

KIPP Academy

HOUSTON

Motivational slogans, aimed at raising students' expectations for success, are everywhere—printed on blackboards, painted on wall banners, stenciled on sidewalks. One favorite may be this: Work Hard, Be Nice. Work hard, they do. KIPP Academy students agree to spend more time in school compared to their traditional public school peers. They and their teachers experience a longer school day, in addition to Saturday school and summer school. Teachers are readily available, providing students with home phone, cellular, and pager numbers and responding to a toll-free number for student homework questions and emergencies. And nice? Yes, they are. Students call their teachers “ma’am” and “sir,” hold doors open for their teachers and for each other, and raise their hands in the classroom. Houston’s KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Academy takes its stated mission very seriously: To prepare students with the academic skills, intellectual habits, and qualities of character necessary to succeed in high school, college, and the competitive world beyond.

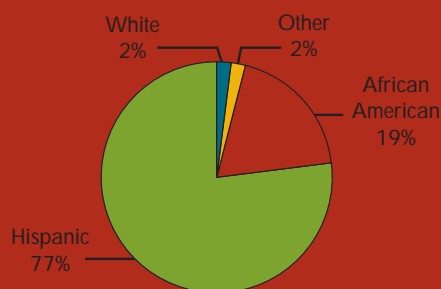
Student and School Characteristics

Although an open-enrollment charter school, KIPP Academy’s 338 students are predominately minority (78 percent Hispanic and 19 percent

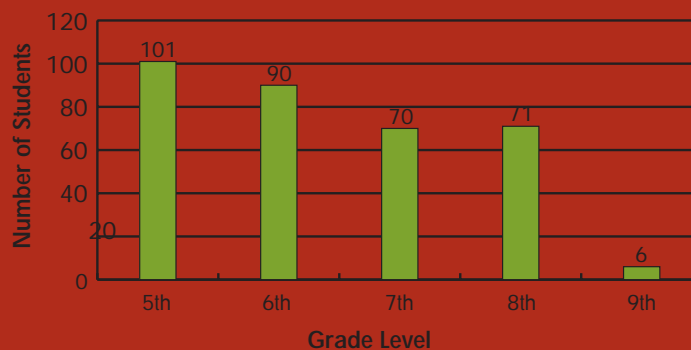
African American) and low-income (90 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch). As Director Elliott Witney says, “If we could screen, we probably would screen for the lowest-achieving kids because our point is any kid can learn if you put them in an environment where they feel a structure and support and it’s fun.” Most students are in grades 5 through 8, with a handful of students attending grade 9 at KIPP due to special circumstances. Class sizes are somewhat larger than average at KIPP, with approximately 30 students per class, but students report that the overall small school size helps compensate for the larger class sizes. The director has been at KIPP’s helm for just longer than a year. Like many charter school administrators, he reports having many roles, including academic leader and financial manager. One important role, according to the director, is this: “I’m accountable to our board of directors and our superintendent to make sure that what we’re doing is great as opposed to mediocre.”

Teachers at KIPP come from all walks of life. Some are recent college graduates, and others came to teaching from the business world; some have traditional or alternative certification and others are not certified. Discussing teacher certification, the school’s director says, “You can have uncertified teachers who are outstanding, and you can have

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in KIPP Academy, Houston: AEIS 2001–02



certified teachers who are not.” One of the most important qualities for teachers at KIPP is the willingness to work hard for the benefit of the children. Although there are no requirements or incentives for professional development, teachers may choose from a wide variety of training opportunities offered both locally and nationally. Teachers also have several staff development days each year.



Educational Program

One difference between KIPP Academy and other schools is the amount of time students spend in class. Students attend classes from 7:25 a.m. until 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday, from 7:25 a.m. until 4 p.m. on Friday, for four hours every other Saturday, and for one month each summer. Students also face between two and three hours of homework each night. Using a college preparatory curriculum, KIPP gives extra emphasis to the core content areas, such as math, English, history, and science, especially during students’ first two years. Students also receive instruction in Thinking Skills (grade 5) and Study Skills (grade 6). In grades 7 and 8, students may participate in organized athletics and enrichment activities as long as academics remain a priority and their grades remain high. Additionally, grades 7 and 8 have study hall and assigned silent reading time daily. KIPP stresses the importance of reading regularly, and rather than assigning students books, which may be above or below their capabilities, students are allowed to choose books “at their comprehension level so that they read with the experience of deep comprehension, so that they know when they’re not comprehending.” Teachers have the freedom to deliver content as they desire, but all constantly monitor stu-

dents for comprehension and understanding. As one teacher says, “The process, it’s reflective. Like okay, wait, this isn’t working? I need to go back and redesign my curriculum....” Another says, “We’re really trying to teach for understanding and not just coverage.” Teachers and administrators also communicate regularly with KIPP alumni about their post-KIPP academic progress. If a former student indicates, for example, that he or she is having difficulties with grammar, KIPP teachers focus on correcting that particular knowledge gap before sending their current charges on to high school.

KIPP teachers approach instruction and instructional methods collaboratively. In addition to regular formal and frequent impromptu meetings to discuss student achievement, teachers will sometimes switch grade-level classrooms (i.e., the 4th-grade math teacher will teach the 5th-grade class and vice versa) just to make sure they are on the “right track.” This allows teachers to identify and correct potential problems or knowledge gaps before student grade-level promotion occurs.

The first year for KIPP students, grade 5, is a foundation-building year. For example, the director calls fifth-grade math a “Swiss cheese class,” in which instruction is geared toward “filling in the holes” or

School Characteristics

Founded	1994
Grades	5 to 9
Enrollment	338
Daily schedule (M–Th)	7:25 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Daily schedule (F)	7:25 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Saturday (two per month)	9:15 a.m. to 1:05 p.m.
Summer (four weeks)	7:25 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Student attendance rate	99.1%
Student dropout rate	0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

School Staffing

Number of teachers	16.8
Number of instructional aides	0
Student-teacher ratio	20.2 to 1
Beginning teachers	5.8%
Teachers with 1–5 years experience	75.9%
Teacher average years experience	3.9
Teacher turnover rate	47.1%
Teachers with no degree	11.7%
Teachers with advanced degrees	18.3%
Average teacher salary	\$37,054
Average campus administrator salary	\$54,757

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

gaps in basic mathematical understanding. English in grade 5 focuses on reading and writing. Rather than just teaching reading skills, however, the goal is to make students “life-long lovers of reading.” Students are encouraged to read as much as possible during the school year, and students often complete between 40 and 60 books. The science curriculum also follows a logical progression and again focuses on building a strong foundation. When possible, the curriculum is tailored to coincide with other learning experiences. For example, grade 6 students’ yearly end-of-semester field trip is a camping trip to Utah—thus, instruction focuses on earth science in preparation for the trip.

In addition to teaching traditional academic skills, teachers structure classes to teach and encourage strong organizational skills. Most teachers, for example, have their students manage their daily accumulation of notes, projects, and tests in files or binders. At the end of the year, the student has a well-organized resource that can be referred to as needed. As KIPP’s director notes, classes are structured to “get the kids to operate like a university student would.”

Teachers suggest that KIPP’s student management strategies also contribute substantially to the learning environment. Students must “earn” everything at KIPP, from their seat on the first class day, to the monthly and yearly field trips, to the right to wear a gold-colored shirt as an 8th grader. As one teacher says, time and energy spent on classroom discipline take time and energy away from classroom learning. Behavior infractions, ranging from acting up in class to failure to

complete homework assignments, accumulate as “strikes;” enough strikes and certain privileges are taken away. Students may also earn rewards for good behavior or for jobs (re-shelving library books, for example) performed around the school.

KIPP also supports students who need a little extra help. An after-school program is in place (from 5 until 8:30 p.m.) for students who are having organizational, time management, or study skills problems or difficulties with consistently completing homework assignments. There is also staff support for student and family outreach and a high school/college counselor. Outside services, such as social services, are contracted out when a need arises. Bottom line, KIPP’s philosophy is simply stated if not simply accomplished: “Just do whatever it takes for [students] to be successful.”

Parental Involvement

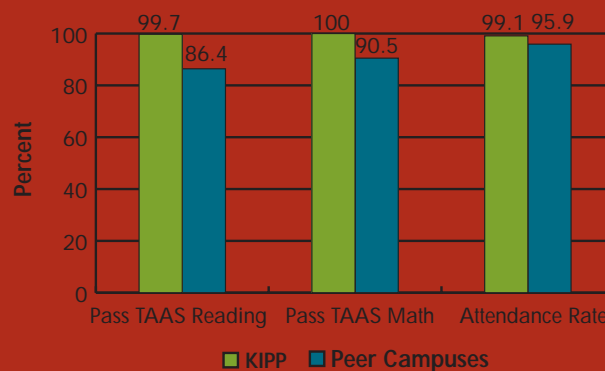
Parents (and students and teachers) must sign a Commitment to Excellence Form when their child enrolls at KIPP Adacemy. In addition to committing to typical standards, such as the school’s schedule and dress code and their child’s regular attendance, parents agree to “Always help our child in the best way we know how, and [to] do whatever it takes for him/her to learn.” A big part of this commitment includes checking homework nightly. Although the commitment is not legally binding, the director has no trouble reminding a parent of the initial commitment when necessary: “After they signed it two years ago, they sometimes forget their commitment, so you pull it back out and say remember this?”

School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$10,378
Per-pupil for instruction	\$7,430
Local revenue	48%
State revenue	43%
Federal revenue	9%

Source: Actual financial data for all funds, PEIMS 2001–02.

Comparison of Performance for KIPP Academy and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001–02



The director prefers to speak of parental involvement in terms of “parental support,” saying, “Primarily what we ask of our parents is that they ensure that our kids do their homework and they come to school.” Parents do help out in other ways. The Parents’ Association helps fundraise for the school and for scholarships by selling concessions at sporting events; other parents assist by chaperoning on KIPP’s frequent outings or by helping out around the campus. Parents also feel free to check in with teachers or administrators about their child’s academic progress. Additionally, “paychecks,” detailing students’ behavior, a part of KIPP’s ongoing student management strategy, go home with the students each week for a parental review and signature.

Governance

KIPP Academy’s 16-member board includes CEOs, bankers, attorneys, community volunteers, and KIPP parents. The board’s contribution to the school is primarily in the financial arena. They assisted with a \$7 million capital campaign for KIPP’s current facility and are now helping fundraise for campus improvements, including the elimination of several temporary structures. Additionally, the board is assisting with a five-year plan designed to contribute to the school’s ongoing stability. There are also several board-member committees (e.g., finance, education, development) that meet regularly. The board is also the school’s champion. “They...support what we do and get out in the community and share what we do,” says the director.

Accomplishments

Students’ and teachers’ hard work has paid off. KIPP Academy has been rated as Exemplary by the TEA each year since 1994, its founding year. In 2002, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 99 percent or more of all KIPP students passed both the reading and math sections of the TAAS test. Perhaps even more remarkably, 100 percent of grades 6 through 8 students passed both sections in 2002 (results are similar for 2000 and 2001). KIPP also is very proud of the fact that they claim no exemptions, meaning that every KIPP student is tested.

Additionally, KIPP Academy received TEA’s Gold Performance Acknowledgment, which recognizes high performance on other factors contributing to overall academic success, for an attendance rate of more than 99 percent in 2002. But how do the students feel about KIPP? This student’s comment, when asked what she likes best about KIPP, is representative: “[I like] how you can come here and feel safe and know that you’re going to have a good education for the future.”

Campus Accountability Rating

2000	Exemplary
2001	Exemplary
2002	Exemplary

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

TAAS Percent Passing

	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 5	92.9	96.8	99.0	97.1	100.0	100.0
Grade 6	98.4	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 7	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 8	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 9	--	--	--	--	--	--

Source: AEIS reports.