

A Voice of the “Resistance,” Breathless and Crude

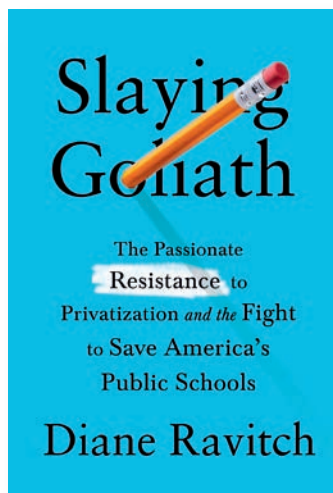
**Slaying Goliath:
The Passionate Resistance to
Privatization and the Fight to
Save America’s Public Schools**
By Diane Ravitch

Knopf, 2020, \$27.95, 352 pages.

As reviewed by Frederick M. Hess

DIANE RAVITCH’S NEW BOOK, *Slaying Goliath*, is the third installment of her “I Was Such a Fool” trilogy. Ravitch, for decades a prominent advocate for testing, school choice, and reform, had a conversion experience in the mid-aughts. She emerged an ardent leader of what she terms here “The Resistance,” bent on defending public education from the so-called “privatizers” and the philanthropists who fund them. Like many a convert before her, Ravitch seems to have emerged a zealot. It’s odd, given that Ravitch made her name as an historian attuned to the complexities and contradictions of education.

In this new volume, Ravitch has instead opted for long-form pamphleteering. She describes dark forces bent on destroying America’s public schools. She also depicts a selfless “Resistance” that’s opposed them. It’s all a cartoonish muddle, as Bill Gates, the Walton family, Michelle Rhee, Arne Duncan, Democrats for Education Reform, Jeb Bush, Barack Obama, Eli Broad, Betsy DeVos, and their “Corporate Disrupter” allies devote themselves to “cutting taxes, cutting spending on public schools, and turning control of public schools over to private corporations.” Why would Obama, Gates, or Bush do this? Ravitch reports that it’s because “they are masters of chaos, which they inflict on other people’s children, without a twinge of remorse. . . . They don’t like public control. They like to close public schools.” If this seems like a case of depicting a vast grab-bag of people



and organizations as mustache-twirling villains, you’ve got the idea.

Ravitch’s tale is how this evil cabal has been bested, David-and-Goliath-style, by a “Resistance” of “teachers, parents, students, parents or grandparents of students, graduates of public schools, scholars,” and more. Some of Ravitch’s villains are also parents, grandparents, or graduates of public schools, but that is not a subtlety she explores in any detail. In her telling, the teachers’ unions are frail collectives of educators while “reformer” groups are nothing more than fronts for a shadowy cabal of billionaires.

The frustrating thing is that this is a book I’d like to like. I too have been critical of aspects of No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, test-based teacher evaluation, the Common Core, big philanthropy, and school choice. Ravitch, alas, eschews careful critique for ad hominem attack. It’s laughable, for instance, for Ravitch to assert that the reformers she attacks are “indifferent to poverty and racial segregation.” In my experience, the reformers are actually *obsessed* with poverty and race.

One big problem is that Ravitch’s account lacks a sense of proportion. The book is a hash of major developments,

tiny events, and massive philanthropic investments falling flat, all described in high dudgeon and without any real sense of scale or significance. So, teachers refusing to administer the zero-stakes MAP assessment in 2013 at Seattle’s Garfield High School is a breathless five-page narrative dotted with speeches, tales of support from the PTA and student government, and supporters sending the teachers pizzas and flowers. Eventually, Seattle high schools (but not K–8 schools) were permitted to treat the diagnostic assessment (not the state test) as optional for 2013–14. Yet, *Slaying Goliath*, published this year, makes no mention of what happened over the next half-decade. How significant was all this? What did it ultimately amount to? The reader is left to guess, with none of the six footnotes more recent than 2014.

The book is heavy on conspiratorial dogma and lists, lots and lots of lists. In a typical turn, Ravitch asserts that “the radical right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is the key organization in the world of Disruption advocacy.” She reports that ALEC’s members include “such major corporations as AT&T, Altria, Amazon, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Boeing, Ford, General Electric, Home Depot, IBM, McDonald’s,” and so forth, proceeding in order through the whole alphabetical list. It’s hard to capture just how tedious this all gets. Ravitch’s paeans to the “Resistance” are similarly wooden, reading like an intern went wild cutting-and-pasting from Wikipedia.

In the 1990s and early aughts, there was a cottage industry in salacious books that would hopscotch through a litany of lurid atrocities to show that public education was broken. One can read *Slaying Goliath* as a tribute to that genre. In Arizona, Ravitch reports, a former superintendent started the

Grand Canyon Institute to study charter schools and wrote that “the finances of the schools were rigged in 77 percent of the charters that he studied.” In California, she writes, one acclaimed school leader “quietly . . . replaced almost all the American Indian students with Asian American students. He kept the students who were most compliant and most likely to earn high test scores.” In Michigan, the state “became a playground for the charter industry, thanks in large part to the billionaire DeVos family.” The presentation is heavy on “Resistance”-aligned muckraking, by partisan groups like the Center for Popular Democracy or the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, without much serious documentation.

Sometimes, the prose gets so purple that it’s funny. At one point, Ravitch starts lauding the noble “reformers of old.” It used to be, she asserts, that reformers “wanted to make public schools better.” She reports that, “before the current era, true reformers wanted” public schools to “have more resources,” “better prepared teachers,” “better curriculum,” “modern buildings,” “libraries,” “up-to-date technology,” and so on. Now, Ravitch insists, the new reformers just want to “break things.” She accuses them of taking pride in disrupting others people’s lives.

One could go on at length about how Ravitch addresses research. When it comes to New Orleans, charter schooling, school vouchers, teacher evaluation, and all the rest, Ravitch plays it fast and loose. She cherry-picks studies, pooh-poohs or ignores positive findings, treats negative findings as dispositive, inaccurately describes bodies of research on questions like class size and school vouchers, and accepts dubious claims as gospel when it’s convenient. At one point, Ravitch brings up the influential 2011 Raj Chetty, John Friedman, and Jonah Rockoff study (See “Great Teaching,” *research*, Summer 2012) that found that teachers who raise student test scores in elementary and middle school have a sizable impact on their students’ lifetime earnings. After noting the study’s impact,

Ravitch laments the lack of attention paid to a “refutation” by Columbia University economist Moshe Adler. In Ravitch’s telling, Adler’s critique implies that the authors manipulated their numbers, potentially suggesting that there was either no impact on earnings or that it was 1/25th as large as reported. Is Adler’s critique convincing? Damning? Ravitch doesn’t much seem to care. She mentions his charges in a single paragraph, makes no effort to explain or adjudicate them, or to consider the response by Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff, and then is back in the next paragraph to attacking Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee, and Arne Duncan.

Ravitch’s diatribe already feels a bit stale. Many of these debates have morphed in ways that are never really addressed. Some of Ravitch’s bêtes noires, like teacher evaluation and No Child Left Behind, are dead letters. Others, like for-profit charter schooling and the Common Core, have had a rough go of it.

Meanwhile, Ravitch makes all manner of curious claims, such as the assertion that schools that enroll voucher students “typically” rely upon “textbooks that teach Bible-based religious doctrine in place of modern science or history.”

Slaying Goliath is a lost opportunity, an account that’s both confused and confusing. The author makes no effort to offer a coherent history or analysis of the past decade. Even as Ravitch crows about “slaying Goliath,” she seems unaware that education philanthropy and the “reform” community have largely abandoned “No

Excuses” schools, testing, the Common Core, and teacher evaluation in favor of “restorative justice,” early childhood education, and social and emotional learning. Whatever one thinks of the shift, it’s disconcerting that Ravitch doesn’t seem to recognize it. The only change she seems to see is that, after all that’s transpired, the teacher-hating “Disrupters” have pivoted to “personalized learning” in order to “replace teachers with computers.”

It may be that Ravitch’s voice was ideally suited to the 2010s. It was, as end-of-the-decade accounts have noted, an era marked by distrust, polarization, conspiracy theories, and an erosion of empathy. That pretty much sums up *Slaying Goliath*.

As the calendar turns to the 2020s, Ravitch’s diatribe already feels a bit stale. Many of these debates have morphed in ways that are never really addressed. Some of Ravitch’s bêtes noires, like teacher evaluation and No Child Left Behind, are dead letters. Others, like for-profit charter schooling and the Common Core, have had a rough go of it. Newer funders like the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and the Emerson Collective have shown little enthusiasm for the old Bush-Obama agenda, while big foundations like Gates and Walton are eschewing national strategies for more localized efforts. One can scour the whole of *Slaying Goliath* and never really get a sense of what’s changed, or why. Ravitch’s latest is in many ways a crude snapshot of an age that’s already behind us.

After a decade of academic stagnation and the unraveling of what was once a bipartisan reform coalition, it seems like a good time for a reset. That effort would benefit mightily from a thoughtful history of why two decades of reform have disappointed. For that volume, I’m afraid, we’re still waiting.

Frederick M. Hess is director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute and an executive editor of Education Next.