

# Smarter Kids at 10 Bucks a Pop



[Stephen J. Dubner](#)  
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A primary school student with glasses from the Gansu Vision Intervention Project in Gansu, China. (Photo: Albert Park)

Our latest episode of Freakonomics Radio (you can download/subscribe [at iTunes](#), get [the RSS feed](#), listen live via the link in box at right below, or read the transcript [here](#)) is about education reform — sort of. Most ed reform addresses the supply side of the equation. That is, what should teachers and schools be doing differently? But this story is about the demand side, the students themselves. What if there were a cheap, quick, and simple way to lift some students' grades?

That's the question that drove two economists, [Paul Glewwe](#) at the University of Minnesota and [Albert Park](#) at Oxford, to conduct an experiment in a poor, rural province of China called [Gansu](#). (You may remember reading about [recent landslides](#) there, which killed more than 1,000 people.)

The [paper](#) that Glewwe and Park wrote, with co-author Meng Zhao, is called "The Impact of Eyeglasses on the Academic Performance of Primary School Students: Evidence from a Randomized Trial in Rural China."



Albert Park with students Guan Guopan and Long Nan at Datong Township No. 1 Jr. H.S. (Photo

courtesy Albert Park)

Glewwe and Park learned that, while 10 to 15 percent of the young students in Gansu had vision problems that could be corrected with eyeglasses, only *two* percent of the kids who needed glasses actually had them. So, working with local health officials, they set up an experimental program to get free glasses to kids who needed them, while also establishing a control group of kids who needed glasses but, at least during this experimental phase, wouldn't get glasses.

In the podcast, you'll hear about a) how effective the glasses were in raising test scores; b) the surprising fact that the take-up rate for the free glasses was relatively low, and possible explanations for this; c) how this intervention compares in efficiency and cost to the typical ed-reform interventions taking places around the world.



Paul Glewwe with a happily bespectacled primary-school student.  
(Photo: Albert Park.)

You will also hear how curious it is that many poor schoolkids in China (and/or their parents) wouldn't accept free glasses that would help them see better while many *Americans* spend hundreds of dollars for eyeglasses with clear-plastic lenses, which don't help them see better at all but do help them look better. The main talker in that section is [Harvey Moscot](#), an optometrist and president (and fourth-generation member) of the legendary New York eyewear shop [MOSCOT](#), which happens to run its own eyeglasses program for needy kids, called the [Moscot Mobileyes Foundation Inc.](#)

Here are a few excerpts from the podcast. First, Glewwe on how hard it is to isolate inputs that really move the needle in education:

**GLEWWE:** There's nothing that comes through really strongly across a variety of countries or contexts, like 'oh, this is the thing that matters.' Like, you know, the level of the teacher's education — sometimes that matters, sometimes it doesn't. It's quite frustrating, actually, to try to understand what's going on. It's pretty clear that it's complicated. And some people would say what really matters is sort of the incentive for all the people involved. If everyone has the right incentive, then learning will take place. But even that, I did some research in Kenya where we tried to give teachers prizes for having kids with higher test scores, and it didn't work very well. So, we're still trying to learn a lot, and there's a lot of people doing research on this topic, but we still have a lot to learn.

Freakonomics Radio

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“Smarter Kids at 10 Bucks a Pop”: It won't work for everyone, but there's a cheap, quick, and simple way to lift some students' grades.

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Park on how this project was different, and important:

**PARK:** I think that a lot of the people going around trying to think about how can we improve education and learning tend to focus on how we can improve schools, and teachers, textbooks, et cetera. And this problem is a little bit different, because it's really about the behavior of students and their parents. Sometimes those get simply overlooked in people trying to find solutions. ... And I think there's a whole area of future potential to think more about the behavior of students. ... [I]n China, the biggest payoff is actually getting into college, because there is a huge return to higher education. ... So, undereducated youth are increasingly disadvantaged.



MOSCOT glasses "The Nebb": is \$255 is a small price to pay to look "cool"?

And Moscot on why Chinese kids might refuse glasses whereas in the U.S., it's estimated that some four million people wear "planos" (glasses with non-prescription lenses):

**MOSCOT:** It doesn't surprise me. I don't think the fashion aspect of eye wear in China has taken place like it has in America. Famous Chinese icons probably are not wearing their glasses like they are in America. In America, eyeglasses are the coolest thing you can put on your face right now. From any hip-hop star to any idol of a sports star that wears them when they're not playing their sports influences children's perception of eyeglasses.





Hyman Moscot in front of the Moscot store on Rivington Street in 1934. (Photo: MOSCOT)