

Case 99

A Model for the New Inner-City School: KIPP Academies

Pisces Foundation, 2000

Steven Schindler

Background. Public education reform has been the object of a great deal of private foundation grantmaking, particularly in the last couple of decades. Much of the activity has arisen from the progress of the school choice movement, fueled in large part by conservative foundations. Charter schools, schools typically run by entrepreneurial leaders as alternatives to traditional public schools, have been among the favorite grantees of private foundations.

KIPP, or Knowledge is Power Program, now perhaps the most distinguished name in the charter, started as a single school in Houston in 1995.¹³⁶⁹ David Levin and Michael Feinberg, roommates and fellow Teach for America corps members in Houston, developed the KIPP model out of frustration with the lack of discipline and motivation in their students. Their school, they decided, would operate on the premise that students would attend KIPP on a voluntary basis. Students opting for KIPP rather than a traditional public school, however, would have to make a number of commitments, including attending school for a few extra hours each day (7:30 a.m.-to-5:00 p.m.) and for forty days more than their public school counterparts each school year. KIPP would demand a lot from its students and their parents, but it would also offer them an escape from the low achievement to which they might otherwise be destined.¹³⁷⁰

Levin and Feinberg recruited a few low-achieving students in the first year, and those students' test scores rose dramatically. Levin then sought to open a school in his home town, New York City. A former school official working at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative policy organization funded in large part by conservative foundations, was able to secure a few classrooms, and Levin returned to New York City's South Bronx to open KIPP's second school. Despite the Houston school's success, the KIPP model faced some opposition. Only after New York enabled Levin to open a school there did Houston Superintendent Rod Paige, later the Secretary of Education, prevent a revocation of the original KIPP charter and classroom space.¹³⁷¹

Strategy. The Pisces Foundation, a supporting organization based in San Francisco, was created in 1997 by Donald and Doris Fisher, cofounders of Gap, Inc. It has endeavored to "leverage change in public education—especially in schools serving disadvantaged students—through large strategic investments in a small number of initiatives that bolster student achievement."¹³⁷² The Foundation, noting the acclaim KIPP was earning for its success in educating disadvantaged students in New York and in Houston, made a grant of \$15 million in 2000 to enable KIPP founders to expand their charter school model nationwide.¹³⁷³ By 2004, the Pisces Foundation and the Fishers individually had given a total of \$34.5 million to KIPP.¹³⁷⁴

When approached by the Fishers, the leaders of KIPP considered how they might best utilize the funds to expand the KIPP model. One option the Fishers and the KIPP leaders considered was to create new schools that KIPP would own and operate uniformly and centrally, similar to the model the Fishers adopted for Gap stores in shopping centers nationwide. Neither Levin nor Feinberg, however, had any experience in business or administration other than their brief service as heads of their schools, and neither was interested in mimicking the for-profit Edison Schools network. Both also feared that centralized control would deter entrepreneurial and creative individuals like themselves from becoming principals of future KIPP schools.¹³⁷⁵

Instead of funding the creation of new schools, the KIPP leaders decided to use the grants from the Pisces Foundation to fund a training program at the KIPP national office for prospective KIPP principals.¹³⁷⁶ KIPP would use the money to recruit the best and most ambitious teachers to be trained

according to the principles Levin and Feinberg developed in their own schools.¹³⁷⁷ KIPP would then assist these individuals in creating their own charter schools across the country, employing the KIPP model guidelines but also adapting to the unique challenges of each school setting. KIPP-trained individuals have the privilege of using the KIPP name in the title of their charter schools, a mark of certification that is a valuable asset in light of the strong goodwill that KIPP has fostered. But for continued enjoyment of that privilege, schools must continue to uphold the core principles of KIPP and must permit KIPP officials to inspect the schools. A handful of schools have been stripped of the right to use the KIPP name.¹³⁷⁸

Impact. Some charter schools have endured criticism for failing to demonstrate evidence of an ability to raise test scores at a relatively higher rate than their public school counterparts. Even KIPP's success has been challenged by claims that students in KIPP schools are ahead of their low-income peers because of selection bias. Nevertheless, KIPP Academies instill a sense of responsibility that, independent of KIPP schools' success in attaining high levels of achievement, has made KIPP the premier brand in the charter school movement for addressing the problem of low student achievement. Washington Post columnist Jay Mathews has called KIPP "the nation's most interesting and most successful response so far to the problem of low achievement in inner city and rural public schools."¹³⁷⁹ Reading and math scores of students at KIPP schools have increased dramatically.¹³⁸⁰ Early figures suggest that students attending KIPP schools will be much more likely to attend college than the national average.¹³⁸¹ With the support of the Pisces Foundation in training new KIPP principals, there are now fifty-two KIPP schools operating in sixteen states and the District of Columbia, serving over 11,000 students.¹³⁸²

Notes

1369. Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, "Scholar Advocates 'Brand Name' Charter School Networks," *Education Week*, Vol. 23, No. 37 (5/19/2004), 11.

1370. Jonathan Schorr, *Hard Lessons: The Promise of an Inner City Charter School* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 49–51.

1371. Schorr, *Hard Lessons*, 51.

1372. Michael T. Hartney, "A Powerhouse Charter-funder Aims for the Next Level," *Philanthropy Magazine*, Sept/Oct 2004, available from

<http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/magazines/2004/SeptOct/Powerhouse.htm>.

1373. Kelly Pedersen, "Hard Work Pays Off," *Houston Chronicle*, 8/5/2000, A35.

1374. Hartney, "A Powerhouse Charter-funder Aims for the Next Level."

1375. Jay Mathews, "Marketing the Best Schools," *Washingtonpost.com*, 8/15/2006.

1376. *Ibid.*

1377. *Ibid.*

1378. *Ibid.*

1379. Jay Mathews, "Expert Takes a New Look at KIPP Schools," *Washington Post*, 5/12/2005, T3.

1380. Mathews, "Marketing the Best Schools."

1381. "KIPP: Results," http://www.kipp.org/press/KIPP_Overview.pdf.

1382. "About KIPP," *KIPP: Knowledge Is Power Program*, <http://www.kipp.org>