

Ravitch: Private Sector Should Provide Help, Not Competition for Public Schools

By [Sean Cavanagh](#) on October 18, 2013 7:50 PM | [No comments](#)

The name of this blog is *Marketplace K-12*, but to Diane Ravitch, the most appropriate market for schools is a decidedly public one, where private companies keep their distance.

The provocative education historian is making the rounds for her new book, [Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools](#). A follow-up to Ravitch's recent bestseller, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, her latest work offers a broad takedown of what she sees as the overhyped sales pitches and broken promises of private interests in education, from school voucher programs to online providers to charter-school operators, and the policymakers who support them.

Ravitch met with a group of education reporters today at the [Economic Policy Institute](#), a liberal think tank in Washington, where she later appeared on a panel that included [Randi Weingarten](#), the president of the American Federation of Teachers.

One of Ravitch's core arguments is that elected officials, philanthropists, and financiers have foisted a "narrative of failure" on the American public, in which the country's schools are in crisis (national test scores, and the United States' continued economic prowess undermine that argument, she says, and that they wrongly believe the only way to rescue schools is through policies that end up setting unrealistic academic goals for them, punishing teachers, and increasing the sway of private operators.

You can watch a webcast of the full EPI event below, but here are some of arguments Ravitch put forward during the Q&A with reporters on the privatization theme.

I asked Ravitch if, given her critiques of corporate involvement in schools, she sees any role for the private sector in public education. She said the private sector's part should be limited to selling goods to schools, in technology and other areas, and raising money for the many schools that need it.

But the notion of pitting public schools against private schools or against schools with private operators (presumably through vouchers and other choice systems) is counterproductive, she argued.

That sort of "competition does not work," Ravitch said. "When I talk to teachers, the one thing they agree on is what makes a school work is having a collaborative culture. The school doesn't get better by looking over its shoulder at what some other school is doing."

Schools and teachers also need "some degree of professional autonomy," she said. If competition worked, "the highest-performing city in the country would be Milwaukee," which has a

longstanding [voucher program](#), and where [test scores are low](#), compared with other big-city districts.

Backers of vouchers would, of course, assert that public schools do in fact benefit from competitors looking over their shoulders. While a lot of research on the benefits or consequences of vouchers is mixed, a study from a few years ago by David Figlio of Northwestern University concluded that a Florida voucher program that supports private school scholarships for students through corporate-tax credits [had a positive effect](#) on the test scores of students in nearby public schools that were forced to compete for those students.

I also asked Ravitch to what extent critics of vouchers actually need to fear them, given that those programs, despite a recent burst of state activity, continue to serve only a tiny portion of the nation's student population. But to Ravitch, one of the main threats posed by vouchers is not just their immediate effect on public schools, but the way they weaken the public's conviction in maintaining an effective, and equitable, public K-12 system.

"What the public has to fear is the....gradual change in belief in public education [being seen as] a civic obligation, to public education as a consumer good," Ravitch said.

She cited former [Florida Gov. Jeb Bush's speech](#) at the Republican national convention last year—in which he said that parents' ability to shop for school options should be as easy as shopping for different flavors of milk—as a symbol of the consumerization of education. If vouchers expand, it will contribute to an attitude toward public education that "it's not my problem, it's yours," Ravitch said.

"When people start to believe that, they'll say, well, I'll send my kid to parochial school," she said. "I don't care about the public school. I have no responsibility for that; let [the schools] die."