

The New York Times

NYTIMES.COM

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

MONDAY, JUNE 13, 2022

Reprinted With Permission

Opinion

This Company Knows How to Increase Students' Test Scores

By PETER COY

Some of the world's most successful educational techniques are being applied today in Kenya, Uganda, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda and India, in schools serving poor children that are run or advised by NewGlobe Schools, a company founded by Americans with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. These techniques deserve to be applied more widely, including in wealthy nations such as the United States.

A new study led by a Nobel laureate economist, Michael Kremer of the University of Chicago, found that in Kenya, enrolling in schools run by NewGlobe for two years increased test scores by an amount equal to being in school for an additional 0.89 year for primary school pupils, and to being in school an extra 1.48 years for pre-primary pupils. The poorest children improved the most.

"The test score effects in this study are among the largest observed in the international education literature, particularly for a program that was already operating at scale, exceeding the 99th percentile of treatment effects of large-scale education interventions," Kremer and his colleagues found.

NewGlobe clearly has built a better mousetrap, but it has taken a while for the world to beat a path to its door. It has encountered multiple obstacles, including from the U.S. Congress, although it is gradually winning followers.

One reason for the slow uptake in the early going was resistance from teacher unions, including the Kenyan National Union of Teachers. During the period studied, NewGlobe paid teachers only one-third to one-fifth of what Kenyan public school teachers were earning. Many of its initial recruits didn't have teaching certificates. (NewGlobe says it adapted to the government require-

ments as they changed over time.)

Students in Bridge International Academies, as NewGlobe's schools in Kenya are called, routinely outperformed students in the public schools, the researchers found. To be sure, that was not a high hurdle: The Kremer paper cites other research finding that "Kenyan teachers were absent from class during 47 percent of unannounced visits and spent about two hours and 20 minutes a day teaching."

"Interleaving" is an example of a teaching technique that NewGlobe rolled out to classrooms successfully. In math classes, for instance, students are given a mixture of problems that require different methods instead of a solid block of problems in which they apply one method over and over. NewGlobe found that interleaving resulted in worse performance on tests in the short term but much better performance over the long run — so now the technique is built into the teaching software that the teachers use.

Some critics of NewGlobe are put off that its teaching is highly scripted and standardized. NewGlobe figures out what works best and then requires teachers to do exactly that. They are equipped with tablet computers that tell them what to say ("Eyes on me," for example), what gestures to use, when to cold-call on a student, when to tell students to work together on problems and so on.

According to union-supported research, school inspectors and other officials in Kenya "describe this method of teaching as 'robotic', 'too controlling', 'disabling the teachers from using their creativity and innovativeness', 'neocolonial' and representing a form of 'slavery.'"

NewGlobe executives don't see it that way. I interviewed Shannon May,

a co-founder of the company, and Sean Geraghty, its chief academic officer. "I think of it like music," May said. "There's a certain order of notes. Those notes have been standardized. They're on a clef. Piano or forte. The composer is guiding you." As with musicians, there is room for teachers to exercise creativity while following the script, she said.

Standardization doesn't drain creativity from students either, Geraghty said. Creativity is hard to quantify, of course, but students in NewGlobe schools perform as well as others in an exercise in which they're encouraged to think of different uses for a spoon. "We find positive and statistically significant effects on higher order skills," the Kremer study found.

Figuring out whether students are absorbing the material is so important that it's written into the script. NewGlobe teachers are more, not less, responsive to students' needs, Kremer's team found.

Still, teachers and parents do not always welcome highly formatted education. In the United States, many parents on both the left and the right opt out of standardized tests for their children. More than 20 states have repealed, revised or rolled back parts of the Common Core State Standards Initiative that was introduced with high hopes in 2010.

NewGlobe has changed its business model in recent years. In Kenya, Bridge International Academies educated about 100,000 students at its peak enrollment, around 2015. But NewGlobe's strategy of low cost private education became a target for teacher unions and some government officials. May says Bridge schools are educating about 45,000 students in Kenya now. It also continues to operate its own schools in

Uganda; Lagos, Nigeria; and Andhra Pradesh, India.

NewGlobe is more focused now on bringing its method to existing public schools. It has contracts with the national governments of Liberia and Rwanda and several state governments in Nigeria and India. More than one million students are being educated by Bridge methods in public schools. May said she's happy with the new approach. "Our interest wasn't in construction of schools," she said. "It was in learning."

The International Finance Corporation, a private sector arm of the World Bank, invested \$10 million in exchange for a share of the ownership. But in 2020, the U.S. Congress forced the corporation to freeze investments in private, for-profit schools from kindergarten through 12th grade — or face a U.S. veto of a \$5.5 billion capital increase for the corporation. Representative Maxine Waters, Democrat of California and the chair of the House Financial Services Committee, described the action as part of "a major labor market and worker protection reform."

In a statement to me, NewGlobe wrote, "It was disappointing that when the International Finance Corporation was trying to raise capital to support economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic that ideological interests were prepared to hold up that vital support in order to reduce investment paths for countries and communities facing the worst learning crisis in a generation."

The International Finance Corporation sold its equity investment in NewGlobe this March at a profit. Bill Gates, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation and the Nigerian Sovereign Investment Authority, among others, remain as investors. (The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation also helped fund the study led by Kremer that evaluated NewGlobe.) In an email, NewGlobe said it is no longer planning on a public offering of shares because it is generating enough cash through operations to fund its expansion.

When I asked for examples of similar arrangements in the United States, where a nonprofit organization supports rigorous public schools for low-income students, NewGlobe cited the KIPP Foundation, which runs 270 charter schools across the country. NewGlobe also cited Success Academy, a network of charter schools in New York City serving mostly low-income students in one of the nation's most segregated school systems. "Success students in the city's poorest communities outperformed kids in the wealthiest suburbs," says an article in the summer 2022 edition of *Education Next*. "If the network were a single school, it would rank in the top 1 percent of the state's 3,560 schools in math and the top 3 percent in English." Eva Moskowitz, the founder of Success Academy, describes her approach as "joyful rigor."

How Kremer and his team determined

that NewGlobe's Bridge schools in Kenya were super effective is an interesting bit of economics. Kremer shared the Nobel in economic sciences in 2019 for developing experimental approaches to alleviating poverty. To investigate the effectiveness of the Bridge schools in Kenya, he and his team used a lottery to hand out scholarships to Bridge schools. Kremer's team compared the average outcome of students who were offered scholarships to the average outcome of those who weren't offered scholarships. That produced an underestimate of the Bridge schools' effectiveness because the scholarship offer raised a student's probability of attending a Bridge school by only about one-third. The researchers adjusted for that built-in underestimate in their calculations.

Kremer taught secondary school in Kenya when he was younger, so he has more of a feel for these issues than the average foreign researcher. His colleagues on the project were the scholars Guthrie Gray-Lobe of the University of Chicago, Anthony Keats of Wesleyan University, Isaac Mbiti of the University of Virginia and Owen Ozier of Williams College.

In an email, Kremer wrote that NewGlobe's new emphasis on working inside public schools struck him as "consistent with a move to a new social contract" that is acceptable to both teacher unions and advocates of standardized education. If so, that would make a lot of people happy.