with Diane Ravitch

The Death & Life of the Great American School System

Interviewed by Watson Scott Swail

Transcribed and Edited by Maly Fung

November 2010
This publication was produced by the Educational Policy Institute, a non-profit research center focused on educational opportunity. For more information about EPI, please visit the website at www.educationalpolicy.org.

CITATION:

An Interview with Diane Ravitch

On October 21, 2010, the Educational Policy Institute’s Watson Scott Swail interviewed Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch. As part of the EPI Book Club Series, Ravitch discussed her most recent book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, which focuses on the current direction of public education reform. In her book, Ravitch reflects on her 40-plus years of research and experience, addressing the impact of choice in public schools and the debate between advocates of charter versus public schools.

Describing her current views on education as a “very slow U-turn,” Ravitch discussed various issues in education, among them, the release of David Guggenheim’s new film *Waiting for Superman*, the US Department of Education’s *Race to the Top* grants, and the Post-NCLB landscape of education.

An historian of education, Ravitch has written extensively on a variety of educational issues. She was appointed to serve under Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of George H.W. Bush and has been involved with National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). She is currently a Research Professor at New York University and blogs regularly for Education Week.

*WSS*: At the start of the book you talked about how you’re sort of cleaning files from twenty years, and I would just like to hear how this book happened.

*DR*: Well, it’s a good question. I have been criticized because people say “oh, you did a U-turn,” but the fact is that this was a very slow U-turn and it doesn’t even really look like a “U.” I supported No Child Left Behind (NCLB), I testified in favor of the New York State charter
legislation in 1998, but all of these things are speculative. No one really knows how NCLB would work out at the time they adopted it. I didn’t read the 1,000 page legislation, I didn’t understand all the consequences, and I don’t think very many people in Congress did. It was just put together by many different hands, as legislation tends to be, and I doubt that Congress, when it was passed, understood that 7- or 8-years later they’d be closing schools around the country based on test scores, which in many cases are not particularly valid or reliable. But what happened to me was that starting in about 2004 I began feeling very impassable with my views about these issues and I wrote an article on the New York Times with Randi Weingarten about mayoral control. It was called “Leaving the Public out of Public Education,” it was very critical of mayoral control in 2004. And that was really the beginning of a lot of reconsideration in my part. When the NAEP scores came out in 2007 and showed very little progress on NCLB over the previous administrations of NAEP, I wrote an article in the New York Times – *that was 3 years ago* – saying that this is a bad law—it should be scrapped. And since then I would say that I’ve been pretty public because I blog every week in Education Week and [have] steadily backed away from things that I once saw were working – *or might work* – and saying it didn’t work, they’re not working.

I’ve reached a point now where I’m pretty upfront in saying, “I was wrong.” And a lot of people get angry and say “you’re not allowed to say you’re wrong”, “you used to be on my side, and now you’re not anymore,” or “we don’t want you on our side.” But fundamentally, I’m 72 years old, I’m trying to tell the truth as I see it, I may be wrong and people can judge me as they will, but I try not to listen too much to the negativity and focus on what is the evidence showing and what’s good for kids, and what will improve education. I guess I’m at a point now where I’m fairly disgusted with what’s called reform these days because I think that it has not only no evidence behind it, but it has overwhelming evidence saying that it’s not working.

*WSS:* *If you look at it with a political hat on, you might call it ‘flip-flopping’ from an age perspective, it’s finding religion. But certainly there have been critics that come out and ask, why the flip-flopping? Why don’t we talk about some of the basic tenets, this leading to *Waiting for Superman*, about teaching and about how much we’re putting on teachers to change worlds for children. What are some of your thoughts – I know you wrote many in the book and many in the article – but let’s talk about this teacher-blame thing.*

*DR:* I think that there’s a fundamental misstatement that is out in the atmosphere right now. We hear it repeated in the *manifesto* by Joel Klein and Michelle Rhee, where they said we now know
that teachers are the main determinant on whether [students] learn or don’t learn, and that’s simply untrue. There is just a huge amount of evidence that family and student characteristics weigh far more heavily than the teacher. The teacher is the most important determinant in the student’s learning within the school. I think Eric Hanushek, who has been outspoken on this issue, in his own words, shows that teacher effects account for about 7.5 to 10 percent. Other people might say it’s 15 percent of the variation of student scores. The economic literature suggests that the schools actually account for anywhere between 25 to a third of the variation. But that same economic literature including Hanushek, and Dan Goldhaber and other economists, says that student and family characteristics, particularly affluence and poverty account for 60 percent. And then there’s unexplained variation. To say that teachers alone account for 100 percent is simply nonsense. I don’t think that there is an economist in the nation who would say that poverty doesn’t affect students’ academic achievement or that affluence has no effect on it, that’s simply ridiculous.

But this has become the mantra of our day. I’m actually, as we speak, arguing with a newspaper editor who asked me to write about the value-added scores that are about to be released in NYC, and I said that there’s lots of evidence about the unreliability of value-added—and he’s disagreeing with me. He’s a newspaper editor, he doesn’t know any of the literature, but he knows because he has heard this repeated again and again that the teacher is the only thing that matters, and poverty doesn’t matter, and affluence doesn’t matter, and student attendance doesn’t matter, and student motivation and effort don’t matter. Everything is the teacher. And this repetition of the teacher as the only one who counts, I don’t think that you would find very many teachers who believe this to be true, because they know that kids come to them with all kinds of issues having to do with their home-life and the burdens of poverty and homelessness and joblessness, and or the advantages that they bring with them because their parents have a large vocabulary and went to college. Teachers understand all of this, which is what I’ve encountered in my past several months traveling the nation, and [that leads to] the demoralization among teachers because they feel that they are being made the villains of the piece.

**WSS: Diane, I think we all know what the solution to this is, of course, more charters schools, right?**

**DR:** It’s funny because the *Waiting for Superman* movie says, and the picture that it presents is, here are five kids who desperately need to get a good education and they’re not going to get it at their local public school. I mean, even David Guggenheim, the producer, drives past three public schools. He doesn’t say why they’re bad or what their test scores are, or what he’s avoiding. But
you just assume that ‘they’re just public schools, they must be bad and every one of these children wants to escape to a charter school.’ He mentioned in passing that only one out of five charter schools gets amazing results. It’s actually less than 1 out of 5; it’s closer to 1 out of 6, because the study that he’s referring to is the Margaret Raymond’s study from Stanford University called CREDO that said that 17 percent of charter schools had better results than a comparable neighborhood public school. But that doesn’t mean that 17 percent get amazing results, it just means that they got better results than a comparable neighborhood public school. The ones that get amazing results are going to be much, much smaller than 17 percent. And the numbers vary anywhere from 2 percent to 5 percent to 6 percent. So it’s a big gamble and there’s a lot of money pushing this narrative.

I just read an article this morning by Barbara Miner, that appears in a website called Not Waiting for Superman, where she documents, really just expands, the documentation my book has on a chapter called the “Billionaire Boys’ Clubs,” where she goes into looking at the board of different successful charter chains and how these are almost uniformly populated by billionaires, by white men, by Wall Street Hedge Fund investors, and it’s wonderful that they’re public-spirited. But part of this public-spiritedness is replacing public schools with poorly managed schools, where parents have no rights and if [the schools] don’t like the kids, or if the kids are low performing, they can get counseled out. I met recently with Ray Cortines (Superintendent of Los Angeles Unified School District) in Los Angeles, who said that there are a lot of charter schools who dump their low performing schools mid-year, right before the state test. I got an email the other day from a principal of a middle school in Los Angeles who complained that he had just had almost 150 kids dumped on him by the local charter school, and they all were ranked far below basic. And he said, “They’re not improving the kids’ scores, they’re just getting rid of their low performing students and dumping them and ruining my scores.” So, we’ve created a competitive situation where there’s a lot of money on one side of the table and what seems to me at this point to be a leaderless public sector cowering next to a charter sector that makes more and more advances against it.

WSS: When we look around the start of the charter evolution around 15+ years ago, maybe 15-20 [years], it was a Republican issue to really get toward a voucher. But then, somewhere along the way with the Clinton administration, they jumped on board too. So it really is a bipartisan issue. How did that happen?
DR: Well, this is one of the most incredible things. I was, as you know from reading my book, associated with conservative think-tanks, and at a certain point in the 90s it became very clear that whenever the voucher issue came to a vote it was overwhelmingly defeated. The public really did not want to see private dollars flowing to private or religious schools and then charters became the replacement for vouchers. There was a lot of discussion about how we must never use the word “privatization”, just talk about charters as public schools and they will get public money. And the charters became the favorite for a lot of conservative types. The people who would have been pushing vouchers gave up on that and moved to charters. Now, how this became a favorite thing with the mainstream and the Democratic Party is something I truly don’t understand. It’s really bizarre, I guess because that’s where the money was, that’s where the foundations were and they were pushing the charter idea very hard. But the result has certainly suggested that the charters don’t do better on the whole than regular public schools. We now have several administrations of NAEP, where charters have been compared to public schools and the charter schools on average don’t get better results than public schools. They don’t get better results for Black students, Hispanic students, low income or urban students, and in fact, there’re many, many states where the lowest performing kids – ELLs in particular – are excluded from many of the high-performing charters. I’ve seen this documented in New Jersey, in Boston, and other places. So we’re creating a very bad situation in terms of pushing on what you might call a reform that has not shown good results. And the more it doesn’t show good results, the more it’s getting pushed.

WSS: When I saw you at Old Dominion University recently, you mentioned the 17 percent of charter schools in the CREDO study that did better than their matched public schools, but 37 percent did worse. Let alone, what was in the other 46 [percent] in the middle. It’s hard to get that information out. You’re kind of fighting this battle and you have a widely popular book, but it’s no “Waiting for Superman” in terms of having Guggenheim behind it. How do we get to talk here about charter schools?

DR: Let’s just talk a little bit about who is behind Guggenheim, to show how weird the political environment is. The two big producers behind it: one is called Participant Media and the other is called Walden Media. The CEO of Participant Media is a guy named Jim Berk. Jim Berk was previously the CEO of a chain of for-profit postsecondary institutions, namely Teaching Vocations & Careers. And the for-profit sector in postsecondary education is a scandalous sector – it has the highest default rates on the federal student loan program and it has a record that Congress is now debating whether or not to regulate. It has a record of enticing kids to take out
student loans, particularly minority kids, and then they drop out or flunk out and the institution gets to keep the money and the student is left with nothing.

Then you have Walden Media, which is apparently wholly owned by a man named Phillip Anschutz. He’s an ultra-conservative, evangelical billionaire who apparently funded—from what I read online—the anti-gay campaigns in Colorado and California. I don’t want to lie about him if this is not true, but it’s in his Wikipedia. Maybe Wikipedia is wrong, but he’s alleged to have done these things. But this is very interesting backing for a movie that claims to be from a liberal director and producer of Al Gore’s Inconvenient Truth. This is a movie about privatizing our public schools and he was unable to find it in his framing of the discussion, to show a single successful public school. Maybe that’s because he himself, went to Sidwell Friends. Many of the people bashing public schools, I discovered, went to elite private schools like Deerfield Academy, Exeter, Andover, and I guess they’ve always had contempt for public education and now they are making a move to take it over and privatize it. I find this very scary.

**WSS:** Many of us who do educational research, we’ve known for a decade that the data on charter schools do not look very good and there are all these failures of schools. My problem with it over the years is that, ok, we’re trying to make things better for students, but what happens when they’re in a failed school? What are we saddling them with then?

**DR:** You really have to ask yourself as you use the term “failed school.” I know that President Obama, when they were talking about Central Falls High School in Rhode Island, called it a ‘failing school.’ He called it a failing school because they were low test scores. Now there were other schools in Rhode Island that had even lower test scores that were not being closed, but the superintendent in Rhode Island made her reputation because she said she was going to close down the entire school and fire the entire staff. But the reason the test scores were low is because they were enrolling kids who arrived 2, 3 grade levels behind, it was enrolling kids who didn’t speak English, and those kids needed specific kinds of resources and help. Closing their school is not going to make them read better. It didn’t address any of the problems that the students had, and many of what the film Waiting for Superman identified as “dropout factories” were schools that have extraordinary numbers of special needs children, non-English speaking children, and homeless children. I mean, I’ve seen this in NYC where the Department of Education opens small schools, but small schools take very few numbers of the most challenging students and then the most challenging students — those with special needs and non-English speakers — are then
unceremoniously shifted into a large high school, which then plummets and becomes a failing
school or a failure factory. But closing it doesn’t address the needs of the children.

WSS: But then again, if it’s not meeting the needs, you have to do something.

DR: Right, but closing the school doesn’t make the school a better school. And this is Arne
Duncan’s strategy in Chicago: closing schools, opening charters. The studies that have been done
in Chicago have shown that it doesn’t benefit the kids. There was a lot of activity and push for a
program called Renaissance 2010. It’s 2010. No one thinks that Chicago is a paradigm that the
rest of the country should emulate.

WSS: During the Clinton administration, Clinton pushed for voluntary national standards and
testing, which of course, a lot of the Republican governors said not in our territory. But when Bush
came in and got No Child through, it mandated this. I think there was a lot of plus out of No Child, but
it obviously launched us into a new era of accountability and testing. Now, you’ve discussed this quite
extensively in recent articles and in your book. As a matter of fact, on page 226 you say, “Our schools
will not improve if we rely exclusively on tests as the means of deciding the fate of students, teacher,
principals, and schools.” Part of it, surely is getting everyone to agree on what is testable, because we
really have 50-plus systems of education in this country. How do we even get to this accountability
issue? How are going to agree on who gets tested? For reportability and any other reason?

DR: I think that to begin with, we don’t have any accountability now. I think what we have is
massive national fraud. And my entire Chapter 8 about accountability is intended to show that
NCLB incentivized teaching to bad tests, narrowing the curriculum so the kids are not getting a
good education. They’re just getting, especially in the poorest low-income neighborhoods, what
they’re getting is a focus on test taking. And all these things done in the test taking industry is not
improving [children’s] education. It’s narrowing their education because there’s less time for the
arts, which are dropped very quickly, and sciences, and history, geography, and civics, literature,
foreign languages. All those things go by the board; even physical education and recess get cut
back on so there’s more time for testing. And then what was discovered eventually, as it recently
turned up in Illinois and also New York State is that state education officials play with the
numbers. They’ve got these four rankings that the federal law requires them to rank in levels 1, 2,
3, 4, or they can emulate the NAEP rankings and call it Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below
Basic. But the scores don’t mean anything because they can move the cut scores around and in
NY State they dropped the cut score when they started the state testing for NCLB in 2006. The passing mark dropped at each level; it went down, down, down, and the scores turned out to be meaningless. So we had no accountability, what we had was institutionalized fraud. There’s no accountability now.

**WSS:** *In the last year, and mostly the last six months, we’ve heard a whole lot about the Common Core Standards that the states are adopting, partially because of Race to the Top (RTTT). What are your thoughts on [adopting the Common Core Standards] as a process? Does that push us in the right direction?*

**DR:** I always, for many years, have advocated that we should have national curriculum standards, so my view of the Common Core Standards is that right now it works on paper. We don’t know if they’re good – they may be wonderful or they may be terrible. But RTTT was used to compel, —really to force—states to adopt them without any trial whatsoever. When I met with people in the White House last June and they asked me about Common Core Standards, I said they were good on paper. I don’t know if they’re good or not, but I told them to field test it. This is what you do with standards. If you were the FDA you wouldn’t mandate that everybody take a particular drug until it has been field tested. And states that adopt new standards, you generally send them out to the field, get corrections on them, you try them out in a few places, you learn over trial and error that some parts of them work very badly and some parts of them work very well. And then when it gets field tested and all the bugs are out of it, then you can go to the states and say, “If you want federal funding, this is what you must adopt.” But they just pushed this right out the door with no field testing whatsoever, and I think that it was wrong to do that.

**WSS:** *In the final chapter of your book, you write:*

> “What, then, can we do to improve schools and education – plenty. If we want to improve education, we must first of all, have a vision of what good education is. We should have goals that are worth striving for. Everyone involved in educating children should ask themselves why we educate. What is the wealth of an educated person? What knowledge is the most worth? What do we hope for when we send our children to school? What do we want them to learn and accomplish by the time they graduate from school?”*
Those are wonderful questions to have, in a country where Kansas and Texas want to play with the curriculum, and biology, and history, and what appears to be in our ability to politicize just about anything. How do we possibly get to an agreement on what education is and for what purpose?

DR: Well, I would start by saying that if you don’t ask yourself those questions, then you shouldn’t even be in the business. What we have now are educational goals that have been shaped by people with green-eye shapes, who are economists and accountants and number-crunchers who have absolutely no concern for something that isn’t tested and who will say at the drop of a hat that “if it can’t be measured, it’s unimportant.” And there are a lot of things that happen in schools and should happen in schools that can’t be measured, but that are way more important than what is measured. Our measurements right now are very inadequate. We have evolved a standardized testing industry that basically punishes divergent thinking. If the things that are most important in education in the 21st Century are original thinking, creativity, divergent thinking, the ability to see beyond limited alternatives and imagine something that is not presented, then we’re punishing exactly what we should be striving for. So without the ability to ask important questions nothing that we do will be worthwhile. It doesn’t bother me particularly that states have different points of view in what to include or exclude in history. It’s unfortunate that people would argue over basic stuff. Fundamentally though, in this country we already have a national curriculum. You can pick up any commercial textbook in US History, put it on the table, take the cover off, and I defy you to tell the difference between what they’re teaching. They’re all teaching about the key events, and controversies, and personalities in American history. There is not a dime’s worth of difference between them. I had the unfortunate experience of having to wave through all of those textbooks, both the World history textbooks and the US History textbooks, and the Literature textbooks. And there is very little variation from one to the other.

There is a national curriculum. That’s why we’re able to have the National Assessment of Educational Progress, because there is fundamentally a curriculum that presupposes that it can be tested. It can be tested at a national level, and then when students participate in the national assessment, it’s understood that there are certain concepts and skills, and science, and mathematics that students at different grade levels are exposed to. So the basics of a national curriculum exist. What I’ve always argued though, about a national curriculum is that it should not consume more than 50 percent of any school day. I would hate to see it limited to reading and math. I would like to see, if you can’t have a national curriculum—which as I said we already have anyway between the tests and the textbooks—certainly, every school in the country should have the arts and every school should have the sciences.
If you had all the money in the world and could send your child to the best school in the world, be it private, public, or religious, what would you want your child to be exposed to? What would you want the education to consist of? Maybe it will look like Sidwell Friends, where President Obama sends his children. Or maybe it will look like some of the great private and some of the great public schools. It will certainly include the arts and science, and history, and literature, and geography, and civics, and foreign languages. All of these things would be there, that’s what a good education is. And yet when I met with the folks at the White House last June, and said since you guys love putting out mandates, why don’t you require that every school receiving federal funding has a full curriculum. Don’t say what should be in it, just list those topics. Any school that doesn’t have the arts available to every child, every year, is not qualified to receive federal funding. And they said we can’t do that. We can do merit pay, which has no basis in research, we can do anything that involves competition, like testing, but we can’t require that schools teach the arts. Even if you leave the schools to try and define what the arts are.

WSS: But you also mention that curriculum isn’t a silver bullet, sort of like Alice in Wonderland, you don’t know where you’re going or the road that will get you there, but we know a lot of this, it is about communities, about parenting. It’s the life outside of the schools. We know that that’s a huge part of changing directions, especially for students who come from the lower rung of the economic ladder, but how do we begin to alter that?

DR: You know the other thing that has gone unmentioned in the popular dialogue, or at least what we hear up here in the blogosphere and everywhere else, is the influence of popular culture. It’s my hunch that for many children, popular culture is far more powerful than what happens in school. But how do we go about changing it? I think that first of all, we need honesty. We need honesty, transparency, accountability. We need to stop blaming teachers. I think we’re right now in the midst of a public discussion that is going to be absolutely harmful for schooling. I have met many teachers who said to me that they’re National Board Certified; that they’re among the highest-rated teachers in their district and they’ve had it. They’re quitting. They just feel that all of their efforts, for what is actually very little pay compared to the kind of guys who are surrounding David Guggenheim, that they go not only unrecognized, but that they get belittled because they’re teachers and teachers are blamed for all this. So we’re going to lose a lot of great teachers, we’re going to lose a lot of good teachers, and you have to wonder about who is going to want to be a teacher given this very hostile atmosphere that had been created by the film Waiting
for Superman, as well as by the very negative statements that have come out like the manifesto that was in the Washington Post.

So I think, with innocence, that we start by stopping. We start by talking about thanking our teachers, appreciating them, and recognizing that most of them are doing the hard work of society that the rest of us can’t do or won’t do. When I was in Houston last weekend, I spoke to an audience that was attended mainly by Teach For America (TFA) and KIPP. They had a TFA in Houston say to me, “How do we get our best and brightest to teach?,” and my response was that in Texas State, the Texas average teacher salary is somewhere around in the upper 50s after 20 years. And I said to him, do you know how many graduates of Harvard, Yale and Princeton who will teach, come into a profession and teach for 20 years hoping to make $58,000 a year? And he didn’t. He acknowledged that given the low pay, you have to appeal solely to idealism and I don’t know how many idealistic people there are who are willing to say, “I have an elite education, I’m in the top 20 percent of my class and I don’t care about money.” Well, that’s a small number. So I think that to change, we have to stop beating up on teachers, we have to start recognizing how hard it is to teach. I think that we have to hold up this kind of guiding philosophy, something that John Dewey wrote in School and Society. He said it was the best and wisest a parent wants for his child, is what we should want for all the children in the community, anything less than that is unlovely and destroys our democracy.

WSS: I spent 7 years in the trenches in middle school 5 in Canada and 2 in Virginia. Teaching is certainly one of the toughest professions and one of the more underpaid professions. Let’s go to a couple of the questions. Andrew asked this question: “Diane, your book was published some 6 months ago. If you were to update it, say for the paperback edition, how would you characterize the intervening months?”

DR: That’s a great question. If I were to update it, there’d be two things I would add in. One is that I would love to have had the material about the complete explosion of the test score bubble in New York State, where the scores went up, and up, and up. At the point that I concluded the book about a year ago, everybody was still on a high claiming that the scores were nearing 100 percent proficiency. In June 2010, the State Commission of Education acknowledged that there had been tremendous grade inflation and he just stuck a pin in the balloon and it would have changed my writing of certainly Chapter 5 about NYC, but also Chapter 8 showing how accountability in this country has become a massive fraud and there is no accountability. There’s just a kind of fraudulent pretense of accountability.
The other thing that I would love to put in to an update is about the Billionaire Boys’ Club. I would add in the Democrats for Education Reform. I did not realize at the time I closed the book, that so many Wall Street hedge fund managers had made charter schools their abiding passion. And since the book was finished, there have been three articles in the New York Times about the love affair between the billionaire hedge fund managers and the charter sector. So, I would have expanded that chapter. And what has happened in the meanwhile since the book came out, I think that things have gotten far worse. Arne Duncan has continued to promote policies that are in opposition to what is well established in research, on things like merit pay, and closing schools, and charter schools. And you know, we just need some honesty, transparency, and we need to have people at the federal Department of Education who recognize that what they’re doing is what [they] want to do, not what research tells us. I think things have gotten worse, I think Waiting for Superman has been just an immense demoralization for the nation’s teachers and if we keep kicking our educators around, we’re not going to get better schools. We’re going to get worse schools.

WSS: Let’s touch on RTTT for a minute. Natalie writes that her state has won RTTT funding and she would like to encourage her district to turn down the funding because of all the strings attached. Now, the governor of Virginia has said that he wouldn’t accept any funding, which is why they didn’t put together a proposal for it. Similarly, Former Governor George Allen of Virginia refused funding for America Goals 2000, which started with Bush and then Clinton. Now you said at Old Dominion University that you wish that more states would follow Virginia’s lead. Would you please expand on that?

DR: Sure. I know that Virginia did not apply for RTTT funding and some other states did not as well, mainly because they were concerned about federal control, which I think is a realistic concern. The problem with RTTT is that every part of it has no basis on research. There is nothing in RTTT that has been validated. It will involve creating more charter schools, which has no basis in research because as I said, only 1 out of 6 might be better than the neighborhood public school, and that most of them will be worse. It encourages states to have merit pay, it encourages—and I think requires—states to evaluate teachers in changes in their students’ test scores, and there has been study after study that has shown that it is not a valid way to evaluate teachers. It has very high error rates and lots of lots of negative consequences and it’s just a good way, again, to demoralize teachers because they know that they are not solely responsible for changes in the students’ tests scores. So, if you look at every part of what RTTT requires, it
requires you to do things that have no basis in research and that are not going to make your schools better, and will have a lot of negative consequences. The other day I was at a meeting in Long Island, NY, and I was talking to a group superintendents and Social Studies teachers, and one of the superintendents got up and said, “Well, if we want RTTT funding we’re going to get $24,000 in my district, but it’s going to cost us way more than $24,000 to comply with the requirements. So, exactly, what is the advantage of winning RTTT funding?”

WSS: Well, you’re doing a great job of leading to the next question. Sally asked, “Would you please comment on the move toward value-added teacher evaluation?”

DR: I was part of the group that’s behind a statement published by the Economic Policy Institute called, Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers. Aside from myself—I’m not a leading testing expert, I’m a historian—everybody else who signed it is one of the nation’s leading testing experts or people who lead national test organizations of one kind or another, and they said that this is a very error-ridden exercise. There have been studies, and the most recent one is by Sean Corcoran of New York University. He found that looking at the Houston value-added system, which is called ASPIRE and also at the New York City system—and NYC is about to release its value-added tables with names of teachers—he said that the margin of error on both of these approaches, in both Houston and NYC, are huge. And that a teacher might be ranked at the 43 percentile according to the NYC methodology or actually be at the 15th percentile or she could also be at the 71st percentile. Any of those statements would be true because the margin of error is so huge, so many effective teachers will be labeled ineffective and many ineffective teachers will be labeled effective. It’s a ridiculous system and the main result of it will be to demoralize teachers because most of them will be mislabeled.

The other thing about the value-added assessment is that it’s highly unstable in so that a teacher who one year is considered at the top quintile may, in the next year be in the middle quintile or even fall to the bottom. There’s a lot of movement because the value-added ratings will depend not so much on your own efforts as on who gets assigned to your class. We have non-random assignment of students to teachers and so one year you’ll have a terrific class – everybody is working hard – and the next year you may have a difficult class with some disruptive students, so your value-added scores drop and you’re a bad teacher. Now, the fact that there was a teacher in Los Angeles who committed suicide and his family said that it was because the Los Angeles Times published his value-added ratings and said that he was a less-effective teacher, that should have something to do with this discussion because, you know, maybe he was going to commit
suicide anyway, maybe he wasn’t. His principal said he was one of the most effective teachers in the building, but the Los Angeles Times printed a database showing him as a less-effective teacher. That was wrong. I thought it was a policy of “naming and shaming” and maybe what we should do to counteract this singling out of teachers for naming and shaming is publish value-added rankings for every single person who does any sort of service work. Not just the public sector but the private sector as well. I think we’re going overboard and we’re not improving education with this kind of misuse of data.

**WSS:** Here’s a question from Megan, “I can completely identify with your statement about certain public schools being able to choose their students. This is also the case in my region, and I refer to it as a two-tier system of public education. This is morally reprehensible and borders illegal. But how do we address this on a large scale?”

**DR:** There are public schools that are, by admission only, for gifted and talented kids and academically-advanced kids. There are usually a few minorities, in most districts there are very few of them. What we see happening in a district like New Orleans, where the public school system is wiped out, is that 65 percent of the kids are in privately-managed schools, and what remains of the kids—the other 35 percent of the kids—those are losers and most of them are in what’s left of the old public school system. And they’re not just losers because they’re not in a charter school, but charter schools don’t want them. If there’s a kid who can’t pass the state test—and well over 80 percent of them fail the state test—the charters don’t want those expensive, hard-to-educate kids. That’s where we’ll be heading, not that they have a district with a few admissions tests for gifted kids, but a district that’s a two-tier system altogether: one tier for the privately-managed charters and the remaining tier for the cast offs. That’s not public education.

**WSS:** David writes this, “People are selecting statistics to support their opinion, especially conservative Tea Party members. It is difficult for President Obama and democrats to counter false data when is out there. It seems that Twain’s idea of ‘lies, damn lies, and statistics’ is really applicable. How can we cut through the false narratives out there? It seems impossible.

**DR:** A lot of people are putting out false narratives and I think that the biggest false narrative is narratives of failure. Our public school system has tremendous diversity; it has to accept everybody, it has to accept, by law, kids that arrive from another country and don’t speak English, and they drag the scores down. Right now, I would wish we could be less data-driven and more
education-driven. More driven to make sure that every child receives the best education we know how to provide and stop using data, which is easily manipulated and lies, damn lies, and statistics, to just beat up on the schools. To me, one of the more interesting pieces of data, if you want to call it that, or at least information, came from the most recent Gallup poll by Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup. It said that the public is overwhelmingly disappointed in American public education. I think it got an approval rating of 18 percent. But when asked, “How do you feel about your own school, the one your own child goes to,” 77 percent gave their own public school an A or a B. That’s the highest rating of approval that has ever been recorded since that question was first asked in 1995 and it got 77 percent saying, “Well, we like our own public school, we’re just disappointed with American public education.” I think that’s because right now, we live in a moment of insanity where everybody is an education expert. We have entertainers who probably didn’t get a good education themselves, declaiming about what needs to be done to fix the schools and I would say that anybody who has a strong opinion about how to fix the schools should be sentenced to teach for at least six months.

WSS: Sally wants to know what you think of the current positioning of postsecondary education as workforce development.

DR: I think that this is a good question because we are in the process in this country of destroying anything that might have once been recognized as a liberal arts education. There are states like California, where many courses that don’t have any economic pay off are being squeezed out in higher education because of the budget crunch. The first things to go are philosophy, and then foreign languages. Certainly ancient languages are gone. Then goes modern languages, and then goes literature and, you know, this is not good education. I think right now what we see, even with President Obama, he says the purpose of schooling is to get into college or get a job. Well, that’s not just the purpose of schooling. I would like to see him use some of his famous eloquence to talk about the civic purpose of schooling, to talk about the aesthetic purpose of schooling, to talk about the personal, and civic, and social goals, the democratic goals. How we’re creating a society through our schooling, not just future workers.

WSS: Andrea asks, “As an urban educator, I have seen and heard of many situations in which teachers either choose to or are threatened with blackmail to influence their students’ test answers or curb them all together. How do we encourage those in charge, that is, politicians and various administrators, to address this massive fraud in our schools and return to our definition of education to involve learning?”
DR: I understand the question because one of the predictable consequences of high stakes testing, and I confess that I didn’t know this, and I know it now and I wish that more people understood it; one of the predictable consequences of high-stakes testing is cheating. When I spoke last spring at Harvard, Dan Koretz, who is a great testing expert, asked, “Why didn’t you know this?” I know this now, we see cheating scandals going on all over the country, we see this because the federal law says that if your scores don’t go up every year, and if everyone doesn’t reach proficiency by the year 2014, your school may be closed. If you get good results, you’re going to get money. These are high stakes. When you attach sanctions and rewards to test scores, there will be cheating. People will cheat to keep their jobs, people will cheat to get the rewards that other people would otherwise get. I think it’s good to have tests, by the way, I’m not against tests. It’s just that tests should be used for diagnostic purposes. They should be used to help kids do better, to help teachers do better. They should not be used for punitive purposes or to hand our rewards and that’s where the tests themselves become corrupted. And, you know, this is obvious by now.

WSS: Lauren asks, “Are any evaluations or accountability reports able to document the charter schools’ dumping of students that you discussed earlier?”

DR: I’m not sure. I know lots and lots of anecdotes. I don’t know that anyone has actually gathered the information. I’ve heard it, as I said, from superintendents, I’ve heard it from principals, and I think that if anybody is planning on doing dissertation research or a study, this would be a good topic. I think that the one way to document it would be to look at the tremendous attrition rates in the most successful charters. Whenever the media celebrates a miracle charter, the one thing that they ought to be required to do is look at the attrition rates. One of them was Urban Prep Charter Academy for Men in Chicago, which got lots of national attention because all of its 107 graduates were headed off to a four-year college. But the scores in the school were no different from the average Chicago scores, so I’m not sure why they were more successful at getting their kids to go to college. And they had a huge attrition rate. The number of kids who started versus the number of kids who finished was very, very different. The same thing, from what I’ve been told, is that SEEDS has a large attrition rate. The study of KIPP in the Bay area in San Francisco shows that over a three-year period they lost 60 percent of their students and didn’t replace them. Again, all of this is out there in bits and pieces. I hope that some enterprising journalist will put it together.
WSS: And our last question comes from Paul. He asks, “How do you feel about the Department of Education’s efforts to develop a national database that’s basically from cradle to career?”

DR: I am worried about misuse of data, because unfortunately, the Department of Education takes the test scores at face-value. And they also have this almost theological belief that you can tie the scores of students to teachers and then fire the teachers. I think that given how many misguided conceptions they have, they believe that merit pay works, in fact, they’re in the process now of handing out over a billion dollars for merit pay even, though the research shows that it doesn’t work and that it incentivizes cheating and it incentivizes narrowing the curriculum. Given all of their bad ideas and their insistence on pushing them through in the face of contrary research, I do not trust the development of a national database of students and teachers.

– end –