

# The Progressive School Reform Voices Crying in the Wilderness

*Profiles of the courageous few on the left who championed choice  
read today like ancient history*

By ANDY SMARICK

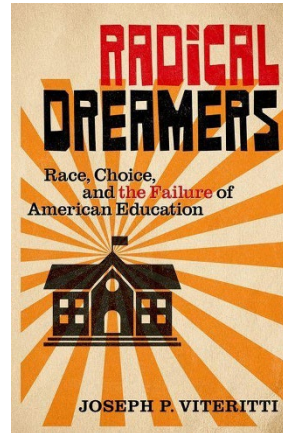


*The radical dreamers (clockwise from top left): Ronald Edmonds, Jack Coons, Diane Ravitch, and Howard Fuller.*

**L**AST SUMMER I TAUGHT a graduate-level education policy course. During a discussion of the achievement gap, I referenced a provision in the No Child Left Behind Act. The students stared blankly. It was late in the day, so I thought the problem was that statutory language can be a sedative. I spiced things up by referencing *Lean on Me* and *Stand and Deliver*, two education-related Hollywood films that energized the accountability movement. Again, stony faces.

The students noticed my confusion. One asked sheepishly, “*Stand and what?*” Then it occurred to me: None of these students had even been born when Congress was debating NCLB in 2001. In fact, for the students born in 2003, *Stand and Deliver* (1988) is as distant as the black-and-white *The Hustler* (1961) is for me.

I realized my two-fold challenge. I had to explain policy history *and* show why it was relevant today. My students, after all, were shaped by the battles over Common Core, Covid, online learning, and the value of four-year degrees. The education news they consumed focused on DEI and AI. My touchstones—*A Nation At Risk*, the Charlottesville Summit, adequate yearly progress, ESEA waivers, Race to the Top—were not theirs. I had to work overtime to make them care about things from my era that I had assumed to be definitive.



**Radical Dreamers:  
Race, Choice, and  
the Failure of  
American Education**

by Joseph P. Viteritti

Oxford University Press,  
2025, \$25.95, 288 pages

This is also the challenge faced by Joseph Viteritti in his new book, *Radical Dreamers: Race, Choice, and the Failure of American Education*. There is already a mountain of monographs on race and schooling. But Viteritti's hill is even steeper: He aims to revive the left's dying support for school choice by recounting the thinking of four primary figures who were born between 1929 and 1941 and whose intellectual contributions came mainly in the late 1960s through the early 1990s. The book's supporting cast of five or ten other individuals are creatures of the same bygone era. If that's not enough, most of the characters are far from household names, one (Diane Ravitch) has renounced most of the positions the author supports, and another (Derrick Bell) was a force behind arguably the most polarizing education topic of our time (critical race theory).

But if anyone deserves the chance to climb this hill, it's Viteritti, an accomplished scholar of education history, policy, and law who also worked in several big-city school systems. His writing influenced my own arguments about replacing urban districts. Such was my respect for his work that I invited him to present at a charter school gathering I organized in 2005 and a White House convening on urban faith-based schools that I shepherded in 2008.

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Viteritti is a man of the left. He makes this clear in his asides about abortion, Donald Trump, income inequality, LGBTQ issues, and the Roberts Court. As he writes in the preface, "If you want to read a story that validates the essential components of critical race theory, stick with this one." His four primary characters—Ravitch, Ron Edmonds, Jack Coons, and Howard Fuller—are of the left as well. Though the author's motivation is familiar (frustration at America's inability to significantly improve education outcomes among disadvantaged kids), his policy focus is unusual, at least nowadays. He wants a narrow form of school choice, one directed at only the most in-need families. Unfortunately, America's left largely opposes private-school choice and has shown little interest in charter schools as a vehicle to create new options for urban students. And the right wants to significantly expand universal choice, supporting policies that enable all families to access a vast array of options.

As a person of the right, I don't think *Radical Dreamers* will convince many conservatives. Nor do I think many progressives will sign on. Animus toward school choice on the left is now *de rigueur*, despite ongoing efforts by groups like Democrats for Education Reform to shift their party's stance. But I suppose there could be a revival among progressives of New Deal-era or Catholic-social-teaching liberalism that

understands faith as a valuable contributor to efforts to help the poor. Or perhaps the left's new abundance movement will come to see opposition to choice as another of the New Left's unwise commitments that thwart opportunity and equality. Only time will tell on these scores.

Though *Radical Dreamers* is a solid work of contemporary policy history, it often reads as an apologia or memoir. It is an extended explanation, using Viteritti's own career for storytelling purposes, of why the author's ideology led him to adopt and retain his unpopular but principled views on school choice.

So while it may not be effective advocacy, *Radical Dreamers* is an often compelling chronicle of strong-willed, independent-minded progressives interested in K–12 schooling during the second half of the 20th century. These thinkers and doers, working in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*, looked beyond the contemporaneous battles over bussing and funding formulas. Though the four primary figures and the cast of supporting actors had very different backgrounds and priorities, they largely agreed on the importance of creating effective schools and empowering families. That led many of them to a shared appreciation of choice. Their non-tribal approach should serve as an example for today's researchers and policy practitioners. As Viteritti writes, "A common characteristic shared by all the principal actors is a painful honesty that drives people like them to tell others what they do not want to hear regardless of the consequences."

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Viteritti begins with his 1978 arrival in the chancellor's office of the New York City Public Schools. From there, the book tracks how a variety of influences shaped the author's scholarship and policy work. Ronald Edmonds, famous for the "effective schools movement," was serving as deputy chancellor at that time and became his "unofficial tutor." Edmonds helped Viteritti develop a model for understanding school politics that carries throughout this book. It's built on the difference between clients and constituents. The former are the families and students a system serves; the latter are the powerful individuals and groups to which the system's leaders are actually accountable. Part of the appeal of school choice, in the author's view, is that it turns clients into constituents.

Edmonds—and the prospects of choice—had a major influence on Viteritti because of the growing consensus in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to studies by James Coleman and Christopher Jencks, that schools could only do so much. Outside-of-school factors largely determined kids' futures. Because of Viteritti's knowledge of this academic literature, he was drawn to Edmonds's research on schools that work for the disadvantaged. The book's funniest passage recounts Edmonds's grudging inclusion of texts he detested on a reading list he distributed to staff in the chancellor's office. Viteritti wanted the list to be balanced, and Edmonds obliged while insulting the works via annotations. The reader will understand when the author writes, "Ron could come off as opinionated because he was. He was articulate and erudite and wanted you to know it."

I learned the most from the chapter on Jack Coons, a law professor at UC Berkeley, whom Viteritti credits with convincing him of the progressive approach to choice. Though Coons is mostly known for his work on school finance, he organized a group of academics and advocates on the left to fight for choice. The chapter includes enlightening discussions of how Coons's work intersected with Coleman's, his role in *Serrano v. Priest* (the landmark 1971 California school-funding case), and his ongoing debate with Milton

Friedman about why school choice is valuable and how it should be brought to life. Though I prefer Friedman's take to Coons's, I agree wholeheartedly with Viteritti's view that "a parent's lack of discretion over the education of a child, in a larger systemic context where others can exercise it, reinforces a sense of powerlessness among the unrich."

If anything in the book will convince today's progressives to embrace school choice, it's probably the two chapters dedicated to Howard Fuller. They are full of gripping stories from Fuller's remarkable career dedicated to empowering the underserved. That section begins by declaring, "Howard Fuller shares Derrick Bell's conviction that American society is incurably racist" and "Fuller's career is a living exhibit of critical theory." The reader will learn of Fuller's upbringing in the Deep South and upper Midwest, his early civil rights work, his role in creating Malcolm X Liberation University, his superintendency of Milwaukee's schools, his founding of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, and more.



*Joseph P. Viteritti*

Though some on the left still caricature school choice as a nefarious effort by the rich and connected to destroy public education, Fuller's career—consistent with Viteritti's view—demonstrates that support for choice can grow from a sense that those without means gain power and influence when they can control education decisions. This agency includes starting schools, running schools, directing school dollars, choosing schools, and holding schools accountable, and it leads to a new, dynamic, pluralist system that better serves the marginalized. As Viteritti describes Fuller's view, "His approach was a complete rejection of the 'One Best System' common school model we inherited from the 19th-century Taylorists, those same reformers who had deemed the factory to be an optimal workplace."

In my view, the most memorable part of the book are the pages dedicated to Diane Ravitch. The author and Ravitch had a productive scholarly partnership in the 1990s. Viteritti appreciated Ravitch's work on high standards, accountability, and choice and admired her independence of mind. They collaborated on a number of projects and both supported vouchers for disadvantaged students. "We proposed that all students who attend a school targeted for closure should be awarded a means-tested scholarship and that nonpublic schools participating in the choice program must not charge tuition above the value of the scholarship." His fondness for her scholarship and their partnership comes through—which makes the chapter dedicated to Ravitch's *volte-face* all the harder to read.

The author recounts a 2010 dinner during which Ravitch dropped the bombshell. "She was about to publish a new book—and it would refute just about every policy position we had taken together during our eight-year partnership at NYU." Viteritti proceeds—to his credit—to even-handedly describe her trilogy of anti-reform books. In a sense, the chapter reads as a non sequitur: After 160 pages of defending school choice from a progressive perspective, the author adds an entire chapter detailing a famous progressive's turn against school choice. I suspect Viteritti's scholarly integrity forced him to include it; after citing Ravitch's influence, he probably felt duty-bound to engage with her apostasy. He states bluntly, "Notwithstanding her positive attitudes toward Catholic institutions as well as some charter and independent private



schools, Ravitch decisively had changed her mind on choice. She was now making arguments that she had previously rebuffed.”

The Ravitch story is important for another reason. Throughout *Radical Dreamers*, Viteritti expresses frustration that school-choice policy is no longer geared toward the most disadvantaged families. The expansion of tax-credit scholarship programs and the advent of education savings accounts (both primarily in red states) have given more and more choices to non-poor families. The market-oriented vision of choice championed by the right is now just about the only game in town. I wish the author had openly grappled with why this is the case: Because conservatives tried for 30 years to partner with progressives to create means-tested voucher programs in America’s cities and were continuously rebuffed. The right’s turn to universalizing choice in the 2020s can only be understood in the context of progressive leaders’ determined, generations-long opposition to choice and the abandonment of choice by independent-minded progressives like Ravitch.

This fact, though not what progressives want to hear, does highlight two great virtues of Viteritti’s work. The author has stuck by his principles even though they’ve fallen out of vogue on his side of the aisle, and he has provided the intellectual history for any future independent-minded choice-curious progressives. **E**

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*This article appeared at EducationNext.org on October 9, 2025.*