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Second Chance School A fledgling Oklahoma City program turns hard-luck kids into success stories

By Susan Horsburgh and Joy Sewing

Rodrick Gold folds his 6' frame behind a fifth-grade desk and joins his classmates as they chant multiplication tables in hip-hop rhythm. He may be a man-size 13-year-old, but just months ago his academic skills were those of a much younger child. "I knew the alphabet, but I didn't know how to put words together," says Rodrick, who had repeated two grades. He was a troublemaker too. "I'd do bad things," he confesses, "like throw a desk at my teacher." His home life was part of the problem: Rodrick's parents have been largely absent, so he shared his grandparents' four-bedroom house in Oklahoma City with his three siblings and up to a dozen cousins. "Nobody," he says, "wanted to help me."

Until last June, that is, when KIPP Reach College Preparatory accepted him into its inaugural class. Since then, Rodrick has turned into an avid--and accomplished--student. "He went from having the lowest confidence to the highest," says school leader (KIPP-speak for principal) Tracy McDaniel.

It's transformations like Rodrick's that fuel the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) movement, a nationwide network of 15 middle schools, with another 19 opening this year. Targeting low-income areas where the public schools are subpar, KIPP schools place education at the center of students' lives--7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week, plus four hours every other Saturday and an extra month over the summer. (Funding comes from government as well as private sources.) Parents or other guardians, along with students and teachers, must sign a "commitment to excellence," pledging to put school--which can include up to two hours of homework every night--above all else. "Three-quarters of the kids didn't want to come here," says McDaniel, 46. "Who wants to go to school longer?" Yet most flourish. "The teachers are hard, but they care," says Walter Henderson, 11. "It makes us want to do our best."

At the two original KIPP academies, in Houston and The Bronx, which opened in 1995, students beat national averages on standardized tests. But start-ups like KIPP Reach, in one of Oklahoma City's poorest neighborhoods, still have to prove themselves. The key, says KIPP cofounder Mike Feinberg, 34--who hatched his vision with fellow Teach for America alum David Levin, 33--is teachers "with fire in their belly," chosen

for their extraordinary dedication.

That means being available to students 24/7, at a starting salary of \$ 35,000. Amy Ingram, 28, who shares KIPP Reach's 63 students with fellow teacher Warren Pete, gets a call at home at 5:30 one morning from a girl who can't find her homework. During her 50-mile commute, Ingram talks on her cell phone to a boy who can't wash his uniform because the power is off in his house. When she arrives at 6:45, three students are waiting outside, ready to feed the animals--fish, lizards, a chinchilla, crickets--that she uses as science teaching aids. Though her long hours cut into her time with her police-officer husband, Ingram says the payoff is the bond between faculty and students. "Many of these kids just want your attention because they don't get it at home," she says.

In Pete's class a boy stands to give a flawless rendition of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. It's Friday, so the kids are in business attire: the boys in neckties, the girls in dresses. It's also "judgment day," when those who have disrupted class or transgressed in other ways during the previous week are "porched." The offenders have to wear their shirts inside out, may speak only to teachers and must apologize to the class. Today a girl in blue bursts into tears as she says she's sorry for skipping her homework. Other girls begin to cry in sympathy, and Pete himself gets visibly choked up. A 29-year-old father of three, he sees KIPP Reach as a second family for kids whose own kin are often overwhelmed by the stresses of troubled homes. Says Pete: "We're doing what every public school should be doing."

Many experts agree. "KIPP schools use their time well," says Dr. Darvin Winick, senior research fellow at the University of Texas, Austin, and chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board in Washington, D.C. "They begin talking seriously about a student's future from the fifth grade, so children learn what they can do and what they're expected to do early on."

Parents are glad to do their part. "The boys are so busy they don't have time to hang outside with other kids," says Sherrell Hayes, 27, who is raising her twin sons, Walter and Ravon Henderson, in one of the city's roughest housing projects. At their old school both boys were disruptive, and Ravon was failing. "I didn't like my teacher," he says, "and I'd make her as mad as I could." Today both boys are making straight A's, and Hayes consults frequently with their teachers. "How many other schools offer you that?" she says. "Half the teachers in public schools don't want to be there."

Which is why McDaniel, a former principal at a struggling

local school, applied for the year-long KIPP leadership program based at the University of California at Berkeley. Once KIPP Reach was approved last spring, he found it a home in a two-room prefab shed behind Dunbar Elementary--the school he had attended as a child--and recruited students via newspaper ads, a billboard and direct appeals to their parents. Then he and his hand-picked teachers began trying to make up for their charges' wasted years of schooling. "The kids give it back," says McDaniel. "They work hard."

And they learn to focus on their dreams. Lanky Rodrick looks like a basketball candidate--but sports can wait. "My education is first," says the teen, who aims to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C. Ultimately he wants to teach reading at a KIPP school--and maybe even transform a kid like himself. "I didn't want to be anything or think about anything," he says. "KIPP helped me to be smart."