

Test Scores Are Up at KIPP Schools

Longer Days, Strict Discipline,
Material Rewards Part of the Program

By Jay Mathews
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Three new KIPP charter schools, including one in the District, achieved substantial gains in test scores last year, according to a study being released today that has caught the attention of U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige and spurred plans for further expansion of KIPP's methods throughout the country.

The study says the KIPP DC/KEY Academy, which opened a year ago with 80 fifth-graders in a Southeast Washington church basement, posted unusually large increases on the Stanford 9 achievement test.

The students took the exam in fall 2001 and again in spring 2002. On a 99-point scale, they improved their average reading score from about 34 to 46 and their average math score from about 41 to 65. The results are similar to percentile scores, and the average score for the nation is about 50.

The fall-to-spring gains at the KIPP DC/KEY Academy were more than twice the increases that students typically achieve from one spring to the next on the exam, the study says. About 80 percent of the school's students qualify for federally subsidized lunches.

The other two KIPP schools that opened last year, in Gaston, N.C., and Houston, also showed significant gains in scores, replicating the success of older KIPP schools in Houston and the Bronx, N.Y., according to the report by New American Schools. The Alexandria-based nonprofit organization promotes school improvement through research and services and was hired by KIPP to analyze the test-score data.

"Given the new national emphasis on closing the achievement gap, this is a tremendously important study," said Craig Jerald, senior policy analyst at the Education Trust, a research organization in Washington. "While it's too early to declare absolute victory, these first-year results are hugely encouraging."

Paige, who is scheduled to appear this morning at a student assembly at KIPP's DC/KEY Academy for the report's release, said its teachers have succeeded "because they do the right things: high expectations, rigorous standards, accountability and results."

KIPP, which stands for Knowledge Is Power Program, has an approach that emphasizes long school days, strict discipline and material rewards -- students can earn points for purchases from a student store and a year-end trip.

Education analysts said the test results and an announcement expected today of \$8 million challenge grant to expand KIPP's network of schools raise the profile of a program challenging Edison Schools Inc. as the best known national model for educating low-income children.

Edison, a for-profit company, has been hurt by a drop in its stock price and resistance from teacher unions and officials in some cities, while KIPP has grown rapidly with grants from Doris and Don

Fisher, founders of the Gap clothing stores. KIPP opened 10 schools this past summer and plans to open at least another 19 in 2003.

KIPP began in Houston in 1994, started by two teachers who were then in their twenties, Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin. The passing rate on Texas state tests for the first group of KIPP fifth-graders jumped from 50 percent to 98 percent in one year.

The second-oldest KIPP school, started by Levin in the Bronx in 1995, also has posted big gains. According to a soon-to-be-published Brookings Institution report by Manhattan Institute senior fellow Abigail Thernstrom and Harvard University historian Stephan Thernstrom, less than a third of the fifth-graders entering the Bronx school are at grade level, but by eighth grade, 75 percent of them pass the ninth-grade State Regents exams.

In recent years, the KIPP founders have won awards, been featured on the television program "60 Minutes" and become a favorite of the Bush administration. KIPP students demonstrated their learning methods on stage at the Republican National Convention to introduce Laura Bush's speech. The program has received a \$3.5 million federal grant.

The KIPP DC/KEY Academy, which moved this summer from the church basement to a more spacious building at 770 M Street SE, follows the model of the Houston and Bronx schools. Classes are from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. each weekday and a half-day on many Saturdays. Summer vacation is only one month long. Parents must come to the school with an explanation when their children have not done their homework. Teachers are issued cell phones so they can answer student questions at night.

Many of the teachers are young, and, like founders Feinberg and Levin, were lured into teaching after college graduation by the Teach for America program.

District officials have not released Stanford 9 scores from this spring for all the city's charter schools, and the scores listed for KIPP's D.C. school in the consultant's report being released today are unofficial.

The study says the KIPP DC/KEY Academy last year posted test-score gains larger than those reported by any of the 20 traditional middle or junior high schools in the city's public school system.

However, the report notes that this was not an exact comparison. The KIPP data covered only fifth-graders (the school will not be a full grade 5 to 8 school until 2004). And KIPP measured progress of each student from the beginning to the end of the 2001-02 school year, while the District compared its schools' scores from spring 2001 to spring 2002.

All of KIPP's 15 schools are public, using tax dollars allotted to charter and independent schools, although 18 percent of their money comes from outside sources, including the Walton Family Foundation and the Challenge Foundation. Outside funding drops to 12 percent in established grade 5-8 schools, KIPP officials say. Given the extra money and longer schools days, some educators wonder whether many other schools can follow KIPP's example.

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