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## A Chance to Learn

**GASTON, N.C.**— The first thing you notice about the school is how quiet it is. The kids are absorbed in their studies and except for the low roar of conversation in the cafeteria during lunch, or the enthusiastic screeching of band practice, you hardly hear a sound.

The Gaston College Preparatory School in this rural town just across the border from Virginia is housed in a new low-rise building on land that until recently was a peanut and soybean farm. Farm equipment outlets and a cotton field or two line the roads leading to the school.

There are only two grades, fifth and sixth. A seventh and eighth grade will be added over the next two years.

I wanted to visit Gaston College Prep because I'd heard it was a remarkable school. It's in a region that is struggling economically and is not known for its academic excellence. Most of the students at the school are black and nearly all of them are poor. Most of the other schools available to them are burdened with problems that show no signs of easing.

At Gaston Prep, which the kids call G.C.P., the atmosphere is almost idyllic. The children are well behaved and the classroom work is intense. "We don't have any fighting here, or any of that picking-on-people stuff," said Shanequa High, a sixth-grader whose reading ability improved dramatically in just one year, and who was the lead dancer in the school's production of "The Lion King" last year.

Another student, 12-year-old Paris Gatling, said, "We're here to work, and we work hard."

Gaston Prep is one of 15 KIPP schools in the United States. KIPP is short for the Knowledge Is Power Program, an effort that began in Houston and has grown into one of the most energetic and academically sound public school programs in the nation.

The key to the success of the schools seems to be the requirement that there be a strong commitment in the very beginning by pupils, parents and a team of extremely dedicated teachers to put forth whatever effort is necessary to enable the children to learn.

KIPP schools are not for the faint of heart. The school day lasts from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., which allows time for additional classroom work and extracurricular activities. After that there are two hours of homework. The kids also attend classes every other Saturday. And there are three weeks of summer school.

The payoff? KIPP students routinely do better than most of their public school peers. In each of its first seven years the KIPP Academy in Houston has been named a Texas Exemplary School. The students there consistently score among the highest in the annual statewide exams.

For five straight years, the KIPP Academy in the Bronx has outperformed all other public middle schools in the borough in math and reading. The student orchestra, considered one of the finest in the nation, recently performed at Carnegie Hall.

Applicants to KIPP schools are chosen by lottery. The program does not seek out the so-called top students. Several of the kids at Gaston Prep are special education students. But in its short tenure, the school has thrived. In the year before they attended Gaston, only 53 percent of the first class of fifth-graders had passed the North Carolina statewide reading test. After one year at Gaston, 93 percent passed, including 82 percent of the special education students. Gaston Prep is already the highest performing public school in all of the four counties from which its students are drawn.

I don't know how easy it would be to repeat KIPP's early success on a massive scale. With so much work involved, I wonder how much of a commitment could be secured from parents in general, or from teachers in general, or students in general. Young Paris Gatling was not kidding when he said, "We work hard."

The hard work was exactly what Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, two Teach for America alumni, had in mind when they created KIPP in 1995. "We are never going to end the day shrugging our shoulders and making excuses," said Mr. Feinberg. "If there's a problem, if something is impeding the success of our kids, that needs to be solved one way or another."

Long hours. Hard work. Discipline. Like I said, I don't know how easily that gets replicated. But schools that thrive in the inner city and in poor rural areas deserve, at the very least, some very close attention.

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**Hard work and  
discipline: keys to  
success.**

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