

# A Nobel for Education Next



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Esther Duflo, left, and Michael Kremer.

The editors of *Education Next* congratulate Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer, two of the three economists who won the 2019 Nobel Prize in economics, announced earlier this week. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences recognized the researchers specifically “for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty”—an approach that was on full display in articles Duflo and Kremer published in *Education Next* more than a decade ago.

In “[Can Tracking Improve Learning? Evidence from Kenya](#)” (Summer 2009), Duflo, Kremer, and Pascaline Dupas reported on the first-ever experimental test of the effects of tracking on students’ academic progress. In schools assigned to the treatment group, first-grade students were placed into classrooms based strictly on their incoming achievement level. Control-group schools in turn assigned their first graders to classrooms at random, without regard to their achievement. The results were striking. As the authors wrote:

The results showed that all students benefited from tracking, including those who started out with low, average, and high achievement.... any negative effects of being with lower-achieving peers were more than offset in tracked settings by the benefit of the teacher being able to better tailor instruction to students’ needs.

And the Spring 2005 issue of *Education Next* carried an article by Kremer, Edward Miguel, and Rebecca Thornton: “[Incentives to Learn: Merit scholarships that pay kids to do well.](#)” That article featured evidence from another experiment in Kenya in which girls in a random subset of schools were made eligible for a merit scholarship if they

performed well on a standardized test administered at the end of sixth grade. The authors found that the prospect of winning a scholarship “significantly improved the test scores of girls. Moreover, the program had salutary spillover effects: test scores of students who were not eligible for—or had no hope of earning—the award also improved, as did school attendance for both students and teachers.”

In [the press release announcing the prize](#), the academy observed, “Half of the world’s children still leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills.” This year’s laureates, the academy said, “have introduced a new approach to obtaining reliable answers about the best ways to fight global poverty. In brief, it involves dividing this issue into smaller, more manageable, questions – for example, the most effective interventions for improving educational outcomes ... They have shown that these smaller, more precise, questions are often best answered via carefully designed experiments among the people who are most affected.”

We are pleased that *Education Next* was able to help illustrate the potency of this method as it emerged—and hopeful that the prestige of the prize will help those educational interventions Duflo and Kremer have shown to be effective gain broader purchase in the developing world. Some of those interventions may warrant additional testing in U.S. schools, where tracking is more common in high schools than in first grade, and where merit scholarships are more common for college applicants than for sixth graders. The experience of third Nobel laureate in economics featured in our pages, though, counsels some caution in that prediction; the Winter 2003 issue of *Education Next* carried an interview with Milton Friedman (“[Choice & Freedom](#)”) about his 1955 essay promoting school vouchers. “So far, we’ve had very limited programs,” Friedman observed. These things do take time, even with a Nobel.

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Business Office

Program on Education Policy and Governance

Harvard Kennedy School

79 JFK Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone (617) 496-5488 Fax (617) 496-4428