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Diane Ravitch Keynote Address

Thank you. Wow, that is totally amazing, I'm honored to be in such esteemed company, and I'm quite sure I don't deserve to be in that company. But thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here today. I spoke to AASA a year ago and was thrilled by your warm reception.

I'll try not to repeat myself. I've spent the last year traveling the country. This is probably the 85th presentation I've made, and it's been a difficult year for me because I try to give



a different presentation every time. I don't want to repeat myself or bore myself, and it's been an incredible year. I've talked to easily 80,000 or more people, and what I've discovered is demoralized teachers and just a general sense of powerlessness. It's so important that organizations like yours stand up and fight for what you know is right.

Well, it happens that almost every day I get emails from teachers, from parents, from superintendents, from principals, saying: look

what's going on here, this is terrible, can you help me? Usually I can't help them, but at least I can give them encouragement.

I got one of those emails last night at midnight. I wanted to share it with you because in a way it sums up what I'm going to speak about this morning. This comes from a fifth grade teacher in California, and it's published online and he asked me to Tweet it, which I did. It reads as follows:

"Dear President Obama, I mean this with all respect, I'm on my knees here and there is a knife in my back and the prints on it kind of match yours. I think you don't get it; your Race to the Top is killing the wrong guys. You're hitting the good guys with friendly fire. I'm teaching in a barrio in California. I had 32 kids in my class last year. I love them to tears. They are fifth graders—that means they were ten years old mostly. Six of them were 11 because they were retained, five more in special education, two more should have been. I stopped using the word 'parents' with my kids because of many of them don't have parents.

"Amanda's mom died in October. She lives with her 30-year-old brother, seven other children live with their grams, six with their dads, and a few rotate between parents. So, 'parents' is out, as a descriptor.



“Here is the kicker: 50 percent of my students have set foot in the jail or prison to visit a family member. Do you and your Secretary of Education Arne Duncan understand the significance of that? I’m afraid not. It’s not bad teaching that got things to the current state of affairs, it’s pure raw poverty. We don’t teach in failing schools, we teach in failing communities. It’s called the zip code quandary, if the kids live in a wealthy zip code they have high scores, if they live in a zip code that’s entwined with poverty, guess how they do.

“We also have massive teacher turnover at my school. Now we have no money, we haven’t had an art or music teacher in ten years, we have a nurse twice a week, and because of the No Child Left Behind Act, struggling public schools like mine are held to impossible standards and punished brutally when they don’t meet them. Did you know that 100 percent of our students have to be on grade level or else we could face oversight by an outside agency? That’s kind of like saying you have to achieve 100 percent of your policy objectives every year.

“It’s not bad teaching that got things to this current state of affairs, it’s pure raw poverty. Do you get that it’s tough here? Charter schools and voucher schools aren’t the solution; they are an excuse not to fix the real issues. You promised us so much and now you want to give us merit pay. Anyway, I think we really need to talk. Oh, can you pull the knife out while you’re standing behind me, it really hurts.”

This is a goal that no state and no nation has ever reached. It wreaks havoc on our nation’s schools. It sets them up to fail. It sets them up to be stigmatized. It causes the public to lose confidence in public education.

When I spoke to you last year, I described how No Child Left Behind had failed to improve the schools, and it had actually imposed many negative consequences for students, teachers, communities and schools. The law’s Utopian mandate that 100 percent of children must be proficient by 2014 is not a goal, but a mandate. This is a goal that no state and no nation has ever reached. It wreaks havoc on our nation’s schools. It sets them up to fail. It sets them up to be stigmatized. It causes the public to lose confidence in public education.

About a third of our schools are now labeled failing schools, and that number will rise every year until the law is rewritten. In Massachusetts, which is the highest performing state in the nation, fully half the schools have failed to meet AYP. This helps no one and demoralizes everyone. Now, you may recall when No Child Left Behind was passed, the basis for this law was what was called the Texas Miracle. We heard the story, it was repeated widely. We heard that Texas had adopted an accountability system of measuring, publishing the results, rewarding those who got higher test scores, punishing those who didn’t, and then stigmatizing them. PRESTO, it produced incredible results.

Test scores went up, graduation rates went up, the achievement gap was actually closing. It turned out not to be true. So, now we have a law and harsh mandates based on a myth. To reinforce the mythical quality of the Texas Miracle, there was an article

published just this month by former first lady Barbara Bush. She wrote in the Houston Chronicle an article called “We Can’t Afford to Cut Education.”

All of these, in combination, have undermined the meaning and the purpose of good education—which encompasses not just basic skills but knowledge, citizenship, character, and personal development.

She said in her article that Texas students now rank 47th in the nation in literacy, 49th in the nation in verbal SAT scores, and 46th in the nation in math scores. She said we can’t afford to cut teachers, we can’t afford to increase class sizes, or to eliminate scholarships for needy children, or to close several community colleges. Guess what? There was no Texas Miracle.

We have a federal law, NCLB, which requires states to fire teachers and close schools based on a myth. No Child Left Behind has produced teaching to the test, cheating, gaming the system, and has turned schooling into a numbers game. It churned children into data points. It has narrowed the curriculum and discourages creativity and innovation. All of these, in combination, have undermined the meaning and the purpose of good education—which encompasses not just basic skills but knowledge, citizenship, character, and personal development. And despite the claims of its advocates, test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress went up faster before the adoption of No Child Left Behind than they have since. No Child Left Behind is a failed public policy. Its accountability provisions should be repealed.

NCLB should be replaced by federal policy that supports equity for the neediest students and encourages a sound education for all students. It should be replaced by policies to help and improve schools that enroll large numbers of low performing students and not the present policies that punish those schools.

Our politicians think that testing is the same as instruction. Educators know that it is not. Politicians think the way to improve schools is to test and test and then test some more. Educators know this doesn’t work. Politicians think that more testing produces higher scores, and they are surprised when the remediation rates in college don’t go down. They think that raising standards produces higher scores. This is like saying that if a child can’t jump over a four foot bar, let’s raise it to six feet. It doesn’t work. It can’t work. It makes no sense.

A year ago when I spoke to you, I warned that Race to the Top was in fact NCLB 2.0. I predicted the Race to the Top’s emphasis on charter schools would unleash a powerful movement for privatization and that its demand to judge teachers by student test scores would lead to even more narrowing at the curriculum and even more teaching to the test and would demoralize teachers. And indeed it has.

Our teachers and schools need support, not punishment. With the administration now seeking an additional \$900 million for a second round of Race to the Top for districts, it is clear that our schools will continue to be subjected to punitive policies that will not improve education.

This has not been a good year for American education. A year ago, shortly after I spoke to you in Phoenix, officials in Central Falls, Rhode Island, announced that they intended to fire the entire staff of this impoverished town's only high school: the principal, the teachers, the lunch room staff, the custodians—everyone—even though not a single person in the school had been evaluated. Secretary Duncan applauded the firings, as did President Obama. The media hailed the city superintendent and the state superintendent as heroes for taking a get tough approach to bad teachers and low test scores. Well, eventually the union agreed to work longer hours, and the superintendent predicted there would be a new era of high achievement.

Closing schools doesn't close the achievement gap. Closing schools does nothing to address the educational needs of students. Public schools are not chain stores that can be closed and opened at will.

But it didn't happen. The get-tough tactics destroyed trust, destroyed staff morale. Twenty percent of the high school's teachers quit, and currently another 15 to 20 percent are absent on any given day. They are all taking every day of leave that's coming to them. Many of the students can't even get their grades because their teachers are absent so often. Now the superintendent is again talking about firing the entire staff or closing the school. This is the new get tough style of leadership. It's great for headlines. It's bad for morale, and is certainly not good for kids and teachers.

Across the nation public schools are being closed, because their scores are too low. When schools close their doors, communities are fragmented and destabilized. In some large cities, there are buildings where 12 children are attending 12 different schools. That destroys social cohesion. That destroys communities.

New schools replace old schools. Many of the new schools also have low scores unless they keep out the low performing students. And in time the new schools will be closed to be replaced by other new schools. Closing schools doesn't help immigrant students learn to read or speak English. Closing schools doesn't close the achievement gap. Closing schools does nothing to address the educational needs of students. Public schools are not chain stores that can be closed and opened at will.

Public schools are and must be vital community institutions, the anchor of their community. In many cases schools are the most stable institution in communities where people are struggling. They are community institutions like the public library, like the firehouse, like the police station. They are not, and should not be transient agencies that come and go as the scores rise or fall.

With the imprimatur of Race to the Top, the movement for privatization and choice is today enjoying unprecedented success. Newly elected governors in several states want to push the envelope even further by offering vouchers for students to attend private and sectarian schools. And the only obstacle, other than legal challenges, is that the introduction of these vouchers is very expensive.

There was one calculation in Florida that if vouchers were offered to the 340,000 students currently in private school, it would add about \$3 billion to the state budget, while the state is currently cutting the budget. So, it made no sense, and apparently the governor has backed down from vouchers because the state simply can't afford them. He was even planning to offer vouchers to home schooled students. How can states supply tuition to students who are already enrolled in private schools without destroying their fiscal condition? This is simply not prudent. To even talk about doing this at a time of austerity makes no sense. There are even people now beginning to wonder why we need public education at all.

A few weeks ago I was called by a reporter *Los Angeles Times* who told me about an affluent district in the state of Colorado with excellent public schools where the community is now deciding whether to give vouchers to everyone. People there are wondering why we need public schools. What's the point? Why not let everyone just take their tax dollars and do what they want with them? That's the dynamic of choice. Everyone looks out for himself, herself, his or her own children and forgets about any sense of communal responsibility for educating the children of the community. Education becomes just a consumer good, not a public good, not a social responsibility for all the children of the community. Thus unravels the social fabric.

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In this past year we've seen a media blitz against public education that is unprecedented in the history of this country. NBC devoted a week of programming last September called "Education Nation" to promote those who want to privatize public education and those who blame teachers for low student achievement. Oprah and her fabulously popular show devoted two programs to celebrating the ideas of the corporate reformers.

The film, "Waiting for Superman," was a public relations coup for corporate reform. "We know what works," the film said. "Testing and accountability works. Firing bad teachers works. Tying teacher evaluations to test scores works."

Of course, they had no evidence for any of this, but nonetheless, it's a movie, it's Hollywood. The film pretended to be a liberal plea on behalf of inner city children, but in fact it was funded and produced by corporate sponsors who support vouchers and privatization. I won't go into the misrepresentations and the inaccuracies in that film. It was simply propaganda for privatization and for de-professionalization and for the corporate reform agenda.

If you want to learn more about its many flaws, I suggest you Google my review in the *New York Review of Books*. I have heard that the review contributed to the movie not getting an Oscar nomination.

I do want to talk about two important facts about the movie. One is that the movie says that 70 percent of the eighth graders are reading below grade level. That is really the core claim of the movie—without that assertion, the whole movie collapses—but it is

not true. The only source of data for a statement like that is the National Assessment of Educational Progress. As Dan [Domenech] mentioned, he and I both served on the board of NAEP. The actual figure is not 70 percent—it's 25 percent. Twenty-five percent of students in eighth grade are below basic, and that includes students who don't speak or read English plus students who have various kinds of disabilities.

Who decided that the best way to lead a school district is to heap scorn on the teachers, fire them if their students' scores don't go up, close the schools, hand control over to private entrepreneurs, and then call a press conference to boast about it?

Twenty five percent is very different from 70 percent. One of the charter schools that he features in the film is a boarding school. While he says that resources don't matter, this particular boarding school costs the public \$35,000 per year per student, while in the state of Arizona, they are spending less than \$6,000 a year per student. But Davis Guggenheim says resources don't matter.

When I reviewed the film, I went to the website of this school, and it said "96 percent of our graduates go to college." I thought, wow, this is really impressive. But then someone send me a page from the U.S. Department of Education website about that school, and I discovered that of the 140 students who started in seventh grade, only 34 graduated last June. That's a 75 percent attrition rate. But 96 percent of them went to college.

Last fall a group of urban superintendents issued what they called a manifesto in the *Washington Post*. They said that they knew how to fix schools. They said that bad teachers were the cause of our education problems, echoing the corporate reform agenda. The leaders of this group became famous for firing teachers.

They became famous for firing teachers, closing schools, and insisting that slash-and-burn tactics were the very best ways to reform our nation's terrible school system. Now, how did this get tough approach become the national formula for educational leadership? Who decided that the best way to lead a school district is to heap scorn on the teachers, fire them if their students' scores don't go up, close the schools, hand control over to private entrepreneurs, and then call a press conference to boast about it? The media idolizes administrators who appear contemptuous of teachers, but this divisive approach is not good leadership.

You are leaders and, you know that good leadership is about inspiring your staff, showing them that you believe in them, bringing out the best in them, helping them overcome the obstacles they face, and encouraging them to pull together as a team to do what's right for students. A good general does not fire on his own troops.

Unfortunately, the punitive approach is now winning the day and the media thinks it's so cool to be mean and hard-hearted and tough. Today public education is the target of unprecedented firestorm of criticism. The goals of the corporate reform movement are privatization and de-professionalization. The corporate reformers run down public education. They insist it's in crisis, it's never been in a worse crisis, and our nation faces

economic decline unless we act quickly and decisively, preferably without too much deliberation or debate. The time for deliberation is past, if ever it came. All this crisis talk is a prelude to turning control of public dollars over to privately managed schools.

The corporate reformers dismiss the importance of credentials or professionalism or training and experience. They say experience doesn't matter. All this is prelude to saying that anyone can be a teacher, a principal or superintendent. It is as if we are going not into the future but back to the early 19th century, before there was a teaching profession. They say, the public education system is broken, and it can't be improved. If you speak of school improvement they laugh and say you can't improve a school—you can only close it. Some of the corporate reformers have suggested that our nation needs a hurricane Katrina to wash away the whole public school system and start from scratch.

I have noticed that many of the people who say this are themselves products of our finest, most elite schools, like Deerfield Academy, Exeter, Sidwell Friends and other boarding schools and private schools where their parents paid high tuition so their children could have the best of everything. They have little sympathy or love for public education. They just want to own it.

It is as if we are going not into the future but back to the early 19th century, before there was a teaching profession.

It's now conventional wisdom to say that public education is a failure and this great institution that built our nation is beyond repair. The schools don't need to be subject to democratic control, they say, because democracy *is* the problem. If you go back to the Chubb and Moe book on school choice published in the early 1990s, they say that democracy is the problem. Mayoral control also effectively solves that problem by putting all power in the hands of one person.

They say that our students' scores on international tests will doom us to decline and that our schools are obsolete, that teachers are the cause of low scores and that the best way to reform schools is to fire the staff, close the schools, and turn them over to private organizations funded by entrepreneurs and Wall Street hedge fund managers. The national media has turned into a giant echo chamber, lamenting the quality of public schools and lambasting those who work in them. Never mind that pundits and the talking heads wouldn't last a day in a public school.

You can be sure that not a one of them would trade their salaries for that of a public school teacher or administrator. Not for one day.

We read the same disparaging narrative in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the major newspapers. We hear it from pundits like Thomas Friedman, Nicholas Kristof, and David Brooks. It is replayed and broadcast by the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, the Walton Foundation, the D.C. think tanks, Secretary Duncan, and President Obama. We heard it in *Waiting for Superman*. The narrative is wrong. It's factually wrong.

This false narrative will harm our children, undermine public education and damage our nation. We have to stand up and say so. Again and again and again, out loud.

Public education is one of the cornerstones of our democracy. If we weaken it, we weaken our democracy. We must improve it, not privatize it. Every neighborhood should have a good public school. Public schools build community. They are part of our democratic heritage as Americans.

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Let me try to set the record straight. Start with the international assessments. When the results of PISA were released in December 2010, the media expressed shock and alarm because American students placed somewhere in the middle on these assessments. We heard gloomy predictions that we're losing the global test score race to Shanghai and Finland. (Actually, I don't think anyone is too upset that are losing to Finland because Finland is not exactly aspiring to be a global power.)

But there was a lot of shock expressed about losing the global race to Shanghai and Finland. By the way, no one mentioned that in Finland—the number one scoring nation in the world—the children never take standardized tests until they apply to college. There are no standardized tests in the number one scoring nation in the world.

In his state of the union address, the President said, “This is our generation’s Sputnik moment.”

He and Secretary Duncan warned that the nation is in danger of losing the future if we couldn't get those scores up. What the President didn't know—probably the Secretary doesn't know either—what their own Department of Education didn't tell them, is that test scores of American students on international assessments were far worse in the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s.

The Soviet Union launched its Sputnik satellite in 1957. We did not respond by raising our test scores on international assessments. For the past 50 years, our students were usually dead last or in the bottom quarter on the international tests of math and science. And yet here we are the strongest most powerful nation in the world, and there is no more Soviet Union. It's gone.

The President said in his state of the union address, “America still has the largest, most prosperous economy in the world. No workers are more productive than ours. No country has more successful companies. No country has more grants, more patents to inventors and entrepreneurs. We are home to world's best colleges and universities where more students come to study than any other place on earth.”

Professor Yong Zhao, who is a Chinese-born and Chinese-educated scholar at the University of Oregon, reacted to the President's speech by asking these questions: Who educated those productive workers? Who educated the founders of those successful

companies? Who educated those inventors and entrepreneurs? Who provided the brain power for the world's best colleges and universities? It must have been that terrible cohort of students who were in the bottom quartile of the international assessments in the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s. So, Professor Yong Zhao said, it doesn't make sense.

Something must be wrong with the logic, or something is wrong with those international assessments, if our allegedly terrible public schools continue to produce the greatest workers, thinkers, leaders, and innovators that created the greatest economy in the world.

We reward the ability to pick the right answer,
not creativity, imagination or innovation.

The President said that we need to out educate rest of world and stimulate innovation, imagination, and creativity—and he is certainly right about that. He said that the winners of the science fair should be applauded just as much as the winner of the Superbowl. He is right about that, and when that day comes, we will all say, “Thank God.”

But only a few days later after his speech, *The New York Times* reported that participation in science fairs has been declining because of the federal government's emphasis on standardized testing of reading and math. So while the President wants to encourage science and science fairs, federal policies incentivize the very opposite.

Just last fall, *Newsweek* had a cover story about declining creativity among young Americans. Is it any wonder if we make standardized testing the sole criteria of success in schooling?

We reward the ability to pick the right answer, not creativity, imagination or innovation. The student who thinks differently is punished, not recognized and not celebrated. The student who has a new idea, a different way of thinking, will be marked down.

Let's consider Race to the Top, which the President said was “the work of teachers and principals, local school boards and communities.”

Anybody here have anything to do with writing race to the top? Raise your hand.

I don't see any hands out there. He did say “local school boards and teachers and principals,” but we know it wasn't local teachers and principals and school board members.

It was not local teachers and principals and school board members who decided that states should increase the number of privately managed charter schools. The big foundations made that decision. It was not teachers and administrators who demanded merit pay, but business leaders. It was not educators who demanded that teachers should be evaluated by student test scores, but economists who think that test scores are the best and possibly the only measure of school performance. Nor was it teachers or principals or local school board members who proposed to turn around struggling schools by closing them. Nor was it locals who want to change the basic principal of federal aid by awarding it to states based on a competition, rather than sending the money to the schools and the districts to serve the neediest students. No...

Race to the Top was not designed by teachers or principals or school boards or communities. It does not reflect what districts want. It does not reflect the best thinking of those who work in schools. They were not consulted. It was designed early in 2009 by high-level officials in the U.S. Department of Education working along with advisors from the Gates Foundation and Broad Foundation. Secretary Duncan hired the chief operating officer of the New Schools Venture Fund to run that competition for \$4.3 billion. The New Schools Venture Fund is a California-based organization heavily funded by the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation and other foundations, and its purpose is to expand charter school chains.

With a competitive approach, only children in the winning states get any federal funds, while the children in the remaining states get no federal funds at all, no matter how needy they are.

The loudest complaint about Race to the Top came last summer from a coalition of six civil rights groups including the NAACP, the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the National Urban League, the Rainbow Push Coalition, and the Schott Foundation for Public Education. The civil rights groups rejected the competitive nature of Race to the Top.

They agreed with Secretary Duncan that access to high quality education is a fundamental civil right, but they said if that is the case why should states compete for federal funds? After all, civil rights belong to individuals not to states. With a competitive approach, only children in the winning states get any federal funds, while the children in the remaining states get no federal funds at all, no matter how needy they are.

This approach, they said represents a retreat from the basic principle of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. That principle is not a race, it's not a competition. That principle is equality of educational opportunity. And the principle of equality of educational opportunity requires that federal funds must go to the schools and the districts with poorest children, not the schools in the districts who hire the best grant-writers.

When ESEA was passed in 1965, the rationale for federal aid to education was equity, not competition. The civil rights groups complained that if the Obama Blueprint—the administration's plan to reauthorize ESEA—inserts the principle of competition, it will gut the promise of fairness and equity, the very rationale for federal aid education. Most children, particularly poor children, will be the losers, and this would be wrong.

But there are even bigger problems with the Race to the Top than its competitive nature. It promotes policies that have no basis in research or in practice. Superintendents in winning states have told me that it will cost them more to implement the mandates than the money they will receive over four years. One superintendent in New York told me that his district will receive \$60,000 over the next four years, and the district will have to spend over \$300,000 to carry out the requirements. This is truly a pig in a poke.

Consider the strategies that districts and states are required to do. First of all, they will get more privately managed charters, which will drain away public support and resources

and students from the local public schools. The local public schools still have the same operating costs, still have the same brick and mortar costs. Most of the new privately managed charters will be no better than the local public schools, and some will be far worse than the local public schools.

Second, the district will be required to evaluate its teachers by student test scores which will be a contentious process that relies on unproven methods and produces dubious and unreliable ratings.

Third, districts will be expected to award some form of merit pay which creates divisiveness among the staff.

None of these initiatives is a proven reform, and some of them have strong evidence against them. Charter schools, for example, do everything that the corporate reform movement wants. The great majority of them are nonunion. Their teachers can be hired and fired at will. The charters can offer merit pay. They have freedom to innovate.

Most of them innovate by becoming 19th century schools in which kids are tightly disciplined. They are akin to boot camp, no-excuses schools that look very much, to my historian's eye, like the American schools of about 1855. And, with all the freedom they have, they don't get better results than regular public schools.

A major study in 2009 by economists at Stanford University, funded by the pro-choice Walton Foundation, evaluated half the nation's charters and found that only 17 percent got better results than a demographically similar neighborhood public school. Thirty-seven percent got worse results, and 46 percent got results that were no different.

But there are even bigger problems with the Race to the Top than its competitive nature. It promotes policies that have no basis in research or in practice.

We knew that last year, but now there is more evidence about the performance of charter schools. Mathematica Policy Research conducted a study comparing charter middle schools with lotteries to regular public middle schools and found that there was no difference either in terms of academics or behavior. The National Assessment of Education Progress has tested charter students since 2003 and compared them to regular public students. In the assessments of 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009, there has never been an advantage for charter schools—not for Black students, not for Hispanic students, not for low-income students, and not for urban students, no difference.

But nonetheless it continues to be a powerful idea that is advancing with no evidence. The people promoting charters simply don't care about evidence. They talk data all the time, but they don't care about data when it contradicts what they want to do.

Then we have this requirement that teachers will be judged by value-added assessment, which they are doing so they can identify and fire bad teachers. There was a report that came out from the Economic Policy Institute last summer, signed by most of the nation's leading testing and accountability experts, saying essentially "...someday this might work.

It's highly inaccurate and highly unstable, and so we recommend against using it now in any large scale."

If value-added assessment actually created dramatically better schools and higher performance, Tennessee would be the highest rated state in the nation. Tennessee has been doing value-added assessment now for 20 years. But if you look at the latest national scores, Tennessee is right in the middle. Value-added assessment has not transformed the schools of Tennessee. And Massachusetts, which is number one, has not been using value-added assessment.



Last summer, the *Los Angeles Times* filed a freedom of information act request with the Los Angeles school district and got the test scores of 6,000 teachers. The *Times* then hired a researcher, created its own ranking, and decided which teachers—by its metric—were effective and which were ineffective. They then put the whole list online.

Such rankings are inevitably filled with inaccuracies. Most testing experts in the country said it was wrong. The only person who seemed to think it was a good idea was Arne Duncan.

Right now, the same thing is happening in New York City where Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* is seeking the test scores of 12,000 teachers and plans to put them online. The union has the issue in court, saying this is highly inaccurate. There's lots of evidence that it's inaccurate and unstable. A lower court judge ruled that it didn't matter how inaccurate the rankings are, that the public has a right to know.

This will destroy the reputations and careers of many teachers. It will demoralize teachers. These value-added ratings with all of their inaccuracies and all of their instability exist. They should be part of a personnel file. Principals should be able to review them, knowing their flaws, as part of a large body of evidence about teachers but they should not be made public. This is wrong.

You should know that there have been many studies of value-added assessment. The most recent came from a colleague at New York University, Sean Corcoran. He studied the value-added program in Houston and in New York City. He said—like everyone else has who studied them in any depth—these rankings are inaccurate and unstable. A teacher will get a big gain in one year, but not the next year, because the composition of the classroom has a large impact on the value-added scores. There is still a huge margin of error.

Corcoran gives this example: A teacher in New York City might be ranked at the 43rd percentile, meaning 57% of the teachers are more effective and 43% are less effective. But, he said, in fact the margin of error is so large that the same teacher might actually be at the 71st percentile or the 15th percentile. So you'd be quite accurate to say that this teacher is either average, above average, or below average. It's all true.

Now what we hear at every turn is that we need effective teachers. It's that word 'effective, effective, effective.' It's become a stand-in for 'higher test scores.' I was last week at the meeting of Parents Across America, a new parent organization. A parent activist from Seattle got up and said, "I don't want an effective teacher for my children. I want an inspiring teacher. I want a brilliant teacher. I want a caring teacher. You have any measures for that?" No, we don't.

Public schools are and must be vital community institutions, the anchor of their community.

So then we come to another part of Race to the Top and what's incentivizing. That's merit pay. Merit pay has been tried again and again since the 1920s; it has never produced better results. It gets tried and dropped, tried and dropped. It's one of those ideas that never succeeds and never dies.

Just this past fall, there was the most important study ever done with merit pay. It was released by the National Center on Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt University, and it was a study conducted in Nashville, Tennessee. It was done by economists who don't have a view on one side or the other. They probably, like most economists, believe that incentives matter a lot. And so they decided the reason that merit pay had failed in the past was that the bonus was never large enough. So the bonus in this case was \$15,000 for getting the test scores higher.

At the end of the three-year period they found that the merit pay offer, the bonus offer, made no difference. Both groups got the same results and the supporters of merit pay said, "Well, we never expected merit pay to produce high scores, that wasn't the point." Hello, I mean, that was the point, wasn't it?

That very same week after the results of the Vanderbilt study came out—the most rigorous study ever done on merit pay—the U.S. Department of Education released nearly \$500 million for merit pay programs, completely ignoring the evidence in front of them. And they promised to add another \$500 million for the teachers' incentive fund for more merit pay. So, a billion dollars for something that has no evidence behind it, proving that ideology matters more than evidence.

New York City has had a school-wide bonus program recently evaluated: it made no difference. Today, despite the absence of any evidence, several states are planning to offer merit pay for higher scores. Some newly elected governors say they want vouchers—or so we hear from states like New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Indiana.

But they should look at Milwaukee. Milwaukee has now had 20 years of vouchers, vouchers since 1990. There are 20,000 kids in Milwaukee with vouchers; 17,000 in charter schools; 80,000 in the remaining shrinking public school sector. Researchers used to argue about whether voucher students were making greater progress than those in regular public schools. But there is now a research consensus that the children in voucher schools get no greater performance gains than the children in regular public schools.

And this past year, something new was added to the mix. Milwaukee for the first time participated in NAEP, in the urban NAEP, the Trial Urban District Assessment. What it showed was that Black children in Milwaukee—who are allegedly the beneficiaries of vouchers—that Black children in Milwaukee have test scores on the NAEP that are below those of Black children in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama. Vouchers made no difference. This has been 20 wasted years in terms of the children in that school district.

The corporate reformers believe that incentives and sanctions will fix our problems. They believe that privatization and accountability and deep professionalization will introduce efficiency and innovation into the schools. They talk about data. They talk about evidence. But I conclude from all of the evidence that they don't care about evidence—only when it agrees with them, and they find precious little that does agree with them.

The one thing they will not talk about is poverty. They say again and again, poverty is just an excuse. They say it doesn't matter if children are homeless. It doesn't matter if they're hungry. It doesn't matter if they are in need of medical care. They say it doesn't matter if children miss school because their family is falling apart or if they're living in neighborhoods that are blighted by crime and unemployment and decay and high rates of incarceration. They're wrong. They're just plain wrong.

They're scapegoating our schools and our teachers to divert attention from the root causes of poor academic performance. If you want to see the data, go and look at the SAT website. Go and look at the scores on the SAT. Lowest scores, lowest income. Highest scores, highest income. The step up at each point goes like clockwork. Society cannot afford to neglect the basic needs of children and families.

Poverty matters. It has a huge impact on children's readiness to learn when they enter school and on their motivation and their attitudes.

Today, more than 20 percent of our children are living in poverty and the number is going up. This is a national scandal. It's a national disgrace. In Finland, the world's highest scoring nation, less than three percent of the children live in poverty. Poverty matters. It has a huge impact on children's readiness to learn when they enter school and on their motivation and their attitudes.

The corporate reformers say to anyone who opposes their agenda, "Oh, you support the status quo." They are the reformers. Anyone who disagrees with them is against reform. You have no solutions, they say. They say this about me. And I say, "I oppose the status quo. The status quo is No Child Left Behind. We have had 10 years of it. It hasn't worked, it has failed." I said I was wrong, why can't they?

We have to change direction. We've had a national strategy of testing and accountability and shaming and blaming and punishing for at least the last ten years, even longer. And we now know that it doesn't work. The status quo is wrong. It demoralizes teachers. It undermines confidence in public education. It diminishes the effort and hard work of those who work in our nation's schools. It has not improved education. It will not help children become innovative, imaginative, and creative as President Obama wants.

We're also seeing so many attacks on public education in state after state where class sizes are rising to unimaginable levels, where teachers are being laid off—where experienced teachers are being laid off simply because they are experienced, and the district wants to shed the burden of expensive experienced teachers.

There is an agenda that we can pursue. There are better ways to improve schools, but none of them is a silver bullet. So many of the corporate reformers come from Wall Street, so many of them come from the technology sector, and they're accustomed to doing something that gets fast results. They can come up with a new technology that revolutionizes the computer or the smartphone or whatever gadget we have in our hands. They can come up with an idea that produces millions in profits, millions in profits overnight. They can hedge a bet that makes them tens of millions overnight. They have the transformative idea. It works for them.

But we in education don't have that kind of a transformative idea because we are not working with dollars. We are not working with computer chips. We're working with children. There is nothing that you can do in a day that will change a child's life. You have to work at it day after day. You have to be consistent. You have to be there for them every day. You have to have proven strategies—proven strategies that will work over time, if given time and resources. Children are educated one child at a time, one day at a time. There are no great leaps forward. There are no miracles in education.

We know that early childhood education works. It's expensive, but it works. Study after study has demonstrated that children do better in school and in life if they have the nurturance and support that they need in the years from birth to five. We know that parent education works because parents are the children's first and most important teachers, and anything we can do to strengthen families will improve educational outcomes. We know that children should have access to decent adequate medical treatment. If they don't have it, it diminishes their school performance. We know that good schools have a full and balanced curriculum and that all children should have not only basic skills but also the arts, science, history, civics, literature, foreign languages, and physical education. (I've heard that in some states, particularly Florida, their children are now doing a virtual physical education. They're given a DVD and told to take it home.)

[Study after study has demonstrated that children do better in school and in life if they have the nurturance and support that they need in the years from birth to five.](#)

What I've described to you—the kind of curriculum that encompasses the full range of the arts and sciences—this is what the corporate reformers want for their children. This is what we should want for all children especially those whose families lack the resources at home. It was John Dewey who said that what the best and wisest parent wants for his child is what we should want for all the children of the community. Anything less than that diminishes our democracy.

We know that testing should be used to diagnose what students and teachers need and testing is important. I'm not putting down testing, but I'm putting down the use of testing

to hand out punishments and rewards because that corrupts the tests themselves. When tests are used to identify what needs fixing, they're constructive. When they're used for bonuses and sanctions, then everyone loses sight of what matters most, which is good education and healthy well-developing children. High stakes testing sacrifices innovation, imagination and creativity.

What I have described to you is an agenda for change. It's something that may sound banal because it's so common sense, because it's proven, because it works, and also because this is what high-performing nations in the world actually do.

We know that we need well-educated teachers, and we need to change our methods of recruiting and preparing and supporting teachers. Teaching should be a respected profession and not a revolving door for bright amateurs.

We know that we need principals who are experienced educators, not people from industry who took a one-year course in how to be a principal. If principals are the ones—and they are—to make the evaluations of teachers, they need to know more than data. They need to have the capacity to go into a classroom and see how teachers are doing and to provide the help to support the teacher so that the teacher can become better. They need to be able to go into a classroom and know what good teaching is and be good teachers themselves.

We know that we need superintendents who are expert educators and not corporate executives looking for a new career. It is the superintendent who will make major decisions about curriculum and instruction, personnel, and policy, and—if it becomes necessary to make cuts—it is a wise educator who will know how to make the cuts hurt least so that children's needs are protected. Our superintendents must be wise educators.

What I have described to you is an agenda for change. It's something that may sound banal because it's so common sense, because it's proven, because it works, and also because this is what high-performing nations in the world actually do. None of them is privatizing their public schools. None is dismantling their education profession. Instead, they're recruiting the very best candidates into teaching and giving them the training, the education, and the support that they need to succeed.

The steady drumbeat of criticism by the corporate reformers has persuaded the American public that public education is in deep trouble. So, in the last Gallup Poll, only 18 percent—the lowest ever—gave public education an A or a B. But Americans have never felt better about their own child's public school. In the same Gallup Poll, 77 percent awarded the school they know with an A or a B, the highest mark ever registered since the poll began.

Teachers are reacting and beginning to take action. Some of our nation's very best teachers, the teachers with National Board Certification, have organized to march on Washington for July 28th to 30th this summer. They've established a website which they

call saveourschoolsmarch.org. These are not the bad teachers. These are not the teachers who are worried about being fired. These are our best teachers. They are tired of the endless teacher bashing. They don't want to give up on public education, and they know what's at stake for our nation.

We're at a historic turning point—and I say this advisedly as a historian. The future of public education and the profession of education hangs in the balance. Important decisions will be made in the months and years ahead in Washington, D.C., and in your state capitals.

Somebody once wrote to me and asked, "Do you speak so bluntly because you're from Texas?" But I said, "No, it's because I'm one of eight children and I always had to speak bluntly or no one would hear me."

But the other thing, folks, is that I'm 72 years old. I don't want a job, I don't want a foundation grant, and I don't have a whole lot of time to say these things, so I got to say them straight.

Write to your elected officials. Meet with your elected officials. Meet with business leaders. Meet with civic leaders. Bring them into your schools. Bring them into your classrooms. Reach out to your community, get their support, tell them what you know, show them around your schools, let them walk in your shoes. Write letters to the editor, write to blogs, blog yourself, speak up, stand up for public education, stand up for children. Get involved. Stay involved. Make sure that what we do is right for our nation, for our children, and for our democracy.

Thank you very much.

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From 1991 to 1993, Dr. Ravitch was assistant secretary of education and counselor to Secretary of Education, then Lamar Alexander, in the administration of President George H. W. Bush. She was responsible for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education. As assistant secretary she led the federal effort to promote the creation of voluntary state and national academic standards. From 1997 to 2004, she was a member of the National Assessment Governing Board which oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the federal testing program that we call our nation's report card.

She was appointed by the Clinton administration's Secretary of Education Richard Riley in 1997 and reappointed by him again in 2001. From 1995 to 2005, she held the Brown Chair of Education Studies at the Brookings Institute and edited Brookings papers on education policy. Before entering government service she was adjunct professor of history and education at Teachers College at Columbia University.

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