



# Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms

*Diane Ravitch*

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## **Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms** Diane Ravitch

For the past one hundred years, Americans have argued and worried about the quality of their schools. Some have charged that students were not learning enough, while others have complained that the schools were not in the forefront of social progress. In this authoritative history of education in the twentieth century, historian Diane Ravitch describes this ongoing battle of ideas and explains why school reform has so often failed. "Left Back" recounts grandiose efforts by education reformers to use the schools to promote social and political goals, even when they diminished the schools' ability to educate children. It shows how generations of reformers have engaged in social engineering, advocating such innovations as industrial education, intelligence testing, curricular differentiation, and life-adjustment education. These reformers, she demonstrates, simultaneously mounted vigorous campaigns against academic studies. "Left Back" charges that American schools have been damaged by three misconceptions. The first is the belief that the schools can solve any social or political problem. The second is the belief that only a portion of youngsters are capable of benefiting from a high-quality education. The third is that imparting knowledge is relatively unimportant, compared to engaging students in activities and experiences. These grave errors, Ravitch contends, have unnecessarily restricted equality of educational opportunity. They have dumbed down the schools by encouraging a general lowering of academic expectations. They have produced a diluted and bloated curriculum and pressure to enlarge individual schools so that they can offer multiple tracks to children with different occupational goals. As a result, the typical American high school is too big, too anonymous, and lacks intellectual coherence. Ravitch identifies several heroic educators -- such as William T. Harris, William C. Bagley, and Isaac Kandel -- who challenged these dominant and wrong-headed ideas. These men, dissidents in their own times, are usually left out of standard histories of education or treated derisively because they believed that all children deserved the opportunity to meet high standards of learning. In describing the wars between competing traditions of education, Ravitch points the way to reviving American education. She argues that all students have the capacity to learn and that all are equally deserving of a solid liberal arts education. "Left Back" addresses issues of the utmost importance and urgency. It is a large work of history that by recovering the past illuminates a future.

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