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## **Twenty Years of Charter Schools: What We've Learned**

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When it comes to charter schools, we've come a long way. In the two decades since my KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) co-founder, Dave Levin, and I first stumbled into the charter school world, via Teach For America and the education reform community, a lot has changed. Charter schools have gone from a wild idea to a full-fledged educational movement, and we have learned – and continue to learn – volumes about what works and what does not in setting underserved students up for success in school and life.

### **The KIPP Idea**

When Dave and I started our journey as teachers in the early 1990s, we did not expect that charter schools would be our avenue for change. As young Teach For America teachers in Houston, we only knew what we saw: that our students were not getting the preparation they needed to do well in secondary school, college, and life. Our fifth grade students, who came from some of the most underserved communities in Houston, were struggling when they came to us and despite improving in our classroom and they continued to struggle later on.

It seemed to us that the community needed more options for a rigorous, college-prep education. At the time, there was a common perception that children born in circumstances like the ones our students faced simply could not learn. That seemed wrong to us. We saw the potential in our students, and knew that

they could achieve if they were given the chance. We knew that all students *can* learn; the challenge was figuring out how to make sure that all students *will* learn. So one night, with U2's *Achtung Baby* playing on repeat, we sat down and hashed out a plan for a new kind of school experience. It took all night, but by morning, the Knowledge Is Power Program – KIPP – was born.

We started KIPP in 1994 with 48 fifth graders, in a single classroom in a Houston Independent School District (HISD) school. The next year, I stayed in Houston to found KIPP Academy Middle School with the support of Houston's then-Superintendent Rod Paige, and Dave returned to New York to found KIPP Academy Middle School in the Bronx. Our goal was simple: deliver on the promises we had made to our students and their families, and give them the best college-preparatory education we could. Our plan was to give our students the extra time, higher expectations, and all-around support they needed to become successful in our classroom and beyond. We also planned, initially, to keep KIPP within the local district. As public school teachers, we wanted to keep KIPP in the public school system, and for the first few years the two KIPP Academies functioned as “schools within schools,” housed in existing district schools in Houston and New York. We discovered that, for a variety of reasons, HISD could not continue to support a program like ours. We began exploring other public school options, and eventually made our way to charter schools. Right away we realized that this could be a solution to our dilemma.

At the time, charter schools were still a new idea. The first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013), two years before we founded KIPP. Charter schools were first authorized in Texas in 1995 (Texas Education Association, 2013), and in New York State in

1998 (New York City Charter School Center, 2012). The idea behind charter schools was to create a new kind of public school, one that would be freed from many of the restrictions that constrained traditional districts and schools. In exchange for this increased freedom, charter schools would be held to a higher level of accountability for the results they produced, and could be closed down if they failed to deliver for students.

The premise of public charter schools was something Dave and I knew we could leverage to increase our impact for our students. One of the potential benefits we saw of charter schools was that they could provide an alternative for families whose children were struggling in traditional public schools. For students like ours at KIPP, who were growing up in poverty and struggling in school, this seemed like a valuable option. Charter schools also had the potential to nourish innovation so that successful ideas could be proven in charter schools and then implemented in traditional public schools on a larger scale. We were very excited by this, and eager to get to work testing and sharing our ideas. We had no idea how much KIPP, and the charter school movement as a whole, would grow in the years to come.

### **The KIPP Impact**

In the nearly 20 years since those first two KIPP schools opened their doors, we have expanded to become a national network of 141 public charter schools, serving 50,000 students in 20 states and the District of Columbia. Across our network, 95 percent of the students we serve are African-American or Hispanic, and more than 86 percent come from low-income backgrounds (KIPP, 2013). Across the country, charter schools have blossomed into a major part of the public school system; from one school in Minnesota in 1992 to more than 5,997 public

charter schools currently operating in the U.S., charter schools now represent over 6 percent of the total number of public schools in the country (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013). The reason for this incredible growth is simple: there is a huge demand. Families in many communities are hungry for great education options for their children. Charter schools are certainly not *the* answer, but they are *an* answer—and a good one for many families in the communities we serve.

As the charter school movement has grown, so has the body of research showing that charter schools are effective. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University released a report earlier this year, following up on a previous report from 2009. Researchers found that, overall, charter schools' performance has improved across the board since the release of the first report, and that charter schools serving low-income and minority students are performing especially well (Cremata et al., 2013). CREDO's most recent charter school report found that charter schools in Louisiana are producing learning gains that amount to an extra 50 days of learning in reading and 65 days of learning in math annually, as compared to neighboring district schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013). Meanwhile, over in KIPP world, Mathematica Policy Research has investigated our middle school results rigorously over the course of several years. Their latest report found that these schools are producing clear and substantial gains in all grades and subject areas that were studied. Mathematica also found that KIPP middle schools serve a population that enters with lower test scores than their peers in neighboring district schools; these students were also from lower-income backgrounds, though they were slightly less likely to be receiving special education services or learning English as a second language. Importantly, the researchers did a highly

rigorous evaluation that controlled for factors like parental motivation, and found that KIPP students' gains held up even when those factors were taken into consideration (Tuttle et al., 2013).

### **The KIPP Future**

Even with the progress we have seen, as charter educators, we are definitely not ready to stop learning, improving, and innovating. Over the past 20 years, all of us in the charter school movement have learned valuable lessons about what students need in order to succeed. At KIPP, continuous learning is one of our mantras, and we take it seriously. Through a combination of rigorous research, self-reflection, and feedback from fellow educators, we and other charter school educators have refined our efforts in several key areas.

The first area is greater accountability and oversight. Accountability is baked right into the philosophy of charter schools; without it, our freedom to innovate is cheap and counterproductive. Unfortunately, the charter school movement over the years has sometimes focused more on opening promising new charter schools rather than shutting down underperforming old ones. I am excited to see progress towards more accountability here in Texas, with the passage of Senate Bill 2 (SB 2) to strengthen both the expansion and accountability of charter schools. SB 2 streamlines the process of opening and renewing high-quality charter schools in Texas, and also expands the state education commissioner's ability to close down underperforming charter schools. Initiatives like this are helping us hold up both ends of the charter school bargain so we can continue making sure we are really doing what is best for students.

The second area is college completion. When we first founded KIPP, our focus was specifically on college matriculation – getting kids *to* college. However, when we examined the college graduation rates of our earliest classes of students, we found something troubling: by spring 2011, only 33 percent of them had actually graduated from a four-year college (KIPP, 2011), though that number has since increased to 40 percent as of fall 2012 (KIPP, 2013). Though this percentage is still higher than the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), and four times the rate of their peers from low-income backgrounds (Mortenson, 2010), it's not nearly good enough. Now, we are focusing on what it takes to get students "*to and through*" college. To that end, we started an initiative in 2011 to partner with colleges and universities to support KIPP students to graduation day; so far, over 40 institutions have signed on to partner with us, including the University of Houston, Dillard University, and my alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania (KIPP, 2013). By partnering with institutions of higher learning and providing direct support through our KIPP Through College program, we are working to help address the academic, social, and financial hurdles that our students face when working towards higher education degrees.

That leads into the third area of growth, character development. Although KIPP always has had a dual focus on both academics and character, in recent years we have zeroed in specifically on the character half of the equation. In our research, KIPP has found that a robust set of character strengths is crucial to helping all children – and particularly first-generation college students – overcome the challenges they encounter in college and life (KIPP, 2013). We have relied heavily on the research of psychologists Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson, and Angela Duckworth to identify the character strengths that our students

need most as they climb the mountain to and through college. KIPP schools across the country are using this research to help students nurture and develop the key character strengths – grit, zest, optimism, self-control, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity – that they will need to rely on as they make their way through college and the competitive world beyond (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The final area is collaboration with school districts. When we founded KIPP, we had high hopes that the innovations we developed within our walls could be expanded into the districts immediately around us. We also hoped that districts would be able to innovate on their own and pass those innovations on to us. In recent years, we have come full circle, and this dream of collaboration has started coming true. In the Houston area, for example, three major players in the local public school landscape – KIPP, YES Prep charter schools, and the Spring Branch Independent School District – have created the SKY partnership to share resources and ideas. Thanks to the SKY partnership, KIPP and YES Prep have access to school facilities and extracurricular activities we could not otherwise afford; SBISD has access to KIPP and YES Prep’s professional development for teachers and leaders. There is a constant cross-pollination of ideas among the three partner organizations, which has made all of our work stronger than ever. There are similar partnerships in the works across the country, fueled by Gates Foundation District-Charter Compacts (Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2013), all working towards fulfilling the ultimate charter school goal: spurring innovation and the sharing of best practices throughout the public school system.

## **Conclusion**

It has been an eventful two decades for us at KIPP, and for public charter schools as a whole. I am proud and humbled to have been a part of this ride. As we gear up for the next two decades, I know that there are many more surprises and lessons in store for us all. In the meantime, we will continue to be united by our common vision: that all students *can* and *will* learn.

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