

Commencement Keynote Address  
Given by China Hill  
KIPP Ascend Charter School  
on Saturday, June 9, 2007

Good afternoon KIPP Ascend faculty and staff, parents, relatives, friends, and the graduating class of 2007.

I am especially honored to be speaking in front of you today not only because you are the first graduates of KIPP Ascend Charter School, but because you are the first students who believed in KIPP's mission and beliefs: You assigned yourself; you worked hard and were nice; you became the constant and not the variable.

However, I know, from experience, many of you didn't start out that way. There may have been base camp meetings and after school detentions. You may have worn your shirt inside out, sat on milk crates, and even wrote *books* of letters of apology. But you stuck it out.

In fact, all of you have stuck it out.

Since 2003, you have attended nearly 900 days of school and completed over 1700 hours of homework. You began learning without a seat to your name, and you were forced to sit through countless numbers of quiet lunches.

But you stuck it out.

If nothing else, the KIPP community has taught you to stick it out.

As you journey through life, you will realize how valuable a concept this is. Some of you already have.

While you are able to write college entrance essays, understand and analyze works by Shakespeare, and apply the quadratic formula, some of your friends at other schools have only learned how to listen to a teacher in a noisy classroom.

While you go on to Walter Payton High School, Whitney Young, Culver Academy, and other top performing college preparatory high schools, some of the friends you leave behind may be repeating the eighth grade.

Sticking it out has gotten you trips to distinguished universities across the country, to Springfield, and to our nation's capital.

Sticking it out has gotten you right here, right now.

But today, I ask you to step up your game: I challenge you to not only stick it out in high school and college, but come back and teach those in your community how to stick it out as well.

Why?

Because you are the most valuable resource our community has. As doctor, you can treat the illnesses that plague our community, such as diabetes and heart disease. As a politician, you can help lower property taxes so those in our neighborhood can afford to live in the homes they own. As a teacher, you can upgrade the lives of the children on your block.

Why should you come back?

Because you owe it to the people in this room today: Parents who have worked twelve-hour shifts to raise you, grandparents who have sat in the back of your classroom to help discipline you, family friends who have encouraged and supported you, and teachers who have neglected their own families to help you with academic and social crises at 8:55 at night.

Finally, why should you come back?

To help your peers who did not or will not get the same opportunities as you. At KIPP, you are taught to resist peer pressure because we know it may lead you down the wrong path—to gangs, drugs, and jail. But we do this knowing that you won't be of any help to those peers stuck with them at the County. That you will be of even greater assistance to them when you can provide jobs, parenting classes, and counseling for them when they get out. And that you will be a positive role model to their kids when they can't.

KIPP teachers and staff are profoundly proud of you and look forward to seeing you come back to KIPP, whether in high school, college, or as a professional. They want you to show other KIPPsters the success that sticking it out brings.

Your parents and community members share in your celebration and look forward to seeing you as journalists, engineers, architects, and entrepreneurs. We all have the highest expectations for you and expect nothing but the best.

Now, I know this may seem like a lot to handle just going into the ninth grade, but I'm only telling you this because I know you can do it.

Because I did it—the second of five siblings, raised by a single mother just a couple of blocks from where I stand now. I stuck it out because there were people—grandparents, teachers, friends—who believed I could.

So I want to make sure you understand that we believe you can do it.

I want to make sure you are crystal clear on how much of an investment you are to everyone in this room.

I want to make sure you know how much we are counting on you to change our world, just as we have changed yours.

To the graduating class of 2007, thanks in advance.