

**Book Review:
As We Emerge
from the Pandemic,
Is Goliath Still Dead?**

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**A Review
of Diane Ravitch's
*Slaying Goliath:
The Passionate Resistance
to Privatization
and the Fight to Save
Public Schools***

**Reviewed
by Roger P. Catania**

More than two years ago I set aside my usual stack of books and articles on schooling and education so that I could focus on the most consequential matter to face public education in my lifetime—Covid 19 and the closing of schools. As the Superintendent of a small rural New York school district I announced that we would be closing our school doors starting March 16, 2020, and began steering us toward the new, necessary, and as yet untried shift to remote instruction. My focus from then on was developing an expertise in public health and online instruction, and trying to hold together my scattered, fearful, and uncertain community of students, teachers, and families. Almost overnight I lost all interest in the usual educational matters that had once consumed me—issues such as new and changing standards, test scores, and state report cards—and immersed myself in topics like viral transmission, Covid testing, quarantines, and video conferencing. So I missed the

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2020 publication of Diane Ravitch's latest attack on the educational accountability and privatization movement.

Two years after Covid's emergence we are still trying to determine if the pandemic represents a significant setback for schooling or an opportunity for positive and lasting change. *Slaying Goliath: The Passionate Resistance to Privatization and the Fight to Save America's Public Schools* may offer us direction. I led the effort to reopen our schools in the fall of 2020 and then retired in the summer of 2021—emotionally exhausted from the experience. Now I find myself returning to these concerns about the assault on public schooling that Dr. Ravitch and I share. It is a critically important time for us to be reconsidering the future of public schooling given the opportunities and challenges that the end of the pandemic (if it ever ends) will bring. Within this context I read *Slaying Goliath*. Doing so brought me right back to the forty-year history of educational accountability in America and the threats to public schooling that—perhaps—are still with us.

Diane Ravitch's *Slaying Goliath* is an early epitaph for the decades-long reform and accountability movement in public education. Ironically, Dr. Ravitch was an early proponent of accountability. She may have helped midwife the movement, but now—in a dramatic reversal that started in 2010—she is helping to defeat it (Ravitch, 2010a, 2010b, 2013, 2020). The disruptive reform measures she criticizes are well known—charters, vouchers, standards, high stakes tests, punitive teacher performance reviews, and punishing “failing” schools. Her villains are the corporate “reformers,” a group committed to privatization whom she refers to more pointedly as “Disrupters.” These Disrupters include the wealthy and the powerful—corporate CEOs, billionaires, philanthropists, marketing wizards, and governmental leaders from both political parties that include education secretaries from the previous three administrations. The Disrupters utilize a network of foundations, conservative think tanks, and libertarian policy groups backed by billions of dollars.

Dr. Ravitch makes a powerful argument against the accountability movement and The Disrupters; her assertions are very persuasive, and her research is excellent. She makes the overarching case that privatizing public schooling is a form of repression by an unaccountable ruling class over the interests of everyday citizens, making this the broader tale of America's struggle for democracy; it's a theme plainly evident within both national and international circles today.

But Ravitch is not simply vilifying the transgressors; she is celebrating the defenders of public schools. She calls this group The Resistance. They are the heroes and heroines of her story, and they include parents, students, scholars, union activists, Civil Rights organizations, public

education bloggers and—at the center of this campaign—teachers, tens of thousands of teachers. Teacher strikes in 2018 and 2019 dominated the news as teachers marched on state capitols in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona. In states and cities like Chicago and Los Angeles teachers demanded higher salaries, better working conditions, better learning conditions for students, and new funding streams for public education.

Thanks to these efforts the movement to disrupt schools is on life support, Ravitch says, but it still lingers on, kept alive by the wealth and arrogance of its benefactors. She uses evidence and common sense to reveal the reasons for their undoing—the failure of charter schools in New Orleans and vouchers in Florida, the ineffective results of state school takeovers in places like Tennessee and Michigan, and the widespread failure of the Common Core standards and teacher evaluations based on student test scores. The voice of the Resistance has been heard, Ravitch says, and the power of the Disrupters is dwindling.

Ravitch provides all the intensity of a heavyweight championship fight in the later rounds. While the Disrupters may be on the ropes, the bell has not yet sounded. Perhaps here is where the reader should be wary of Ravitch's persuasive optimism.

The movement to privatize American education may be fading, and schools and teachers may have taken on a new, critical, and heroic importance as a result of the pandemic, but legislation has not changed. Federal law still requires every state to test children, align those tests to statewide academic standards, release assessment data, monitor and evaluate schools according to that data, and intervene in those schools that perform poorly. Statewide mathematics and English exams are still required every year in grades 3 through 8 and at least once in high school, while science exams are required once every three years starting in grade three. Other subjects remain a lesser priority (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

State laws reiterate federal mandates and then go further, requiring value added measurement (VAM) teacher and principal evaluation systems. These VAM-based evaluations are on the books in 34 states (Ross & Walsh, 2019), including New York, with its Education Law subsection 3012-d. Known as the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR), New York's system of evaluating teachers and principals requires schools to base employment, promotion, retention, tenure, termination, and supplemental compensation decisions in part on the use of student test or assessment scores, with the remaining part based on teacher observations (*Annual Teachers and Principals Evaluation*, 2021). Some of this requires statistical measures of student growth, calculated on spreadsheets according to complicated algorithms, impos-

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sible for non-statisticians to understand. Many of these accountability mandates were put on hold during the pandemic, but they remain on the books. As the pandemic recedes they will likely be making a return. Ravitch may be declaring accountability's defeat, but while these laws still stand victory remains elusive.

Beyond the difficulty of breaking the powerful hold existing law presently has on accountability practices in education lurks the more subtle, yet pervasive, challenge of confronting educational inequality. Troubling inequitable conditions and outcomes preceded the accountability movement and will likely survive it. Disrupter "solutions" like testing, choice, charters, and teacher evaluations were always too simplistic (not to mention misguided) to overcome the immense social forces that allow some children to succeed in school while others struggle. But Dr. Ravitch's heroic tale of good vanquishing evil may be equally narrow as an alternative prescription for increasing equity and reducing underachievement. As we emerge from the pandemic we would benefit from setting aside this dualistic viewpoint in favor of a deeper and more contextualized interpretation.

The social foundations perspective offers us this fresh outlook. Social foundations provides a critical lens on schooling and education that considers multiple dimensions and levels of complexity. It encourages us to consider ideas about class, race, culture, poverty, and inequality. Social foundations recognizes the influence of politics, history, philosophy, and economics on schooling and education. Given the radical changes to both school and society brought about by the pandemic, what better time to reconsider schooling and education through the social foundations contextualized perspective? Doing so is perhaps too much to tackle in this review or in *Slaying Goliath*, but it would be advantageous for educational scholars and policymakers seeking better answers for the future.

Like Ravitch, I welcome the repeal of testing, privatization, and evaluation mandates. But investing all of our hopes on dismantling the structures of accountability is unlikely to bring about the widespread benefits for students and schooling that many seek. The social foundations perspective offers new avenues for critical inquiry and progressive action. Real and tangible educational progress will require us to better understand and respond to the pressing social conditions that impede children from marginalized groups and the institutions that serve them. The pandemic has more starkly revealed those conditions and offers renewed motivation for positive change. Ravitch asserts that we are on the way to saving America's public schools, but I suggest that we be prepared for a struggle ahead in case slaying Goliath is not enough.

Reviewed Book

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