — decided to disown them.³⁵

³⁴ Crabtree to Nash and Dunn, 28 August 1995; Crabtree to Dunn, 2 September 1995; both Charlotte Crabtree Papers, Box 8, Folder 16. Nash, Crabtree and Dunn believed that Cheney's attacks were also an attempt to curry favour with the Republican right; *History on Trial*, 213-215.

³⁵ Nash et al., *History on Trial*, 252, 253, 246-247, 255; Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The New, Improved History Standards," *Wall Street Journal* (3 April 1996): A22.

Reflecting on the history standards in 1997, Ravitch gave her assessment of why they did not secure acceptance. Reaffirming the belief in compromise which had characterised her work on history curriculums in the mid-1980s, she viewed the fundamental problem as a failure to find a “middle ground” which recognised the contribution to history of “race, ethnicity, class, and gender” but also “important historical figures” such as Washington, Franklin and Edison. She framed the dispute as one between ideological historians (raising echoes of her earlier attacks on the revisionists and radical historians like Howard Zinn) and implacable critics who made “false and inflammatory charges”, and she repeated the call for a “barbershop test” before any standards were released. Crabtree took a radically different view.

Dismissing Ravitch’s attempt to cast herself as a voice of moderation, she accused her of “sacrificing the ‘good’ on the altar of the ‘excellent’” and said that by “joining the worst of the critics”, she bore “heavy responsibility for what has happened.” In retrospect both the project team and Ravitch took decisions which made the defence of the standards more difficult. At the same time, Crabtree’s task in seeking to forge a consensus which satisfied assertive and culturally progressive organisations like the AHA, as well as more conservative opinion, was highly challenging. It is also doubtful whether more support from Ravitch, despite her influence as a figure with a lengthy track record on history curriculums, could have stemmed the tide of negativity about the standards. This was an exceptionally divisive period in 1990s U.S. politics and culture, with what Julian Zelizer described as Gingrich’s “partisan warfare” sitting

alongside tirades from figures like Limbaugh who were eager to stoke the fires of the culture wars by strident appeals to American patriotism.³⁶

The movement for national curricular standards did not recover from the history standards furore. The Clinton administration made no effort to promote national standards, which were also weakened by the March 1994 cancellation of federal funding for the English Standards project because of the lack of progress. The bipartisan approach of NCLB under George W. Bush excluded any provision for national standards or testing; the lesson of the history standards was that these were unlikely to promote consensus. Ravitch however remained a strong supporter of national standards and assessments through the 2000s, and this continued to be a vital part of her personal commitment to reform. She argued in 2005 that to make NCLB work more effectively “Americans must recognize that we need national standards, national tests and a national curriculum.”³⁷ She also retained her enthusiasm for a liberal arts curriculum, and this was one of the driving forces behind another career landmark from this period — the publication in 2000 of *Left Back*.

Ravitch as Writer: *Left Back* and *The Language Police*

Ravitch began work in the late 1980s on a history of school humanities teaching in the twentieth century. This broadened over the following decade into *Left Back*, the

³⁶ Ravitch, “The Controversy over National History Standards,” *Bulletin of the America Academy of Arts and Sciences* 51, no.3 (January-February 1998):24-25, 26-27(Ravitch has continued to hold a broadly similar view, see *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 20-21); Crabtree to Nash, 22 March 1997, Charlotte Crabtree Papers, Box 8, Folder 17; Julian E. Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 299; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 274-276.

³⁷ Ravitch, “Every State Left Behind,” *New York Times* (7 November 2005): A23.

core argument of which was that the deficiencies in American schools could be very largely attributed to the effect of progressive educational ideas and particularly the anti-intellectualism inherent in them. It marked her return as a historical writer but was heavily influenced by her view of the issues affecting U.S. school education at the turn of the century. Ravitch reprised the arguments in *The Troubled Crusade* and her later work on the humanities, reiterating her view that the triumph of progressive principles had obstructed the provision of a liberal arts education for all. She went on to challenge what she regarded as the later manifestations of progressivism, such as the post-World War II life-adjustment education and the 'open education' of the 1960s. In *Left Back* however, Ravitch expanded the scope of her attack, increased its intensity and related it firmly to contemporary concerns.³⁸

Ravitch took what she acknowledged in the book (albeit only briefly) was a broad view of the meaning of progressive education. Like her mentor Lawrence Cremin, she believed that it encompassed much more than the emphasis on child-centred pedagogy, which (as she also admitted) had been shown by writers such as Larry Cuban to have had limited impact in the classroom, and the rejection of conventional subject matter. She argued that it included developments such as the industrial education movement and IQ testing, both of which she viewed as a means of restricting access to the liberal arts, and she criticised the progressive belief in the school as a vehicle for building a new social order. In this way, she was able to maintain a wide-ranging attack on progressive ideas, even though, as she accepted, some of them appeared loosely related and even contradictory. She coupled this

³⁸ Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (First Touchstone ed., New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Touchstone, 2001), 41-129, 162-201, 327-343, 382-407.

with sustained criticism of John Dewey, an iconic figure in progressive education, whom she accused of having been too tolerant of progressive views, even when he did not agree with them. By contrast, she heaped praise on those figures such as William C. Bagley and Isaac Kandel who rejected progressive thinking and championed the liberal arts curriculum.³⁹

In the final chapter, Ravitch summarised the efforts directed to school improvements from the late 1980s, resistance to which she represented as largely the continuation of erroneous progressive ideas. She linked the growth of ethnic separatism, which she viewed as a distraction from the need for curricular reform, to the 'self-esteem movement' the roots of which she traced in turn to 1930s progressivism. Similarly, she compared the support for the 'whole-language' approach to teaching early grade readers, rather than the use of phonics, to the earlier progressive belief in 'whole-word' reading. Having returned to the history standards war by repeating her support for the "middle ground" on curriculum content, she concluded the book by warning that the "anti-democratic" views of progressives who opposed a broad education for all children could still be encountered in late twentieth-century America.⁴⁰

There were several factors driving Ravitch's vigorous attack on progressive education. In her 1995 proposal for *Left Back* she stated with apparent relish that the book would be controversial "especially to the education establishment" among which she identified "the schools of education." These included the strongly

³⁹ Ibid, 462, 527n, 77-81, 130-161, 202-237, 54, 172-173, 151, 208, 121-123, 314-321.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 420-429, 443-450, 252-253, 450, 461.

progressive Teachers College, to which Ravitch had not been reappointed following her time in government; she moved instead to New York University. She later said that this was because the Teachers College faculty disliked what they regarded as her increasingly right-wing views. *Left Back* represented in part the breaking of Ravitch's remaining ties with progressivism, including the ideas of Cremin. Maurice Berube has described it as a "Freudian act" in which she killed her "surrogate intellectual father."⁴¹

The book also provided Ravitch with a vehicle with which to frame her belief in standards-based reform in a historical context. Her condemnation of the progressives' "century-long effort to diminish the intellectual purposes of the schools" was designed to add power to her work to enhance student achievement, centred on a liberal arts curriculum. Ravitch displayed her usual acumen in the timing of *Left Back's* publication; in 2000, the political consensus for school reform was gaining force and polls indicated that the public regarded education as the most important issue facing the U.S. Ravitch's proposal for the book said that it "would not be addressed to scholars" but to "a general audience that wants to understand what has happened to the schools and why they are as trendy and standards-averse as they are."⁴²

Left Back was widely reviewed, further indicating that Ravitch had accurately judged the public interest in schools. The book unsurprisingly received largely

⁴¹ Ravitch to Lynne Chu, 30 March 1995, Diane Ravitch Papers Box 1, Folder 6; Kevin Carey, "The Dissenter," *New Republic* 242, no. 19 (15 December 2011): 15; Maurice R. Berube, "The Education of Diane Ravitch," in *Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Essays on the Politics of Culture* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Bergin and Garvey, 2002), 47.

⁴² Ravitch, *Left Back*, 459; McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind*, 148-149; Ravitch to Lynne Chu.

unqualified praise from publications such as *Commentary*, which had continued to move to the right under the long-standing editorship of Norman Podhoretz, and *The National Review*, founded by the strongly conservative William F. Buckley, Jr. Some other reviews, whilst generally acknowledging the validity of Ravitch's concerns about progressive curricular ideas, correctly recognised the limitations of her arguments. Because her thesis laid the blame for the ills of American schools so strongly on one single cause — the failings of the progressives — she tended to overlook other forces which were at work, notably socio-economic factors. Rutgers professor Catherine Lugg chided Ravitch for focusing on 1930s academic debates at Teachers College rather than the Great Depression, whilst David Tyack argued powerfully that the reduced status of the liberal arts curriculum resulted as much from societal change — not least the growth of the student population — and pressure from interest groups promoting subjects such as sports and driver's education, as from progressive theories. In attacking progressivism, Ravitch had again adopted an argument founded on broad principles rather than granular analysis.⁴³

From the mid-2000s, Ravitch became concerned that the standards movement, which she had viewed in part as a means of countering the progressive-inspired errors of the past with strong curricular content and a robust assessment system based on a range of measures, had become increasingly focused on basic skills and standardised tests. She also returned to the more nuanced view of progressive

⁴³ Sol Stern, "Regressive Education," *Commentary* 110, no.4 (November 2000): 53-56; Carol Iannone, "They'll Never Learn," *The National Review* (11 September 2000): 57-58; Catherine Lugg, review of *Left Back, History of Education Quarterly*, 41, no.4 (Winter 2001): 552; David Tyack, "School Reform Is Dead (Long Live School Reform)," *The American Prospect* (23 October 2000), Lexis-Nexis copy, Diane Ravitch Papers, Box 8, Folder 6. On the rightward shift of *Commentary*, see Nathan Abrams, *Norman Podhoretz and Commentary Magazine: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons* (New York & London: Continuum, 2010).

education which she had held in the early 1980s, moving closer to progressives such as Deborah Meier, who she had said in *Left Back* were seeking to “reclaim the strain of progressivism that championed students’ joy in learning without denying the importance of academic disciplines.” Ravitch indicated in 2019 that if she were writing the book then, she would adopt a different approach, focussing for example on the progressives’ emphasis on social welfare as well as their anti-intellectualism. Although *Left Back* contains a wealth of historical material about progressive education, it was very largely driven by the issues of the day and Ravitch’s response to them.⁴⁴

Ravitch’s other book from the turn of the century period, *The Language Police* (2003), was also a reflection of her contemporary concerns. It drew on her (largely negative) experience of the processes for adoption of textbooks and deciding test content, and its core argument was that the deference to pressure groups of state and federal government and producers of textbooks and tests had led to a form of censorship, manifested particularly through bias and sensitivity guidelines. She perceived this pressure as coming from both the left, which focused on issues such as sexism and racism, and the right, with its particular concern about secular humanism, although she argued that publishers were more inclined to sympathise with the left because they generally “came from the same cosmopolitan worlds.” Like

⁴⁴ Ravitch, *Left Back*, 463. In 1982, Ravitch had expressed the hope that it might be possible to find “common ground that encompasses the educational ideals of the traditionalists and the compassion of the progressives”, “American Education: Has the Pendulum Swung Once Too Often?”, *Humanities* (November 1982), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 88. Ravitch, interview with author, 30 September 2019.

Left Back, the book was aimed at an educated general readership. Ravitch said that she wished to “expose censorship to public review.”⁴⁵

Some of the arguments in the book were reminiscent of Ravitch’s culturally conservative writing in the previous two decades which underpinned her work on curricular standards. She said that one set of history bias guidelines encouraged “ideas that appeal to ethnic pride” except for European Americans who “must be taken down a few pegs” and argued that literary textbook selections “strain[ed] to obscure any sense of literary tradition” so that work by Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain was “mixed haphazardly with...never-heard-of, soon-to-be-forgotten pieces by little-known writers.” While she stated that she did not advocate the canonisation of particular books, she included as an appendix a 30 page “sampler of classic literature for home and school”, prepared by her and California educator Rodney Atkinson.⁴⁶

More generally, Ravitch expressed concern at the exclusion from textbooks (including literary selections) and test questions of words and images deemed by guidelines to be outdated and insensitive. She argued for example that the reasonable desire to avoid stereotyping, such as the general portrayal of women as homemakers, had evolved into the pursuit of an idealised world of complete racial and gender equality. Some of Ravitch’s concerns now appear very outdated. She was puzzled by the rejection of “African slave” in favour of “enslaved African”, indicating that she had not taken account of contemporaneous developments in the study of enslavement, in which the lives and cultures of enslaved people were treated more

⁴⁵ Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (First Vintage Books ed., New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 5-8, 79-96, 62-78, 87, 167.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 37, 127-128, 219-250.

respectfully, and enslavement was not regarded as the defining marker of identity. She also seemed unconvinced by the objections to the use of “man” in non-gender specific contexts. Underlying this was her view that “sometimes words do hurt, but we learn to live with that hurt as the price of freedom”; for her, censorship was an evil which trumped sensitivity about words and images, and her belief in universal rights did not encompass a right not to be offended.⁴⁷

Ravitch has changed her mind on the question of reader sensitivity in children’s books. Writing in 2021 about the suspension of publication of six Dr. Seuss books, she said that in *The Language Police* she had been concerned with “organized efforts to cleanse publications of anything that might offend anyone” such as “an elderly person using a cane” and had not addressed the problem of “books that contained hateful images, even if they were not seen as such when they were first published.” She added that if revising the book her view would be that children should not be “required to read books that contain images that are insulting to people based on their race, gender, ethnicity, or religion.”⁴⁸ A vital element in the book was Ravitch’s fierce defence of free speech against attacks from any quarter which dated back to her schooldays and continues to feature strongly in her writing. Nevertheless, the nature, and particularly the tone, of some of her detailed arguments in *The Language Police* marks it out, like *Left Back*, as very much a book of its time.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 26, 27, 9, 175, 162. On the historiography of enslavement, see Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M.H. Camp, eds., *New Studies in the History of American Slavery* (Athens, Georgia and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 1-18.

⁴⁸ Ravitch, “Dr. Seuss and ‘Cancel Culture,’ *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 7 March 2021.

The Turning of the Tide: The Origins of Ravitch's Disillusion with Reform

In the decade after she left government, Ravitch's work as a think tank member and writer had confirmed her high standing among educational opinion formers, putting her name, in the words of a *Left Back* reviewer, "somewhere near the top of the Rolodex of every serious education journalist."⁴⁹ She had played a significant part in promoting the reform agenda, on which political consensus had been achieved in the shape of NCLB. By the beginning of the 2010s however, she had called for the abolition of NCLB and rejected many of the reform-based ideas she had advocated.

Ravitch remained a strong supporter of the reform agenda, and NCLB in particular, as late as 2006. She has written that the origins of her disaffection with NCLB dated from a conference of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) which she attended in the autumn of that year and where the operation of NCLB was criticised by several established members of the reform movement, including Finn. They attacked the goal of proficiency for 100 per cent of students by 2014, which was regarded as entirely unachievable, and the ability of states to set their own standards and tests, so that they were able to fix a more generous definition of proficiency to mitigate the effects of the sanctions imposed by NCLB's compliance regime. In fact, the evidence produced at the conference showed that the incidence of students switching schools — one of the remedies within NCLB for schools failing to reach their target — was very low.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Peter Schrag, "The Education of Diane Ravitch," review of *Left Back*, *The Nation* (2 October 2000): 31.

⁵⁰ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 105, 108-109, 107.

This critique of NCLB was echoed by Ravitch in an October 2007 *New York Times* op-ed. Her prescription for change was to “reverse the roles of the federal government and the states.” The federal government would under her plan be responsible for a national assessment process and would provide information about student achievement to states and school districts; this was consistent with her long-held belief in national testing. She argued however that school improvement policies, based on this information, should be devised at the state and local level where decision-makers were closer to the problem. She also stated firmly that the “absurd goal of achieving universal proficiency by 2014” should be removed. She did not believe at this stage that NCLB should be abandoned; she was clear that it could be “salvaged” provided it was “radically overhauled.”⁵¹

Ravitch however had other significant concerns about the nature of school reform. In her op-ed, she reaffirmed her desire to promote the liberal arts, saying that NCLB’s “unhealthy obsession” with standardised testing in reading and mathematics had reduced the time spent on “other important subjects.” Within the Koret Task Force, Ravitch, along with E.D. Hirsch, Jr., was a member of the so-called ‘instructionist’ group which believed there should be a greater emphasis on improving the curriculum and classroom teaching. By contrast the ‘incentivists’ such as John Chubb, Terry Moe, political scientist Paul Peterson and economist Caroline Hoxby, believed the focus should be on choice, including the promotion of charters and the widespread use of vouchers, together with other market mechanisms built around school and teacher accountability. Sol Stern reported in *City Journal* on an

⁵¹ Ravitch, “Get Congress Out of the Classroom,” *New York Times* (3 October 2007): A25.

early 2007 debate at the Koret in which Ravitch and Hirsch proposed, and Hoxby and Peterson opposed, the resolution “True School Reform Demands More Attention to Curriculum and Instruction than to Markets and Choice.” Ravitch at this point was not opposed to choice but she firmly rejected the ‘incentivist’ view that the market would inevitably raise standards. She argued that even in a completely free market, teaching in schools would continue to be based on the ideas of the schools of education which trained their teachers (and which Ravitch had criticised in *Left Back*); these, she said, were uniformly adopting programmes which failed to give due weight to effective classroom methods and strong curricular content. In her view, it followed that without intervention to ensure improvements in the curriculum and pedagogy — not currently a priority of school reform — most students would continue to receive an inadequate education, particularly in the liberal arts.⁵²

More generally, Ravitch began to question the role of business- and market-related ideas within school education policy. The first signs of this emerged in New York City where Michael Bloomberg was elected mayor in 2001, promising to initiate a plan for schools based on centralised mayoral control and business principles. Ravitch initially supported this but soon became a fierce opponent of Bloomberg and his Chancellor of Schools Joel Klein. In his critical 2011 article about Ravitch, Kevin Carey alleged that she was motivated in part by personal factors, since she tried unsuccessfully to persuade Klein to appoint her partner Mary Butz as leader of a programme training school principals, though Ravitch has denied this. In any event, by October 2006 Ravitch was unleashing a vigorous attack on Bloomberg’s policy,

⁵² Ibid; Sol Stern, “School Choice Isn’t Enough,” *City Journal* (Winter 2008).

criticising his business-led Leadership Academy for principals and stating that businessmen and politicians did not have a “secret formula for fixing what ails schools.” Foreshadowing much of her thinking after 2010 she argued that “good education” would be achieved not by mayoral control or business leadership but by matters such as “good teachers”, “adequate resources”, and an “excellent curriculum.” It appears that Ravitch also became increasingly disturbed by the stridency of the pro-market views held by the ‘incentivists’ to which she was regularly exposed at the Koret. She has written of her distaste at a remark by Terry Moe that he looked forward to the end of “government schools.”⁵³

Ravitch’s concerns ultimately crystallised into an ideological shift. She recognised that the reform agenda which she and other neoconservatives had promoted had become underpinned by neoliberal policies based on school choice and other market-related initiatives. By the turn of the century, neoliberal ideas had attained a hegemonic status: what Gary Gerstle has described as a “New Order” in American politics, extending to much of the Democratic party as well as Republicans. Ravitch however came to realise, as she later wrote, that she was “too ‘conservative’” to continue to accept reform because “the effort to upend American public education and replace it with something market-based began to feel too radical for me.”⁵⁴

Ravitch was acknowledging a fundamental paradox of neoliberalism. Whilst it is a creed often associated with self-described ‘conservatives’, its foundation is a radical

⁵³ Carey, “The Dissenter”: 16-17; Ravitch, speech at Wagner College, Staten Island, 25 October 2006, Diane Ravitch Papers Box 49, Folder 1; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 13.

⁵⁴ Gary Gerstle, “The Rise and Fall(?) of America’s Neoliberal Order,” *Transactions of the RHS* 28 (2018), 241-264; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 14.

rejection of the New Deal-era ideology which Ravitch had absorbed in her formative years, and which was based on government intervention to regulate the corporate sector, support trade unions, and promote social and economic welfare.

Neoliberalism does believe in the state management and regulation of markets, but in the interests of business rather than society as a whole. It also stands for individualism and is sceptical about established institutions such as the public school system. Ravitch said her “basic conservatism about values, traditions, communities, and institutions” led her to reject school reform — a similar motivation to that which had driven her challenge to the New Left attacks on public schools in her early career. Her search for tradition had come full circle, so that she was now challenging the radicalism of the right.⁵⁵

This fundamental shift in Ravitch’s viewpoint appears particularly striking when set against her status from the mid-1990s as a right-of-centre figure (a political ‘conservative’ as she was generally labelled) who often supported Republican ideas and individuals. Her position was however more complex than it first appears. Ravitch was not a committed Republican like Finn. She responded positively to overtures from the Clinton administration. Also, whilst she became actively involved in devising George W. Bush’s education platform for the 2000 presidential election, she resigned after Bush refused to meet with the Log Cabin Republicans, a Republican group concerned with gay and lesbian issues and was reported as describing herself as an Independent. Ravitch refused to classify herself as right-wing. Writing to Gary Nash in 1996, offering to produce a supportive piece on the revised

⁵⁵ Ibid.

history standards, she suggested that it would be appropriate for Schlesinger to co-author this because “he is viewed as a liberal, and I am often viewed as a conservative (tho not by conservatives — and for good reason).” Her assessment was endorsed by Sara Mosle, who in her review of *Left Back* argued that because Ravitch had tended to “run with the conservatives” in the previous decade, she was “often (wrongly) labeled a right-winger” when she was in fact a “very old-fashioned liberal, of a pre-1968, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. bent” who (like Albert Shanker) had a “talent... of speaking her mind, irritating friends and foes alike.” Even the highly critical Carey acknowledged that Ravitch “never indulged in the strident anti-labor rhetoric common among educational conservatives.”⁵⁶

Accepting this view of Ravitch’s underlying political instincts, the question is then why she chose to remain heavily involved for so long with the forces — often, albeit not exclusively, on the right — which supported the reform agenda. Speaking in 2019, she said that she had become concerned about the “anything goes approach” in America’s schools. After her time in government, she credulously placed her faith in the broad principle of reform, recognising its increasing political dominance (which she helped to foster) and viewing it as the most effective — if not the only — means of securing the overall enhancement of American public education to which she was strongly committed, even though she might not share the ideas of some other reformers. Her major priority was curricular reform, particularly the promotion of the liberal arts, which had been a key element of her work for many years, and which

⁵⁶ David J. Hoff, “Ravitch Leaves Bush Campaign Over Log Cabin Stance,” *Education Week* (12 January 2000); Ravitch to Gary Nash, 25 February 1996, Charlotte Crabtree Papers, Box 8, Folder 16; Sara Mosle, “The Fourth R,” review of *Left Back*, *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (27 August 2000):7; Carey, “The Dissenter”: 16.

was also strongly supported by Finn. She appears to have expected that this aspect of school policy would ultimately receive the attention she believed it deserved and her confidence in the power of the reform movement would have been increased in the early 2000s by the breadth of political support given to NCLB. As it turned out however, that measure placed the focus of reform on a narrow view of education based on basic skills, whilst marginalising the liberal arts — confirming the fear which Ravitch had expressed in her mid-1980s work on the humanities.⁵⁷

Ravitch's attachment to reform was also driven by personal factors. She may (as Charlotte Crabtree privately suggested) have entertained ambitions of returning to the Education Department in a Republican administration, although her resignation from the 2000 Bush campaign team indicated that there were limits to her willingness to support the Republican cause. She certainly enjoyed her membership of pro-reform think tanks, which provided her with stimulating and well-paid work and helped to keep her close to the centres of power. She has said that at the Koret Task Force, although she did not agree with her colleagues on all issues, she "loved the intellectual stimulation."⁵⁸

By 2009 however, the differences between Ravitch and her think tank colleagues had become insurmountable. Early that year, the Koret Task Force prepared a list of recommendations for amendments to be made to NCLB when it was re-authorised and Ravitch refused to sign them. In a dialogue with John Chubb in *Education Next*,

⁵⁷ Ravitch, interview with author, 30 September 2019; Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and P. Holley Roberts, eds., *Challenges to the Humanities* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 7.

⁵⁸ Crabtree to Ross Dunn, 2 September 1995, Charlotte Crabtree Papers, Box 8, Folder 16; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 13.

she cited the problems with NCLB which she had previously identified, also adding a criticism of the legislation's performance in raising student achievement. Whilst Chubb acknowledged that change was needed, Ravitch concluded that "a few tweaks here and a little tinkering there cannot fix this fundamentally flawed legislation." She clearly believed that the federal government's role should extend no further than facilitating strong curricular standards and assessment processes, stating that "Washington does not have the institutional knowledge or capacity to reform our nation's schools."⁵⁹

Ravitch's association with the reform agenda proved to be an aberrant episode in her career. Her support for reform was pragmatic. She appreciated the benefits it brought to her career; she also recognised its political impetus, believing naïvely that it would bring about wide-ranging improvements in school education. When she realised this prospect was illusory, the political instincts she had formed as a mid-century liberal Democrat reasserted themselves as she turned firmly against the pro-business neoliberalism within NCLB. In her most striking act of contrarianism, Ravitch rejected the measure which reflected the very broad political consensus she had helped to create. In April 2009, she resigned from the Koret Task Force, and a year later she announced her break from the reform movement with the publication of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*.

⁵⁹ Diane Ravitch and John Chubb, "The Future of No Child Left Behind: End It? Or Mend It?" *Education Next* 9, no.3 (Summer 2009).

CHAPTER 6 – THE CAMPAIGNER, FROM 2010

As Ravitch attacked reform in *Death and Life*, there was an underlying continuity with the views she had held in her early career. Drawing a clear ideological line between herself and her former allies, she vigorously endorsed public schools and elected school boards, arguing that privately run schools, particularly charters, would weaken public education without bringing significant benefits. She also condemned the role of private foundations, such as the Gates Foundation, in supporting reform, raising echoes of her attack on the Ford Foundation's involvement in community control. Drawing on ideas from the collapsed New Deal Order, she defended teachers' rights, and called for increased government spending to address the inequality which she believed was the root cause of underachievement among poorer students. In the second edition of *Death and Life*, and in *Reign of Error* and *Slaying Goliath*, Ravitch expressed these ideas with heightened intensity, as she worked increasingly with public education activists, and she strenuously supported teachers' strikes. She also acknowledged her earlier failure to recognise the continuing effects of racism. She condemned the emphasis of both parties on pro-business, neoliberal ideas, being highly critical of the Obama administration's Race to the Top. In her battle against reform, she also became close to progressive educators, particularly Deborah Meier; as well as ending her lengthy battle with progressivism, this contributed to her rejection of national curriculums, of which she had remained a supporter in her early post-reform career. Whilst Ravitch has been increasingly willing to associate herself with the left, she has continued to uphold traditional, culturally conservative ideas, including the importance of 'character' traits such as hard work in school education, and the value of a common culture.

Death and Life: The Rejection of NCLB and Market-Based Reform

Ravitch clearly recognised that the publication of *Death and Life* would provoke a response, given her reputation as a writer and as a prominent advocate of the reform agenda, and specifically NCLB, for most of the 2000s. She was determined to ensure maximum publicity for her book and the ideas it contained. On 9 March 2010, just a few days after publication, an article by her appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, summarising the key arguments in *Death and Life*. Just over a week later, a similar article was the opening salvo in a *New Republic* symposium in which she was supported by Richard Rothstein of the left-of-centre Economic Policy Institute, but attacked by several pro-reform writers, including Brookings Institution-based Ben Wildavsky and Kevin Carey of the Education Sector think tank. Ravitch also made over 20 appearances on local radio and TV during March and April 2010, and during the next year spoke regularly at meetings organised by teachers' unions and other groups. Her strategy, based on a wide range of media, ensured a high level of exposure for the themes which she presented in *Death and Life*. These focussed on both NCLB's disappointing contribution to improving pupil outcomes and her broader concerns about the market-based principles underlying the reform agenda, including teacher accountability and the promotion of privatised charter schools.¹

¹ Diane Ravitch, "Why I Changed My Mind About School Reform," *Wall Street Journal* (9 March 2010), reprinted in *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch* (New York: Garn Press, 2019), 7-10; Ravitch, "Pass or Fail," *The New Republic* (TNR symposium, 15 March 2010); Richard Rothstein, "Moment of Clarity," *The New Republic* (TNR symposium, 15 March 2010); Ben Wildavsky, "Education's Tea Partier," *The New Republic* (TNR symposium, 15 March 2010); Kevin Carey, "Is Education on the Wrong Track?", *The New Republic* (TNR symposium, 16 March 2010); Ravitch, *Interviews on Television, Radio and Video*, dianeravitch.com.

Ravitch first claimed that NCLB had failed to make a significant positive impact on student achievement. She began by repeating criticisms that predated her rejection of reform which, as she explained, were shared by Finn and other former allies. She described the goal of proficiency for 100 per cent of students by 2014 as “utterly out of reach”, noting that in 2007 only a third of American fourth-grade students had achieved the standard of ‘proficiency’ defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). She added that “most states devised ways to pretend to meet the impossible goal” (of progress towards 100 per cent proficiency) since each state had “the power to establish its own standards, choose its own tests, and define proficiency as it wished.”²

Ravitch went on to argue that in any event “NCLB did not...bring about rapidly improving test scores.” Basing her analysis on the NAEP outcomes, rather than the inconsistent state tests, she stated that whilst scores for grades 3 to 8 (the grades tested annually) increased following the introduction of NCLB, the rate of increase slowed. Expressing concerns which reflected her long-standing belief in the value of the humanities and writing skills, she also argued that NCLB had resulted in an inappropriate emphasis on reading and mathematics, whilst many schools devoted less time to liberal arts subjects and students had developed skills in answering multiple-choice tests but were unable to express themselves.³

The evaluation (and ultimately removal) of teachers on the basis of student test scores was a particular issue for Ravitch. She was implacably opposed to this,

² Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; first paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2011), 103, 106.

³ Ibid, 109, 107-108.

referring to studies which indicated that scores were generally the result of something other than the teacher's contribution (such as student motivation or the conditions in the school) and arguing that it led to teaching to the test. This reflected the intellectual chasm between Ravitch and the reform advocates which had emerged as her early political instincts, forged in the New Deal era, reasserted themselves. Chester Finn, for example, in his review of *Death and Life*, advocated merit-based pay for "great instructors" but "no pay for incompetents" and emphasised the need to "break the union stranglehold" in teaching.⁴

Ravitch rejected the market-based model in schools which posited the idea that teachers should be able to earn performance bonuses, but that union authority should be removed or greatly reduced so that they could be readily hired and fired. She endorsed the principle of teacher tenure, which the unions actively supported, stating that it was not a "guarantee of lifetime employment" but a "protection against being terminated without due process." Ravitch had defended due process in her earliest educational writing, in the context of the rights of the teachers removed from Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools. She acknowledged in *Death and Life* that her friendship with Shanker, and lengthy association with the AFT, had reinforced her belief in the importance of unions in protecting teachers' pay and conditions. In part the strength of her support for teachers and their unions stemmed from a feeling that she had betrayed them during her period of advocacy for the reform agenda.

⁴ Ibid, 186; Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Finn on Ravitch: A review of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*," (first published 3 September 2010, reissued on Thomas B. Fordham Institute website, 2020).

Interviewed by David Denby for his 2012 *New Yorker* article, she said that “I feel I have to make up for the damage I’ve done.”⁵

In *Death and Life*, Ravitch argued for changes to the recruitment, training and management of teachers. Consistent with her support for ‘career teachers’, who were more likely to be unionised, she stated that there was a need for a “steady infusion of well-educated teachers who will make a commitment to teaching as a profession.” She was critical of the emphasis placed by reform advocates on the mainly non-unionised Teach for America (TFA) programme, asserting that participants’ short period of service (typically three or four years) meant that they were unable to make an effective contribution. Ravitch argued that “good salaries and good working conditions” were required to attract teachers of the right calibre, and that they should be better educated, with a strong liberal arts background and deep knowledge of the subjects they taught. Her prescription for the teaching profession was remarkably similar to the one outlined in her 1983 “Scapegoating the Teachers” article, which also counselled against laying the blame for all educational problems at the door of teachers. This was representative of the thread of continuity between the arguments in *Death and Life* and Ravitch’s earlier writing.⁶

Ravitch was also highly critical of the school choice provisions within NCLB. She identified charter schools as the major manifestation of school choice, noting that by

⁵ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010; first paperback ed., New York: Basic Books, 2011), 192, 176, 175; David Denby, “Public Defender: Diane Ravitch Takes On A Movement,” *New Yorker* (19 November 2012): 69.

⁶ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 191, 190; Ravitch, “Scapegoating the Teachers,” *The New Republic* 189, no 19 (7 November 1983) reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of Our Times* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 90-99.

2010, only 30,000 students were using vouchers whilst there were 4,600 charter schools with 1.4 million students. She did not accept that charters, which were mainly located in large urban districts, could make a significant contribution to overall student achievement. She acknowledged that in some cases, for example the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools, they did produce excellent results particularly with poorer children, including blacks who constituted a higher proportion of the student population in charters than in regular public schools. She argued however that the KIPP model could not be applied to an entire public education system, since KIPP schools selected students by lottery, so that only the most committed families applied for places, and they enrolled a smaller proportion of non-English speakers and children with special educational needs than regular public schools.⁷

More generally, Ravitch described charter schools in *Death and Life* by saying that “some are excellent, some are dreadful, and most are somewhere in between.” She noted a 2009 summary of research on charters by Tom Loveless and Katharyn Field of the Brookings Institution which said that “none of the studies detects huge effects — either positive or negative.” She also referred to the evidence of financial abuses affecting the charter sector, which received substantial public subsidies (an example of the ‘corporate welfare’ provided to private businesses which was a characteristic of neoliberalism in practice). Criticism of the outcomes achieved by charters could also be found among strong supporters of school choice. Finn said in

⁷ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 132, 134, 135-136. Ravitch has also written about reports of abuse against children by KIPP staff, see “Being Black at KIPP,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 4 January 2022.

his review of *Death and Life* that charters were “uneven at best.” In the same article however, he challenged Ravitch’s opposition to “charter laws and other choice schemes”, arguing for “far more fundamental and radical reform” so that “every child” had “quality school choices.”⁸

Ravitch’s opposition to school choice (and particularly charter schools) was, like the reform movement’s support for it, largely based on matters of principle and was another manifestation of the intellectual divide between her and her former allies. She rejected the view she had held from the mid-1990s that offering poorer students access to schools outside the regular system, as well as increasing their opportunities, would also motivate public schools to improve. She was concerned that charters, by enrolling the most motivated children, would leave public schools with a disproportionate number of lower performing students, thus reducing the effectiveness of the school. She also advanced the more general principle that the comprehensive neighbourhood public school created “a sense of community among strangers” and was “an essential element of our democratic institutions.” This view of the role of the public school echoed the arguments which Ravitch had advanced in *The Great School Wars* and *The Revisionists Revised*. The debate about the merits of charter schools had largely crystallised into a battle between those who upheld the neoliberal idea that choice based on privatised services was a key element in school education and their opponents such as Ravitch who argued that public schools performed a unique function and must be defended at all costs. Ravitch herself in

⁸ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 138, 134; Loveless and Field quoted in *ibid*, 143; Finn, “Finn on Ravitch”.

Death and Life noted that the 2009 Brookings Institution review “predicted that the real debate about charter schools was ideological and would not easily be resolved.”⁹

A corresponding issue of principle reflecting the divide between Ravitch and the reform advocates emerged in relation to school governance. Finn in his review of *Death and Life* criticised Ravitch for rejecting centralised forms of authority such as mayoral control of schools, saying that he did not “expect locally-elected school boards to put kids’ interests first.” Ravitch by contrast condemned mayoral control, arguing that Michael Bloomberg’s centralised control of New York City schools had caused parents to become “frustrated by their inability to influence decisions that affected their children or their school.” She asserted that the governance of public education must be “democratic, open to public discussion and public participation” — a principle which again closely matched her argument over 30 years earlier in *The Revisionists Revised*.¹⁰

In a similar vein, Ravitch expressed concern at the influence of large foundations in school education. In a chapter of *Death and Life* entitled “The Billionaire Boys’ Club”, she highlighted the activities of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation (established by the founders of Walmart) and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. She argued that there was “something fundamentally antidemocratic about relinquishing control of the public education policy agenda to private foundations run by society’s wealthiest people.” Ravitch was anxious about

⁹ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 144-145, 220-221, 143.

¹⁰ Finn, “Finn on Ravitch”; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 73, 91; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978), 15-16.

the strong endorsement given by the Obama administration to what she described as the “Gates-Broad agenda” based on support for charters and “teacher effectiveness”. For her, the power of present-day foundations in school education had uncomfortable echoes of the role of the Ford Foundation in promoting community control based on black power activism in Ocean Hill – Brownsville in the late 1960s.¹¹

The content of the school curriculum was another major preoccupation for Ravitch in this period, as it had also been whilst she advocated for the reform movement. In *Death and Life*, she echoed her writing from the mid-1980s, supporting a liberal arts education for all students. A pro-liberal arts stance could in fact be found among both supporters and opponents of the education reform agenda in the 2000s. Ravitch had in 2006 begun a published dialogue entitled “Bridging Differences” with Deborah Meier, a progressive educator who had founded several small public schools in New York City and Boston in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and whom Ravitch had praised in *Left Back*. In their introductory piece, Meier had indicated that she agreed with Ravitch on the need for a “broad liberal arts curriculum.”¹²

In the first edition of *Death and Life* however, Ravitch went further, arguing that the U.S. should follow “top-performing nations” like Finland and Japan by adopting a “substantive national curriculum”, comprising the “full range of liberal arts and sciences.” Ravitch was familiar with the constitutional prohibition on the federal imposition of national standards and states’ reluctance to accept any interference

¹¹ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 199, 200, 202, 219, 217, 195-197.

¹² Ibid, 226; Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch, “Bridging Differences,” *Education Week* (23 May 2006).

with their curricular independence, so her belief in the viability of a national curriculum appears highly optimistic. On the other hand, at the time *Death and Life* was completed, work was in hand to produce what became the Common Core standards in reading and mathematics, and Ravitch hoped that this might lead to a more broadly-based initiative covering the liberal arts.¹³

Ravitch also gave a clear indication of her views on the appropriate content of a national curriculum. She acknowledged the “culture wars” over curricular matters in the 1990s (particularly the disputes over the National History Standards) but believed that these had now ended in a “truce”. Repeating ideas she had held for well over two decades, she argued that in literature there could be a list of “indispensable literary classics” in each grade, to be read alongside contemporary work. In history she advocated the replacement of the existing textbooks which she regarded as “lacking in narrative or intellectual excitement” with “great stories of brave men and women, of heroes and villains”.¹⁴

Ravitch’s views on the curriculum were well received by Finn in his otherwise largely critical review of *Death and Life*, which was unsurprising since he and Ravitch had worked together on this subject for so long. The proposal for a national curriculum however conflicted with the ideas of Deborah Meier, who in the 2006 “Bridging Differences” dialogue had said that she doubted the effectiveness of “even the best imposed curriculum” especially if it was “designed by people who are far from the actual school communities and classrooms.” Ravitch did acknowledge that it

¹³ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 231-232, 235-236.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 232, 234.

might not be possible to achieve agreement on a national curriculum. In that case, she argued, states should adopt a curriculum that was “rich in knowledge, issues, and ideas”, such as that published by E.D. Hirsch, Jr.’s Core Knowledge Foundation. Ravitch had worked with Hirsch since the 1980s, and in 2010 was still a board member of the foundation, which Hirsch had founded with the aim of producing curricular material for elementary schools.¹⁵

In the first edition of *Death and Life*, Ravitch also touched on a subject which came to feature increasingly in her work — the effect of poverty and under-resourcing of schools on educational outcomes. Ravitch argued for additional provision of medical and social services for poorer families and the allocation of extra resources to help address the inadequate school facilities experienced by students from such families.¹⁶ Her focus on the need for substantial government action to address the socio-economic and school funding issues which limited the progress of poorer students was a further example of her return to New Deal-era principles and her corresponding rejection of the market-based ideas of the reform agenda. She revisited this topic in more detail, along with the other themes of *Death and Life*, in her next book, *Reign of Error* (2013).

The Activist: Challenging Inequality, RTTT and National Standards

In the introduction to *Reign of Error*, Ravitch stated that she had written it as a response to critics who had said that she was “long on criticism but short on

¹⁵ Finn, “Finn on Ravitch”; Meier and Ravitch, “Bridging Differences”; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (first paperback ed., 2011), 235, 236.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 229.

answers.”¹⁷ In setting out an alternative approach to school education, based on major government expenditure to combat educational inequality, she condemned the reform movement in even stronger terms than *Death and Life*. The more combative style of *Reign of Error*, like Ravitch’s other writing in the period after 2012, was indicative of her association with anti-reform individuals and her own adoption of an activist role in support of public education and teachers. It was also a result of her increasing frustration at the continued espousal of market-based education policies by both Republican and Democrat politicians.

The need to attack child poverty, and particularly the achievement gaps between students from prosperous homes and those from poor families, was a major theme of *Reign of Error*. Reform advocates agreed that improving the outcomes of poorer — especially black and Latino — children was a key priority but disagreed fundamentally with Ravitch about how this was to be achieved. Joel Klein, the former Chancellor of New York City public schools, wrote in 2009 of the “culture of excuse” under which educators claimed that the effects of poverty absolved schools of accountability for student underachievement and argued that “America will never fix poverty until it fixes its urban schools.” Ravitch countered this by quoting a UNICEF report which indicated that the U.S. child poverty rate was substantially higher than that of most other economically advanced nations. She also referred to the work of economist Helen F. Ladd who found that there was a demonstrable link between poverty and academic achievement within the U.S. and internationally. The effects of poverty in education in the U.S. are exacerbated by its system of school finance

¹⁷ Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools* (First Vintage Books ed., New York: Vintage Books, 2014), xi-xii.

under which around 90 per cent of funding is raised at state and district level. A 2018 Education Trust report identified a 7 per cent per student gap on spending between the wealthiest and poorest districts, with an even bigger disparity between predominantly white and non-white districts.¹⁸

Ravitch advocated a comprehensive programme of government spending aimed at improving living standards of poorer families, including good pre-natal care and childbirth services and universal pre-school education, which she argued would result in healthier children who were better able to learn. Her proposal for schools included the provision for poorer students of reduced class sizes, improved medical and social services, and access to good extracurricular activities. Her approach indicated her increasing enthusiasm for the high government spending which characterised the New Deal Order. It also harked back to her early writing; even when championing the contribution of the public school (for example in *The Revisionists Revised*), Ravitch had cautioned against the idea of the school as the “great panacea” and referred to “social and economic problems” which might be “more...fruitfully attacked in noneducational ways.”¹⁹

In considering the particular issue of black student underachievement in *Reign of Error*, Ravitch expressed concern about the lack of progress towards racial integration which, she believed, played an important part in hindering black academic achievement. She also argued that charter schools, which were usually highly segregated, had fostered the maintenance of segregation by targeting black families

¹⁸ Ibid, 55-62, 94, 98; Klein quoted in ibid, 92; Ivy Morgan and Ary Amerikaner, “Funding Gaps 2018,” The Education Trust (27 February 2018).

¹⁹ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 227-229, 230-233, 242-246, 255-260; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 171, 173.

or alternatively feeding the desire of some white parents for all-white schools.

Ravitch had previously failed to acknowledge the enduring nature of racism in American society, but now accepted the merits of the analysis provided by Critical Race Theory (CRT), namely that racism was structural and intrinsically linked to aspects of the legal system and government institutions and policies. She became more explicit about the limitations of the liberal universalism which had led her to adopt a colour-blind stance and admitted that she had an unrealistic expectation in the 1980s that racism would fade away.²⁰

As in her earlier career however, Ravitch was unconvinced of the merits of initiatives such as busing. Interviewed in 2019, she said that busing could mean “bringing children who are in extreme poverty to neighbourhoods of affluence” which she was “not sure...works very well” and that a better solution would be government action to help bring about integrated neighbourhoods — repeating an argument she had advanced as far back as 1976. In *Reign of Error*, she commented favourably on the proposals made (but not implemented) under the Nixon administration to counter housing segregation by denying federal aid to communities which refused to accept low-cost housing for poorer blacks. She has however said that this approach “requires a political will that today does not exist.”²¹

Set alongside Ravitch’s emphasis on combating achievement gaps was her challenge to the idea that the school system as a whole was failing. She reframed her

²⁰ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 291-292, 293-294; Ravitch, “Washington Post: What is Critical Race Theory and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools?”, *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 7 June 2021.

²¹ Ravitch, interview by author, Brooklyn, 30 September 2019; Ravitch, “Integration, Segregation, Pluralism,” *The American Scholar*, 45, no. 2 (Spring 1976), reprinted in *The Schools We Deserve*, 222; Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 297.

arguments about student performance, taking a longer view and reaching the conclusion — supported mainly by historic trends in mathematics and reading scores for fourth- and eighth-grade students — that “test scores are at their highest point ever.” Underlying Ravitch’s analysis was her increasing belief that overall test scores were in any event a flawed measure of the effectiveness of schools and teachers. She approvingly quoted a former Department of Education analyst who challenged the value of international test comparisons (in which U.S. students had historically performed poorly) and pointed to the sustained progress of the U.S. as measured by economic growth and levels of entrepreneurship. Ravitch argued that there was a need for “structured, disciplined learning” based on the liberal arts but that the strong focus on testing would “undermine the creative spirit, the innovative spirit, the entrepreneurial spirit that have made our economy and our society successful.”²²

Reign of Error is also notable for Ravitch’s increasingly emphatic support for public schools and her correspondingly fierce criticism of charters. She called for an outright ban on for-profit charters, arguing that state laws authorising charter schools should be changed so that charters could only be “managed by local educators and nonprofit organizations” and that a significant proportion of them would be required to “enroll...the children who are not succeeding in public school.” This change of emphasis and tone in *Reign of Error* reflected the emergence of Ravitch’s crusading role in the period after 2010. The origins of this lay in the growth of grass roots anti-reform activism, an early manifestation of which was the SOS (Save our Schools) March in Washington, D.C. in July 2011. By 2013, Ravitch had co-

²² Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 44, 65-68, 70-72, 73.

founded the Network for Public Education (NPE) with Anthony Cody, a teacher she met at the SOS March; this aimed to connect groups supporting public education. In April 2012, she started her blog, and by July of that year was regularly averaging over 10 posts per day, concentrating on the themes which she had developed in *Death and Life*, including the threats to public education and the teaching profession and the particular dangers of standardised testing and charters.²³

Ravitch's heightened opposition to the reform agenda was also evident in her 2016 revision of *Death and Life*, where she was fiercely critical of the Race to the Top (RTTT) programme implemented in 2010 by the administration of Barack Obama under his first Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. As Ravitch had noted in the first edition of *Death and Life*, even reform advocates were dissatisfied with the operation of NCLB. But whereas Ravitch had become hostile to the principle of NCLB, reform supporters urged measures to correct what they perceived as its deficiencies, and RTTT was in part a response to this.²⁴

RTTT allowed states to obtain waivers from the NCLB proficiency target, and to compete for additional federal funding totalling \$4.35 billion. To do so however, they were required to adopt 'college- and career-ready standards' (which for most states meant the Common Core State Standards covering mathematics and English Language Arts), and these formed the basis of student testing. They were also obliged to place particular emphasis on accountability measures, which involved

²³ Ibid, 247, 250, 251. For a description of early anti-reform activism, the SOS March and the formation of NPE, see Ravitch, *Slaying Goliath: The Passionate Resistance to Privatization and the Fight to Save America's Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 59-62, 68-69.

²⁴ For criticisms of NCLB by reform advocates see Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn, Jr., eds., *No Remedy Left Behind: Lessons from a Half-Decade of NCLB* (Washington D.C.: The AEI Press, 2007).

judging teachers by students' standardised test scores, taking action (extending ultimately to closure) on schools performing poorly on test-based criteria and increasing the number of charter schools. Ravitch described Race to the Top as "NCLB on steroids", emphasising the fact that the Obama administration was continuing — and indeed reinforcing — the bipartisan policy put in place under the George W. Bush presidency. She was greatly concerned at the support given to charters, highlighting their use of campaign contributions to politicians to procure higher subsidies, and the increasing incidence of financial abuse.²⁵

Ravitch's major challenge to RTTT related to the introduction of the Common Core standards. She was strongly critical of the Common Core testing regime which incorporated a pass mark based on the NAEP 'proficient' level, generally attained by under 40 per cent of students. Ravitch also challenged the content of the standards, particularly the focus on academic content at the expense of play in the early grades and the emphasis placed on 'informational text' rather than fiction in Common Core's prescribed standards for English Language Arts. In addition, she bemoaned the fact that the Obama administration, having asked for her views on Common Core, had not followed her advice to field test the standards.²⁶

Ravitch was particularly concerned at the involvement of private organisations in the production and implementation of Common Core. As she explained, since federal government was constitutionally prohibited from funding the creation of the

²⁵ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxxii, 139-141. For a summary of the principal provisions of Race to the Top, see Jennifer A. Rippner, *The American Education Policy Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 87-90.

²⁶ Ravitch, "Common Core Standards: Past, Present, Future," speech to the Modern Language Association (11 January 2014), reprinted in *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch* (New York: Garn Press, 2019), 158, 159, 157.

standards, that role had been filled by the Gates Foundation. The bodies responsible for the production of the standards included Achieve (a private company specialising in school curriculums) and Student Achievement Partners (a company led by McKinsey alumnus David Coleman). Ravitch said that the “writing group” for the standards “contained few educators, but a significant number of representatives of the testing industry.” In relation to the Common Core tests, she described how the federal government provided funding of \$360 million to facilitate the formation of two testing consortiums, SBAC and PARCC, which created tests aligned to the standards.²⁷

Ravitch had become increasingly unhappy at the operation of the market in schools. She deplored the extension of corporate welfare to a range of private organisations, highlighting the involvement of business interests in RTTT, including “entrepreneurs and vendors ready to sell stuff that schools allegedly needed to meet new federal mandates.” She was also critical of the role of the Gates Foundation, citing its provision of funds to organisations, such as the teachers’ unions the NEA and AFT, to encourage their support for Common Core. She was alarmed at the broader effects of privatisation on schooling, arguing that a “humanistic, child-centered, community activity” had become “shaped by the ideas and interests of economists, statisticians, and entrepreneurs.”²⁸

²⁷ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxxv, xxxiv, 248; Ravitch, “Common Core Standards: Past, Present, Future,” 155. Ravitch argued in *Death and Life* (xxxv) that Secretary of Education Duncan was in fact in breach of the prohibition on federal officials attempting to direct, control, or influence curricula and instruction.

²⁸ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxxii, xxxiv.

RTTT, and NCLB more generally, were replaced in 2016 by a new measure — the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Writing in her blog, Ravitch expressed herself content with the removal of the 100 per cent proficiency target and AYP, along with the federal requirement to evaluate teachers, principals and schools based on student test scores; ESSA gave states the opportunity to lower the stakes associated with testing, and some did so. She however took the view that ESSA, whilst reducing the federal role, had preserved the “mindset of NCLB”, based on standardised testing, accountability, and choice. In particular, she deplored the fact that annual testing had been retained together with support for charter schools. She argued that in enacting ESSA “once again, Congress failed to address the root causes of poor academic achievement” — which in her opinion were poverty and segregation, and a lack of respect for the teaching profession.²⁹

The 2016 revision of *Death and Life* showcased the most fundamental shift in Ravitch’s views in the period after 2010, as she declared that she “no longer believe[d] in the necessity of national standards and a national curriculum.” She argued that districts and states should have “curriculum guidelines” but that “teachers must be trusted...to perform as professionals, without minute oversight.” A major contributor to her change of mind was her experience of Common Core, and her concern that similar principles would be applied more generally to national curriculums — for example the close linkage to standardised tests, the process for

²⁹ Ravitch, “My Views About ESSA: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 30 January 2016; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxxviii, xxxix-xl. For a summary of ESSA, see Alyson Klein, “The Every Student Succeeds Act: An ESSA Overview,” *Education Week* (31 March 2016). On Indiana’s lowering of stakes on testing, particularly regarding teachers, see Jeanie Lindsay, “Changing Evaluation Law Spurs Questions on Testing, Teacher Accountability,” *WFYI* (5 March 2020).

deciding content and the exploitation of national standards for financial gain by the private sector. Ravitch wrote that the “toxicity” of Common Core had caused her to reject the idea of national curriculum standards. It is true that, following Common Core, there was little appetite in the U.S. for a national curriculum. As well as the leftist opposition, characterised by Ravitch’s viewpoint, there was resistance from the Republican Party, which contained within its leaders some of the early supporters of Common Core, but in its 2020 electoral platform emphasised its “long-standing opposition to the imposition of national standards and assessments.” She also said that “given our diversity as a nation, I no longer believe that national standards are necessary or possible.” In part this represented an accurate assessment by Ravitch that the culture wars over curricular matters had not abated as she had hoped, so that finding common ground on content would be difficult. In the mid-2010s, and particularly following the election of Donald Trump as president, the culture wars were revived more generally — for example on racial matters, where strongly racist rhetoric was ranged against the ideas of organisations such as Black Lives Matter.³⁰

Even taking these points into account however, it is striking how far Ravitch had shifted her position on curricular matters in the period between the two editions of *Death and Life*. As well as rejecting the idea of common standards across the U.S., Ravitch removed from the 2016 revision her reference to the merits of “indispensable literary classics” and “great stories of brave men and women” which she had advocated for most of her career. An explanation lies in Ravitch’s increasing

³⁰ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxiv, xxv, 250, 249; David Griffith, “What the Democrats and Republicans stand for on education: Excerpts from party platforms,” Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development website (2 October 2020); Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 289.

contact with proponents of progressive education as part of her activist opposition to school reform. Ravitch's views on the curriculum in the 2016 revision appear very much in line with Deborah Meier's ideas, dating back to the first "Bridging Differences" piece in 2006. The reference to teachers deciding classroom content subject only to "guidelines" had echoes of Meier's call for "teachers to continually re-examine curricular assumptions." The statement about the need to recognise "diversity" within the U.S. reflected Meier's view that it was right to "accept the risks of local, parochial agendas" (which Ravitch in 2006 thought might lead to "foolishness" such as the teaching of intelligent design) rather than "risk the centralized power over ideas."³¹

The writer Sol Stern, who had endorsed Ravitch's curricular stance before 2010 and was acknowledged by her as having read and commented on *Death and Life* during the writing of the book, certainly believed that she had adopted Meier's viewpoint. Writing in Autumn 2013, by which point Ravitch had flagged her change of mind on the curriculum, he said that she had "wound up surrendering abjectly" to Meier, which "for the progressives...was similar to the defection of a top general from the enemy side." In view of Ravitch's fierce attack on progressivism in *Left Back*, Stern was right to identify this as a fundamental shift in position. Ravitch was however drawn closer to the progressive educationalists because they shared her general distaste for the reform agenda. In particular they were strongly opposed to attacks on teachers, which had become a prime concern for her; she said that the educational academic Pasi Sahlberg — whose child-centred ideas she championed —

³¹ Meier and Ravitch, "Bridging Differences".

had told her that in Finland there was “no word in the pedagogical dictionary for ‘accountability.’” Further, whilst their detailed positions on curricular content had differed in the past, Ravitch and the progressives were united in their rejection of the test-based focus on basic skills which was a defining feature of Common Core. As part of her rapprochement with progressivism, she adopted a more positive view of the ideas of John Dewey, praising his “Pedagogic Creed” because it confirmed that education was not about “test scores” or “readiness for college and career.”³²

At the same time, Ravitch moved away from her former close association with E.D. Hirsch, Jr. and his Core Knowledge curriculum. This exemplified her dislike of the involvement of large corporate interests in school education; in April 2013, Hirsch’s Core Knowledge Foundation entered into a licensing agreement with Amplify, a company within Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp group, and Ravitch resigned from its board. In line with her increasing connection with progressive educators, she also began to question the appropriateness of the Core Knowledge curriculum content for early grade students, quoting in an August 2015 blog post an example requiring knowledge of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia in the first grade. Ravitch continued to describe Hirsch as one of her five “inspiring mentors” in the 2016 revision of *Death*

³² Sol Stern, “The Closing of Diane Ravitch’s Mind,” *City Journal* (Autumn 2013) (Stern had been an editor at the leftist *Ramparts* in the 1960s, after which he had moved to the right); Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xxvi; Diane Ravitch, “John Dewey: My Pedagogic Creed,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 31 December 2017. There was a strong interest in Dewey’s ideas, and their relevance for contemporary education, in the 2010s; *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* produced a special issue in 2017 to mark the centenary of the publication of Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*.

and Life and said in 2019 that she still “believe[d] fundamentally in the idea of core knowledge”, but she no longer endorsed Hirsch’s particular approach.³³

Ravitch remained committed to a “full and rich curriculum” for all children. In the 2016 revision of *Death and Life* however, she said that “the best we can hope for” was a “national consensus” on the contents of a “good education”, to include the liberal arts as well as the basic skills of reading and mathematics, without indicating how the formation of this consensus was to be encouraged. In view of the history of unsuccessful initiatives aimed at facilitating curricular improvements across the U.S., even Ravitch’s limited hopes seemed highly optimistic. Developments in the early 2020s in fact illustrated the danger that local politicians would become involved in deciding curriculum content, which Ravitch had highlighted in 2006 when defending a national curriculum against Meier’s challenge. In her blog she herself focused on the efforts of state governors, such as Florida’s Ron DeSantis, to restrict teaching about race (and in DeSantis’s case, LGBTQ+ topics also), referring to the effect this had had on state history standards.³⁴

From the mid-2010s, Ravitch focused increasingly on the activist opposition to the reform agenda and on leftist causes more generally. In her blog, journal articles and *Slaying Goliath* (2020), she intensified her attack on testing, charters and wealthy pro-reform organisations and redoubled her support for public schools and

³³ Ravitch, “NY Times Opinion Piece Lauds Common Core and Core Knowledge,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 28 August 2015; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xiv; Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019.

³⁴ Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), xliii, 250; Ravitch, “Florida Sets Off a Red-State Frenzy to Add Anti-Gay Laws to Their Anti-CRT Laws,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 21 February 2022; Ravitch, “Stephen Sawchuk: How the CRT Debate Is Shaping State History Standards,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 1 February 2022.

the teaching profession. In *Slaying Goliath*, she characterised the supporters of reform as ‘Disrupters’ and those openly challenging it as ‘the Resistance’ — a term adopted by feminists who attacked the views of Donald Trump. She extended her assault on organisations funding reform to encompass a lengthy list of foundations and corporations, including ExxonMobil, AT&T and Citigroup. She also highlighted “conservative think tanks” which “supply academic veneer to the offensive against public education”, including the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Manhattan Institute, with which she had been personally associated. By contrast, she praised the efforts of groups working against the ideas of reform, such as the testing opt-out movement which grew in strength following the implementation of Common Core, including the parent-led New York State Allies for Public Education (NYSAPE).³⁵

Ravitch was especially forceful in her support of teachers. She promoted the writing of anti-reform ‘teacher-bloggers’ and publicised the activities of the Badass Teachers Association (BATs), the stated mission of which was to work for teachers who refused to “be blamed for the failure of our society to erase poverty and inequality” or to “accept assessments, tests and evaluations imposed by those who have contempt for real teaching and learning.” She threw her weight firmly behind the strike action taken by teachers in the late 2010s, in protest against cuts in state education budgets, real-terms reductions in teachers’ salaries, and the added pressures on educators resulting from reform measures. Writing about the 2018 strikes (principally in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona) and the 2019 strike in Los Angeles, she said that “Teachers learned that together they had power. And they

³⁵ Ravitch, *Slaying Goliath*, 33-37, 41-42, 97-102. On the feminist ‘Resistance’, see Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 293.

won't forget that lesson." Ravitch was prepared to associate herself with grass roots teacher activism, even when this conflicted with official union policy. Although she was a vigorous advocate for teachers' unions and described AFT president Randy Weingarten as a "friend", she took the side of teachers' groups in their opposition to the Common Core tests, to which the AFT had given its firm support.³⁶

In the later 2010s, Ravitch continued her assault on federal policy under the Trump presidency. Even before his inauguration, she condemned Donald Trump's plans to encourage the growth of the private sector in school education. She was especially scathing about Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, highlighting at the time of her confirmation hearings DeVos's efforts to promote charter schools in Detroit, which she described as "still the lowest-performing urban district in the nation", and regularly berating her for continuing to support charters and vouchers. At the same time, Ravitch maintained her attack on the Democratic Party for its support of testing, accountability, and choice. She targeted particularly the work of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) which, she explained, co-ordinated the funding of Democrat politicians prepared to advance the cause of charter schools. In 2021, she commented critically on the influence within the Department of Education under the Biden administration of individuals with connections to DFER and the Gates Foundation. She reported that she had served on the Biden transition team and had made several proposals, including a prohibition on federally mandated annual standardised testing and the ending of federal funding for the Charter Schools

³⁶ Ravitch, *Slaying Goliath*, 64-66, 71, 250-266, 267, 98; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 184.

Program (amounting to over \$400million per year) but had been “stonewalled repeatedly”, which led to her leaving the team.³⁷

A strand running through Ravitch’s continuing challenge to both parties was her disillusionment with the free-market, neoliberal sentiment which had increasingly infused the ideas of mainstream American politicians since the 1990s and against which she had moved decisively since her rejection of reform. This was evident in her response to RTTT and charters, and in *Reign of Error*, she had asserted more generally that “public education is a public responsibility, not a consumer good” and “the free market works well in producing goods and services, but it produces extreme inequality, and it has a high rate of failure.” She also became highly critical of the emphasis on the use of data to make decisions, particularly in the context of school and teacher accountability. In the 2016 revision of *Death and Life*, she quoted Deborah Meier as saying that “schools should be ‘data-informed’, not ‘data-driven’.” Ravitch’s wider concern about the impact of neoliberal ideas on American society was illustrated by a December 2018 blog post entitled “American Capitalism Isn’t Working.” Here she approvingly republished a piece by *New York Times* writer David Leonhardt, describing the social and economic environment in the U.S. in the quarter-century after World War II and quoting a corporate executive from that

³⁷ Ravitch, “When Public Goes Private as Trump Wants What Happens?” *New York Review of Books* (8 December 2016), reprinted in *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch*, 321-335; Ravitch, “Why Would Anyone Listen to Betsy DeVos On The Subject of Education? It Can’t Be Results,” *Huffington Post* (18 January 2017), reprinted in *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch*, 341; Ravitch, “Don’t Like Betsy DeVos? Blame the Democrats,” *The New Republic* (23 May 2017), reprinted in *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch*, 362; Ravitch, “Familiar Faces on Biden Education Team,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 22 December 2021.

period who argued that companies should accept government regulation and not earn their profits “at the expense of the welfare of the community.”³⁸

Ravitch provided broader indications of her increasingly leftist stance. In part this was a consequence of her pressure for greatly increased government spending — for example, she backed a tax levy on billionaires. It also reflected her affirmation of liberal democratic values in the face of challenges from the far right; during the Trump administration’s attack on the anti-fascist organisation Antifa, she published a blog post entitled “I Am a Proud Anti-Fascist.” More generally, she praised left-wing individuals, describing Jonathan Kozol, the former New Left writer of *Death at an Early Age*, as a “much admired author” and labelling Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a “superstar Congresswoman.” In emphasising her break from the reform movement and the freedom this gave her to adopt a crusading role on behalf of public education and the teaching profession, she was eager to stand shoulder to shoulder with her new allies on the left.³⁹

Reaffirming Tradition: Ravitch as ‘Conservative’ Crusader Against Reform

Ravitch’s conversion from proponent to vigorous critic of the education reform agenda, working closely with its left-wing opponents, constituted a fundamental rejection of the views she had held when endorsing NCLB in the early 2000s. For some of her opponents, this in itself undermined her credibility. An anonymous

³⁸ Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, 300, 304; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 244; Ravitch, “American Capitalism Isn’t Working,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 7 December 2018.

³⁹ Ravitch, “Homi Kharas: How Billionaires Could Solve Global Problems with a 1% Tax,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 2 December 2021; Ravitch, “I Am a Proud Anti-Fascist,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 7 September 2020; Ravitch, *Slaying Goliath*, 205; Ravitch, “AOC Did Not Disappoint,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 20 March 2019.

Twitter feed, @Old-DianeRavitch (later renamed @NOTDianeRavitch), containing pro-reform quotes from Ravitch, ran in the early 2010s. Kevin Carey, writing in the March 2010 *New Republic* symposium, said that “the problem with ‘I was wrong about everything’... is that it doesn’t exactly inspire confidence in the repudiator’s judgment.” Ravitch herself justified her change of mind by referring to the saying attributed to J.M. Keynes “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?” It is true that she argued that the evidence pointed to the failure of NCLB and RTTT to produce significant improvements in student outcomes or narrow achievement gaps. As she also accepted however, a key factor driving her shift of position was an ideological one — her rejection of market-based neoliberal ideas in school education because of what she described as her “conservatism.” This manifested itself as the reaffirmation of the principles she had absorbed in her formative years as a mid-century liberal Democrat, and which had continued to influence her work for much of her time as a neoconservative intellectual.⁴⁰

For the most part, Ravitch’s stance on school education after 2010 represented the views she had expressed throughout her career prior to her energetic support for the reform agenda in the mid-1990s. There is a partial exception in the case of curricular matters, where she joined her new allies in the anti-reform camp by becoming reluctant to prescribe detailed curriculum content and opposing national standards; even here however, she remained committed to the principle of a liberal arts education and core knowledge. Overall, one can locate the origins of many of Ravitch’s post-2010 ideas in her earlier work. Richard Rothstein, in his article for the

⁴⁰ Carey, “Is Education on the Wrong Track?”; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 2, 14.

March 2010 *New Republic* symposium, said that she had “returned to deeply held convictions” and described her support of “NCLB’s test obsession” as “the aberration.” Her fervent belief in the vital role of the public school and strong support for teachers, together with her scepticism about foundations, dated as far back as her writing on Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Even when adopting a colour-blind stance, she had recognised the value of government action to encourage integrated neighbourhoods and, more generally, her support for American capitalism in *The Revisionists Revised* was tempered with an endorsement of government programmes such as welfare. In taking leftist positions in the 2010s, Ravitch often presented themes which echoed her previous work and her New Deal-era roots. Sol Stern attacked Ravitch for her blog posts on Labor Day 2013 which contained the words of “militant union songs like ‘Joe Hill’ and ‘Which Side Are You On?’.” She had however included both of these songs in her 1990 literary collection *The American Reader*.⁴¹

Ravitch’s crusading persona was also sharply criticised by Stern, who said that her blog had “all the subtlety of an Occupy Wall Street poster.” He referred particularly to its preparedness to include ad hominem attacks, quoting a blog post on Bill Keller, a *New York Times* writer who endorsed Common Core, which associated his earlier support for the 2003 Iraq War with his father’s former position as chief executive of Chevron. The blog has frequently adopted a pugilistic, polarised tone and focused on individuals who were placed on a ‘wall of shame’ – for example the Walton family and Michael Bloomberg in 2020 for “their ceaseless efforts to

⁴¹ Rothstein, “Moment of Clarity”; Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised*, 98; Stern, “The Closing of Diane Ravitch’s Mind”; Ravitch, *The American Reader: Words That Moved a Nation* (1990; second Perennial ed., New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 471-474.

dismantle public schools.” This style is clearly very different from the measured approach of *The Great School Wars* and *The Troubled Crusade*. Since her earliest writing however Ravitch has been willing to adopt the role of a polemicist in support of an issue of the moment which resonates strongly with her personal values, as evidenced by her vigorous defence of the UFT’s standpoint in Ocean Hill—Brownsville.⁴²

Another important example of the continuities within Ravitch’s ideas after 2010 is the fact that she has remained, in her own words, “culturally conservative.” Whilst focusing primarily on the key issues affecting school education, she has also engaged more broadly as a public intellectual with the continuing culture wars.

Notwithstanding her increasing sympathy with progressive educators like Meier, she has continued to emphasise the importance of traditional ‘character’ based elements in teaching. In a 2012 blog post, republished in her 2019 collection *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch*, she was unapologetic about describing traits such as “industriousness”, “self-discipline” and “respect for others” as “19th century skills” which should be “cultivate[d] assiduously among the rising generation.”⁴³

Whilst latterly acknowledging the enduring nature of racial inequality, Ravitch has also adopted a more nuanced position on American racism than some other writers. In line with her lifelong aversion to restrictions on free speech, she has consistently attacked efforts to suppress teaching about theories of racism, including CRT (though as she explained, this was largely taught in universities) and the

⁴² Stern, “The Closing of Diane Ravitch’s Mind”; Ravitch, “Tom Ultican: School Board Elections Pit Billionaires vs. Public School Advocates,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 13 November 2020.

⁴³ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019; Ravitch, “The Partnership for 19th Century Skills,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 11 July 2012, reprinted in *The Wisdom and Wit of Diane Ravitch*, 84, 85.

argument of Nikole Hannah-Jones in the 1619 Project that the United States was defined by slavery and white supremacy. In a 2021 blog post, she referred to Hannah-Jones's "courage, audacity, and scholarship" and said that black Americans would "feel that at long last the story of black people was told." She however appeared unconvinced by some of Hannah-Jones's more pessimistic conclusions. In answer to the question "was the American Revolution intended to preserve slavery, as Hannah-Jones asserts?", she stated that "most seismic events have multiple causes." She wrote that if racism was "part of the DNA of America" then "the situation is hopeless and the prospects for change are out of reach." The conclusion she reached was that the 1619 Project should be "taught alongside the criticisms of its ideas" so that students could learn that history was a "fascinating battleground of ideas." Ravitch was expressly acknowledging that history teaching should encompass more than an engaging narrative based on 'heroes and villains'. She herself however continues to admire heroic figures even when their careers have latterly received more critical scrutiny—for example, praising Winston Churchill's wartime leadership.⁴⁴

Ravitch has remained committed to the American common culture and sceptical about what she regards as an undue emphasis on ethnicity. In 2020, she compared the pressure to mandate an ethnic studies course for high school graduation in California with her experience of working on the California History-Social Science Curriculum Framework in the 1980s, when her committee had been "pounded by

⁴⁴ Ravitch, "The U.S. Has a Long History of Banning Controversial Topics and Blaming Teachers," *Diane Ravitch's blog*, 22 June 2021; Ravitch, "My View of the 1619 Project," *Diane Ravitch's blog*, 6 June 2021; Ravitch, "Today: The Anniversary of the Blitz," *Diane Ravitch's blog*, 7 September 2020. For a dialogue on history teaching, and particularly the 1619 Project, which is consistent with Ravitch's analysis, see Donnalie Jamnah and Jonathan Zimmerman, "Policy Dialogue: The War over How History Is Taught," *History of Education Quarterly*, 62, no.2 (May 2022): 231-239.

every racial, ethnic, and religious group in the state for not giving enough attention to them.” She has praised the work of Johann M. Neem, a historian who emigrated to the U.S. from India as a child and who largely shares Ravitch’s view of the role of the public school. In a guest post on her blog, whilst acknowledging the damaging effects of racism and the dangers of erasing non-white experiences, Neem argued for the need to “move beyond multiculturalism” and advocated a “curriculum that integrates rather than divides.” Ravitch has long been concerned about the divisiveness of identity politics, particularly in relation to ethnicity, and its tendency to weaken the shared belief in American values and institutions — a fear which for her is now especially relevant in view of the right-wing challenge to liberal democracy; she has been scathing about the January 2021 “conspiracy to destroy our democracy and our Constitution” and Donald Trump’s role in it.⁴⁵

Ravitch’s cultural conservatism has extended beyond school education to encompass areas such as feminism. She has celebrated achievements by women, ranging from the appointment of Lady Hale to head the British judiciary to the presence of Rose Cleveland as the first gay first lady in the White House. She has also vigorously defended the right of women to be protected against abuse and in 2017 strongly criticised Betsy DeVos for changing the evidential requirements for campus rape allegations in a way which benefited accused persons. At the same time, she has challenged the censorship of male writers based on their behaviour towards women. In January 2020, she wrote that a blog reader had criticised her references to the

⁴⁵ Ravitch, “Andrea Gabor: The Flaws in California’s Ethnic Studies Mandate,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 5 October 2020; Ravitch, “Johann Neem: Restoring the Promise of Public Education,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 20 November 2020; Ravitch, “The Most Shocking Story Yet About the Failed Coup,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 19 June 2022.

work of Garrison Keillor because “many women credibly accused him of making sexual advances.” She acknowledged that she was aware of these accusations but asserted that “everyone has a chance to redeem themselves” and that “I will continue to post whatever interests me.” More generally, Ravitch has indicated that —despite her increased awareness of potentially hurtful words and images — she remains sceptical about the pressure for politically correct language from feminists, and others. Writing in 2018, she described the “banned words” she had identified in *The Language Police* as the “pet peeves” of “feminists, ethnic groups, rightwing groups, lobbyists for the elderly, and for every imaginable aggrieved minority.”⁴⁶

Ravitch’s standing within the field of school education has continued to be high. Between 2012 and 2017 she was either first or second in the annual Edu-Scholar surveys in *Education Week* listing the scholars making the greatest contribution to public educational debates, and she remained in the top ten throughout the 2010s. As the 2015 survey (in which Ravitch was placed first) explained, the ranking was partly a reflection of the scholar’s body of work, but also indicated his or her “footprint on the public discourse.” Whilst Ravitch has foregone the forum provided by think tanks, she has continued to maintain her profile through writing and public appearances. Both the Obama and Biden administrations consulted her; Obama did not accept her advice, and Biden initially appeared reluctant to do so, though his administration has introduced provisions to regulate federal charter funding and

⁴⁶ Ravitch, “Lady Hale: A Profile of Britain’s Top Judge,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 29 September 2019; Ravitch, “Washington Post: America’s First Gay First Lady Revealed,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 20 June 2019; Ravitch, “DeVos Changes Obama-Era Policy on Campus Rapes to Provide Greater Protection for Those Accused of Rape,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 23 September 2017; Ravitch, “Today is Zora Neale Hurston’s Birthday,” *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 7 January 2020; Ravitch, “The Language Police Are Back (Psst: They Never Went Away)”, *Diane Ravitch’s blog*, 16 January 2018.

made major investments in public education in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. Through her work as a blogger and appearances on television programmes such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* she has retained her status as the “first crossover educational historian” as described by Maurice R. Berube at the turn of the century. She has continued to be active beyond her 80th birthday, being apparently undeterred by open-heart surgery in 2021.⁴⁷

Ravitch has remained unstinting in her attacks on the reform agenda and its proponents. In the early 2020s however some of her former neoconservative pro-reform allies were continuing to express their ideas in a way which suggested common ground with her. In his essay in the 2020 collection *How to Educate an American* (edited by Finn and Michael J. Petrilli), William J. Bennett re-emphasised his belief in the “three Cs” for improving schools. Of these, “character” was a vital element in Ravitch’s view of school education. On “content”, which he described as “the greatest of the three [Cs]”, Bennett agreed with Ravitch about the importance of core knowledge, but like her accepted that national curriculum standards were no longer a viable option, whilst praising the Massachusetts curriculums, which she had lauded in *Death and Life*. In addition, he emphasised the importance of improved teacher education, particularly in the field of subject knowledge, which was another of her key themes.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Rick Hess, “The 2015 RHSU Edu-Scholar Public Influence Rankings,” *Education Week* (7 January 2015); Libby Stanford, “Biden Administration Tightens Rules on Charter School Funding Program,” *Education Week* (1 July 2022); U.S. Department of Education, “Biden-Harris Administration Highlights Efforts to Support K-12 Education as Students go Back-to-School,” Fact Sheet, 28 August 2023; Maurice R. Berube, “The Education of Diane Ravitch,” in *Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism: Essays on the Politics of Culture* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Bergin and Garvey, 2002), 43.

⁴⁸ William J. Bennett, “Building a Conservative Consensus: The Need for a Great Relearning,” in *How to Educate an American: The Conservative Vision for Tomorrow’s Schools*, edited by Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, Jr. (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2020), 236, 242, 243, 244,

Despite this apparent measure of consensus however, Ravitch has displayed no inclination to reach out to her former colleagues. The stumbling block is the third of the 'Cs' — choice. Bennett was in fact relatively circumspect about the importance of choice, describing it as “a tool to drive the other two [Cs]” which “as with any tool...has limitations.” Petrilli and Finn also wrote about choice in measured terms in the conclusion to *How to Educate an American*. They noted that “a single-minded focus on choice...tends to neglect the huge fraction of American children who remain in traditional, district-operated schools.” Their conclusion was that school choice alone was “simply not sufficient.” At the same time, they believed that “robust school choice” was a necessary part of the overall education system and had the potential to improve that system. They argued for “more quality choice” coupled with “a renewed and sophisticated effort to improve the outcomes for youngsters who remain in [public school] settings.”⁴⁹

For Ravitch however, school choice — along with its associated neoliberal features of privatisation, accountability, and attacks on unionised teachers — has become the defining issue in school education. Those who uphold choice, even in a qualified way, are in her view taking an untenable position and she sees no point in seeking dialogue with them. By contrast, she is happy to be associated with those figures on the left who attack the reform agenda, even though they might not share her cultural conservatism. This is reflective of Ravitch's preference for hunting as part of an intellectual pack. In her earlier career, she had placed herself firmly in the

245; Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (revised and expanded paperback ed., 2016), 22.

⁴⁹ Bennett, “Building a Conservative Consensus: The Need for a Great Relearning,” 236; Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn Jr., “How to Educate an American,” in *How to Educate an American*, 252-253.

neoconservative camp and promoted its views on race, ethnicity, and culture, and later on school reform, whilst being slow to adopt the free-market ideas which were increasingly popular with the majority of neoconservatives. It is entirely consistent with this tendency for Ravitch to be a strong ally of the activist opponents of school reform whilst retaining her own ideas on topics such as character-based values in schools and the common culture.

Ravitch is clearly content with her latest role as a doughty fighter for public education and she has relished the opportunity to battle for the grass roots teachers who had been dismayed by her earlier support for the reform agenda. The dust cover of *Slaying Goliath* highlighted a quotation from William Doyle, author of the Iraq War-based book *A Soldier's Dream*, who described her as “the Martin Luther King and Joan of Arc of American education” and “a fearless crusader for every American child, parent, and teacher.”⁵⁰ Whilst however Ravitch has defined herself as a campaigner, her overall viewpoint combines centre-left politics with cultural conservatism. As such it harks back to the stance she took at the beginning of her life as a writer and demonstrates the continuity which sits alongside the change within her career.

⁵⁰ Ravitch, *Slaying Goliath*, dust cover.

CONCLUSION

Ravitch's role as a warrior for public education is the latest manifestation of a battle — albeit one complicated by her period of support for reform — to uphold the traditional ideas and institutions to which she became attached in her youth, in a changing political and intellectual climate. Her career foregrounds a series of shifts in the politics of American school education from the 1960s. First, there was the New Left challenge to the positive, unifying view of the public school, and the evolving struggle for black civil rights, which generated initiatives such as community control and busing and was part of a growing group consciousness in education. Later there were increasing concerns about educational achievement, which gave rise to calls for a disciplined school environment, a demand for stronger curriculum content, and ultimately an emphasis on student testing, with high-stakes consequences for teachers and schools and a significantly greater role for the federal government and the private sector. Ravitch has been a participant or close observer in relation to all these developments, and a study of her work provides a distinctive and highly valuable perspective on them.

Ravitch's engagement with issues of race and ethnicity highlights the conflicting educational policy priorities that have generated debate over the last half-century. She was an enthusiastic advocate for black civil rights who became opposed to community control and colour conscious initiatives, a believer in reflecting the experience of marginalised groups in history who reacted strongly against the separatist tendencies she perceived within multiculturalism, and a supporter of a more inclusive literary canon who continued to laud the classics of Western

literature. Her career illustrates the tension between the aim of policymakers to tackle inequality, and the desire to avoid fragmentation within society. She has spoken out against racism and other forms of injustice, but has continued to advance the idea of education, particularly the traditional public school system, as the foundation of a national consciousness which transcends group divisions.

Similarly, Ravitch's lengthy involvement with the work to improve school and student performance illustrates the complexity of that enterprise as it evolved over time. At the heart of her ideas was the aim of encouraging the federal government to promote higher standards through an enhanced curriculum and a broadly based system of student assessment. As her career demonstrates however, the pressure to achieve political consensus on school reform, in which she was a key player, resulted in an increased reliance on market disciplines to drive improvements. Ravitch's ultimate rejection of reform, as encapsulated in NCLB, was an acknowledgement of the fundamental inconsistency between the desire to achieve broad improvements in the quality of classroom teaching — such as a greater emphasis on the liberal arts — and a commoditised view of school education focused on basic skills and underpinned by incentives and sanctions.

Ravitch's primary significance within American school education has not been as an original thinker. Her importance stems from her ability to identify and distil the key arguments affecting education policy and communicate them effectively to a range of audiences. Ravitch built her career as a writer for a general readership but has been equally adept at presenting ideas to politicians and other opinion formers. The clarity of her writing, coupled with her effectiveness in other media, enabled her

to become the best-known American educational expert as debates about the future of schools rose to the top of the political agenda.

In evaluating Ravitch's overall contribution, however, it is necessary to consider the elements which have underpinned her intellectual stance, such as her defence of the humanities, her belief in a common culture, and her liberal universalism. All of these illustrate Ravitch's idealistic intent, but also her tendency at times to adhere to general principles in the face of conflicting evidence about the nature of American society. In particular, for much of her career, she did not acknowledge the enduring racism which caused blacks to challenge her support for the common culture and her universalist endorsement of colour-blindness.

At the core of Ravitch's views for most of her career has been her belief in a school education system dominated by strong public schools, with a content-rich liberal arts curriculum for all children and staffed by a well-paid and respected teaching profession. The application of reform-based ideas since the turn of the century has been inimical to the achievement of all these objectives. The public school system, whilst still educating the vast majority of children, faces the challenge of privatisation, focused increasingly on vouchers in some states, the emphasis on testing of basic skills has limited the scope for increasing the profile of the liberal arts, and teacher dissatisfaction has manifested itself in a series of strikes.¹ Ravitch placed the strength of her reputation behind the movement for reform and helped to foster the bipartisan coalition which culminated in NCLB. In doing so, she overlooked

¹ Ravitch, "Iowa Increases Funding for Vouchers, Expands Eligibility," Diane Ravitch's blog, 25 April 2024; Madeline Will, "Why Teachers Are Going on Strike This Fall — and What Could Come Next," *Education Week* (19 September 2022).

warning signs which she had identified in the mid-1980s, not least the danger that the work to raise school standards would prioritise basic skills at the expense of the humanities. She should therefore accept her share of the blame for the issues affecting public education which she has herself identified. To be fair to her, she has been unequivocal in acknowledging her mis-judgment, and her desire to rectify this drives her current combative attacks on reform.

Ravitch's personal commitment to the liberal arts, and particularly the humanities, has been unstinting throughout her career. Her belief that literature and history should not be restricted to high achieving, academic students represents a worthwhile and idealistic objective. Some of her work on history curriculums produced concrete and lasting results which evinced her desire to achieve compromise. The intensity of the culture wars ultimately helped to defeat her efforts to secure a broad and lasting consensus on curriculum content. There were however aspects of her viewpoint which caused her to be cast as a divisive figure and made compromise harder, in particular her fierce aversion to ethnic separatism. Influenced by her negative experience of some elements within ethnocentrism, she was reluctant to accept that many of those demanding a greater ethnic focus in the curriculum were driven largely by frustration at the systemic racism and inequality in school education.

Ravitch's opposition to ethnic separatism demonstrates the contested nature of her firm, and continuing, belief in a common culture. It is unlikely that there is an all-embracing set of common values and traditions which would receive general acceptance. Ravitch herself has acknowledged that the enormous diversity within

the United States means that “controversies periodically erupt about the definition of ‘common culture’”, whilst some individuals — particularly those calling for an increased emphasis on ethnicity — reject the very idea of a common culture. There is however an underlying validity in Ravitch’s support for shared values. A society in which there is no consensus even on fundamental principles, such as “laws” and “the Constitution”, which she has identified as the foremost elements in the common culture, is fundamentally flawed and open to attack from extremists. Her view that public schools should equip students with core values, particularly belief in American democracy, represents a sound objective in the light of the threats about which she has written extensively such as the resurgence of Donald Trump, restrictions on voting rights, and what she describes as “rightwing ideologues” on the Supreme Court bench.²

The liberal universalist strand in Ravitch’s thinking has also been a consistent feature of her work. She has since 2010 accepted that the universalism which drove her support for colour-blindness contributed to her failure to recognise the ongoing effects of racism. In seeking to reduce the achievement gaps affecting black and Latino children, however, she has generally advocated broad measures aimed at reducing overall poverty and attacking systemic unfairness in school funding, rather than initiatives targeted at particular racial groups. She has maintained her long-

² Diane Ravitch and Nancy E. Bailey, *EdSpeak and Doubletalk: A Glossary to Decipher Hypocrisy and Save Public Schooling* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2020), 48; Ravitch, “Memorial Day: Dangers to Our Democracy,” Diane Ravitch’s blog, 29 May 2023. Ravitch’s views have latterly received support from the educational historian Johann N. Neem who praised the historic role of public schools in preparing students to “take part in the shared life of our democracy”; *Democracy’s Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), x.

standing support for policies designed to encourage integrated neighbourhoods but retains her belief that busing was misconceived.

Ravitch has also continued to adopt a universalist viewpoint in her response to feminism. She has avoided the strident anti-feminism of Midge Decter, who argued that feminists were seeking freedom not from discrimination but from the competitive pressures of the workplace. She has also applauded female achievement and endorsed measures designed to provide protection for women and girls. At the same time, she has abstained from involvement in feminist campaigns, saying that she has never been “sympathetic to the idea of marching in women’s parades”, and she has not focused on issues such as the incidence of misogynistic behaviour towards girls or the continued gender inequality in many walks of life. This stance is reflected in her view of her own career; she has said that she does not trade on her identity as a woman because “ideas should stand on their own, not because they are advocated by someone of a particular group.” Ravitch’s universalist sentiment is rooted in the liberalism of the 1950s and contrasts sharply with much of the contemporary political and cultural landscape, marked by activism based around, and led by, members of a particular group.³

Ravitch’s criticism of progressive education has been another major — though sometimes unhelpful — feature of her work. She tended to overstate the influence of progressive pedagogy in the classroom. At the same time, her critique in *The*

³ Ravitch, interview by author, Brooklyn, 30 September 2019. On Decter, see Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 67-68. Ravitch did condemn the misogyny she perceived in the 2024 Trump/Vance presidential election campaign; Ravitch, “Jennifer Rubin: The He-Man Woman-Haters’ Ticket,” Diane Ravitch’s blog, 31 July 2024.

Troubled Crusade of the vocational, anti-liberal arts strand within progressivism represented a fair and measured analysis, and she gave qualified support to John Dewey's ideas for finding creative ways to engage student interest, whilst distancing herself from the far-right attacks on progressive education. By the time *Left Back* was published however, she was blaming progressivism for all the alleged failings of American school education. As a result, she failed to note that in the contemporary educational landscape, so-called 'progressive' ideas like IQ tests and the focus on skills rather than content were very much in tune with the business-oriented thinking of the reform advocates, as evidenced by NCLB. Ravitch has found allies in her fight for the liberal arts by joining forces with progressives like Deborah Meier, so completing a circular intellectual journey similar to that which has marked her career as a whole.

Ravitch's relationship with neoconservatism has been a dominant factor in her career. Her natural inclination was towards a distinctive, statist position among neoconservatives. Describing her own intellectual standpoint in 2019, she referred to Daniel Bell's mixture of cultural conservatism and leftist politics. Whilst, as she acknowledged, the comparison with Bell is imprecise, she did combine her stance as a cultural conservative with an underlying belief in the need for government intervention to support public institutions and soften the effects of the market.⁴

The viewpoint which Ravitch had developed by the mid-1980s within the neoconservative fold did not address all the issues affecting American schools; for instance, it did not focus on the structural inequalities affecting school education and

⁴ Ravitch, interview by author, 30 September 2019.

society more generally which have featured strongly in her recent work. It did however constitute a coherent approach, based on her desire to enhance the public school system, and particularly curriculum content, by working with the government and teachers, but — so far as she was concerned — without reliance on the market. It could reasonably be regarded as an example of the “serious and intelligent conservatism” which Steinfels perceived in ‘first age’ neoconservatism as defined by Vaisse, but which he believed had been lost as neoconservatives increasingly embraced market-based thinking.⁵ When however Ravitch joined her neoconservative allies in accepting the value of pro-market ideas in school education, she helped lay the foundation for NCLB, in which the neoliberals were the real winners; of William Bennett’s ‘3Cs’, ‘choice’ became a priority, whilst the elements which represented distinctive neoconservative values — ‘character’ and ‘content’ — were marginalised.

Ravitch ultimately recognised that the neoliberal philosophy underlying reform was contrary to her core beliefs, and firmly rejected it, as she had the countercultural ideas of the New Left at the beginning of her career. In breaking from neoconservatism, she restored the connection to the political ideas of the New Deal era which had been interrupted by her dalliance with the reform agenda. She has been at the forefront of calls for increased public-school spending, greater control of charters, and support for teachers, whilst retaining her distinctive cultural conservatism on issues like the common culture. At this late stage of her working life,

⁵ Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Origins of a Movement* (1979. Republished edition with new foreword. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and New Delhi: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013), xv.

Ravitch has shown that she has lost none of her combativeness, nor her contrarianism, as she has reaffirmed her devotion to traditional ideas and institutions.

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