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April 07, 2010

## Change the Conversation on Education

By [Christopher Chantrill](#)

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It's time for conservatives to go Alinsky on education. It's time for a fresh line of attack.

Diane Ravitch has given up on [school](#) choice. Her latest book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, tells the story of her change of heart. You can read a quickie version in [The Wall Street Journal](#) or [The Washington Post](#).

Ravitch doesn't like charter [schools](#) because they don't seem to make much of a difference. And testing? President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act has made things worse, encouraging "states to lower their standards

and make false claims of progress."

"It is time to change course," Ravitch writes. She recommends more credentials for teachers, "principals who are master teachers ... superintendents who are experienced educators ... assessments that gauge students' understanding" rather than "guessing," and so on.

She sounds like Arthur Call. He pushed for [high schools](#) "under the leadership of friendly and large-spirited men and women." They would make students "socially and serviceably efficient." In 1909.

Why in the world would anyone, then or now, think that a government [high school](#) with jobs-for-life teachers would generate friendly and large-spirited leadership, or attract master teachers?

Obviously "we" need good people to teach in our schools. The question remains in 2010 as in 1910: How? How do you organize a good educational experience? How do you correct failure?

The answer from the educated class is always the royal "we," as in:

"We should" stop using the term "failing schools" to describe schools where test scores are low.

That "we should" always seems to mean another administrative [government](#) program, conceived and administered by the educated class. Again.

There was once a teacher who really made a difference. His name was Jaime Escalante.

Remember Jaime Escalante? They made a movie about him. Now he's dead, and in [The Wall Street Journal](#) last week, Cato Institute's [Andrew Coulson](#) celebrated his outstanding record at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles.

Jaime Escalante showed that you could teach inner-city kids math. He also showed that the education system didn't give a damn.

In any other field, his methods would have been widely copied. Instead, Escalante's success was resented. And while the teachers union contract limited class sizes to 35, Escalante could not bring himself to turn students away, packing 50 or more into a room and still helping them to excel. This

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United States Census 2010

weakened the union's bargaining position, so it complained.

So what did the school district do? In 1990, it "stripped [Escalante] of his chairmanship" of the school math department. Escalante retired and went back to his native Bolivia.

I have a challenge for Diane Ravitch and for the Obamis teeing up for another try at education reform: Show us why things would be any different after the next round of your brilliant "we shoulds."

The record is clear. Government's interest in education has always been to produce nice, conformable Kates. Condorcet, the French *philosophe*, wanted state education to make the rabble into good citizens that would support the Republic. The German Humboldt wanted to raise up Prussian soldiers that could beat the French. Horace Mann, the father of the "common school," wanted centralized bureaucratic education management to cut the crime rate.

It gets worse. In his book *Market Education: The Unknown History*, Cato's Andrew Coulson shows what government education is good at. It is really good at creating conflict.

Far from bringing citizens together, the endless succession of confrontations precipitated by state-run schooling has consistently torn communities apart. Public schools, by their very nature, attempt to force consensus on many issues where it is neither possible nor even desirable -- issues such as the role of religion in education or the interpretation of a nation's history.

We saw this recently when the conservative textbook committee in Texas scandalized liberals everywhere by daring to force their conservative notions upon the textbooks purchased for Texas public schools.

It is time for conservatives to raise our game on education. Here's a brilliant idea. Forget the conservative critique and the argument from freedom. Let's shame liberals by critiquing their education system from a liberal perspective.

We can use the argument from equality: How can liberals support a system that has always screwed the poor?

We can use the argument from liberation: How can a system that forces every child to attend a prison-like school, complete with lock-downs and metal detectors, be a celebration of liberation from oppressive social structures?

We can use the argument from creativity: How can young people develop their creativity from a system that kicks out the really creative teachers like Jaime Escalante?

Finally, there's the argument from postmodernism: How can a government school system do anything other than mouth the self-serving narrative of the governing elite?

Let's exploit the disillusion of education experts like Diane Ravitch. Let's change the conversation on education.

*Christopher Chantrill is a frequent contributor to American Thinker. See his [roadtothemiddleclass.com](http://roadtothemiddleclass.com) and [usgovernmentspending.com](http://usgovernmentspending.com). His *Road to the Middle Class* is forthcoming.*

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