

# High-Flying High-Poverty Schools

In discussing socioeconomic integration before audiences, I am frequently asked: What about high-poverty schools that do work? Don't they suggest that economic segregation isn't much of a problem after all?

High-poverty public schools that beat the odds paint a heartening story that often attracts considerable media attention. In 2000, the conservative Heritage Foundation published a report, titled *No Excuses*, meant to show that high-poverty schools can work well. The forward of the report proudly declared that the author "found not one or two ... [but] twenty-one high-performing, high-poverty schools." Unfortunately, these 21 schools were dwarfed by the 7,000 high-poverty schools identified by the US Department of Education as low performing.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, the liberal Education Trust purported to find 3,592 high-poverty schools with test scores in the top one-third of their states.<sup>2</sup> The study was useful to the extent that it exposed as myth the idea that poor children cannot learn, but a follow-up study by an independent researcher found that Education Trust included in its total many flukes—schools that performed well in just one grade, or on just one test (math or reading), or in just one year.<sup>3</sup> When schools had to perform well in more than one grade, more than one subject, and more than one year, the number of high performers was reduced from 15.6 percent of high-poverty schools to just 1.1 percent.

But wait, what about new charters like the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)? KIPP, a chain of 125 schools educating more than 35,000 students in 20 states and the District of Columbia, is often cited as evidence that high-poverty public schools ought to be able to produce very positive results. The school program emphasizes "tough love": a longer school day and school year, more homework, and the explicit teaching of middle-class habits and norms. In his book on KIPP, the *Washington Post's* Jay Mathews says that test scores in KIPP have risen faster for more low-income students than anywhere else.<sup>4</sup>

Some point to KIPP as a segregation success story. Noting the high rates of achievement in KIPP schools, which have concentrated poverty, some conclude that poverty and economic segregation don't matter that much after all. At their most hyperbolic, charter enthusiasts like Davis Guggenheim, director of *Waiting for*

*"Superman,"* point to KIPP and conclude, "we've cracked the code."<sup>5</sup> One charter school advocate pointedly asked me in private conversation if I found the success of KIPP "threatening" to my argument that economic segregation needs to be addressed.

In fact, KIPP was initially puzzling to me because, on the surface, it appeared to contradict all the research I'd read on the effects of concentrated poverty. So I began to dig deeper. What I found after some

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exploration was that KIPP's success hardly means that segregation doesn't matter; indeed, the KIPP model (which relies heavily on self-selection and attrition) reinforces the idea that the peer environment may matter a great deal. While KIPP's results are very impressive, they hardly suggest that regular public schools can ignore concentrations of poverty.

To begin with, KIPP does not educate the typical low-income student, but rather a subset fortunate enough to have striving parents. KIPP parents not only must know about KIPP schools and take the initiative to apply, they also are required to sign a contract that is unlike those found in most public schools. According to Mathews, KIPP parents and guardians sign a commitment to "check our child's homework every night ... and try to read with him/her every night." It is unclear whether KIPP can enforce this contract, but its mere presence may serve to screen out families unwilling or unable to make the commitment.<sup>6</sup> Some evidence also suggests that KIPP educates a disproportionate share of girls.<sup>7</sup>

More importantly, KIPP schools have very high rates of attrition and rarely replace those who leave middle school with new seventh- and eighth-graders. In a rigorous 2008 study of five KIPP schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, researchers found that

an astounding 60 percent of KIPP students left over the course of middle school. Moreover, the researchers found evidence that the 60 percent of students who did not persist through the tough KIPP regimen (a longer school day and week, and heavy doses of homework) tended to be the weaker students.<sup>8</sup>

KIPP supporters respond that a 2010 study of 22 KIPP schools found that the attrition rates were comparable to nearby high-poverty public schools that also have

lots of kids leave.<sup>9</sup> Poor people tend to move frequently, so high attrition rates are to be expected at KIPP schools, it is argued. But researchers have found that 40 percent of African American male students leave KIPP schools between grades 6 and 8.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, a key difference between KIPP and traditional high-poverty public schools is that in KIPP schools, when students leave, few new students enter in the seventh and eighth grades. An analysis found that while KIPP does accept many new students in sixth grade (a natural time of transition to middle school, and a time when KIPP is looking to fill seats from fifth-graders who are held back in larger numbers), the spigot is severely constricted for new entrants in seventh and eighth grades. While in comparison district schools, classes grew in seventh and eighth grades, at KIPP they shrunk. Comparison schools saw newcomers outnumber leavers, so replacement was 145 percent in seventh grade and 146 percent in eighth grade. By contrast, in KIPP schools, only 78 percent of leaving students were replaced in seventh grade, and just 60 percent in eighth grade.<sup>11</sup>

The study of San Francisco-area KIPP schools illustrates how the combination of attrition and low replacement rates combine to make KIPP cohorts of students smaller and smaller over time. It found a net



enrollment of 312 students in fifth grade, then an uptick of students who enter during the sixth grade (the customary time to enter middle school), bringing net enrollment to 319. But then the total number of KIPP students in seventh and eighth grades fell precipitously: 238 in seventh grade and 173 in eighth grade. The KIPP Bay Area schools cannot be dismissed as outliers on the KIPP attrition question: a 2008 review of several studies found high attrition rates at a number of other KIPP schools.<sup>12</sup>

Having few new entering students is an enormous advantage, not only because low-scoring transfer students are kept out, but also because in the later grades, KIPP students are surrounded by other self-selected peers who have successfully survived what is universally acknowledged to be a very rigorous and demanding program. In terms of peer values and norms, then, KIPP schools more closely resemble economically mixed schools than traditional high-poverty schools.

How important to KIPP's success are the positive peer influences that come from self-selection, high attrition, and low levels of replacement? While we cannot know for certain, it is telling that on the one occasion when KIPP took over a regular high-poverty public school—and came close to having to serve a regular, rather than self-selected, student population, with new students entering when they moved into the area—KIPP failed and got out of the business.

Jay Mathews, a strong supporter of KIPP, wrote in 2009: "KIPP's one attempt to turnaround an existing public school, in

Denver, was a failure. KIPP said at the time they could not find a school leader up to the challenge, which is another way of admitting such a job may be beyond mere mortals."<sup>13</sup>

Another important difference between KIPP and regular high-poverty public schools is the teachers. The dedication of KIPP teachers is legendary—they work at school from 7:15 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and then go home to plan for the next day, as they take phone calls to help students with homework—but a KIPP-style existence is hard to sustain.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the study of five San Francisco-area KIPP schools found that nearly half (49 percent) of teachers who taught in the 2006–2007 school year had left before the beginning of the 2007–2008 school year. This compares with a 20 percent turnover rate in high-poverty schools generally.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as KIPP's reputation grew, it could select among prospective teachers who wished to be part of an exciting program and be surrounded by high-performing colleagues, an applicant pool not typical of high-poverty public schools.

KIPP schools are not funded at levels typical of high-poverty public schools either. KIPP has won the backing of some of the richest individuals in the country; they have helped fund the program at levels more likely to be found in middle-class schools than high-poverty public schools.<sup>16</sup> With at least \$50–\$60 million in funding from the founders of Gap Inc., KIPP says it spends \$1,100–\$1,500 more per pupil than do regular public schools.<sup>17</sup> In 2011, researchers who examined IRS documents

concluded that KIPP schools had revenue of \$18,491 per pupil, about \$6,500 more than what local school districts received in revenues.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of KIPP's long-term success, the jury is still out. KIPP's predominantly low-income students do very well compared with other low-income students nationally, which is an important accomplishment, but the effects of poverty remain, as two-thirds of the KIPP students who graduated from eighth grade 10 or more years ago haven't earned a bachelor's degree—a level of failure one of KIPP's founders, Mike Feinberg, called unacceptable given the group's goal of 75 percent college completion.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, while many educators stand in awe of the impressive efforts of KIPP to make high-poverty schools work, the fact is that the vast majority of high-poverty charters fail. While, in theory, charter schools, as schools of choice, could be more socioeconomically integrated than traditional public schools, in fact, they are more segregated. In the 2007–2008 school year, 54 percent of charter school students were in high-poverty schools, compared with 39 percent of public school students. Meanwhile, 28 percent of charter school students were in extremely high-poverty schools (more than 75 percent low income), compared with 16 percent of regular public school students.<sup>20</sup> The high-poverty model has not been met with success at a national level. The most comprehensive study of charter schools completed to date found that only 17 percent of charter schools outperformed comparable traditional public schools in math, while 46 percent performed the same, and 37 percent performed worse.<sup>21</sup>

—R.D.K.

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## Folly of the Big Idea

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In Aesop's fable "The Frog and the Ox," a frog tries to puff himself up to the size of an ox and bursts in the process. We have seen many a reform burst, not because it was too big per se, but because it puffed itself beyond its actual worth. To gauge the worth of education reform, we must hold it up against our best conception of education. This conception must build slowly; it must be grounded in literature, mathematics, history, and other subjects. If we let these subjects guide us, if we make room to contemplate, absorb, and discuss what they hold, we will not get lost. Or, if we do, we can call up those things we have learned and, through the recalling and reviving, find our way again. □

### Endnotes

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