

Ravitch answers Gates

By Valerie Strauss

In a paean to Bill Gates, [Newsweek's Jonathan Alter](#) calls [Diane Ravitch](#) the Microsoft founder's "chief adversary."

It's the world's richest (or second richest) man vs. an education historian and New York University research professor.

Gates, through his philanthropic foundation, [has invested billions of dollars](#) in education experiments and now has a pivotal role in reform efforts. Ravitch, the author of the bestselling *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, has become the most vocal opponent of the Obama administration's education policy. She says Gates is backing the wrong initiatives and harming public schools.

In the Newsweek piece, Gates poses some questions aimed at Ravitch. I asked her to answer them. Below are the questions Gates asked, in bold, and the answers, in italics, that Ravitch provided in an email.

Gates: "Does she like the status quo?"

Ravitch: "No, I certainly don't like the status quo. I don't like the attacks on teachers, I don't like the attacks on the educators who work in our schools day in and day out, I don't like the phony solutions that are now put forward that won't improve our schools at all. I am not at all content with the quality of American education in general, and I have expressed my criticisms over many years, long before Bill Gates decided to make education his project. I think American children need not only testing in basic skills, but an education that includes the arts, literature, the sciences, history, geography, civics, foreign languages, economics, and physical education.

"I don't hear any of the corporate reformers expressing concern about the way standardized testing narrows the curriculum, the way it rewards convergent thinking and punishes divergent thinking, the way it stamps out creativity and originality. I don't hear any of them worried that a generation will grow up ignorant of history and the workings of government. I don't hear any of them putting up \$100 million to make sure that every child has the chance to learn to play a musical instrument. All I hear from them is a demand for higher test scores and a demand to tie teachers' evaluations to those test scores. That is not going to improve education."

Gates: "Is she sticking up for decline?"

Ravitch: "Of course not! If we follow Bill Gates' demand to judge teachers by test scores, we will see stagnation, and he will blame it on teachers. We will see stagnation because a relentless focus on test scores in reading and math will inevitably narrow the curriculum only to what is tested. This is not good education.

"Last week, he said in a speech that teachers should not be paid more for experience and graduate degrees. I wonder why a man of his vast wealth spends so much time trying to figure out how to cut teachers' pay. Does he truly believe that our nation's schools will get better if we have teachers with less education and less experience? Who does he listen to? He needs to get himself a smarter set of advisers.

"Of course, we need to make teaching a profession that attracts and retains wonderful teachers, but the current anti-teacher rhetoric emanating from him and his confreres demonizes and demoralizes even the best teachers. I have gotten letters from many teachers who tell me that they have had it, they have never felt such disrespect; and I have also met young people who tell me that the current poisonous atmosphere has persuaded them not to become teachers. Why doesn't he make speeches thanking the people who work so hard day after day, educating our nation's children, often in difficult working conditions, most of whom earn less than he pays his secretaries at Microsoft?"

Gates: "Does she really like 400-page [union] contracts?"

Ravitch: "Does Bill Gates realize that every contract is signed by two parties: management and labor? Why does management agree to 400-page contracts? I don't know how many pages should be in a union contract, but I do believe that teachers should be evaluated by competent supervisors before they

receive tenure (i.e., the right to due process).

"Once they have due process rights, they have the right to a hearing when someone wants to fire them. The reason for due process rights is that teachers in the past have been fired because of their race, their religion, their sexual orientation, or because they did not make a political contribution to the right campaign, or for some other reason not related to their competence.

"Gates probably doesn't know this, but 50% of all those who enter teaching leave within the first five years. Our biggest problem is not getting rid of deadbeats, but recruiting, retaining, and supporting teachers. We have to replace 300,000 teachers (of nearly 4 million) every single year. What are his ideas about how to **do this?**"

Gates: "Does she think all those 'dropout factories' are lonely?"

Ravitch: "This may come as a surprise to Bill Gates, but the schools he refers to as "dropout factories" enroll large numbers of high-need students. Many of them don't speak or read English; many of them enter high school three and four grade levels behind. He assumes the schools created the problems the students have; but in many cases, the schools he calls "dropout factories" are filled with heroic teachers and administrators trying their best to help kids who have massive learning problems.

"Unless someone from the district or the state actually goes into the schools and does a diagnostic evaluation, it is unfair to stigmatize the schools with the largest numbers of students who are English-language learners, special-education, and far behind in their learning. That's like saying that an oncologist is not as good a doctor as a dermatologist because so many of his patients die. Mr. Gates, first establish the risk factor before throwing around the labels and closing down **schools.**"

Gates: "If there's some other magic way to reduce the dropout rate, we're all ears."

Ravitch: "Here's the sad truth: There is no magic way to reduce the dropout rate. It involves looking at the reasons students leave school, as well as the conditions in which they live. The single biggest correlate with low academic achievement (contrary to the film *Waiting for Superman*) is poverty. Children who grow up in poverty get less medical care, worse nutrition, less exposure to knowledge and vocabulary, and are more likely to be exposed to childhood diseases, violence, drugs, and abuse. They are more likely to have relatives who are incarcerated. They are more likely to live in economic insecurity, not knowing if there is enough money for a winter coat or food or housing. This affects their academic performance. They tend to have lower attendance and to be sick more than children whose parents are well-off.

"The United States today has a child poverty rate of over 20%, and it is rising. This is a national scandal. The film compares us to Finland, but doesn't mention that their child poverty rate is under 5%. Mr. Gates, why don't you address the root causes of low academic achievement, which is not 'bad teachers,' but poverty. It won't involve magic, but it would certainly require the best thinking that you can assemble. And if anyone can afford to do it, surely you can.

I don't mean to suggest that schools as they are now are just fine: They are not. Every school should have a rich and balanced curriculum; many don't. Every child should look forward to coming to school, for his or her favorite studies and activities, but those are the very studies and activities likely to lose out to endless test preparation. Schools need many things: Some need more resources and better conditions for teaching and learning; all need a stable, experienced staff. Teachers need opportunities for intellectual growth and collegiality. Tests should be used diagnostically, to help students and teachers, not to allocate bonuses and punishments. Teachers, principals, administrators, parents, and local communities should collaborate to create caring communities, and that's happening in many places. I know that none of this is the "magic way" that you are looking for, Mr. Gates, but any educator will tell you that education is a slow, laborious process that requires good teachers, able leadership, willing students, a strong curriculum, and willing students. None of that happens magically."

I also asked Ravitch about her reaction to the strange comparison Alter made in calling her "the Whittaker Chambers of school reform." She wrote:

"I wondered if Alter knows much about history. Whittaker Chambers renounced Communism and embraced American patriotism. Was Alter suggesting that Bill Gates is the Alger Hiss of school reform? I thought it was a weird analogy.

