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## Book Review: The Schools We Deserve

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# The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crises of our Time

by Diane Ravitch  
Basic Books, Inc., 1985.

"It would be difficult to find a sustained period of time in our history when Americans felt satisfied with the achievements of their schools." This sweeping observation begins the first in a collection of some twenty essays on the varied problems facing American education today. Specifically, Diane Ravitch cites the "low state of learning," "poor training of teachers," "insufficient funding" and "apathy of the public" among the more common issues confronting our nation's educational efforts, both public and private.

The essays in *The Schools We Deserve* were written over the past decade, the majority of them since 1981. The author's style is objective, reasoned and above all, balanced - far removed from the emotional tone of so many critics of contemporary educational policy. Her writing projects a sense of detached investigation and considered thought; note, for example, the care with which she presents the controversial issue of testing and test usage in the schools.

Ravitch identifies her basic theme as follows: educational outcomes are not inevitable; they are not the result of forces beyond our control. Rather, educational outcomes are a direct function of our assumptions, ideals and policies. Given this context of our own responsibility for our own actions, she goes on to ask some probing, and possibly upsetting, questions: How strong is our commitment to education? Do we really provide equal educational opportunity for all? Are we truly concerned about offering a broad range of academic disciplines through the high school years? Are we willing to pay the price of attracting and rewarding highly qualified teachers.

One is struck by the wide range of problems associated with schooling and how it might be improved. Perhaps this lengthy list of weaknesses and shortcomings is, in fact, part of the

problem. The essays deal with a variety of political, social, economic, cultural, religious, racial, psychological and even intellectual issues. This is not to fault Ravitch for taking on such an amalgam of concerns — but it does raise the question of priorities. What is the legitimate domain of schooling? Is this domain defined through any logical process? Or, do these functions become part of a limitless, poorly-defined body of concerns? Comforting though it would be, the schools are not about to fix everything in society that is in need of fixing.

The author's tone is, at times, more positive than the title of the book would seem to indicate. American schools are not without their successes. She cites teacher training, unions, increased enrollments because of increased opportunity, and federal aid among the accomplishments of recent decades. Unfortunately, these advances have not eliminated problems but have only served to move them forward to a new age and a new set of critics. Today's critics, she maintains, are not likely to dwell upon yesterday's victories. The school is continually faced with new demands, new expectations and new hopes. In 1940, 16% of our youth attended college. This figure had climbed to 75% in the late 1960's. The G.I. Bill, Headstart and other support programs brought about the democratization of education. Education, especially higher education, was no longer the exclusive privilege of the selected few. However, Ravitch points out, the high school diploma became "universal," declining in importance because "high school graduates were not necessarily literate." I am reminded of the dilemma set forth in the title of John Gardner's book of 25 years ago: *Excellence - Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?*

Ravitch devotes one essay to the matter of teachers and the teaching profession, and spares nobody, it

would seem, in her criticism of why teachers are not better qualified to do their jobs. Government at all levels, colleges and universities, the press, the courts, private business — all should play a role in upgrading the quality of education. The essay contends, however, that these various agencies and institutions lower standards, promote their own interests, or simply exhibit a lack of interest in education at the public school level. It is not sufficient to blame the schools, or the teachers, in that they do not exist as a separate institution — the school is a product of the interrelationship of many societal forces.

Our schools, surveying the past half-century, have "lurched from crisis to crisis," amidst conflicting views on "bilingual education, busing, tuition tax credits, school closings, bond issues, tax rates, teacher qualifications, text book selection and allocation of resources." Yet, Ravitch contends, there remains the over-riding belief that "schools can make a difference in the lives of our children."

In addressing the issue of reform, Ravitch turns to past attempts at prediction and innovation. A review of futuristic thought from Dewey to Illich leads her to the conclusion that projected innovations of the past 50 years have fallen far short of the intended goals. She characterizes today's teacher with 25 years of experience as someone who has lived through "an era of failed revolutions."

In sum, this collection of essays makes no attempt to offer a ready cure for the future. It should not be dismissed, however, as merely another display of negativism. It is an objective dissection of problems and issues, and for that reason alone is of greater value than the fiery criticism which education frequently must endure. Ravitch suggests that, although we have the ability to improve our schools, we will continue at much the same level of performance until such time as we free ourselves from the "errant assumptions" of the present. We are able, she writes, to bring about change in a small, immediate arena — our greatest challenge is to reach agreement on a grand scheme of goals. □

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