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Opportunities Lost

Sol Stern tells how New York City got derailed on the way to school reform

Sol Stern Mr. Stern is a contributing editor at *City Journal* and the author of "Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice." This essay appeared on the Fordham Foundation's Web site and is adapted from Mr. Stern's epilogue to the recently released paperback edition of the book.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg gave his first hint about his plans for reforming the New York City school system on Martin Luther King Day in January 2003. I was heartened as much by what Mr. Bloomberg didn't say as by what he actually said, and I applauded him in the pages of *City Journal*. I noted that Mr. Bloomberg didn't offer a single excuse for the disastrous state of the city's schools. Breaking with 50 years of liberal political rhetoric about "insufficient funding" of public education, Mr. Bloomberg owned up to the fact that an operating budget of more than \$12 billion (about \$12,000 a student) ought to be sufficient to provide decent schools for the city's 1.1 million schoolchildren.

To make the available money stretch further, Mr. Bloomberg said he planned to dismantle the system's "Byzantine administrative fiefdoms." He also promised that reading and writing instruction in the early grades would henceforth "employ strategies proven to work," including "a daily focus on phonics." This clearly suggested a rejection of progressive education fads like Lucy Calkins's "writing process" and the constructivist math exercises that my sons had suffered through in their less than challenging classes at P.S. 87.

And there was even more good news to come. Mr. Bloomberg's new schools chancellor was Joel Klein, the former Clinton administration Justice Department official who prosecuted Microsoft Corp. for antitrust violations. Now Mr. Klein the trustbuster was targeting the teachers' contract, with its antiquated work rules, as a major obstacle to school improvement. I eventually met Mr. Klein and he told

me he had read my book “Breaking Free.” He had even appropriated my depiction of the city’s labor agreement with the United Federation of Teachers as the “we don’t do windows” contract.

Taking Charge — Briefly

It was all music to my ears. A voucher program was not likely to come to a union-dominated state such as New York. So along with other school choice reformers, I backed what seemed like the second best alternative: giving the mayor full responsibility for the education system. The theory was that if this mayor — or any mayor — knew he would be held directly accountable by voters for the performance of the schools, he would have a strong incentive to oppose the vested interests blocking reform, including the politically powerful teachers’ union.

For a brief, shining moment, that was exactly what seemed to be happening. First, Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein cleaned out the stables at the Board of Education headquarters at 110 Livingston St., breaking up the patronage nests within the central administrative apparatus and selling the empty building. Then they took a wrecking ball to the system’s other pillars of patronage and corruption — the 32 community school boards. Finally, they created a revamped command-and-control center for the entire system of 1,200 schools.

Once the new streamlined administrative structure was in place, Mr. Klein unveiled his “Children First” instructional initiative, advertising it as bringing the “best practices” in teaching and curriculum to every school in the system. But this is where New York’s experiment in school reform by mayoral control got derailed. For reasons that are still not clear, Mr. Bloomberg misled us when he said the new curriculum would “employ strategies proven to work,” and include “a daily focus on phonics.” A week later, Mr. Klein announced that a reading program called “Balanced Literacy,” which included a workbook called “Month by Month Phonics,” would now be mandatory in almost all early grade classrooms. But not only has this program never been “proven to work” — it wasn’t even phonics, despite its name.

Whole-Language Hoopla

I soon discovered that the city’s new reading program had little to do with phonics. Sure, the workbook contained suggestions to teachers about how to weave the occasional word- and letter-sounding cues into daily classroom reading activities. But right from the outset, the authors make it clear that they’re not very enthusiastic about systematic phonics instruction. In the authors’ view, phonics is only “one-quarter of a well-balanced literary diet.” In fact, balanced

literacy is a widely used euphemism by progressive educators for their preferred “whole-language” approach to teaching reading.

The problem with balanced literacy or whole language, take your pick, is that it totally disregards what the scientific evidence says about the most effective teaching methods in reading. Recent advances in our understanding of how children learn to read — based not on wishful thinking, but rather on a remarkable convergence of evidence from experimental psychology, linguistics, and medical research — make it possible to design truly effective instructional programs to raise reading levels in the early grades.

Two separate government-sponsored reports have clearly laid out the evidence. The first, published in 1998 by the National Academy of Sciences, concluded that systematic phonics instruction is the most effective approach. Two years later, the National Reading Panel’s even more comprehensive report also concluded that “systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than instruction that teaches little or no phonics.” In 2002, the American Psychological Association got into the act, too, issuing a report whose conclusions *Scientific American* summarized: “Our recent review of the topic shows that there is no doubt about it: teaching that makes the rules of phonics clear will ultimately be more successful than teaching that does not.”

Ironically, it is President Bush, derided by most New York educators as cognitively challenged, who has been more responsible than any other American politician for bringing the findings of cognitive science to bear on reading instruction for young children. The morning after Mr. Bush’s first inauguration, he and Mrs. Bush listened carefully as Reid Lyon, director of the National Institutes of Health’s research programs in the neuroscience of reading, and other top researchers presented their findings at a White House forum on reading pedagogy. The president made it clear that he wanted federal reading policy to go “wherever the evidence leads.”

Within a week of taking office, the Bush administration had devised a strategy for getting a \$6 billion “Reading First” phonics initiative past the Congress as part of the “No Child Left Behind” act. The White House offered school systems a deal that went something like this: “The federal government will give you lots more money than ever before for early reading programs. Nothing obligates you to take the money. But if you do take it, the programs you choose must teach children using phonics.”

You’d think that Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein would welcome the scientific turn in federal reading policy. After all, the racial gap in school performance — that both liberals and conservatives decry as the greatest obstacle to equal

opportunity in America — first shows up as a wide gap in reading. While about 40% percent of all students don't attain the "basic" reading level by fourth grade, the rate of reading failure for innercity black and Hispanic children is a catastrophic 70%. If we now have hard evidence of what methods will best bring these struggling students up to speed, why wouldn't all conscientious educators support the federal government's efforts to promote those methods?

Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein have shrouded their education administration in almost total secrecy, so it's hard to know why the mayor's promise to put a back-to-basics reading program into the schools morphed into its very opposite, and why they are so hostile to the idea of science informing the teaching of reading. Still, we can make some educated guesses: The mayor is a successful businessman; his schools chancellor is a former prosecutor who then served as chief executive officer of a publishing conglomerate. Thus, they moved quickly and decisively on the Management-101 part of the school system's overhaul. But in the area of classroom instruction, Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein obviously felt less confident. Looking for guidance from experts, they made the mistake of deferring to the system's progressive-ed old guard.

The progressive educators that Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein empowered shudder at the thought that science confers validity on the practice of teaching young children to read through scripted lessons in letter/sound correspondence — that is, phonics. Phonics conjures up everything progressives hate about traditional classrooms: that they are artificial places, where standardized lessons are taught by "drill and kill" methods that destroy children's innate creativity and turn them into the regimented conformists that a repressive industrial society needs to staff its assembly lines and corporate offices.

Constructing School Failure

A major influence on Mr. Klein was none other than Lucy Calkins, a professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, the inspiration for my sons' teachers at P.S. 87. As I pointed out in "Breaking Free," her approach to teaching reading and writing to young children is based on the Romantic idea that all children are "natural readers and writers" and should be encouraged to start scribbling in journals and rewriting composition drafts without worrying or being taught much about formal grammar or spelling. Under Ms. Calkins's tutelage, the city's new literacy curriculum encompassed two of progressive education's key commandments — that teachers must not "drill and kill" and that children can "construct their own knowledge."

Ms. Calkins was present at Mr. Klein's press conference announcing Month by Month Phonics as part of the balanced literacy curriculum, and school officials

pointed her out to reporters as an allegedly independent academic expert who could testify to the program's effectiveness. Reporters were not told that Ms. Calkins was getting millions of dollars in staff development contracts for the same program. After the city's choice was criticized by seven top reading specialists who had served on the National Reading Panel, Ms. Calkins drafted a counterletter, signed by more than 100 education-school professors, effusively praising the program. Though few of the signers had looked at the reading program, and fewer still were reading specialists, they confidently asserted that it "has a strong track record in both New York City's high-achieving schools and in schools that serve our high-need areas." In fact, it has no statistically validated track record at all, but what are mere facts to determinedly "progressive" education professors?

Ms. Calkins is a true believer in the power of her own ideas. When I spoke to her, she was charming and articulate in defense of those ideal classrooms where young children naturally find their way to literacy without boring, scripted drills by automaton teachers. She was also unabashed in saying she hoped her literacy-training programs would expand to more schools, and not just middle-class schools. "It's a great move to social justice to bring this to every school in the city," she said.

And that is exactly what the city of New York is now trying to do through the vehicle of the most authoritarian, top-down management system in the recent history of American K-12 education. Agents of the chancellor, euphemistically called "coaches," operate in almost all of the city's 1,200 schools to make sure that every teacher marches in lockstep with the Department of Education's approved pedagogical approaches. It's a vast re-education campaign to force teachers to teach literacy and math one way — the progressive way.

To launch the campaign, each of the city's 80,000 teachers received a six-hour CD-ROM laying out the philosophy behind the new standardized curriculum and pedagogy. As it opens, Mr. Klein announces: "This CD will walk you through the research upon which we based our decisions regarding our program choices." The implication is that the Department of Education's search for the "best practices" was an open and intellectually honest process.

But in the section that lists academic sources, one encounters not a single education writer who favors phonics for reading instruction or a curriculum emphasizing factual knowledge.

Teachers looking for references for further study won't find the authors of the Scientific American article on reading instruction, or the names of Jeanne Chall, E.D. Hirsch, Diane Ravitch, or countless other distinguished scholars who

believe that all children, but particularly economically and socially disadvantaged children, desperately need instruction in basic skills and factual knowledge to be able to function in an increasingly complex information economy.

You Will be (Re)Educated

Amazingly, much of the text is dominated by the pedagogical principles of an education guru that not a single New York teacher is likely ever to have heard of before: Brian Cambourne, a professor at Wollongong University in New South Wales, a leader of the whole-language movement that, along with its cousin constructivism, dominates Australian public schools. He came to his theories, he says, when he discovered as a young teacher that many of his poorly performing students were actually quite bright. He began to meet with them outside the classroom. To his surprise, almost all demonstrated extraordinary competence at challenging tasks in the adult world. The son of the local bookie, for example, was failing his math tests. "He couldn't learn basic math," noted Mr. Cambourne, "but he could calculate the probability the Queen of Spades was in the deck faster than I could."

After this epiphany, Mr. Cambourne came to realize that children learn better in natural settings with a minimum amount of adult help. The role of the educator should be to create classroom conditions that stimulate children and most closely resemble the way adults work and learn. Thus, children should not sit in rows facing the teacher, but rather the room should be arranged with work areas where children can construct their own knowledge — the theory of learning commonly termed "constructivism."

So crucial does the Bloomberg/Klein education department deem Mr. Cambourne's theories that it instructs teachers to go through a checklist to make sure their classroom practices meet the professor's "conditions for learning." Which of four scenarios most accurately describes how your classroom is set up? the disc asks. If the teacher can claim "a variety of center-based activities, for purposeful learning using different strategies, and for students to flow as needed," she can pat herself on the back. But if her classroom is set up "for lecture with rows facing forward," she must put on the dunce cap.

In an illuminating magazine interview, Mr. Cambourne distinguished among three kinds of literacy that schools can foster. "Functional Literacy" produces adults who can succeed in the real world and hold challenging jobs, which would be a considerable achievement for most inner-city students. But Mr. Cambourne dismisses this competence as inadequate, because it produces "dependent and compliant learners." The next level of literacy, which produces adults who can enjoy great works of literature, is also insufficient for Mr. Cambourne, since it

merely “produces a citizenry that admires and values individual achievement and expertise.” What all conscientious teachers ought instead to try to inculcate in students is “literacy for social equity and social justice,” a literacy that can deconstruct language and show how it is used to maintain power and privilege in our current society. Mr. Cambourne acknowledges that his own work “is based on the political prejudices I have and these must of course impact what I research.”

Am I suggesting that Mr. Bloomberg, a Republican mayor, is trying to impose Mr. Cambourne’s left-wing political views on teachers? Not quite. Still, Mr. Cambourne’s constructivist assumptions, which are now being implemented throughout the city, are not just honest mistakes about what works best in the classroom, but are, indeed, political in the deepest sense.

That is why Mr. Klein’s re-education sessions for teachers are meant to overcome dissenting opinion and drive home the progressive party line relentlessly: “Your students must not be sitting in rows. You must not stand at the head of the class. You must not do ‘chalk and talk’ at the blackboard. You must have a ‘workshop’ in every single reading period. Your students must be ‘active learners,’ and they must work in groups.”

Some brave teachers have dared to object. At Junior High School 44 in Manhattan, one teacher tried to point out, quite reasonably, that some teachers feel more comfortable and get better results through traditional methods. The school’s literacy coach responded: “This is the way it is. Everyone will do it this way, or you can change schools.” You might say, in the words of the first great progressive-ed reformer and political radical, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that the education department’s aim is to “force them to be free.”

In many city schools, progressivism has turned into pure farce. In preparation for a site visit to Seward Park High School, one of the city’s most violent schools, a supervisor named Michael Laforgia sent a memo to an assistant principal, indicating the kind of classroom environment he would be looking for. Mr. Laforgia offered helpful hints from the works of constructivist guru Alfie Kohn.

The idea that one of the education department’s top administrators thought that Mr. Kohn’s student-ruled classrooms would work in a school with 600 reported incidents a year of student disruption or violence provided the demoralized staff with some comic relief. As the memo went around the school, some teachers wrote anonymous comments on it, like samizdat. Next to Mr. Laforgia’s question, “Is the teacher teaching the text or the students?” one teacher wrote, “Duh...aren’t we supposed to do both?” The question, “Who is solving the students’ reading and writing problems?” elicited this response: “Clearly not the Dept. of Education.” As in other soft totalitarianisms, gallows

humor has become a means for dedicated teachers to cope with absurd directives from the Tweed headquarters.

Potemkin Village Reform

But Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein never get to hear the jokes. They are still basking in the applause they are receiving from most of the city's editorial writers and elite opinion makers, who have no idea of what is going on in the classrooms. Even some of my fellow reformers who support school choice have been willing to "give Mike a chance." After all, Mr. Klein still rants against the teachers' contract. But by now it has become abundantly clear that there will be no improvement with Month by Month Phonics, and with Messrs. Klein and Bloomberg's Dictatorship of Virtue.

And there will be no reform of the teachers' contract either. Because of their dictatorial treatment of rank-and-file teachers, Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein will find it almost impossible to win work-rule concessions from the union in the current contract negotiations. Teachers who want to be treated as professionals and might otherwise be appealed to over the heads of the union leadership will now cling to the work rules as their only protection from what they see as an arbitrary and oppressive system.

New York City is still without work rule reforms, without school choice, without a scientifically grounded reading program, but with continuing stagnant test scores and a widening racial gap in academic performance. Messrs. Bloomberg and Klein have alienated the unions, the teaching rank-and-file, and some of their erstwhile allies in the education reform community, all without any improvements in test scores to show for it. Now, they have resorted to the last refuge of every failed educator: They are pleading for more money. After a recent state court decision that city schools are not getting enough funds from the state for an "adequate" education, Mr. Klein proclaimed that he needed a minimum of \$21 billion to run the school system. If he didn't get it, he said, it would be a violation of the spirit of the historic 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision. If you do the math, that comes out to about \$20,000 a student, enough to pay the tuition at all but a handful of the country's elite private schools. Following on a late November recommendation from a special referee panel in the case, he's likely to get just about everything he wished for.

What's left of New York's experiment in mayoral control is the progressive illusion that children of color in their "child centered" classrooms are learning to become "critical thinkers" who will help reform the world and make it a better place. There's nothing wrong with healing the world, but the progressives have put the cart before the horse. There will be no improvement in our inner cities until

the students learn to read and acquire basic academic skills.



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