

## At the Top of the Class

***KIPP programs could revolutionize charter schools in poor districts--if they can just keep their grades up***

By Pat Wingert and Barbara Kantrowitz

Adalberto Garza's 13-year-old son, Adalberto Jr., was tagged a problem learner in his Houston elementary school. He's dyslexic and, because his first language is Spanish, English-speaking teachers often had difficulty understanding him. "His accent and his way of talking made him seem as if he had a mental handicap," his father says. But after Adalberto Jr. enrolled at KIPP Academy Houston, his grades shot up. At KIPP, Garza says, the teachers "are truly interested in our children."

Garza is not the only one who's impressed. Many education reformers think the Houston middle school and 14 other KIPP schools in 11 states and the District of Columbia may have found a better way to educate disadvantaged students. And KIPP has also become a national model for more widespread reform of charter-school programs. KIPP began in the mid-1990s, when Michael Feinberg and David Levin, two alums of Teach for America (which sends recent college graduates into urban schools), grew frustrated by their lack of progress teaching fifth graders in the Houston Independent School District. They persuaded the then Superintendent Rod Paige (now the secretary of Education) to let them try a new concept--demanding academics, much longer days and stricter discipline. Feinberg and Levin called their class the Knowledge Is Power Program, and their results were striking: 98 percent of their students passed the state's standardized tests compared with just 50 percent the year before. Feinberg went on to open the Houston school, and Levin started a second KIPP school in the Bronx. At both, students attend class 10 hours a day plus alternate Saturdays as well as summers. Teachers carry cell phones so they can be reached 24/7 if students need help (they get a stipend for the extra hours). And students sign a pledge to abide by the rules.

Although middle schools are notoriously difficult to run, KIPP students were soon outscoring their peers in other schools and winning national attention, including an

appearance at the 2000 GOP convention. Results like these attracted more districts and foundation money, including \$25 million in the past few years from the Pisces Foundation (started by the founders of the Gap chain) to help open more KIPP schools. It's too soon to say how the newer schools will do in the long run, but a KIPP-commissioned study last fall indicated that the first three spinoffs outperformed their districts.

Education reformers say KIPP represents the second wave of charter schools, public schools that design their own curricula. States have had mixed results with charters. Despite high hopes, scores at many charters are no better than regular public schools. And while some reformers argue that charters are primarily about choice, others say that the point was to make demonstrably better schools--not just different ones. They contend that there simply aren't enough successful charters and want to focus on creating prototypes that really work and can be replicated.

KIPP is aiming to be among the best of these prototypes. The plan is to double the network next year by opening 19 more schools. All the schools will be in poor communities. The real challenge, the founders say, will be to let the principals decide the best way to operate in their particular locations while still embracing the basic KIPP philosophy. Quality control will be a big issue; KIPP's founders, both still at their original schools, say they will hire a team of inspectors to monitor progress at the new schools. One problem they don't have is attracting students and teachers--despite the rigorous schedule. At the KIPP DC Key Academy, which opened in 2001, principal Susan Schaeffler already has a waiting list for students. And last year she received 250 applicants for four teacher openings despite a national urban teacher shortage. But the best indicators of success are the students themselves. During one recent class, Diamond Branch, 11, in her second year at the school, let out an enthusiastic "Yes" when her teacher returned a quiz. "I was excited to see my grade," she says. "I just want to keep those A's and B's rolling."