

A Cure for Poverty

Here is a template for creating schools that overcome disadvantaged students' handicaps.

By Jay Mathews

I am at that age where I read every word about experiments in preventing heart attacks, cancer, and other afflictions of my generation. And I carefully note those results that are so good the research is called off early so that everyone can adopt the new method.

There is a suggested treatment for the ills of low-income schools that is approaching that same point when it will no longer be just another experiment, but I wonder if we will have the good sense — in an educational community often suspicious of good news — to recognize that it is time to apply it to many, many more schools.

I am talking about the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), a national network of 15 public schools that have produced achievement gains of a size and consistency I have never seen before.

Any time I see achievement rates double in a year, which has happened in some KIPP schools, I remember all the instances of cooked grading books and second year slumps and faculty revolts that caused so many miracle schools of the past to disintegrate.

But what reassures me about the KIPP successes is that I have had a chance to look closely at what they are doing, with several visits to the KIPP DC: KEY Academy these last two years. There is no magic in their method.

If I did not understand their approach, I would be suspicious. But all they are doing is those things that experts have long known work best with low-income kids, and in this case sticking with them.

Good schools share three characteristics. They have high expectations for every child. They carefully follow the progress of every child. They increase learning time for every child. The very best schools, like KIPP, find good teachers who stay focused on those three objectives and pursue them in consistent ways.

Track Record

Not only are 83% of the students in KIPP schools poor enough to be eligible for federally-subsidized meals, but they are all hormone-laden middle-schoolers, considered the worst possible age to try to teach anything. Yet here is what has been happening to kids embraced by KIPP.

The **KIPP Academy New York** has become the highest-performing middle school in the Bronx in terms of reading and math scores and score improvement.

In its first year, the **KIPP DC: KEY Academy** in Washington, DC, had the highest grade 5 math scores of any public school in the city. In the second year, its next grade 5 class gained 14 points in reading and nearly 20 points in math on the 99-point normal curve equivalent scale, while the grade 6 students bested their own grade 5 scores by 6 points in reading and nearly 9 points in math.

The **KIPP Gaston College Preparatory** in rural North Carolina, which I visited in 2001 as it was setting up next to a peanut field, raised the percentage of its grade 5 students passing the state reading test from 59% to 100% in just one year. For the school as a whole, 100% of students scored at grade level or above in math and 99% at grade level or above in reading.

After just one year, the **KIPP Reach College Preparatory** in Oklahoma City had 87% of its grade 5 students scoring advanced or satisfactory in math and 66% in reading on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test, compared to city averages of 54% and 47% respectively.

The **KIPP Asheville Youth Academy** raised the portion of grade 5 students testing proficient in reading from 44% to 80% and math proficiency from 78% to 91%.

Each KIPP school is a grades 5 to 8 middle school, with approximately 80 students in each grade. Teachers visit each home and have students and parents sign contracts accepting the schools' standards and rules.

Students arrive at school about 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. and stay until 5:00 p.m. There are frequent Saturday classes for sports, music, etiquette, and other niceties. Everyone goes to summer school, usually in July.

Every teacher has a school-issued cell phone. Every student has those cell phone numbers and is told to call them at night with any homework questions.

Students who do not complete all their homework are disciplined. Classroom misbehaviour is handled swiftly.

A point system rewards good work and behaviour and subtracts points for failing to obey the rules. Points can be redeemed for items in the student store, and those with enough points at the end of the year may go on special school trips.

There is a year-long KIPP principals program that gives bright young teachers management training at the University of California at Berkeley and then has them help out at one of the existing KIPP schools for several months.

There will be 17 more KIPP schools opening next fall. I don't think we can declare the experiment a success quite yet. Often, as such efforts grow larger, they lose their focus and standards slip.

But if there is a KIPP school in your area, you should keep a close eye on it, and spread the word. And if you don't have one, you might contact the KIPP folk (www.kipp.org) and ask how to get one.

(Adapted with permission from "KIPP Model Could Help Low-Income Schools", Washington Post, July 1, 2003.)