

NEW REPUBLIC

Direct Answer

by John McWhorter | January 14, 2009

One does not expect to see New York's school Chancellor Joel Klein on the same stage as Reverend Al Sharpton. Klein is infamous for his emphasis on test scores and shutting down schools that fail to measure up. Not so long ago, Sharpton was in the barricades with Russell Simmons protesting mayor Michael Bloomberg and Klein's plan to cut New York City's education budget.

Yet these days the two are teaming up for the [Education Equality Project](#), which seeks to close the achievement gap between white and black kids in public schools. And at the New York City Department of Education's kickoff in a series on the topic last week, Klein and Sharpton agreed on most issues. Sharpton, who in his "reformed" guise has decided that education is a key civil rights issue, actually spoke up for vouchers and mayoral control of the school board.

The forum was a typical one on race and education, as ritualized as a religious service. First, an introducer recites the latest dropout statistics. Then, discussants and audience questioners flag the usual terms--Low Expectations, Parental Involvement, Vested Interests, Resources, Accountability--each greeted with knowing murmurs and applause. A tacit assumption is always that the grievous intersection of these factors explains why poor children, especially black and Latino ones, tend to trail so far behind white ones in reading skills--a maddening gap that persists in National Assessment of Educational Progress reports year after year.

Yet a solution for the reading gap was discovered four decades ago. Starting in the late 1960s, Siegfried Engelmann led a government-sponsored investigation, Project Follow Through, that compared nine teaching methods and tracked their results in more than 75,000 children from kindergarten through third grade. It found that the Direct Instruction (DI) method of teaching reading was vastly more effective than any of the others for (drum roll, please) poor kids, including black ones. DI isn't exactly complicated: Students are taught to sound out words rather than told to get the hang of recognizing words whole, and they are taught according to scripted drills that emphasize repetition and frequent student participation.

In a half-day preschool in Champaign-Urbana they founded, Engelmann and associates [found](#) that DI teaches four-year-olds to understand sounds, syllables, and rhyming. Its students went on to kindergarten reading at a second-grade level, with their mean IQ having jumped 25 points. In the 70s and 80s, similar results came from nine other sites nationwide, and since then, the evidence of DI's effectiveness has been overwhelming, raising students' reading scores in schools in [Baltimore](#), [Houston](#), [Milwaukee](#), and other districts. A search for an occasion where

DI was instituted and failed to improve students' reading performance would be distinctly frustrating.

Still, at this forum you would never have known Project Follow Through existed. Key moment: A teacher reminded us to keep "creativity" in mind as a teaching tool, with coos and scattered applause from the audience, and Sharpton milking it by chiming in. Indeed, schools of education have long been caught up in an idea that teaching poor kids to read requires something more than, well, teaching them how to sound out words. The poor child, the good-thinking wisdom tells us, needs tutti-frutti approaches bringing in music, rhythm, narrative, Ebonics, and so on. Distracted by the hardships in their home lives, surely they cannot be reached by just laying out the facts. That can only work for coddled children of doctors and lawyers.

But the simple fact of how well DI has worked shows that "creativity" is not what poor kids need. At the Champaign-Urbana preschool, the kids--poor kids, recall, and not many who were white--had a jolly old time with DI, especially when they found that it was (hey!) teaching them to read.

In 2001, third-grade students in the mostly black Richmond district in Virginia were scoring abysmally in reading. But once a scientifically proven reading program similar to DI was brought in, by 2005, three-quarters of black students passed the third-grade reading test. Meanwhile, out in wealthy Fairfax County, where DI was scorned as usual, the black students taking that test--despite ample funding--were passing it at the rate of merely 59 percent.

The saddest thing about the blithe neglect of Engelmann's findings is that they are the answer to the problems people at forums like these find so challenging. It's as if you're listening to people discuss the merits of moving a two-ton load of grain into a barn by spreading the ground between the load and the barn with cooking grease and heaving-ho. The solution's "creative," alright--but hasn't Engelmann already invented the wheel?

Arne Duncan, Barack Obama's appointed Secretary of Education, happens to be a signatory to Klein and Sharpton's Education Equality Project to bring "equity to an educational system that, 54 years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, continues to fail its highest-needs students." In Washington, Duncan might consider taking the blinders off and forcing America's urban school districts to teach poor kids to read with tools that we have known to work since the Nixon Administration.

Otherwise, all we will have is the likes of the audience at the Klein-Sharpton event coming away thinking the event was "great" because Sharpton is a jolly presence and everyone got to clap upon hearing terms like Low Expectations and Resources. I submit that this is a distinctly thin basis upon which to translate our President-Elect's call for hope into action.

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