



Ascend Charter School's fifth- and sixth- grade students look at The Rock during a scavenger hunt around Northwestern on Saturday morning. After the trek across campus, the middle school students chatted with Wildcats about life at NU. The campus visit was just one component of the Knowledge is Power Program, which aims to prepare students for college life.

## Charter school students get taste of college life

By Kendra Marr  
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To 150 Chicago-area middle schoolers, everything about Northwestern was big. The campus was longer than their school's. Lecture halls were enormous. Even reading the words on The Arch required nearly bending over backwards.

These are some of the things Ascend Charter School fifth- and sixth-graders noticed when NU students gave them an introduction to college life Saturday morning.

"The Harris (Hall) building is so big and huge it make me look short," said Sonya Boykin, one of the middle school students.

The visit was sponsored by NU's African-American studies program as part of the Knowledge is Power Program, a nationwide non-profit organization that recruits teachers to run high-quality college-preparatory public schools. The program aims to prepare students for college regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

"It was a lot of fun," said Lesley Hollis, an Education junior. "The kids were wonderful, adorable and energetic and it was great to talk about a campus that I love."

To follow the typical day of a NU student, the middle school students embarked on a campus scavenger hunt. They searched for Chicago Avenue like lost freshmen and took pictures of themselves napping in Allison Hall as if they'd pulled an all-nighter. They also explored student gathering places, such as the University Library and Norris University Center.

Then the group met back in Harris Hall where the marching band, the National Association of Black Journalists and Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity talked about their groups and answered questions on everything from the cost of tuition to Saturday night parties.

"It was nice to slow down and appreciate what we have here and see it through the eyes of someone younger," said NABJ President Shayla Reaves, a Medill junior. "They're going to be in our shoes someday."

Boykin said she now looks forward having a laptop and roommate in college.

Jalil Beasley liked climbing on top of The Rock and watching the marching band perform.

"(What) I like about Northwestern is that in orchestra they play a lot of cool instruments that we (play) at the KIPP center," Beasley said.

The NU visit is a part of the school's Saturday enrichment programs. Students attend school every other Saturday for special programs such as dancing, poetry, orchestra and college field trips.

KIPP students spend 70 percent more time in class than traditional public school students in Chicago. School starts at 7:25 a.m. and goes until 5 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and until 3:30 p.m. on Friday, in addition to the Saturday enrichment programs.

"Students put in a lot of time and effort toward this ultimate goal of going to college," said trip coordinator Amanda Jonas, Medill '99. "It's important for them to meet actual college students, see a college campus and what they're working toward."

KIPP Ascend, located in the West Side of Chicago, is part of a network of independently run KIPP schools. Started in 1994 serving 50 fifth graders in Houston, KIPP has grown to include 38 public schools across the country.

"KIPP has a common sense, no-excuses approach to education," said Sheri Barrette, director of development and operations and Communication '98. "There's no magic formula for success. Here students that are not typically expected to succeed, do."

About 170 fifth- and sixth-graders from the Austin neighborhood and surrounding communities of Chicago's West Side are now enrolled at KIPP Ascend. The charter school has expanded one grade level each year since its July 2003 opening. It will reach a full capacity of 340 students in grades five through eight by 2006, according to the school's Web site.

At KIPP Ascend, 98 percent of students are African American and the same percentage qualify for the federally subsidized free/reduced-price meal program. These are the students who aren't normally given the opportunity to reach their full potential, Jonas said.

"We tell the kids knowledge is power," Barrette said. "Once they go on to college that is the golden ticket to do whatever they want to ... in life."