

Aug. 29, 2007

Q&A: Diane Ravitch

Author and professor
ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 "What is Ready?" cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Diane Ravitch, a former U.S. assistant secretary of education, is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institute and member of the Koret Task Force of K-12 education. A professor at New York University, she is the author of numerous articles and books, including *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, and the new *EdSpeak: A Glossary of Education Terms, Buzzwords, and Jargon*.

Editor: What is "ready"? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

Ravitch: The skills needed for college and work in the 21st century are essentially the same skills needed in the 20th century, but with the addition of technological know-how.

Students still need to know how to read critically, so they can separate fact from opinion, and speculation from hard evidence. They need to be able to weigh opinions and evaluate what they read and hear and see, so as to reach good judgments.

They still need to have a secure knowledge of history, both American and world history. They still need a solid grounding in the essentials of civic education, especially an understanding of the way our government works, our Constitution, our laws, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. They still need a deep knowledge of our political history and contemporary politics, so they can understand the events that affect our lives, have a knowledge base about major issues, and know how to research the origins of conflicts in our society and in the world.

They still need a strong knowledge of mathematics and science, so they can understand how the world works and how to explain natural phenomena and to estimate the significance of events. They still need to appreciate and participate in the arts. They still need the knowledge to keep themselves and their families healthy. They still need command of a foreign language.

What they also need -- and by now, almost all have mastered -- are the skills involved in using new technologies of communication.

Editor: How well are schools preparing today's students for tomorrow's workplace challenges?

Ravitch: It varies. They are trying but are fighting a vapid and ignorant popular culture that diverts young people's energies and attention from the important goals that they should be pursuing at this time.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

Ravitch: For some, it is; for others, it is not.

Editor: What can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching "readiness" skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

Ravitch: First, agree on what the goals are. Second, reassure educators that the goals are not a dramatic departure from what they know how to do. Third, focus on reaching these goals for greater numbers of students, with greater efficacy.
