“Minority kids soar in reading,” screamed the banner headline on the New York Post’s front page earlier this year. Along with its rival tabloid, the Daily News, the Post supported Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s education reforms and now has credited those reforms for a “record setting” 10 percent improvement in the city’s scores on state-administered 4th-grade reading tests.

Actually, it’s anyone’s guess why the 4th-grade scores rose so sharply this year at the same time that the 8th-grade reading and social studies scores went from bad to worse (with only 32.8 percent of city 8th graders meeting state standards in reading and 20 percent in social studies). It could well be due to broader educational forces or to changes in testing procedures. Either could explain why 4th-grade scores were up throughout the state, and student gains in Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers were even more impressive than in Gotham (see Hanushek, “Pseudo-Science,” pp. 67-73).

In any case, no reputable researcher would rely on a one-year bump in some test scores to judge the efficacy of a new program. In the absence of independent confirmation by testing experts, one should remain highly skeptical of the claims of Mayor Bloomberg and his supporters that his instructional initiatives are working.

Unfortunately, this is also an election year, which means that political spin is likely to drown out reasoned debate about what policies are most likely to work in inner-city classrooms. The premise of mayoral control was that the public would finally be able to hold someone accountable for the schools. But the billionaire mayor has almost unlimited resources to win an electoral spin war, regardless of the reality in the classroom. In addition to dipping into his private fortune for unlimited campaign ads touting his test score gains, he has total control of a $15 billion education empire that doles out jobs and no-bid contracts to potential critics and spends millions on a well-oiled public relations machine, but spends nothing on independent research or evaluation of classroom programs. This has consequences for the national education debate as well. If Bloomberg is reelected, his model of reform through dictatorial mayoral control will surely be urged on other troubled urban school districts.

Before that model is exported anywhere else, however, serious thought ought to be given to what the mayor promised and what he has actually delivered.

City Hall Rules
It once seemed to be a good thing for education reform that Mike Bloomberg was so rich. Having financed his first election campaign completely out of his deep pockets, Bloomberg was unencumbered by debts owed to the system’s entrenched interest groups, including the powerful union representing 80,000 teachers. In this favorable political climate, the new
The mayor was quickly able to persuade the state legislature to vest him with total control of the schools. Even the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) supported the reform legislation after Mayor Bloomberg gave the teachers a 16 percent across-the-board wage hike (plus an extra 5 percent for beginning teachers).

Crammed with thousands of redundant bureaucrats and patronage appointees, the Board of Education’s labyrinthine headquarters building at 110 Livingston Street in downtown Brooklyn was the most notorious symbol of the old regime. The mayor seized control of the building, cleaned out the time-servers and the patronage nests, and then sold off the property to the highest bidder. A few hundred top administrators who survived the purge were relocated to the newly renovated Tweed Courthouse building a few hundred feet from City Hall, where the mayor could keep a close eye on them.

The mayor seemed equally bold in his selection of Joel Klein, former chief of the Justice Department’s antitrust division, as schools’ chancellor. The highlight of Klein’s career to that point was his prosecution of the Microsoft Corporation for antitrust violations. Bringing in a “trust buster” to help reinvent a monopoly public school system was hailed by many education reformers (myself included) as a stroke of genius and more proof of Mayor Bloomberg’s commitment to radical change.

Bloomberg and Klein then created what appeared to be a streamlined structure for efficiently managing the city’s 1,300 schools. Instead of overlapping administrative layers operating through 32 separate school districts, there would now be one clear chain of command extending vertically from the mayor’s office to the chancellor, then down through ten regional superintendents, and finally to the principal of every school in the system.

So much for the Management 101 part. What happens in the classroom of the new order?

The mayor presented his master plan, called Children First, in an inspired Martin Luther King Day speech in January 2003. Standing in front of a portrait of Reverend King at the Schomburg cultural center in Harlem, he described the effort to improve the schools as a “civil rights” battle. The administration’s new approach, Bloomberg said, was to allow the chancellor’s office to “dictate the curriculum and pedagogical methods,” including a reading program with “a daily focus on phonics.” The mayor also promised, “Our teachers will all employ strategies proven to work.” A few days later Chancellor Klein announced that the mainstay of the new citywide literacy curriculum would be a program called Month-by-Month Phonics.

The references to phonics and “strategies proven to work” seemed like a calculated hint that the businessman mayor would favor a return to “basics.” This was music to the ears of education traditionalists bemoaning the use of unproven progressive methodologies in inner-city classrooms. Still, Bloomberg also offered plenty of red meat to those reformers pushing for school choice, competition, and incentives in education. Vouchers remain off the table in New York, but Chancellor Klein soon came out for the next best thing: charter schools. He also pressed for reform of the onerous work rules in the teachers’ contract, including eliminating the seniority provisions, making it easier to fire incompetents, and establishing a system of merit pay.

For pushing these market-style initiatives, Klein and Bloomberg have been celebrated in the media and the business community as courageous visionaries, even revolutionaries. Two of the nation’s most influential education philanthropies, the Gates Foundation and the Eli Broad Foundation, are deeply invested in Bloomberg’s structural reforms and see them as national models of reform. The same Bill Gates whose company was prosecuted by Assistant Attorney General Joel Klein has given Chancellor Klein at least $70 million for creating hundreds of new small high schools and charter schools. And California billionaire Eli Broad, who helped finance the Children First planning phase, predicted that Bloomberg and Klein would soon succeed in turning around the schools.

---

Month-by-Month Phonics is not a systematic phonics program, despite its name.

---

Calamity of the Lams
The only reform that ever matters in education is doing whatever it takes to lift student academic achievement and reduce the scandalous racial gap in learning. Unfortunately, somewhere along the road to the brave new world of charter schools and market incentives, Bloomberg and Klein either forgot, or never comprehended in the first place, that all good education, and, even more so, education for disadvantaged children, starts with systematic and explicit instruction in the basic skills of literacy, numeracy, and other foundational academic subjects. By that standard, there is nothing at all revolutionary about the progressive pedagogy that now rules New York’s schools. Even
worse, the administration’s authoritarian attempts to impose a single instructional approach throughout the system have demoralized and frightened rank-and-file teachers that it is now virtually impossible for the city to get much-needed reforms of work rules in the next teachers’ contract.

The selection of Month-by-Month Phonics in January 2003 provided the first clue that there was an instructional void at the heart of the Bloomberg/Klein reforms. Not only has this program never met the “proven to work” standard set by the mayor; it isn’t even a systematic phonics program, despite its name. Even the authors of the program concede the point. Phonics, they argue, is only “one-quarter of a well-balanced literary diet.”

The authors’ invocation of “balance” was a giveaway. Real phonics instruction teaches children about the sounds of spoken language and how letters represent those sounds. “Balanced literacy” is the brand name for an instructional approach that adds a dollop of phonics to an otherwise whole-language reading program in which children are encouraged to “construct” or decipher meaning from so-called authentic texts. It’s a clever marketing ploy that allows school districts to “construct” or decipher meaning from so-called authentic texts. It’s a clever marketing ploy that allows school districts to appear to be responding to growing pressure from law-makers and parents for explicit phonics instruction while doing the opposite.

Mayor Bloomberg likely was never told that Month-by-Month Phonics was part of a stealth whole-language program. The same excuse can’t be made for Chancellor Klein, who chose to surround himself with a palace guard of progressive educators who all hate phonics. The key managerial decision in this regard was Klein’s selection in August 2002 of Diana Lam as deputy chancellor for teaching and learning at $250,000 per year, the same salary as his own, surely one of the most embarrassing hiring decisions in the history of New York City government. Lam flamed out in less than 18 months after she was caught in a nepotism scandal, but the education damage she caused during her brief tenure was incalculable.

As schools’ chief in Providence, Rhode Island, Lam assiduously promoted balanced literacy and “fuzzy” math programs, but the results were nothing to write home about. Fifty-four of the 55 schools in the district were listed by the state as “low performing” when she got there. After she left, three years later, only one of those schools had moved up a notch. Nevertheless, Klein gave her control over curriculum and pedagogical decisions during the planning stages of Children First. It was Lam who convinced Klein that balanced literacy, with its phony phonics component, should be used in virtually all schools.

With Klein’s approval, Lam also managed to wipe out one of the few instructional programs that actually met Mayor Bloomberg’s “proven to work” standard. It’s an explicit phonics program called Success for All that was put into 50 of the city’s lowest-performing schools in the late 1990s. Reading scores went up in those schools for four consecutive years. Yet despite the program’s good track record and the $27 million that the city had invested in it, Lam dumped it without even so much as a phone call to the program’s developer, Robert Slavin. “She decided on the first day not to listen to other voices,” Slavin said.

Klein and Lam launched their jihad against phonics at a rather inopportune moment. The National Reading Panel commissioned by Congress had concluded, based on an analysis of 52 randomized scientific studies, that effective reading programs, especially for kids living in poverty, require “systematic and explicit” instruction in phonics. Because of this converging scientific consensus, the No Child Left Behind Act requires school districts to demonstrate that they are using reading programs that have been tested for their efficacy through scientific studies in order to qualify for federal reading funds.

Mayor Bloomberg was warned repeatedly by federal and state education officials that Month-by-Month Phonics wouldn’t qualify for the $34 million annually in reading funds available to the city. In a letter to Bloomberg, Klein, and Lam, seven noted reading specialists, including three who had served on the National Reading Panel, said that Month-by-Month Phonics is “woefully inadequate,” “lacks a research base,” and “puts beginning readers at risk of failure in learning to read.” The federal government would be guilty of malpractice if it funded a reading program that its own experts said “puts beginning readers at risk of failure.” That alone should have led Bloomberg and Klein to reverse course immediately in the interests of the children and to fire Diana Lam.

Instead, the Bloomberg administration treated the scientists’ letter as a political and public relations problem. Enter Professor Lucy Calkins of Teachers College, the doyenne of balanced literacy in New York, with $6 million in city contracts to train teachers for the program. Although the experts’ letter was private, Calkins rounded up a posse of 100 ed-school professors, most of whom had
nothing to do with reading instruction, to write a counter-letter made public by the administration. It was hardly hot news that education school professors hate phonics. Nevertheless, the administration tried to persuade the public that the letter with 100 signatures outweighed the one from a mere seven reading scientists, as if an educators’ plebiscite could resolve the evidentiary questions about the effectiveness of the reading program.

After stonewalling for almost a year, Chancellor Klein found a way out of the dilemma. He agreed to install a phonics program called Harcourt Trophies in only 49 schools in order to qualify for the federal funds. Klein’s gamesmanship was unnecessary and tragic. It should have been a no-brainer for the city to pick up more than $200 million in federal funds over six years for something it should have been doing all along. So why would an education administration that claims to care only about the interests of kids decide to use a reading program, Month-by-Month Phonics, that does not meet the standard for effectiveness established by a broad consensus of scientists?

The Romance of Progressivism

The answer is that the progressive educators empowered by Chancellor Klein shudder at the thought that science confers validity on the practice of teaching young children to read through heavily scripted lessons in letter/sound correspondence. Their pedagogical starting point is the great Romantic idea, starting with Rousseau, that children learn naturally (including learning to read). Thus the role of the teacher is to facilitate this natural process through hands-on, “constructivist” activity in “child-centered” classrooms. This can be seen vividly in a CD video distributed by the chancellor’s office to all teachers in 2003 and that was still posted on the Department of Education’s (DOE) web site as of May 2005.

As the video opens, 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 city’s search for the “best practices” was intellectually serious. Not so. Otherwise, this instructional guide would not be dominated by the pedagogical principles of a radical education guru from Australia named Brian Cambourne, who believes that teachers ought to encourage their students to achieve a “literacy for social equity and social justice.”

Professor Cambourne says he came to his theories when he discovered that many of his poorly performing students were actually quite bright. To his surprise, almost all demonstrated competence at challenging tasks in the real adult world, including poker. This led to the brainstorm that children learn better in natural settings with a minimum amount of adult help. So important does Joel Klein’s education department deem Cambourne’s theories to be that it instructs all city teachers to go through a checklist to make sure their classroom practices meet the down-under education professor’s “Conditions for Learning.” Which of four scenarios most accurately describes how your classroom is set up? Teachers are asked. 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 immediately change her practice.

You might ask whether there’s any evidence for such pedagogy. It’s “weak to nonexistent,” according to Reid Lyon, former head of all reading research at the National Institutes of Health. “The philosophical and romantic notion that children learn to read naturally and through incidental exposure to print and literature has no scientific merit whatsoever.”

That hasn’t deterred Chancellor Klein in the least. Constructivist pedagogical guidelines are forced on classroom teachers in weekly “professional development” sessions that are closer to a military boot camp than any serious inquiry into the best classroom practices. No dissent is allowed. Teachers are given lists of “nonnegotiables,” a strange and embarrassing concept for any education enterprise. Thus students must not be sitting in rows. Teachers are forbidden to stand at the head of the class and do “chalk and talk” at the blackboard. There must be a “workshop” (students working in groups) in every single reading period. Teachers are also provided with classroom maps indicating the exact location of the teacher’s desk, the students’ writing stations, and exactly how much of the wall space should be set aside for posting student work. Also nonnegotiable is that every elementary school classroom must have a rug.

Is it surprising then that Chancellor Klein is facing a revolt from teachers like 13-year veteran Jackie Bennett, from a Staten Island high school? Ms. Bennett’s problem is that she believes it’s not a sin to bring her knowledge of great literature to her students, even if she occasionally lectures. After all, Bennett has a master’s in English literature from Columbia University, exactly the kind of academic attainment we supposedly want more of from our teachers.


What they really want is all-group, all the time. What’s more, the message is clear: when we visit your classes and the kids are not in groups, you have one strike against you.

My recent experience at staff development is illustrative of just how clear that message is intended to be. After spending the morning working with my colleagues on a small group activity that entailed busy-work that did nothing to further our development as teachers, we returned to a whole-class discussion to briefly assess what we had learned. I raised my hand
and asked if there was any research tying group work to better test scores. The answer was no.

My behavior was reported to the Local Instructional Superintendent, and two days later, my assistant principal asked me to forgo attendance at the remaining meetings. I had, it seems, been kicked out of staff development. Had I made a ruckus? No. But I had asked uncomfortable questions. I had thought critically. Though the City’s Department of Education gives lip service to teaching kids to think critically, it is clear they want those critical thinking skills taught by drones.

Tyranny in the Classroom

Chancellor Klein has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on mandated professional development sessions of the kind that Jackie Bennett describes. Yet there’s no research evaluating the effectiveness of a program that is eating up so much of the city’s budget and its teachers’ precious time. New York City has nothing like the independent research consortium, based at the University of Chicago, which provides objective third-party evaluation and analysis of performance data supplied by the Chicago school system.

What’s indisputable, however, is that the intellectually vacuous nature of these sessions and the central administration’s tyranny over classroom instruction is demoralizing many excellent and successful teachers. The city will surely lose many of them. “There isn’t one teacher I know who doesn’t say they would leave if they could,” says Norman Scott, a 35-year veteran classroom teacher and publisher of an independent newsletter for city teachers. In the meantime thousands of teachers have taken to the streets in union-organized protests over Klein’s instructional dictatorship. “Let teachers teach,” say the placards carried at these demonstrations.

At a recent UFT rally, union president Randi Weingarten said: “We knew that a top-down, command and control management and rigid, lockstep teaching mandates would be demoralizing. But I never imagined that guidelines for, say, the workshop model, complete with its limit of ten minutes of direct instruction, would devolve into orders to use it every day, for every lesson and every group of students.”

Klein and Mayor Bloomberg have countered that all the tumult in the street is nothing but posturing over a contract dispute. The UFT wants more money, they say, but no reform of the work rules. They are right that the existing contract is a lousy deal for everyone involved. I have been writing about the contract’s excellence-killing seniority rules, its lockstep pay schedules, and its other inflexible regulations for years (see “Facade of Excellence,” Education Next, Summer 2003). In fact, Klein once told me he had read my critique of the contract, and from time to time he has even borrowed my quip that this is the ultimate “we-don’t-do-windows” labor agreement.

The problem is that, because Chancellor Klein has tyrannized all teachers with mindless directives about their classroom practices, he has forfeited any chance of getting significant work-rule changes. Why would any self-respecting teacher be willing to give Chancellor Klein even more power over his or her professional life? Come to think of it, Chancellor Klein has managed to incorporate one of the worst characteristics of the teachers’ contract into his own professional development regime. It’s the pernicious idea that all teachers are of equal value to a school and should be treated accordingly. Thus the contract mandates that the math teacher with a Ph.D. who teaches AP calculus is on the exact same pay scale as the 7th-grade gym teacher. The teacher who works 60 hours a week, spending extra time with students and parents, is equal to the teacher putting in the contractual minimum of 6 hours and 40 minutes per day.

But consider Chancellor Klein’s professional development program. It is meant to indoctrinate and remold virtually every teacher in the system, regardless of that teacher’s level of academic attainment, years of experience, established record of success, or personal teaching style. All are herded into professional development boot camp, the 13-year veteran with a master’s degree in English literature next to the rookie just out of education school. All are forced to slavishly parrot progressive education theories and apply them in their classrooms. Just as the teachers’ contract undermines teaching excellence, Klein’s professional development regime demoralizes good professional educators with a previous track record of success.

In the balance between the rules of the teachers’ contract and the rules of Joel Klein’s pedagogical dictatorship, there is now more harm in the latter. There’s always time to change the contract, which is renegotiated every two years or so. In the meantime, creative principals still find ways to work around its restrictions. But if Mayor Bloomberg is reelected, city teachers face four more years of relentless indoctrination in an unproved classroom methodology.

It is true that Chancellor Klein has created dozens of new charter schools and small, new high schools. But school reformers ought not to be so fixated on getting the market incentives right that they lose sight of the fact that what actually happens day by day in the classroom, the content of what teachers actually teach, is the acid test of all education improvement. By that standard the Bloomberg/Klein legacy is an unsettling one. It leaves in place a demoralized teaching staff and classroom practices that in the long run stand little chance of narrowing the racial gap in learning, unless, that is, progressive education finally succeeds in dumbing down all students. This is not a product made for export.

Sol Stern is the author of Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice.