

The Force Behind Sisulu-Walker

West Harlem charter school founder is an unlikely hero

A Light Shines in Harlem: New York's First Charter School and the Movement It Led

By Mary C. Bounds

Lawrence Hill Books, 2014, \$24.95; 224 pages.

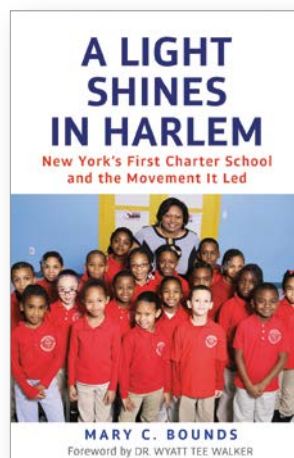
As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

This is the story of one of the first three charter schools authorized in New York State, Sisulu-Walker, in West Harlem. The first charter-school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991, and New York finally followed with its own statute in the last days of 1998. At the beginning of the following school year, in September 1999, Sisulu-Walker opened, remarkably, with 247 students, from kindergarten through grade 2, in the new community building of a Harlem church. From this book one learns how difficult and complicated it is to open a charter school, even with the relatively supportive legislation of New York State. Indeed, it is a wonder that the school was launched so rapidly. The minister of the church at the time, Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, introduces the book, and has been one of the school's strongest and most effective supporters. (Walker was one of the closest associates of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who spoke at Walker's installation in his Harlem church in 1968.)

Despite Walker's praiseworthy role, what is especially distinctive and intriguing in the book is the part played by Steven Klinsky, an equity-fund manager whose name will not be familiar even to those who follow efforts to create independent choices in schooling. Klinsky, from a Michigan business family, had gone through Harvard Business School and Harvard Law School simultaneously and was in the

middle of a successful career in private equity in New York in the early 1990s when he began to think of what he could do to honor a deceased older brother. "One night, on a business trip to London, by chance he picked up philosopher Martin Buber's thin book, *The Way of Man*, at an airport bookstore. Buber's thoughts and metaphors resonated so strongly with Klinsky that he began copying entire paragraphs into his notebook." Author Bounds quotes a passage from Buber retelling the classic kabbalah account of God's broken, fragmented light and its way in the world, and notes that Buber also influenced Martin Luther King. On his return to New York, Klinsky decided to do something, which led to his creation of an academic afterschool program in a school in one of the most poverty-stricken areas in Brooklyn. The experience taught Klinsky a great deal about the New York City public schools, and the Gary Klinsky Children's Center has since grown to include many sites.

Then came the New York State charter law, and Klinsky decided to establish a new school. He had the help of veterans of the New York City school system such as Seymour Fliegel, who had led an innovative program of school choice in East Harlem. The New York charter law envisions a school built with the support of community leaders, and Klinsky was not a natural for such a role. He realized early on the kind of assistance that a new school, indeed any school and particularly a charter, would need. He set about creating "a technical support and advisory group that would



seek out the very best of these community leaders, give them the start-up funds and technical advice [finances, payroll system, health care program, implementing curriculum, relations with public authorities] they needed, and help them manage their own schools." In effect, he created a "charter school support organization," of

which there are now many. To do this, he went to Harvard Business School to recruit top graduating seniors who, surprisingly, he was able to convince to choose working with him, over Wall Street alternatives, in his new organization, Victory Education Partners.

"Klinsky began to systematically tackle each academic, political, and financial challenge inherent in building a school from scratch," writes Bounds. Studying educational programs, Klinsky decided the curriculum for the new school would combine E. D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge, Direct Instruction (DI), and a theme-oriented program that would draw on and develop many kinds of knowledge.

A central problem for any charter school is space. While public school buildings are publicly funded, charter schools have no financial resources for building, renting, or renovating, and must find them or take them from the funds they get for teaching, which are in any case less than the support the public schools receive. Klinsky scoured the city and the suburbs (all while working in private equity) for low-achieving areas that might welcome his new school and in which he might find space. Eventually, through

a chain of contacts, he discovered Walker's new community building behind his church. Walker was enthusiastic, but the site was not ideal: the rooms would have to be cleared daily for church uses, and the kindergarten classes would meet in the assembly hall separated only by temporary barriers. But there was now space.

Would the school be authorized? Klinsky was at the same time working on opening two other charter schools, one in the very troubled minority Roosevelt district in Long Island, another in Queens, with the associated difficulties of finding space, creating community boards, etc. In the case of Roosevelt, there was also consistent opposition from the school district and the town authorities. Hundreds of pages of applications and supporting documents were provided to the SUNY committee that could authorize charter schools, but Sisulu (not yet called Sisulu-Walker) did receive a charter to open in 1999.

Many community meetings were conducted to explain the new school and its objectives and curriculum, and principal and teachers had to be recruited, all during the heat of a New York City summer. But Klinsky kept up the pace, and Sisulu opened with enough applicants to require a lottery.

Since then the school has flourished, but not without further difficulties. Finding more space at a nearby Police Athletic League (PAL) youth center, Sisulu expanded to grade 5, taking in more children from the community. But then it floundered, finding it difficult to manage in two facilities, the second of which also required clearing the space at the end of each day. One suspects it may have been adversely affected, as so many educational innovations are, by the fact that the creative individuals who found and staff the schools are ready to move on after two or three years. (We are given no details on staff turnover.)

The curriculum Klinsky had created also began to raise questions. Why DI? When private schools didn't

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use it, why was it prescribed for these children? There was a showdown of the community board with Klinsky, who, despite his creative role in establishing the school, had no formal position in running it. His Victory group provided services and financing through loans (particularly rent for the facilities Sisulu used). Klinsky agreed to drop DI and forgave the million already expended on Sisulu. (There were also expenditures for the other charters Klinsky had founded and financed.)

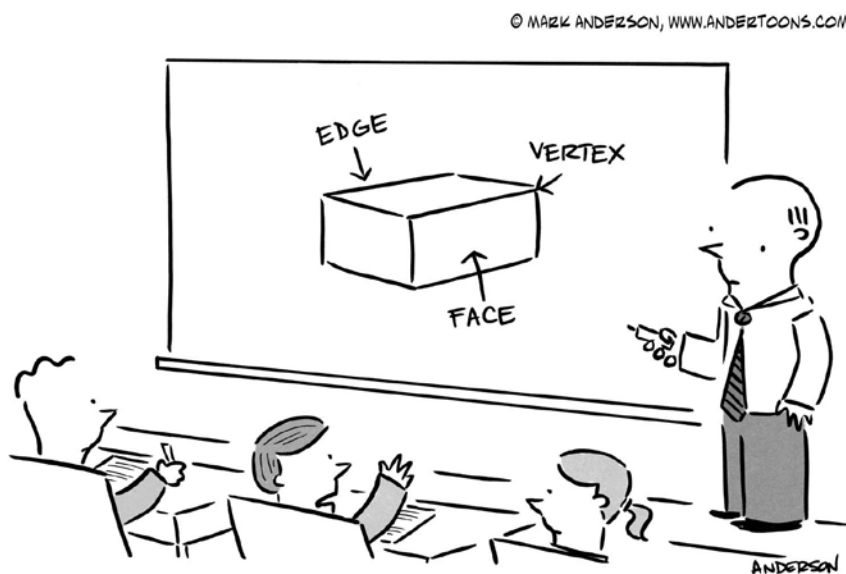
Sisulu eventually withdrew from the PAL site, continued its expansion to 5th grade, and has been reauthorized by the state authority. Today it is flourishing,

which is not true of the two other New York charters launched at the same time, which have run into financial and programmatic difficulties, as so many charters have. But unlike some of the best-known New York City charters, Sisulu has not been able to draw on large philanthropic contributions. Klinsky's expenditures, while not clear, seem to amount to not much more than \$1 million a school.

Why do they do it? Bounds writes, “Klinsky was walking away from his status as a senior-level partner of one of the most successful financial firms in the world. Leaving behind Gulfstream jets, Sikorsky helicopters, private chefs, drivers, and celebrity Aspen weekends, all for hard work in Harlem and Roosevelt, zero-pay and the need to start again.”

Why indeed, but Klinsky and others do. Most provide only the money, which is easy when one is wealthy. But some do much more, and in doing so they are bending an education system that has become sclerotic and exceedingly hard to move on any large scale.

Nathan Glazer is professor emeritus of education and sociology at Harvard University.



“That's fine, but you haven't told us the most important part - what's in it?!”