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KIPP: Learning a Lesson from Big Business

The charter school powerhouse uses motivational techniques inspired by America's top corporations, to impressive effect

By Molly Peterson

Touring a branch of the Knowledge Is Power Program in southwest Houston is like dropping into an underage executive boot camp. The building houses three KIPP charter schools spanning pre-kindergarten to 12th grade—each one a showcase for motivational tactics. The youngest kids wear shirts emblazoned with "Class of 2024," the year they plan to start college. Classrooms are named after Yale and other top colleges. Fifth graders chant their multiplication tables in unison. And the corridors of the middle school are lined with slogans such as "No Shortcuts."

The resemblance to executive training—an intense, communal focus on goals—is no coincidence. KIPP's two founders, Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, drew lessons from some of America's top companies, including Gap (**GPS**), FedEx (**FDX**), and Southwest Airlines (**LUV**), as they built the program. Both men graduated from Ivy League colleges, and both are alumni of Teach for America, a New York nonprofit that funnels college grads into two-year teaching stints in poor neighborhoods. They and many of their principals have also taken business school classes. "KIPP school leaders are small business owners in many respects," says Elliott Witney, the chief academic officer of KIPP's Houston schools, who keeps a copy of Jim Collins' *Good to Great* in his office.

Started in 1994 as an experiment with 50 fifth graders in Houston's inner city, KIPP has blossomed into the biggest U.S. charter school operator, with 82 schools for poor and minority children in 19 states. The Obama Administration

cites KIPP schools as models for some of the education reforms it hopes to spur with \$100 billion in stimulus money. The program has gotten "remarkable results from students," Education Secretary Arne Duncan told Bloomberg. It helps kids "who didn't really have a good work ethic start to become extraordinarily successful."

Working overtime is central to KIPP's success, as it is at many corporations. Starting with the Houston experiment, Feinberg and Levin instituted nine-hour school days instead of the usual seven, held classes on some Saturdays, and ran summer sessions. Students often spent 60% more time in class than regular public schools require. After one year, the number of students performing at grade level in reading and math jumped to 90% from 50%.

Results kept improving over the next decade. In 2005, a study by the Educational Policy Institute in Virginia Beach, Va., found "large and significant gains" among fifth graders in KIPP schools nationwide on the Stanford Achievement Test Series, a standardized assessment used by school districts. On a scale of 0 to 99, the students scored an average of 9 to 17 points higher in reading, language, and math than they had the previous year elsewhere.

KIPP now has an 85% college matriculation rate, compared with 40% for low-income students nationwide, according to a 2008 report card KIPP prepared and posted on its Web site. About 90% of KIPP's 20,000 students are black or Hispanic; 80% qualify for subsidized meals.

Principals, teachers, students, and parents stay focused on preparing every child for college, says Feinberg, 41, a University of Pennsylvania graduate who heads up KIPP's 15 Houston schools. (Yale University alumnus Levin, 39, runs the system's six New York City schools.) When KIPP students graduate, "It's not just the high school teachers that walk in the commencement," Feinberg says. "The middle school teachers and the elementary teachers that taught those kids walk as well."

KIPP school leaders, who refer to students and parents as "customers," have more control than traditional public school principals over budgets, staffing, and curriculum, Feinberg says. They also continually assess whether students are likely to succeed in college. Schools that fall short can lose the right to the KIPP brand.

WORTH EMULATING?

Some scholars, such as Jeffrey Henig, a political science and education professor at Columbia University, question whether the KIPP experience can be reproduced on a large scale. KIPP staffs its relatively small number of schools by recruiting from a limited pool of top candidates, he points out. About a third of KIPP's teachers and two-thirds of its principals are alumni of Teach for America, which draws heavily from the Ivy League and other highly ranked colleges. "KIPP and Teach for America have shown that it is possible to get bright, enthusiastic, energetic young people [teaching in] schools," Henig says. "But we don't know whether that's sustainable."

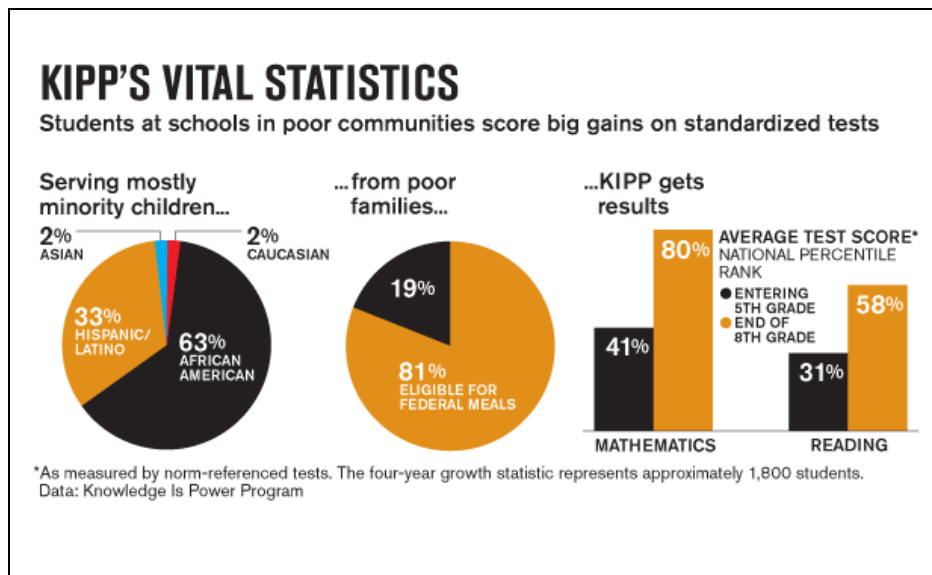
KIPP's defenders insist the model is worth emulating. The New York chapter has expanded "in a way that ensures quality control," says New York Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein. "They have consistently opened up very good schools, and we want to support that."

The nation's 4,900 charter schools, including KIPP's, operate under contracts with school districts or states and receive most of their operating funds from them. KIPP students attend for free and are chosen by lottery. Additional aid comes from organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. Gap clothing chain founders Don and Doris Fisher were early donors, contributing \$64 million of KIPP's \$130 million tally from philanthropies.

Feinberg wants to expand in Houston from 15 to 42 KIPP schools, serving 10% of the city's public school students by 2020. He hopes his program

will prod traditional public schools to adopt KIPP methods—just as competition from FedEx inspired the U.S. Postal Service to expand overnight mail. KIPP provides "healthy competition" that "makes everybody better," says Houston Independent School District spokesman Norm Uhl.

Like KIPP, some other charter schools have increased class time, and many regular public schools have started effective after-school programs, Uhl says. Michelle Rhee, head of Washington (D.C.) public schools, has modeled some initiatives after KIPP, including Saturday classes and more rigorous summer school.



Could KIPP, or any charter program, become a major catalyst for change in America's faltering public education system? It's not clear, says Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers. "Public schools don't always react" the ways

companies do, Fallon says. "They'll whine about losing enrollment" to charter schools, "but whether they do anything about it is another story."

Yet KIPP proves that "it is absolutely possible for poor minority kids to achieve at the highest level," says Rhee. She cites a KIPP school in Washington where, she says, 90% of students are performing on grade level, compared with 10% at a regular public school six blocks away. "Same neighborhood, same challenges, same kids with those wildly different outcomes," says Rhee. That's a report card any school would be happy to receive.

Peterson is a reporter for Bloomberg News.