

Post-Tribune (Merrillville, IN)
"KIPP Says it has recipe for educational success"
By Sharlonda Waterhouse
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CHICAGO — The classroom windows at the KIPP Ascend College Preparatory School in Chicago frame a view of boarded-up houses and shuttered businesses.

Nearby lots host abandoned junk buses and cars sprayed with graffiti. Jobs are scarce here, and life is hard.

This south side Chicago neighborhood has survived gang violence, drugs, and the flight of commerce — much like Gary, where KIPP hopes to open its next charter school — KIPP Lead.

But children inside the renovated 1892 Chicago building don't dwell on the reality outside the school's doors.

Literally locked inside this haven (visitors have to call to be let in), they dream of college, play violins, write screenplays, practice entrepreneurship and learn responsibility.

When the school day ends at 5 p.m., many students elect to stay for two more hours to get free music lessons and help with homework.

"They don't want to leave," said founding KIPP Ascend Principal Jim O'Connor.

KIPP leaders hope Gary students and parents will be just as enthused. Although the school awaits approval, applications from Gary teachers already have started trickling in.

National Executive Director Richard Barth calls KIPP "the country's most successful network of public schools for underserved kids."

The organization boasts that it promotes better academic success than surrounding schools. The Illinois Board of Education confirms that through Illinois Standard Achievement Test scores: In 2004, 23.5 percent of students in neighboring Chicago schools passed ISAT reading, while 36.3 percent of KIPP students met state standards. That KIPP rate rose to 40.4 percent in 2005. In math, 28.2 percent of CPS students passed ISAT in 2004, while 53.8 percent of KIPP Chicago kids passed. That math rate rose to 71.9 percent in 2005.

However, IBOE figures show KIPP Ascend still performed below the state average: In 2004, Ascend passed 17 percent less students on the ISAT than the average Illinois school. KIPP closed that gap to 8 percent this year.

KIPP Foundation spokeswoman Debbie Fine said it's better to compare KIPP students to their immediate peers than the rest of the state.

"The Chicago rates might be a more accurate comparison of the demographic and background of our students," Fine said.

KIPP caters to low-income, minority children, many of whom transfer in from failing schools. Fine said comparing them to a state average that likely includes "more privileged children" is unfair.

At KIPP Ascend in Chicago, 90 percent of the 238 students are on the free and reduced lunch program and 98 percent are black (2 percent are Hispanic). Such a demographic mirrors what the foundation could target in Gary if, in two weeks, Ball State gives a green light for the school to open in July.

On a tour of Chicago's KIPP Ascend, the Post-Tribune found a school bulging with books — there were piles on tables, in baskets on shelves, and most prominently, in student hands. Several were reading books while standing in line for lunch.

On school bus rides, students aren't allowed to talk. They must read. Occasionally, silent lunches are held. After the food is gobbled, students read.

Literacy is a dominant goal. "We spend four hours a day on literacy here," O'Connor said.

The rest of the 9 1/2 hour day is spent on math, social studies, science and the arts. It seems exhausting.

"It would be if students were sitting at their desks listening to teachers the whole time, but they move around, have labs, etc.," O'Connor said.

KIPP claims to have a recipe for urban education success that mainstream models can't match.

Teachers' breaks are few. Lunch time is only 20 minutes. And even after the school day is over, students still buzz teachers on their Nextels asking for help with assignments.

Such dedication earns teachers 15 percent to 20 percent more in yearly salary than mainstream educators in the immediate area — but they put in 62 percent more time, including some Saturdays and summer, so it evens out. When compared to all of Illinois, the board of education reports that KIPP teachers are actually paid less.

Many KIPP teachers are young and on the lower end of the pay scale. But such youth seems to afford KIPP a staff of eager idealists uncrushed by the stopgaps of bureaucracy that exist in mainstream educational systems. O'Connor, a principal who teaches two math classes, is 33.

He still believes anything is possible and KIPP National gives him the freedom to try the non traditional.

While teachers work hard, KIPP demands that students work even harder and accept responsibility for their own success and character. At KIPP, grades go hand in hand with good citizenship.

The hallways and classrooms bear character-building slogans and quotes from great thinkers like Ghandi.

But perhaps the most often repeated catch phrase is: Assign Yourself.

Students are taught not to wait for an adult to guide them.

"If they see something that needs to be cleaned up in the bathroom, assign yourself," O'Connor said. "If they see another student not paying attention in class or doing their work, tap them on the shoulder — assign yourself."

Leaving homework and supplies at home won't fly in this no-excuses environment. As Golden Apple Award-winning teacher Tracy Kwock reminded one whining child: "You have a problem, now figure a resolution."

Those who don't rise to responsibility wear a brand: blue vests over their KIPP uniforms.

Everyone knows that student in a blue vest is on in-school suspension or "Base Camp." They lose privileges, like the ability to talk to friends and team members. This punishment allows them to remain in school and learn while correcting their behavior.

On the opposite end of "Base Camp" are the students who conduct themselves according to KIPP values.

They earn KIPP dollars that can be used to buy things at school auctions, get pizza, or "buy" a day of casual jean wear.

KIPP uses a holistic approach, fusing dance and theater alongside science and social studies.

The Illinois Board of Education reports that KIPP Ascend's classes are smaller than the state average and that they spend more money on students than average Illinois schools.