

Finding Superman & Global Competitiveness



A Conversation with Arthur Levine & Watson Scott Swail

Finding Superman & Global Competitiveness

A Conversation with Arthur Levine & Watson Scott Swail

On March 21 2013, the Educational Policy Institute held the first day of the EPI Forum on Education & the Economy in Orlando, Florida. Sponsored by USAFunds, The College Board, EPI International, AVID, InsideHigherEd.com, NACME, and LatinosInHigherEd.com, The Forum was designed to discuss critical issues related to the nexus of education and the workforce.

The session transcribed here featured two of the authors of the Teachers College Press publication, *Finding Superman: Debating the Future of Public Schools in America (2012)*. The book was a response to Davis Guggenheim's documentary, *Waiting for "Superman,"* released in 2010. Dr. Watson Scott Swail, President & CEO of the Educational Policy Institute, served as editor of the book and wrote the introductory chapter, *Finding Superman*. Dr. Arthur Levine, President of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, wrote a chapter titled "The Potential Impact of *Waiting for "Superman"* on Schooling in America."

The Forum provided an opportunity to talk about their respective chapters and engage in an interesting conversation about education and international competition. Dr. Swail served as moderator of the session. The transcription is slightly edited for flow and readability. The video of this session can be found on the Educational Policy Institute's YouTube channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/educationalpolicy>

About the Speakers

DR. ARTHUR LEVINE is the sixth president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. Before his appointment at Woodrow Wilson, he was president and professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He also previously served as chair of the higher education program, chair of the Institute for Educational Management, and senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.



Dr. Levine is the author of dozens of articles and reviews, including a series of reports for the Education Schools Project on the preparation of school leaders, teachers, and education researchers. Dr. Levine's numerous commentaries appear in such publications as *The New York Times*; *The Los Angeles Times*; *The Wall Street Journal*; *The Washington Post*; *Education Week*; and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

His most recent book is *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student* (with Diane Dean, 2012). Among his other volumes are *Unequal Fortunes: Snapshots from the South Bronx*; *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student* (with Jeanette S. Cureton); *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College* (with Jana Nidiffer); *Higher Learning in America: Shaping Higher Education's Future*; *When Dreams and Heroes Died: A Portrait of Today's College Students*; *Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum*; *Quest for Common Learning* (with Ernest Boyer); *Opportunity in Adversity* (with Janice Green); and *Why Innovation Fails*.

Dr. Levine was also previously President of Bradford College (1982-1989) and Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Foundation and Carnegie Council for Policy Studies in Higher Education (1975-1982). He received his bachelor's degree from Brandeis University and his Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

DR. WATSON SCOTT SWAIL is the President and Chief Executive Officer of The Educational Policy Institute, a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to policy-based research on educational opportunity for all students. Dr. Swail also serves as CEO of EPI International, a for-profit research institute aligned with the Educational Policy Institute.



Dr. Swail founded EPI in 2002 to meet a growing need for high-level research on educational opportunity issues. Since that time, EPI has conducted dozens of studies on issues from early childhood reading to postsecondary outcomes for students. EPI's clients have included Lumina Foundation for Education, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, the Texas Education Agency, and several state education organizations and local school districts.

Dr. Swail has a very broad understanding of education. He served as a middle school teacher in Canada and the United States for seven years, while also becoming an expert in curriculum design and teacher professional development. He has worked on school reform initiatives and currently assists several school districts around the country with reforms designed to improve student persistence in middle and high school. In 2000, he directed the National Survey of Outreach Programs while working at the College Board, which surveyed over 1,100 programs around the US. He is currently directing the 2010 National Survey of College Outreach Programs.

In addition to his research and writing, Dr. Swail has taught educational policy and research at The George Washington University in Washington, DC, where he received his doctorate in educational policy. He earned his Master's of Science from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and Bachelor's of Education from the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Teachers College Press recently released Swail's "Finding Superman: Debating the Future of Public Education in America" (2012).

Suggested Citation: Swail, Watson S. and Levine, Arthur (2014, August). "Finding Superman and Global Competitiveness." *Policy Perspectives*. Virginia Beach, VA: Educational Policy Institute.

SWAIL: Arthur Levine is the president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and before that he was president of Teachers College in New York. Many of you may have read his work before. He has conducted a number studies and one of my favorite books is still *Beating the Odds* from the 1990s. I think you followed 24 students. Does it seem like a lifetime ago?

LEVINE: It is a lifetime ago.

Now, who in the audience has seen that documentary? [most hands go up] Well, that's pretty good. It didn't do very well at the box office. I watched the movie. I really liked Guggenheim's previous works; he of course did the nice piece with Al Gore that won an academy award: *An Inconvenient Truth*. And then he did a really fabulous-but-quirky documentary called *It Might Get Loud* with Jimmy Page, the Edge (the U2 guitarist), and Jack White, which is really interesting but kind of off what he



SWAIL: But the issues in that Book are still relevant today in terms of, well, it's a bit of a lottery on how you do in life, at least in America. And that brings us to our topic. In 2012, we released *Finding Superman: Debating the Future of Public Schools in America*. I was very fortunate to edit this book and Dr. Levine had one of the chapters in it. I'm going to ask him to talk a little bit in a moment about what he wrote and his thoughts about it. The genesis of the book was based on the documentary by Davis Guggenheim called *Waiting for "Superman."*

usually does. But he's a great filmmaker and created this movie *Waiting for "Superman,"* which followed five families and looked at what happened to them.

The thesis of the movie is that we're not doing enough; that kids are failures because of society and that public schools aren't engaging them well enough. There is some constituency out there that believes that the movie was a bit of a promo for charter schools. It is. I've been an evaluator of charter schools and there are things I like about them and things I don't like about them. But I can say pretty much the same thing about public schools, as well.

I got this idea and said, well, why don't we write something that gives experts the an opportunity to say what they think about the movie? So we had Linda Darling Hammond, Dr. Levine, Diane Ravitch, Peter Smith (Kaplan), Milton Chen (Edutopia), Dan Domenech (American Association of School Administrators), John Merrow (PBS), Ben Levin (University of Toronto), and Ann Lieberman. We put together this really nice piece with various perspectives in it.

Now, there was some criticism on the book that it leans to the left, which I thought was interesting because the design was absolutely not to do that. I wrote an op-ed for a journal after they wrote a book review on *Finding Superman*; it was a charter school journal and they said how left-leaning it was and that it was too bad that it was absent any right-thinking on it—they said “right,” not “correct.” “Right.” In my response, the problem I had with this is that we invited all these other people to write chapters including Michelle Rhee, Davis Guggenheim, Geoffrey Canada, and many others—and they all said no. Even those who originally agreed to write ended up saying “no, I don't think I'm going to do it.” So it was disappointing. That said, I think it is a balanced and fair book. I've got a few things I want to say about my chapter, but if it's okay, I'd like to turn it over to Dr. Levine to talk with some of his theses in the book.

LEVINE: Fair enough, good afternoon everybody. I can't see anyone because of the lights but I can hear your voices. In preparing for this thing, I looked

up the word “documentary” because *Waiting for “Superman”* is a documentary. And a documentary is something that emphasizes or expresses things as perceived without distortion or personal feelings, insertion, fictional matter, or interpretation.

Now, no such thing ever existed, and *Waiting for “Superman”* surely wasn't it. It's an advocacy piece. And, when I look at this thing, it is a morality play. It's got villains, and those are unions in public schools, unwilling to change. And it's got victims, a lot of them are poor kids. And it's got heroes, and there are all charters, and there is Geoffrey Canada, and Michelle Rhee, and all the people who were invited to write this book. They turned it down and they chose me instead after they turned it down [editor's note: not true... Dr. Levine was the first one asked and agreed immediately].

This thing is timely. It comes in the midst of almost 30 years of school reform. It plays on the emotions as well as the intellect. It's deeply biased. It puts a firm hand on the scale in terms with reforms need to be. And it's really in the same ballpark as things like Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, and the earlier Al Gore film, and even Edward R. Murrow's stuff. Probably not a lot of people have seen his films, but he brought down McCarthy with something like this. And just by way of background, if you're interested in my chapter, go read it. But the reality for me is—let me try and put the book in context—our nation is making a transition, and it's a transition from national analog industrial economy to global digital information

economy. And the problem is every one of our social institutions was created with the former. And some look at them and say, “you know, the schools are broken, and you know, our governments not working so well anymore, and health care’s in trouble, and our financial institutions are really in great difficulty, and on top of that we got problems with our media—we don’t understand you anymore.” It seems to be falling apart; our newspapers seem to be in the midst of closure or merger. And what’s happening is the consequences, and by the way, nobody in any other industry is aware of their own industry is in trouble.

I once had a conversation with Mayor Giuliani. Soon after I came to Teachers College, he summoned me to City Hall, and he said, “you people are doing a terrible job in education.” I’d been there a week. I hadn’t had enough time to do a terrible job. It took me years to do a terrible job! I finally just got so angry, and I said it very calmly, “your industry is in the same shape as mine. You think people in my industry aren’t as good as they used to be, they are self-serving, the industry’s falling apart and ineffective, and we think the same thing about your business. The fact of the matter is, you don’t want to give us money, and we don’t want to give you money, and you tell me that people are withdrawing from schools, they’re going into charters, they’re going to private schools, they’re going to the suburbs. Well, we’re withdrawing from government; we’re not voting. And the fact of the matter is, you don’t like unions and we don’t like political parties, and you don’t like tenure, and we want term

limits. And you want business personnel in our schools, and we want business personnel in your job, both of which happened since our conversation. And I left and he never invited me back to City Hall.

But it’s a real problem we’re facing. Every institution is broken right now, and the question is: how do you fix them? And we’re doing two kinds of things at once. One is we’re trying to repair them and the other is we’re trying to replace them. And the simple fact is, when you look at repair, what’s happening now is, some of the heroes in this book, people like Michelle Rhee, are taking jobs in major school systems and trying to turn them around. We’re still at a point at which we haven’t been successful in turning around any urban school system in the United States for 30 years. What is also happening is we are working with the very same model. We have people who are saying, “you know, we can fix that model. Maybe if we recruit teachers differently and we prepare them differently—that model would be fine. And those people are called *Teach for America*. And maybe if what we do is change the governance of schools they will be fine. We’ll create charter schools. And then people are saying let’s change the calendar and let’s change the curriculum and that’ll be fine. And those people are called KIPP.

But something far more fundamental has happened in education, and what that is, industrial societies have one view of education; information economies have another. The industrial societies, the

epitome of industrial America's assembly line. And our schools are sort of built like that. We take kids at age five. We march them through 13 years of instruction; batch processing them by age. They attend 180 days per year. They take five major subjects for once upon a time dictated by the Carnegie Foundation in 1908. The focus of industrial societies is on fixed time and common processes. Information economies don't believe in that. What information economies say is, you know something, time can be variable, process can be variable. All we care about are outcomes; all we care about is learning. So where we stand right now is, we are trying one other thing at the same time, and you can see examples over or around the country. We're trying to reinvent public schooling. And you can see projects like *School of One* in New York City, where I live, and I was really pleased to hear in the last presentation, as an environmentalist, it had a very small carbon footprint.

What those schools are doing is a focus on learning, not teaching, which is a revolutionary change—it's not simply rhetoric. And what they're also doing is they are revolutionizing the curriculum and focusing on mastery. Students move as fast as they master the materials. The role of teacher changes. The teacher ends up being a diagnostician: "What does Johnny and Mary need?" The teacher ends up being a prescriber; the teacher ends up being a teacher; the teacher ends up being an assessor. It's a very different vision of schooling. That that's the direction which were moving, so when one looks at this project—this movie—in

some respects maybe the biggest failing is that it is betting on a system that's not going to work. We are doing two kinds of change; the repair work that I can only describe as *Schindler's List* kind of work. We have a broken system, and what we're trying to do is make it better and save as many as we can while we reinvent what schools are going to look like in the future. There are two critical ingredients and charters maybe a part of repair, and different organizations maybe hindrances to those repairs, but at the moment, there are not a lot of heroes and there aren't a lot of villains in this story. We have a lot of people working very, very hard to try to reach solutions either designed to save kids or reinvent schooling. And this movie comes out very, very strongly for solutions, none of which are yet proven.

SWAIL: That's excellent. Thanks very much. You just made me think a few things. I grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and I went to the University of Manitoba and became a teacher in the school system there, and I'll say this: it is very hard to grow up next to the United States. It's a very difficult thing to do because the "US is the US" and we were reminded every time the Olympic Games happened. You know, the flag-waving and everything else, and it's one of those things that it's easy to dislike, but really, inside you're kinda jealous because you like that flag waving, too; it's just really bad that the US does it. Well, I've lived in the US now for 22 years. I'm a dual citizen. I just wave two flags now. The reason I mention this is that we do like to go like this [waiving number one finger in air] and say we're number one, and

when we're not, we like to believe that we will be again, and especially in education. Those who have heard of PISA rankings, if you can call them rankings, in terms of where we are in science and literacy in the world. Well, we don't do very well on that list. I believe on the math scale we're 36th in the world, but then the politicians get involved and say that by 2020 we're going to be number one. We're not. There is just no possible human way we can be number one. And, you know, I don't know if it matters that much, but we still stress that we want to be number one. I'd be happy with "let's be better." How do we just become better?

The reason this conversation is so important in terms of the Higher Education dialogue we are also having here in the next several days is because we are kind of ticked off we're not number one in higher education anymore. And we have the president and others who are saying we need to be number one again. It's not going to happen; not in our type of society. It cannot happen. We have such a massified system of higher education—that's mostly a good thing—it comes out of the GI Bill and many other legislative actions at the federal level and of course the state and local levels to a degree. But we're not South Korea; we don't have this type of way of doing things, and we're certainly not Finland, and on Saturday morning we're going to hear from Pasi Sahlberg about what's going on in Finland; they were number one in the rankings in the PISA. Number two, by the way, depending which way you look at it, was Canada. I just had to put that out there. [laughter]

But for this higher education, in terms of what we're going to do, is it that important that we have the highest attainment rates in the world? Does that really translate into the economy? And this is a yes and no proposition. It is partially; it does push us. But we have to answer the much more difficult questions of why. Now, this is not at all what I was going to talk about right now, but once Dr. Levine started talking, it kind of brought me to a different thesis on this. Because we do have this dialogue of "more of what" and "why" and we're not asking that question necessarily, and I'll talk in a breakout session tomorrow about some of the data because I've looked at the Bureau of Labor Statistics and I'm seeing this real disconnect between what we're doing in higher education and what we're doing in the economy, and where is this nexus.

So, what has this got to do with the K12 system and whether we're doing charter schools or anything else? Well, the solutions to higher education in terms of attainment and other things depend largely on what is going to happen in elementary and secondary school.

We had a workshop the last two days, our *Retention 101 Workshop*, and in terms of increasing diversity, increasing access to college, and most importantly, increasing completion, if you ask what two issues stop both access and success in college, the first is financial—having financial access to be able to pay the high cost of higher education; and the second is lack of academic wherewithal. This isn't about passing the buck. As a matter fact, I've read your [Levine's] study and you've

talked about this in in your work looking at teacher preparation programs. You said that we can't just pass the buck and blame the high schools, because higher education trains all the administrators; trains all the teachers. So there's a shared responsibility here. But I think the challenge is if we don't do more at the elementary and secondary level, we can't solve these other conditions and other issues that happen in higher education.

Those are my new comments based on *Finding Superman* that have little to do with the book, but I think they get at the larger issue of what we do.

LEVINE: You know what I'm going to disagree with you, if you'll let me.

SWAIL: Sure, because I control the mics... please do. [laughter]

LEVINE: I'm going to say it really matters that we're number one. And number one is going to be number two, three, four, or five. But the reality is, the industrial society in success of industrial societies was driven by natural resources and capital. If you didn't have natural resources you didn't have capital, and you didn't succeed as an industrial nation. During that era we did succeed as an industrial nation. We were China. We stole from Western Europe every technological innovation, and we created our first factories, and we created steam engines, and we created trains, based on *their* models, and by the 1850s we were moving ahead of them. Where we stand right now is, we live in a society. We live in a nation. And it came through very clearly in the last presentation, in which

our future is tied to the quality of human capital.

I took my board to Finland and we met with people from the Prime Minister's Office through to teachers, and my favorite comment was from our guide, who is this very straight-laced woman, probably in her 50s, and I turned to her and said, and they are proud of everything they have done, and I said "what would you do if next year on PISA you guys finish 57th and saw your scores plummeted. She looked at me and said, "it would be shocking." And she's exactly right.

The reality is for us is that our kids aren't competing against the kid from Bloomfield Hills and the kid from Scarsdale and the kid from Potomac. They are competing with kids from China, India, Hong Kong, and Singapore for the same jobs.

And the people who are going to get those jobs and the society that is going to advance most quickly are those that have done the best job on preparing human capital. And that means not only to be able to score well on those tests, it means creativity, it means continuous learning, and it means critical thinking. The whole set of what we call 21st century skills—we need them all if we're going to be able to compete in an international marketplace. And that's where the competition among nations is going to be. It's going to be economic.

The other phenomenon is, "you don't know these things." There are no jobs for people who don't have high school

diplomas. The fact of the matter is, once upon a time, dropouts were part of the cost of doing business in K 12 education. And that was fine because there used to be jobs for high school dropouts. You get a job working in manufacturing plant. Those plants are in other countries now and so are those jobs. So we need more education in order to be successful with the population that we have been least successful with so far, and the educational system needs to be stronger for them.

The interesting phenomenon for me right now, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation has a series of programs, where state-by-state, we are trying to transform teacher education. What we ended up doing was going into a state and creating a coalition, and the coalition includes the Governor, the Chief State School Officer, the state Higher Education Executive Officer, legislators on both sides of the aisle, universities, schools, unions, philanthropies, and stakeholders who are unique to that state. And part of what I was worried about—part of the reason for the coalition—is continuity. Programs died when they're based on one office holder and a group of institutions, and someone leaves and the program is over. But if we build a coalition, it continues.

My biggest fear was, because we're in Ohio, because we're in Michigan, they went from blue to red in the governorships and the surprise to me came in that there was no difference in terms of the agenda that each put forward. They put different policies. The key agenda is economic development and

education is a key part of that. If you look at the Obama agenda in education, let's see, it's charters, its pay-for-performance, it's accountability, it's data. And you say, what, what, what? I know people who use that platform—they're called Republicans. The fact of the matter is, both parties are talking the same language these days. The two areas which I think I see differences these days: one is unions—Republicans trash them in public and Democrats do in private; and the other is vouchers. But beyond that, they are talking a lot of the same type of language, and what it all comes back to is human capital being the answer for tomorrow. And if we can't succeed in doing a good job in producing that capital, we will sink as a nation, not as measured by PISA, but by our capacity to generate industry, to sustain industry, to build industry, to build an economic platform. Right now, in every major city in the country, there are thousands of jobs that are going unfilled, in a bad economy, because we don't have the trained labor force to fill those jobs. So long as those jobs stay empty, economic development won't hit the peaks that are possible.

One more item.

Last summer, Guatemala was holding a presidential election and the state department sent me to Guatemala to brief their presidential candidates, because ironically, for a nation that has an average of a fourth-grade education, education wasn't among the items being discussed by presidential candidates. I ran into a banker there, and he said, "we

have a program and we're going to teach as many kids in Guatemala Chinese." And I thought that absolutely brilliant. They are also competing with us for technical assistance so when you call up to explain that your computer is not working, and you need get that person in Detroit; you may not get that person in Washington, DC; you may not get the person in Chicago; you may get that person in Guatemala.

The fact is third world countries, developing nations, whatever it is we choose to call them, have a huge advantage. What they don't have is the infrastructure we built. Infrastructures are a curse in some ways; what it defines is the kind of program that you have and have to change as opposed to having no program at all and be able to build from scratch. So we're going to see not only competition from Finland and Singapore and Hong Kong and China, but also Guatemala. A long answer to a short question.

SWAIL: You know, it made me think back into in that great decade "The Eighties." Growing up I was a musician in a former life, and I was trying to get airplay and trying to play in the bars, and I thought the competition were the local people, and Bryan Adams, and people like that. My producer said to me, "that's not your competition. Your competition is Paul McCartney; your competition is this new band called U2. It dates me a little bit right there.

LEVINE: I don't think I want to play this game with you... [laughter]

SWAIL: The point being, you are correct about the competition. The question is whether we focus on being number one or are we focused on getting a whole lot better than we are, and where we rank, we rank. We can't solve that right now. We will have a dialogue after, and Dr. Levine will also be back for our later session on the future of higher education.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/educationalpolicy>



www.educationalpolicy.org

Copyright 2014