

EDUCATOR PRAISES VERMONT'S DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF SCHOOLS, WARNS AGAINST PRIVATIZATION

ALICIA FREESE

OCT. 27, 2013

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Diane Ravitch signs copies of her most recent book, "Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools," at Dartmouth College's Hopkins Center for the Arts. Photo by Alicia Freese/VTDigger

HANOVER, N.H. — Diane Ravitch, a prominent figure in the education policy world, was in the Upper Valley on Wednesday evening to talk about a movement she says is endangering public education.

Vermont has proven largely impervious to those threats, Ravitch told the crowd of educators, lawmakers, school board members, and other community members.

Ravitch is probably best known for doing a very public 180-degree turn on her stance toward the school reform movement. As an assistant secretary of education for President George H.W. Bush and as a developer of national education assessments for President Bill Clinton, Ravitch supported the creation of charter schools to supplant failing public schools. She also supported standardized tests and tying teacher evaluations to those tests.

Then in 2010, Ravitch did an about-face, publishing a book in which she declared the movement a failure that's been undermining the nation's public school system.

Ravitch, currently an education historian and a research professor at New York University, recently published another book, "Reign of Error: The Hoax of the

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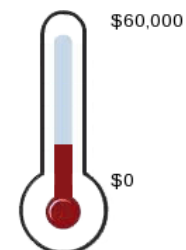
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Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools.” Ravitch has been traveling and speaking extensively about her central message in “Reign of Error” — wealthy corporations have co-opted public education by promoting the misguided notion that public schools are failing.

Wednesday’s event, held at Dartmouth College, was co-sponsored by the Vermont School Boards Association, Dartmouth’s Nelson A. Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences, and the Teacher Education Program.

Prior to the event, Ravitch dined at the Norwich Inn, along with a number of the state’s education policy makers, including state legislators, incoming education secretary Rebecca Holcombe, members of the state’s teachers union, the Vermont NEA, the Vermont School Boards Association, the Vermont Principals’ Association and the Vermont Superintendents Association.

VTDigger interviewed Ravitch in the inn’s foyer after dinner. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

VTD: I ran into a state legislator on my way here. She’s coming to your talk, and I asked her what she would ask you. She said she would ask you for your No. 1 recommendation on what Vermont can do to improve its public education system.

Ravitch: Show incredible appreciation to teachers and parents about what a great job Vermont is doing. There’s too much fault-finding.

The first thing is not to feel complacent, but on the other hand recognize that Vermont is a really successful state, probably the most successful state in the country in terms of the [high school] graduation rate. There’s a wonderful climate here for education, and people really care about it. What seems to be different here in Vermont is the strong sense of community and recognition that public education is the backbone of democracy.

Vermont seems to be the strong exception to what’s happening, the national trends.

That matters because there are so many places around the country where public education is being ripped apart and kids are being horribly underfunded, particularly in urban districts.

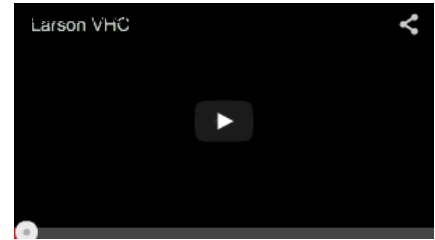
Vermont seems to be the strong exception to what’s happening, the national trends. For me it’s very gratifying to come to a place that feels a little like

Finland, and Finland is the wonder of the world in terms of the education system, and I sense some of the same feeling of community that I felt there.

VTD: There are fierce battles around town meeting time, when towns are passing their budgets, and the property tax rates, which are paying for the schools, can be a huge source of contention.

Ravitch: But you know, that’s democracy and what’s happened in place after place in this country, particularly in cities, is an elimination of democracy. You have cities like Chicago and New York and Boston where the mayor controls the school board and communities, if they are lucky they get paid attention to, but in many cases they are not listened to at all. Here there is a strong sense of, the town matters, the town makes the decision — there is a very strong democratic control of education and that’s terribly important.

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VTD: There's one town, North Bennington, and this I think stems from that devotion you're talking about, where they've decided to turn their public school private because they are concerned that somewhere down the road the state is going to mandate that small schools be consolidated and they'll be targeted for that.

I'm wondering what you think about that because I know how you feel about the for-profit charter school model, but how do you feel about a whole town going private?

Ravitch: I think it's a terrible idea, actually.

VTD: Why?

Ravitch: Because it's privatization. It's taking the public schools private, and there are districts around the country that are doing this but they are doing it as a way of cutting the budget and getting themselves out of public education. They see it as almost a voucher scheme.

VTD: But if it's still the community that's operating the school? What's the danger there, if it's still community-run?

Ravitch: If it becomes a pattern across the state, then we do lose the sense of we're all in this together. You can't just say, 'Well it works in Bennington, we'll leave it there.' Other communities will say if Bennington does it, why can't we do it, too? And at some point you look around and say, gee, what happened to public education? We don't have it anymore.

VTD: Something that a lot of businesses are talking about and something the governor has talked a lot about is the fact that there's sort of a disconnect between the graduates coming out of our high schools and our colleges and the skills and needs of the businesses in the state. There's a lot of concern about kids leaving the state because they can't find job opportunities in Vermont.

The governor has made it a priority to focus on the STEM fields and trying to align high schools and tech centers to match the skills that students have with the businesses in Vermont, and I wonder what you think about that approach?

Ravitch: Well, I certainly think that all students today need STEM skills, but very often I've heard companies complain that they can't find high school graduates with the right set of skills, but what they really mean is they want to hire people at low wages with the right set of skills. So they outsource their jobs to China because they can find that set of skills where the people work for \$20 a day, and I don't think American workers will work for \$20 a day.

I think it's very important as long as, there's a new acronym called STEAM, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics, because the arts are terribly important.

So you have to be clear when you approach that problem about whether they are just looking for low-wage workers or whether they truly can't find the people who have the skills. I have discovered lots of people of who have the skills who can't find jobs.

But I wouldn't do anything to discourage the governor's emphasis on STEM. I think it's very important as long as, there's a new acronym called STEAM, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and

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Mathematics, because the arts are terribly important.

VTD: Vermont has signed up for the Common Core Standards, and that's a concern for teachers and schools in terms of how they are going to adjust. I know you have deep reservations about the standards, but I'm wondering what advice you'd offer?

Ravitch: I have a lot of reservations about the Common Core, I think it's been moved much too rapidly and its not ready for prime time. It's never been field tested. The few states that have used the Common Core test have found that the level of the test questions was far beyond the reasonable ability of students.

I'm very concerned about the lack of teacher preparation, lack of student preparation, lack of curriculum, lack of resources. It's also extremely expensive to switch to Common Core because all the testing will be done online, which means all students will have to access to some form of computer to take the test and every school will have to have the bandwidth to support the computers.

VTD: So what would you say to Vermont teachers who at this point don't have a choice? They have to adapt to this.

Ravitch: I'd say do whatever you can to delay the testing. Try to get at least a three-year moratorium, maybe a five- year moratorium on the testing and adapt the standards, make the standards work for you. I think they are particularly bad in the early grades. Most early childhood education experts say they are developmentally inappropriate.

VTD: Could Vermont do that?

Ravitch: Why not? Who's to say you can't do it?

VTD: Wouldn't we forgo federal funding?

Ravitch: Why? The federal government has no right to tell you that you have to do Common Core. It's against the law. The federal government created these two testing consortia but the law actually says the federal Department of Education is prohibited from influencing the curriculum or instruction. So it would be illegal for the federal government ...

VTD: But they have tied funding to the adoption of the standards, haven't they?

Ravitch: That was probably illegal too, and Arne Duncan keeps insisting he had nothing to do with it.

VTD: What's the danger if Vermont puts the testing in place and scores come back way lower than we are used to?

Ravitch: It will create an anti-testing movement. That's what happens. People don't get angry at the school, they don't get angry at the teacher, they get angry at the test and the state department of education.

VTD: But from your perspective, that might be a good thing, right?

Ravitch: Yeah, sure.

VTD: *I hear you saying standardized testing isn't the best way to judge how any given public school is doing. What data or what statistics do think it is important for a state to be looking at if it's trying to evaluate its public school system?*

Ravitch: I would look at it a different way. I wouldn't ask how well a school is doing. I would ask, are we doing a good job of providing good schools in every neighborhood? Have we made sure that we have the right resources; is there a good arts program at every school; is there a foreign language program at every school.

VTD: *Beyond looking at a school and saying, OK, you've got an arts program in place, you've got a robust math program in place, how do you gauge success?*

Ravitch: Just take Finland as an example — they have no standardized testing at all. How do they gauge success? They put highly qualified people — I'm not talking people who have five weeks of training — but they have people who have excellent preparation in every classroom and they have excellent principals and schools have the resources they need for the kids they enroll. And their goal is equity.

VTD: *We haven't really seen any signs of the charter school movement coming to the state. Is this something we should be worried about or are we different because we don't have urban settings with high levels of poverty?*

Ravitch: I think they have bypassed you, but that doesn't mean they always will. I've been getting letters from Idaho that there's now a big push to bring charter schools to Idaho. And Idaho is in some ways like Vermont in that it's a very dispersed and rural population. Why in the world would anyone want charter schools in Idaho? But there are you are, there's a big multi-billion dollar foundation that's making a big push for this in Idaho. But I think where the charter school movement is most successful is where there's a failure narrative and I don't think Vermont has any reason to have a failure narrative. You have incredibly successful schools.

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COMMENTS

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Sandra Bettis

October 27, 2013 at 12:37 pm

privatization never works – in any field. if we privatize our schools, only the rich will be educated. just like healthcare in this country – 45 million don't have it thanks to the (privatized) ins cos.

[Reply](#)

Robert Roper

October 28, 2013 at 3:41 pm

<http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2013/10/16/richer-americans-like-living-with-poorer-people-until-they-have-kids/>

Actually, a recent study showed how the current structure of the public school system (assigning kids to schools based on where they live) actually contributes to the growing divide between rich and poor. The rich folks all move into the wealthy neighborhoods with good schools, leaving the poor behind. Breaking down those artificial walls through school choice will actually lead to more diverse neighborhoods and more economically integrated classrooms.

[Reply](#)

Bill Bissmich

October 29, 2013 at 12:18 am

And when ACA kicks in, 90 million won't have insurance. Good thing we have a government to keep screwing things up.

[Reply](#)

rosemarie jackowski

October 27, 2013 at 3:19 pm

I have followed the work of Ravitch for a long time. I often disagree with her views.

I started teaching in 1957. I have taught almost everything in almost every kind of school...public, private, religious, in Vermont, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Florida, Texas, K-12...also some speaking at colleges. Recently, I have participated in blogs about Ravitch's latest book.

In my view the system as it now exists is in desperate need of change. A question I would have asked Ravitch...since 12% of Vermont K-12 students are in Independent schools, this would be a good place to use as a model around the country. Why not? The Vermont Independent schools are a success...Does anyone deny that? Many of the traditional schools are not functioning. Does anyone deny that? Imagine how bad things are when a family is pushed to putting a wire on a 9 year-old boy to expose abuse by school staff.

Ravitch seems to believe that the schools should remain as they are because any change will bring an end to publicly financed education for all. That is incorrect. It is a fallacy – black and white thinking. There are many different models for education. The old way is not working in many places. Sometimes change is good.

I congratulate the citizens of North Bennington.

[Reply](#)

Janice Prindle

October 28, 2013 at 9:43 am

And in 1957 I started attending school, and it was pretty dismal, back then. Now I'm a retired teacher and I know my classroom, like those of my colleagues, was a far better place for students than the ones I was consigned to. Schools have changed, for all sorts of reasons, over the past 50 years, from racial integration (still a work in progress) to new understandings, based on brain science, of how people learn. Schools also now include all sorts of students who would never have attended public school back in 1957: special ed students, whose families were left to cope on their own, successfully or not at all, based on their personal resources. We now graduate a much higher percentage of the real school age population, reflecting that public education is and should be truly open to all. That is at least as good a measure of success as any standardized test.

Of course there are always ways educators and administrators and families can

improve their schools, which will continue to change as our world changes. But I disagree with you that our schools are in such desperate shape, at least most of them, and certainly not in Vermont. (I'm not familiar with the "wired" student you mention, but abusive individuals can be found in private schools and other workplaces as well, and shouldn't be the basis for developing state and federal school policy.)

Most of the problems with schools could be solved by a national will to fund them properly, as opposed to funding the standardized testing boondoggle and now the Common Core scandal of a federal curriculum. Racism is at the root of much of the poverty that cripples schools, either directly through their lack of taxpayer dollars or indirectly through the stresses on families with school-aged children. If real income for working and middle class families was returned to the levels of the 50s and 60s and 70s, not just for whites but for all Americans, schools would have far more students coming prepared to learn, with active family support. As it is, the real crisis being the transfer of wealth in this country and the chasm of inequality, we are likely to see more problems in schools.

Truly private independent schools will always be with us, but they are a poor model to follow for public education, because they rely on a self-selected student body and financial security. North Bennington, though, strikes me as more of a hybrid in the Vermont tradition. We have many technically private schools that are actually public: their students all come from area towns that can't support their own high schools, whose taxpayer dollars pay for the tuition.

Representatives of those towns sit on the private boards, though not through public elections; but the accountability really comes through the publicly elected school boards that will approve, or not approve, the tuition. That could work in North Bennington, as it has worked in Thetford Academy, for instance, since 1819, with no threat to local control that I consider essential to education. On that we do agree.

[Reply](#)

Julie Hansen

October 27, 2013 at 5:49 pm

All of us in education respect some aspect of Ravitch's research and commentary. I do hope that she, and others, do not link Vermont's independent schools with her description of private schools.

Parents and alumni parents serve on the boards of independent schools, along with community members, not corporate leaders of industry.

[Reply](#)

Al Salzman

October 27, 2013 at 10:04 pm

What the hell is going on? Is there a conspiracy of silence among the elite educational reformers about the radical (root) cause of our educational failures – the obscene inequality of wealth in our society? In the interview with Diane Ravitch there is the usual song and dance about the usefulness or the lack thereof of standardized testing, the value of charter schools, or a common core curriculum, but not one word about the systemic cognitive impairment of children raised in poverty and cultural deprivation. There have been studies up the yazoo, for decades showing that the financial predicament of low wage families, with it's attendant stress, anxiety and exhaustion, seriously atrophies a kid's cognitive abilities crippling his readiness to learn. A recent government agency declared that 80% of American families are experiencing financial insecurity. How can

any educator possibly ignore factoring in these data in any agenda for educational reform. Any such discussion is bulls–t without mentioning these crucial social inequities. If we are sincere in our efforts to improve our kids abilities in school we should fight for the establishment of a living wage for their parents.

[Reply](#)

Fred Woogmaster

October 28, 2013 at 5:47 am

” If we are sincere in our efforts to improve our kids abilities in school we should fight for the establishment of a living wage for their parents.”

Absolutely! And then some!!

The disparity between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in relation to equal education is obscene and growing greater, disintegrating the very process of democracy – child by child.

[Reply](#)

Janice Prindle

October 28, 2013 at 9:45 am

YES!!! You are spot on.

[Reply](#)

[Thomas S. Martin](#)

October 28, 2013 at 8:06 am

I would like to extend a warm invitation to Ms. Ravitch to visit The Village School of North Bennington or any of the other independent town academies in Vermont that having been serving a public mission with independent quality for over two hundred years. As with all town academies, we do not separate the ‘have’ and ‘have nots’. Like all town academies, The Village School of North Bennington serves ALL children of our sending towns as public schools do. Nearly 50% of the children enrolled in VSNB this year qualify under federal guidelines for free or reduced lunch. Our independence gives us a unique governance structure that permits our school to creatively respond to the misguided initiatives from both state and federal agencies that Ms. Ravitch expresses such strong objections to.

[Reply](#)

Fred Woogmaster

October 28, 2013 at 9:17 am

Mr. Martin: “...any of the other independent town academies” – is there a directory or list? Thanks.

Your website is most impressive; it sounds like children are fortunate to be students at The Village School.

[Reply](#)

David T. Gross

October 28, 2013 at 9:14 am

Ms. Ravitch is another voice crying in the wilderness that is the incorporation of our public education system. Unfortunately, I am not holding my breath that she will have any effect at all on the situation re in Vermont. Each time the classroom teachers finally are able to make their point that the present standardized testing regime is fatally flawed, a new “improved” system is trotted out and the process is repeated once again, and again, and.....

I appreciate Ms. Ravitch praising the educational system of her host, but I must point out that VT Digger reports that economic surveys of local employers show that our schools are graduating students who require massive training in order to prepare them for low-skill entry positions (EB-5 and the NE Kingdom). Ask any experienced high school teacher about the group of “mathematical miracles” who receive their degrees each spring, and thus give our state its so-admirable high graduation rate.

One of the reasons I think that so few Vermonters have voiced their concerns about our massive statewide testing program is that no one, no where will give them the tally of just how many dollars and how many classroom hours are spent preparing for, administering, and evaluating these tests each and every year.

Anyone? Any numbers? Didn't think so!

[Reply](#)

Justin Boland

October 28, 2013 at 12:45 pm

“And at some point you look around and say, gee, what happened to public education? We don't have it anymore.”

Right...and we'd have community-run education that is open the public...so what am I not understanding? Does she just not know anything about the Bennington situation beyond the question she was posed here?

[Reply](#)

Angela Bennett

October 28, 2013 at 3:46 pm

And yet, ALL the children who I know who were taken out of Vermont public schools and sent to private schools, funded by their parents, some were friends of mine, have most definitely gotten a better education than my children did. And, they got better SAT scores and they got into better colleges. (Note: two of my children have been tested as gifted and were bored to death in school, all 13 years of it.)

[Reply](#)

Sandra Bettis

October 28, 2013 at 9:45 pm

and that just makes the divide between rich and poor worse. we need to find a way to improve our public schools.

[Reply](#)

Dave Bellini

October 28, 2013 at 5:42 pm

What's the rap against private schools? Can't Vermont have good public AND private schools? If private schooling is so terrible why do many parents who are lucky enough to afford to choose, send their kids to private schools? Private schools are OK at the collegiate level. Isn't Rice a good school for example? I don't understand the argument. If

I were a parent I would want to send my kid to the best school in the area, public or private. Why not figure out a way to let parents do that? Parents will act in their kids best interest. Give them a choice.

[Reply](#)

Sandra Bettis

October 28, 2013 at 9:47 pm

the problem is that the choice is limited by income.

[Reply](#)

Robert Roper

October 28, 2013 at 10:29 pm

Not in Vermont's tuitioning towns, Sandra. In those 93 towns where the money (roughly \$13k) follows every child, rich and poor alike, the poor families are the ones who are empowered. It's only within the government assigned system where poor kids have no options while their wealthier peers can either pay private tuition or move to a more expensive neighborhood with a better school. If you don't want choice to be limited to income, you need to embrace vouchers.

[Reply](#)

Janice Prindle

October 29, 2013 at 3:13 pm

Schools are not like restaurants or other services where you can just shop around and pick a "good one." Apart from practical issues like transportation that would limit choices anyway, and the very mediocre track record of most charter schools— often organized around fads and gimmicks, rather than solid educational philosophies—vouchers would undermine the very idea of school reflecting a community commitment to its children, and developing a relationship between the school and the community, as the best public schools are able to do.

Education is not a commodity and children are not products. Our learning as social animals grows out of a network of relationships. So it's not surprising that only two factors consistently correlate with academic achievement: the socioeconomic background of the student (which influences the amount of time a child can spend with parents) and the socioeconomic background of the school (which influences class sizes and the amount of individual time that students get from teachers). Successful students come from financially secure and stable families who can and do support their learning in and out of school, and from school districts full of such students, which are better able to pay for enough teachers to have small class sizes. In short: relationships, at home and at school.

If we want these good relationships for all children, we need to have the political will to address the huge income gap that's been growing in our society over the past 30 years, reducing even the working class and the middle class to a condition of insecurity, and swelling the ranks of the poor. As part of that,

we obviously need to address the racism that fuels much of this inequality, especially when it comes to schools. Check out MeasureofAmerica.org for the correlation between your zip code and your educational achievement.

Public schools can work well if the money we waste on testing can be put towards education itself. There's no need to create a shopping mall of private "schools" that don't work any better than the ones we already have.

[Reply](#)

Julie Hansen

October 29, 2013 at 3:54 pm

There is another factor in student achievement beyond the socio-economic status. Teacher expectation has a great deal to do with student achievement and this has been tested time and time again.

Vermont continues to link low achievement with low income; if we were to insert a racial category, or a gender determination in place of the word poor, it would not be so easy to use it with such ease. Under certain circumstances it becomes a specious argument. There have always been poor students who attended schools, many of whom became highly successful because of the dedication their teachers.

[Reply](#)

rosemarie jackowski

October 29, 2013 at 4:07 pm

Thanks, Julie....very well-said. I, too, am bothered by the stereotyping of poor kids. I know too many 'poor' kids who knew how to read before they went to school.

[Reply](#)

Janice Prindle

October 29, 2013 at 4:50 pm

I don't know how anyone can speak for all the educators in Vermont to say that they do this (expect less of students based on socio-economic status). Some teachers may; I would argue most do not, based on my experience, but who can say?

Of course we all have had students who overcame all sorts of challenges (not just poverty!) due to their own motivation and the dedication of their teachers. We have also all had students from families (regardless of whether both parents are in the picture), struggling to put food on the table, essentially absent from the child's life in any meaningful way, certainly not around to see that homework gets done, or model the value of reading instead of television, or take the child to museums and plays and enriching experiences that give classmates the edge in vocabulary, background knowledge, all of those elements that set the stage for learning. All too often those children were not able to stay after school and get extra help, either, because their parents' work hours required that they go home on the bus, or that they go home to babysit younger siblings. And such a student in a class of 25, 30 or 40 students (in some of the poorest urban schools) is simply not going to get as much attention and support in class as he or she needs, it simply is not physically possible in terms of time and often even

classroom space. And any teacher can tell you that stress of any sort has a crippling impact on learning; children fully experience the stresses that poverty and insecurity put upon their families.

No student is merely a statistic and doomed to a statistically- predicted outcome. But public policy has to be based upon significant factors, large patterns, not individual scenarios. When you look at the data over time and across larger groups, the pattern emerges: the more money (translate that into: financial security, family stability, school resources and conditions for personal attention), the more educational success. We ignore this at our peril, and I do mean peril.

[Reply](#)

Angela Bennett

October 29, 2013 at 6:01 pm

I have lived in Vermont for nine years. During that time, my wealthier friends have, at some point, moved their children into private schools. Lucky children! Our wealthy friends who chose to keep their children in the public schools told me time and again how they would “demand” a certain teacher for their child, AND get that certain teacher! After hearing this story the first time, I paid close attention to whether or not this demand of a certain teacher actually worked and *who* it worked for. Let’s just say it didn’t work for me, but it did work for my wealthy friends. The few times it did not, they would pull their children out of the public school. Hmmmm...

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Julie Hansen

October 29, 2013 at 10:30 pm

I agree that we cannot make public policy based on anecdote; nor can we make it based on bias. I will be interested to see which students on the new Personal Learning Plans are geared toward vocational training and which are geared for an academic future. Does this really further democracy? Or does it reinforce plutocracy? Let parents decide their children’s future.

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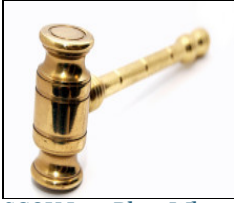
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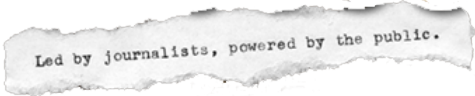
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