



W E D N E S D A Y

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The gap: schools that don't work vs. schools that do

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Is there an achievement gap between black and white students in Oak Park? The Illinois School Report Cards say so.

I'm not so sure. Could it be the achievement gap is a myth perpetrated by educators and administrators who have no idea how to educate many African-American students?

Here's an even more radical concept: If District 97 wants to improve the lot of our African-American students, it needs to look to schools on Chicago's West Side.

Horrors! Everyone knows nothing good happens in Chicago public schools.

Au Contraire. How about a school in North Lawndale with all low-income African American students that has higher State test scores than River Forest?

Sacre Bleu! Meet KIPP Ascend Charter School. First, the stats. This KIPP middle school (which is part of a nationwide school network founded by OPRF High School alum Mike Feinberg) had the following percentages of students testing at or above grade level in eighth grade: 94% (reading), 100% (math).

Take that, River Forest, which only managed 93% (reading) and 94% (math) at or above grade level. Oak Park elementary schools had a comparatively paltry showing: 84% (reading) and 87% (math).

One hundred percent of KIPP graduates attend college prep high schools, including Francis Parker, Fenwick, Lake Forest Academy, Loyola Academy, the Latin School, Whitney Young, etc.

Did I mention that KIPP Ascend achieves these results by accepting all children who win a Chicago Public School lottery? It does not skim the "best" students.

How does KIPP do it? It creates a safe and structured learning environment. The school day is extended to 5 p.m. ("Mon Dieu!" the teacher's union will say, "that would cut into nap time"). KIPP teachers are available by phone until 9 p.m. to help with homework ("Not on my union scale").

The students are in school two Saturdays a month and for a three-week summer session. Exhausted yet? There's more.

Students get paid to go to school ("No, no, no. In Oak Park we don't pay students"). They get "KIPP dollars" for positive behavior and good grades that can be used at the school store for supplies (and they thereby learn about bank accounts and financial responsibility).

Each school year ends with a week-long trip to visit colleges. Sixth-graders visit the University of Wisconsin and learn to rock-climb.

When I went to KIPP Ascend, I visited a fifth-grade classroom. There were 30 students in class, and you could hear a pin drop.

In a seventh-grade class I heard a discussion of *The Diary of Ann Frank*. Students waited their turn to talk. They made thoughtful comments. No one was rolling their eyes or tuning out.

School President (and Oak Park resident) Jim O'Connor was quoted in *Chicago* magazine saying, "Kids on the West Side are just as smart as kids on the North Side."

You see? There is no student achievement gap. The gap is between our acceptance of a familiar educational model that does not work and our failure to embrace a more rigorous school model that does.

I invite District 97 board members, administrators and parents to learn more at KIPPascend.org.

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