



## West Side students seek to ascend at KIPP

By TERRY DEAN

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Friends Diamond Swanigan and Shonarrow Seaberry, both 10, didn't see much of each other during their first day as students at KIPP Ascend Charter School on the West Side.

The former John Hay Community Academy students live across the street from each other, but spent their first day as fifth graders in different classes. And like the other fifth graders on Monday, before they began learning their academics, they were being taught about listening, working together and respecting each other and their teachers.

According to KIPP school officials, they wouldn't have the children start their first day any differently.

KIPP Ascend Charter School opened in 2003 in the McNair Academy Center building, 4820 W. Walton, before moving to its current location in the former Charles Sumner Elementary School on West Fifth Avenue and Kildare.

The West Side school is one of 47 charter schools operated by KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) nationwide.

Using two floors and two cafeterias for its 320 students in grades 5-8 and its 25 teachers, KIPP Ascend's first day of classes left an impression on the new students.

"It's been really good," said Swanigan of her first day. "This [school] is better because at the other school, [the students are] usually doing bad things to the other teachers and being disrespectful."

"I like it because there are students who respect teachers," added Seaberry.



*Fifth grader Diamond Swanigan is first in line to go to the lunch cafeteria Monday, which was also her first day at KIPP Ascend Charter School, 715 S. Kildare. Photos by Terry Dean*



*KIPP Ascend Charter School Principal Jim O'Connor talks to fifth graders on their first day of school Monday Aug. 7. KIPP students learn things like how to line up properly to go to lunch and other fundamentals before even opening up a textbook.*

The first day Monday was for fifth graders, to get them acclimated to the school's structure and what's expected of them. Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders start classes later in the week.

"We talk about expectations in the first class, on the first day," said Principal Jim O'Connor.

There's no running in the halls at KIPP. No students talking back to teachers. No fighting. Students line up one behind the other on their way to lunch. And at lunch, the students talk at a whisper, sometimes reminded to do so by their teacher. In class, they sit up straight with hands folded as the teacher talks. All of the students wear uniforms--a white top and blue pants or skirts. It may sound strict, but there are also moments where a teacher will interrupt the students' lunch, not to chastise them for talking too loud, but to say thank you to a group of students who aren't making noise. This emphasis on structure, O'Connor said, is important to the students' learning environment. And the students, he said, like it as well.

"We found that establishing a strong discipline and structured school culture is the most fundamental thing that a school should do in the first three months of the year, O'Connor said. "If they don't get it now, and you don't enforce it in the fall, you end up battling kids all year. You're not accomplishing what you need to do."

This model, first established in 1994 by KIPP founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, two former Houston public school teachers who started the program with a handful of children, has produced results.

KIPP Ascend's ISAT scores climbed from 56.2 percent (meeting or exceeding standards) in 2005 to 73 percent in 2006. Almost 90 percent of their seventh graders are at or above grade level, and more than 70 percent of overall students are at or above grade level.

"Kids are free to be as smart as they want to be, and they don't have to worry about being made fun of," said O'Connor. "For a lot of our kids, this is a safe place to be smart."

"I think kids, generally, like structure," O'Connor added. "They like to know what's happening next. They like a school that's safe and teachers they can count on, and we have that here."

A majority of KIPP's 47 schools in 15 states, including California and Georgia, in addition to Washington D.C., are in low-income, minority populated areas. Ninety percent of students in the KIPP school system--about 8,900 in all--are black and Latino.

O'Connor added that some will argue his school's high performance is due, in part, to having enrolled "different" students than those found at under-performing schools. His students, he replies, live in Lawndale, East and West Garfield Park and other parts of the West Side. Most of the students enrolled, he said, live in Austin. "People come in here and say, 'Where did you get these students?' These are neighborhood kids. They didn't come from anywhere else," O'Connor said.

Amy Pouba, a sixth-grade teacher, came from the Baltimore school system three years ago to work at KIPP Ascend. The school's philosophy, she said, was similar to her own.

"The rewarding thing is seeing the kids come in not believing in themselves, and seeing their expectations rise and seeing them excel in their academics," said Poubá. "Once they get the skills, they feel empowered."

On the first day at KIPP Ascend, two, three and even four upper grade level teachers are in classes with the fifth graders and their teachers. All of the teachers, O'Connor points out, work with the new kids on the first day. By next week, as the upper grade students start school, each class will have one teacher.

Around the time KIPP Ascend first opened its doors, Barbara Johnson made sure her granddaughter Yasmin James was among the first batch of students. Now in the seventh grade, her granddaughter is an honors student. On Monday, her niece started school as a fifth-grader. Her nephew will start the sixth grade this week. Johnson also volunteers at the school, almost daily.

"I think I spend more time here than I do at home," said Johnson, who touts the school to other parents. "It's a smaller school, and it's more one-on-one compared to a neighborhood school. I feel the school they were going to ... they were just passing them. Now they're more interested, and they're doing much better."

In the first few weeks, students attend class from 7:25 in the morning till 1:30 in the afternoon before going to regular school hours from 7:25 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the evening, starting in September.

KIPP even provides cellphones to teachers so students and/or parents can call if they need help. And when it comes to under-performing schools, the focus should be on the adults and not the kids, O'Connor said.

"Our thing is, there are no excuses--we can teach any child," he said. "If there's something wrong with what's going on in the building, it starts with the adults. If you can change what the adults in the school are doing, you can have an impact on the students."

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