



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on September 17, 2012

N.Y. Times Education Confab Ends in Zero

After a full day of discussions about public education among a select group of establishment educators and allied think-tank types, the best recommendation they could all come up with is the need for more “effective teachers.” Not to be outdone by the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on Education, the *New York Times*, in its second annual conference held on September 13, decided to put its three cents in the ongoing discussions on public education which seem to have attracted the attention of the establishment cognitive elite.



Naturally, there was no criticism of the progressive curriculum which has destroyed academic excellence in the government schools. The focus was on teachers, who do not formulate the curriculum, but merely implement it. The *Times* statement about the conference made that clear:

The second annual Schools for Tomorrow conference will explore how government, the private sector, parents and others can develop the best teachers possible. Topics of discussion will include the changing role of the teacher, using technology more effectively, teacher training and professional development and more.

The entire conference was videotaped so that anyone with access to the Internet can actually view the discussions. Among the participants were several *New York Times* columnists who acted as moderators, as well as such establishment luminaries as Dennis Walcott, chancellor of New York’s public schools, who gave a rather cheerful report on the improvements being made in the city’s schools; Mark Edwards, superintendent of Mooreville, N.C., Graded School District where test scores are up. Somehow he was supposed to reveal some magic trick to the Mooreville success story; Aneesh Chopra, former chief technology officer for the United States, who opined that technology alone will not improve education; Pedro Noguera, professor of education at Columbia University, who jolted the audience by saying, “We have set some schools up for failure,” which received great applause; Lauren Saunders, head of the Rebecca School, who spoke of the joys of educating special needs kids. And others.

No one questioned the progressive curriculum. No one questioned the need for the federal government to be involved in education. In other words, the participants were all politically correct types who would stay as far away from John Taylor Gatto, Marva Collins, or Charlotte Iserbyt as possible. They didn’t even invite Taylor Mali, bestselling author of *What Teachers Make*, who has a lot to say about effective teaching. Indeed I found the following lines interesting in his book that focus on the importance of what teachers do in the first grade:

I started substitute teaching because I wanted to teach younger students. I wanted to see if I could make more of an impact in students’ lives if I got them into my class earlier, before they had learned bad habits. But the younger the students I taught — eventually worked my way down to sixth grade — the more I realized that the most important work to be done in education is with the



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youngest possible kids, the ones in primary school and pre-primary.

From what I understand, the evidence is overwhelming: when children have access to quality pre-primary education, the advantage they get is so great that their peers who were not as fortunate will never catch up. Never. Even if I had been the greatest teacher in the history of the world, by the time a student reached my sixth-grade class, the extent to which he or she could progress intellectually had been almost entirely determined nearly ten years earlier. No wonder teachers will never be able to make up for the work that parents have failed to do.

I've been saying this for years. If children are not taught to read with intensive phonics in the first grade, they will never be able to achieve educational excellence. Many of those children actually had very effective teachers who applied the worst teaching methods, forcing children to do the impossible: learn to read English as if it were Chinese. These teaching methods injure children's brains. But this kind of information is as forbidden at a *New York Times* education confab as the notion that government monopoly education is only fit for a socialist society.

Also participating in this *Times* confab was Kaya Henderson, chancellor of D.C. Public Schools, which has the worst reading scores in the country. What can she possibly tell us about effective teaching? In public education, principals and superintendents are chosen for their self-imposed ignorance. They must not have read books like *Why Johnny Can't Read*, or *Dumbing Us Down*, or *Is Public Education Necessary?* Another participant was Lori Breslow, director of the Teaching and Learning Laboratory at M.I.T. She admitted that she knew nothing about what is going on in K-12 public schools.

That is why these conferences are little else than exercises in skirting around the real problems that beset American education. So they amount to little more than polite dinner conversation in which no one is supposed to say anything that would upset anybody. That is why when Professor Noguera suggested that some schools are being deliberately set up for failure, there was applause from the audience. Apparently, the audience was ready and able to accept the real truth about public education if that were the actual purpose of the conference.

But every day we are confronted with the failures of the government schools. The *Boston Globe*, which is owned by the *New York Times*, reported on September 15: "Most students not proficient in writing, test finds." The report states:

Just a quarter of eighth and 12th grade students in the United States have solid writing skills, even when allowed to use spell-check and other computer word-processing tools, according to results of a national exam released Friday.

Twenty-seven percent of students at each grade level were able to write essays that were well-developed, organized, and had proper language and grammar — 3 percent were advanced and 24 percent were proficient. The remainder showed just partial mastery of these skills.... In 2007, 33 percent of eighth grade students scored at the proficient level, which represents solid writing skills, as did 24 percent at grade 12.

The results at both grade levels showed a continued achievement gap between white, black, Hispanic, and Asian students.

Obviously, writing skills are not improving. The fact that 75 percent of American students have poor writing skills makes one wonder how this nation is expected to compete with other nations in the global economy. There is no excuse for this failure. We not only know how to teach reading effectively, we also know how to teach writing. But our curriculum does not provide for effective teaching of these skills.



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Indeed, the most destructive philosophy that permeates primary education is the notion that accuracy is no longer essential in developing basic skills. That is why guessing is encouraged in reading. An advocate of this philosophy was Julia Palmer, founder of the American Reading Council and a believer in the whole-language approach in teaching reading. She said that it was OK if a child read the word “house” for “home,” or substituted the word “pony” for “horse.” “It’s not very serious because she understands the meaning. Accuracy is not the name of the game.” (*Washington Post*, 11/29/86) Ms. Palmer may have said that in 1986, but it is still the philosophy of teaching today in many primary public schools. Her Council folded in 1991.

As a tutor I discovered how destructive this philosophy is when tutoring a 14-year-old boy who thought he was stupid because he could not guess the right word in reading. He had been taught to read by the look-say method which encourages guessing. He assumed that knowledge was obtained by guessing, and that if you were a poor guesser, you were born stupid. But after I taught him to read with intensive phonics, he found out that he did not have to guess the word on the page. He could sound it out. That revelation changed his life. He discovered that gaining knowledge was not a matter of guessing, but a matter of knowing how to read phonetically. He had never learned how to use his brain. The school had taught him that learning consisted of guessing and immediate magical knowing. But after months of tutoring he realized that he was not born dumb, that learning was a matter of using his brain and phonetic skills to figure out the words on the page.

How many children grow into adulthood believing that learning is a guessing game, and that because they are poor guessers they will never become good readers? This is a question that the *Times* conferees would never even know how to ask. And until they know that such questions should be asked, they will never be able to improve public education.

Meanwhile, in Boston, the mayor had decided that the best way to improve education for the poor was to transform the faltering Madison Park Vocational Technical High School into a “topnotch center for career readiness and workforce development.” A September 15 article in the *Boston Globe* described the lack of planning in opening the school:

There were hardly any administrators in place to run the school.... The last-minute hires at the Roxbury school have some staff wondering whether the grand plans for an overhaul may be nothing but broken promises. “It’s falling apart,” said one teacher, who like others interviewed for this story asked not to be identified because they were not authorized to speak to the press. “Morale is nonexistent here.”

When [Boston mayor] Menino unveiled his proposal for Madison Park in January, he warned a packed crowd at Faneuil Hall that “real change won’t come easily.”... Released simultaneously with the mayor’s proposal was a report that exposed a culture of low expectations at Madison Park. Less than a third of students scored proficient or advanced on state standardized tests in 2010. More than 40 percent of students fail to graduate in four years, and only a few dozen students took college-level courses.

This is just another example of government incompetence in running anything that requires intelligent planning. Most of the participants at the *Times* conference were fellow feeders from the federal trough. They talked about training “effective teachers” without even discussing the curriculum being used in the schools. None of them seemed to know how teachers are trained in our colleges of education. When Professor Noguera said that “we have set some schools up for failure,” there was no follow up on that provocative comment. No one asked him to elaborate on that statement. Who are the “we”? And why



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would “we” set up schools for failure? Who benefits from that kind of evil? But until the *Times* starts inviting the true critics of government education to their confabs, they will continue to run around in circles.



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