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Educated nation?

By [Harold Levy](#)

The extraordinary gulf between science and education was on sharp display this week. The *New York Times*' [Schools for Tomorrow](#) conference and NBC's [Education Nation](#) took place within a few days of each other, both in New York City. The *Times*' conference emphasized the tremendous strides that have been made in educational technology—particularly in online courseware and delivery systems—while the NBC conference led with the most extraordinary photos of neuron development in the infant human brain. At each conference, however, there was a disconnect in the contributions by politicians and leaders of our educational institutions.

Notwithstanding the exceptional advances of science on display, it was as though the political and educational policy debates were taking place in two different universes. The 10 sitting governors who were assembled as a single panel for Education Nation—more governors collected than at any time since meeting of the [National Governors Association](#), according to moderator Brian Williams—debated everything from budget reductions for education to the merits of the Obama administration's decision to wave NCLB's Annual Yearly Progress requirements. The power of the brain research and the potential of new technology to revolutionize teaching and learning simply hadn't gotten through to the governors. The two conferences left me with a strong sense that our national conversation about education is irrelevant and quaint.

To any objective observer, the facts underlying the debate had changed radically—but word had somehow failed to spread across the hall to the ostensible leaders of the political debate. It has long been known that [early childhood is a critical time for brain development](#), but the extraordinary photos of neuron development captured by [Patricia Kuhl](#), of the University of Washington, made this all the more clear. [Using cutting-edge magnetic resonance technology, she showed](#) that in the first months of an infant's development, the brain synapses grow from frail connectors between the speaking and listening parts of the brain into super-rich highways, and then they are “pruned” back—all through usage. If the infant brain isn't stimulated by usage in this key phase, neuron development is permanently lost. In short, Kuhl was proving graphically the “use-it-or-lose-it” model of brain development.

At the same time, the work of Harvard's [Jack Shonkoff](#) showed that if a child doesn't have a controlled, supportive environment in the early years, an overdose of stress can hinder the development of the brain and other organs. Taken together, we now have an explanation for how growing up poor in an unstimulating environment can permanently handicap a child's ability to learn.

Against this background, the governors offered the same old bromides: If only we could get rid of bad teachers, impose tougher standards and “do more with less,” all would be well. Only [Gov. Martin](#)

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[O'Malley](#) (D-Md.) offered a considered response, saying that “vilifying teachers” did nothing to address the issues currently confronting the country.

The thoughtful comments of the representatives of the Singaporean and Finnish education ministries stood in sharp contrast to the panel of governors. Both emphasized the need for society at large to treat teachers with respect, for each teacher to receive meaningful, relevant professional development, and for master practitioners to guide apprentices and encourage practices that stimulate student participation in learning.

To answer simplistic questions about whether technology was “successful,” the Singaporean and Finnish educators were constantly required to parse the questions: what do we mean by “success,” are standardized test scores the only measure that matters to us, do we intend also to include as metrics the fostering of inquisitive learners and creative innovators, or enabling the poorest citizens to compete educationally?

By contrast, the American approach seems primitive. We are playing Three Blind Mice to their Bach Cello Suites.

Education is a critical national need, and yet U.S. leaders seem oblivious to the fact that the Chinese have ever-growing numbers of Ph.D. students enrolled in our best universities, the Finns have superior literacy skills, and the Singaporeans routinely outscore us in math.

Not one of these countries has challenged the primacy of its teachers, curtailed its education budget so as to “make do with less,” or sought to replace its public schools with privately managed charters. At the same time, children who immigrate to the United States do worse on our standardized tests the longer they're in this country.

The sorry truth is emerging: increasingly, American culture is toxic to intellectual development. We aren't losing our “edge,” we are losing a generation.

In a sensible world, how to address that issue would take center-stage at the next debate among presidential candidates. The fact that two premier news agencies sponsored these conferences is cause for hope, but the response of our political leaders remains to be seen.

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