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The Reign of Error

If you read one book for “work” this year, make it Diane Ravitch’s new book The Reign of Error. In a clear and factual way, she lays out the case of what is happening to American schools under the guise of educational reform. As school public relations professionals, the information and arguments she presents are critical for us to understand and without a doubt will assist you in your work to support our schools.

Ravitch begins her case by explaining the current narrative that is damaging the reputation of our schools. American schools are often described as “failing” or “drop-out factories,” and a variety of other negative terms. In fact, the opposite is the case. Test scores for American students are at their highest levels, and have been steadily increasing since 1973. The high school graduation rate is 78%, and increases to 90% by age 19. More American students are going on to college than ever before. And finally, American students and workers are recognized internationally for their innovation and creativity.

So, how is this negative and inaccurate portrayal of American schools becoming a commonplace idea? Under the guise of education reform, a small but extremely powerful group of foundations and businesses (The Gates Foundation, The Walton Foundation, etc.) have used their wealth and reach to spread a carefully crafted message about school choice. This message damages the reputation of American schools by misinterpreting data about public schools, while it enhances the benefits of charter schools. The phrase “school choice” is designed to imply that parents and students have the freedom to select the schools they want, when in fact the more correct term for the process would be privatization. A slew of corporations and consultants have sprung up in the last decade to feed off the testing and charter school industries. Public dollars are going to these private industries, all under the guise of education reform. Realizing that the phrase privatization has negative connotations when it comes to the realm of education, the school reformers use the phrase school choice instead.

Charter schools, however, do not actually always provide a choice. As has been well publicized, often entry to these schools is by a lottery. In other cases, children with special needs are not admitted to charter schools or are expelled. Charter schools do not have the open door policy of public schools, even though they are funded by public dollars. They have less stringent requirements than public schools, in some cases even allowing non-certified teachers in the classrooms. Finally, as we have discussed often here in e-Comm, charter school performance is not exceeding that of public schools and in the majority of cases is significantly less than our public schools. Yet this wildly inaccurate narrative about both public schools and charter schools still persists.

As more students leave public schools for charter schools, public schools lose funding, and are weakened; creating a vicious cycle that can eventually close schools. Students are often no better off in the charter school, and some students return to their public school within a year, *without*

the funding that followed them to the charter school. The student returns to the public school further behind, the public school is required to spend additional resources to help this student catch up, and/or the public schools will be penalized when this student performs poorly on standardized tests. This scenario is repeating itself thousands of times in school districts across the country, and it makes no rational sense... yet it is widely described as education reform, and is being legislated as reform. It is in no way reform; it is part of the hoax that is paving the way for the privatization of our schools.

Ravitch presents powerful research to break down the myths about test scores, international test scores, graduation rates, the achievement gap and teachers and test scores. She covers the corporate reformers in depth as well as Michelle Rhee and Teach for America. After informing us as to why this complex story about American schools is all wrong, she then moves on to how we as a society can fix it. The reformers have been successful she argues, because they seem to be presenting a solution to schools that are struggling.

Did you know that 23% of American students live in poverty? Poverty is the real crisis that Ravitch believes must be addressed before we can make further gains with education. While America's standing on international test scores is often misrepresented, it is a fact that the United States has a higher child poverty rate than *any other economically developed nation*. Yet this fact is often dismissed in the education reform debate. Ravitch presents compelling evidence on why poverty is the real crisis facing American schools, and offers a plan to begin to address the real issue.

I hope this summary of the book has whetted your appetite to read it. As school communicators, we can serve a vital role in repairing the damage to the reputation of America's schools. Our schools are not in decline and the vast majority of our schools are not failing. Our schools are at peak levels of achievement. PenSPRA has created the first of a series of infographics you can use in your district to support this positive message. The infographic can be used as a PNG, a web link or shared through Facebook or Twitter. The infographic is attached to the newsletter as a PNG. The web link is here, and I will share it from the PenSPRA Facebook page today. It's time we say ENOUGH to the naysayers and critics, and work to use the truth to abolish the hoax that is cursing our schools.

Member Request

Cheryl Galdo of School District asks "Does your superintendent or district have a blog and, if so, could you e-mail a link to it?" Send links to Cheryl at cgaldo@lmtsd.org

Job Opportunity

Director of Public Affairs, National History Day

(Not to encourage anyone to leave Pennsylvania, but this is an interesting job opportunity for anyone with school PR experience.)

National History Day (NHD) is a highly-regarded non-profit organization that sponsors a year-long academic program focused on historical research, interpretation and creative expression for 6 - 12 grade students, culminating in a national competition held in Washington, DC.

NHD seeks a Director of Public Affairs to design and implement communications plans to increase visibility and media coverage and supplement external relations, including alumni outreach. The full-time position is based at the national office in College Park, Maryland and reports to the Executive Director. He/she will work closely with the Deputy Director and

Director of Programs. The Director will periodically assist more than 50 affiliate coordinators with media strategies and communications.

Click here for all the details

<http://www.nhd.org/JobOpportunities.htm>

Submit an Article for the February 2014 Pennsylvania Administrator

The Pennsylvania Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals (PAESSP) is seeking principals and other educators to write for the February 2014 edition of its award-winning Pennsylvania Administrator magazine. This issue does not have a specific theme, so any education topics will be accepted for review by the Editorial Review Board.

The deadline for submitting articles is Dec. 6, 2013. Articles should be no longer than 1,500 words and must be submitted via e-mail as a Microsoft Word document. A biographical sketch and a photograph of the author(s) (saved as a JPEG or a TIFF file) must accompany all articles. E-mail articles to sherit@paessp.org.

Pittsburgh Magazine/TV Partnership Opportunity

For the next several months, Pittsburgh Magazine, WQED, Pop-City and WESA-FM will be focusing some of their coverage on the great things that are happening in classrooms in southwestern PA. The purpose of this partnership is to raise awareness of how learning is changing for today's youth, both in classrooms and in communities, and how educators in Pittsburgh are helping to remake learning for a new generation of students. Click here for all the details on how to take advantage of this opportunity to promote your school.

News From Around the State and Nation

Education advocates rally in Harrisburg

http://articles.philly.com/2013-10-01/news/42539843_1_districts-school-funding-chief-education-officer

Legislation to replace property tax with income and sales taxes defeated

http://www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/20131001_ap_98100951b5b744e2aaccfeec5155756.html#J4Cswqe8rJvfquHp.99

Legislation requiring online courses comes out of Education Committee

http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2013/10/bill_requiring_public_schools.html

Review of online schools provides further evidence of poor performance

<http://www.politico.com/story/2013/09/cyber-schools-flunk-but-tax-money-keeps-flowing-97375.html#ixzz2fzLA8bHz>

Charter school reform bill passes House and moves to Senate

<http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/news/education/pa-bill-proposes-review-of-charter-school-funding-704864/#ixzz2fzOdG0vn>

What does the government shutdown mean to your district?

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2013/10/the_shutdown_and_education_you.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-TW

Proposed bill would create website to improve school budget transparency

http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2013/09/pa_lawmaker_proposes_to_create.html