

# Kids' intelligence isn't fixed

BY ROBERT MARANTO

Is intelligence fixed or changeable? Is it a quality you can develop like strong muscles, or one you were born with, like eye color or sexual orientation?

This is not merely an ivory tower question: It is key to how schools work and whether making them work better is worth the effort.

Of course, as Stanford University Psychology Professor Carol Dweck writes in "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success," the truth about intelligence lies in between. Some people are born with more capacity to develop than others. Some have more advantaged upbringings. Yet a century of psychological research shows that with hard work and good teaching, most students can get smarter. Whether they do get smarter depends in no small part on what they believe and what their teachers believe.

As Ms. Dweck shows, when a student who sees intelligence as fixed fails a test, he or she tends to withdraw psychologically and avoid future academic challenges. After all, why beat your head against a wall? On the other hand, when a student who sees intelligence as changeable fails a test, he or she tends to work harder to get better. For example, one previously unmotivated student Ms. Dweck worked with suddenly declared: "You mean I don't have to be dumb?" That simple recognition led him to work hard. As the emerging psychological research on grit shows, over time that hard work tends to pay off.

This has much to say about the politics of school reform.

If you think that intelligence is a

constant, then there is no point reforming schools because schools don't matter. "Good" schools and "good" teachers either cherry picked or lucked into smart students. It's unfair to compare schools or teachers on academic results because student learning is determined by who teachers teach, not what or how they teach.

Right-wing social scientists like Charles Murray and Robert Weissberg argue that the relatively low academic performance of certain groups and high performance of others reflects fixed genetics rather than changeable conditions or institutions. By and large, their voices have been marginalized in social science and in polite society.

Unfortunately, others on the left believing very similar things quietly dominate public education. I know prominent education professors who have not read any of the eight high-quality scientific evaluations of the high-poverty/high-achievement Knowledge Is Power Program schools, nor set foot in such schools, but know that KIPP must be cheating in some way. They have no more interest in the research on KIPP than a creationist has in paleontology.

Our unwillingness to learn from success goes beyond ignoring successful charter schools. I do fieldwork in a reasonably good school district that has depressingly little success teaching its Hispanic minority; yet no one there bothers to check out a similar school district 10 miles away that has nearly eliminated its Anglo-Hispanic achievement gap. These educators believe, on the basis of no evidence, that Hispanics in the other school district differ from their Hispanics. They cannot imagine different tactics including parental outreach and

after-school tutoring yielding better outcomes with the same kids.

Nor is this unusual. As my colleague Patrick Wolf and I discovered in researching an article, gains in student achievement do not seem to have any impact on whether big-city school superintendents keep their jobs, reflecting the view of school boards that when it comes to student learning, schools and teachers don't matter.

The view that intelligence is fixed affects the rich as well as the poor. A teacher I know in an affluent community has urged her school district to find and recruit successful teachers from other districts just as it headhunts successful coaches. Unfortunately, the same school board which hires great coaches to develop kids' athletic talent thinks that when it comes to academics, kids are either smart or dumb, so teachers don't matter.

The education reform movement of the past two decades has presumed to find successful schooling models and disseminate them across the land. It reflected the worldview of leaders like Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama that intelligence is a variable which good schools and good teachers can raise. My work in roughly 200 public schools and numerous schools of education convinces me that most of the education establishment still hasn't gotten the memo. Until they do, school reform has a Shakespearean quality as just so much sound and fury, signifying nothing.

A Baltimore native, Robert Maranto is the 21st Century Chair in Leadership in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. His email is [rmaranto@uark.edu](mailto:rmaranto@uark.edu).

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