

**A Spectacular Minority: Charter Schools that
Respond to the Problem of Poverty in Public Education**

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The “achievement gap”: it is a phrase all too familiar in public education today. Most research speaks of the gap as the learning disparity between Whites and Asians, on the one hand, and Hispanics and Blacks, on the other. Statistics on the racial gap are everywhere. By twelfth grade, the average black student is underperforming white and Asian students by four grade levels. In five out of seven core subjects (such as Mathematics, Science, or U.S. History), over 50% of black students are performing below the national Basic level. For Hispanics, the number is four out of seven. In 1999, black and Hispanic 17- year-olds scored no higher than the 28th percentile of white students in measures of reading, mathematics, and science (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, chap. 1). A second, less common understanding of the gap is as a socioeconomic disparity: between students of high and low social classes. In fact, much of the racial gap is attributable to factors of socioeconomic status—that is, parental income, education, and occupation levels. In the U.S., 27% of Hispanic children and 30% of black children live in poverty, compared to 13% of white children (Proctor and Dalaker 2002). The SES disparity begins at a young age: high-SES children outperform their low-SES counterparts on cognitive tests as early as pre-kindergarten (Lee and Burkam 2002, para. 4). This achievement gap has devastating implications for post-secondary opportunities in terms of academic, career, and social well-being.

That is the problem “on paper.” This summer, I learned first-hand what the problem looks like in “real life”—at least in urban areas, where many low-performing students and schools tend to be concentrated. For eight weeks I worked at a summer

camp run by Students Sharing Coalition, a non-profit youth organization located on the narrow first floor of an apartment in Baltimore City's Charles Village. The goals of the camp were ambitious: to bring together local middle- school students of all races and income levels, get them to think critically about the social problems facing their community, and lead them in service projects that would empower them to pursue social change on a broader scale. Upon commencement, however, the camp goals had to be adjusted quite a bit. Rather than a conglomeration of SES levels and races, all of the campers were black, lived in low-income neighborhoods, and attended schools in Baltimore City, known to have one of the worst public education systems in the nation. Service projects were no longer geared only toward empowerment, but also toward reflection upon the things these kids encountered every day, especially in their schools. They taught me why the achievement gap exists, though not in formal words and numbers. Candace explained it through references to regular brawls between her friends and girls from rival schools on the bus. Cory explained it by telling me that his school did not have clean drinking water. Tyrus and George, two brothers referred to the camp by the Department of Social Services for behavioral problems, highlighted the factors of delinquency and disengagement. Jakiah, who came from a family of five in an apartment complex a few streets away, and whose mother had lost her latest job, gave me yet another angle on the problem. Thus, for these children and others like them, the achievement gap was a problem deeply rooted in violence, drugs, family instability, delinquency, and discrimination—not simply poor reading and math skills.

Much of the problem of the achievement gap, in short, is poverty. On paper, “poverty” is the status given to any family whose income falls below the Poverty Line,

developed in 1965 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and calculated to be the minimal amount that a family needs to maintain sufficient nutrition, multiplied by three. In reality, poverty is much more than an income level: it is inadequate nutrition, housing, health, and other social supports. A student who struggles with these difficulties is much less likely than a higher-SES counterpart to learn the academic skills needed to enter and survive in college. A person without a college degree, in turn, is likely to struggle with poverty. It is a vicious cycle in which wealth and education are inextricably linked.

Certain social groups are more likely to face poverty than others. Blacks and Hispanics, for instance, are much more likely than Whites to be poor. Rates of immigration, mobility, young motherhood, and low birth weight, as well as discrimination and parenting practices, have all been blamed for racial minorities' underachievement and overrepresentation in poverty. Another proposed culprit is innate ability, but this has received little research support. In general, research shows that the gap in skills is not inherited, it is not a fixed outcome, and therefore it is changeable. In light of this conclusion, there is no reason why we cannot and should not find a way to reduce the gap through effective reform measures.

The history of public education is a long and exhaustive one, filled with numerous attempts at reform. These attempts have paved the way for one of the most controversial reforms in recent history: the charter school movement, which heralds the values of school choice, freedom from bureaucracy, and accountability. The movement has become a controversial topic of debate in education, as evidence begins to accumulate that charter schools in general do not outperform traditional public schools (Carnoy et al. 2005). Nevertheless, there is a small but growing contingent of charter schools producing

spectacular results for children of minority and low-income backgrounds, as indicated by their performance on traditional measures of success (i.e., standardized tests). These schools rely on nontraditional methods to meet the specific needs that children of disadvantage bring to the educational atmosphere, and it is these methods that may be the key to closing the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap.

There are two important questions to keep in mind throughout this paper. The first of these is how “success” ought to be defined. Is it college entrance and graduation? Is it a certain type or level of occupation; that is, can a car mechanic succeed as well as a managerial accountant? Is it the acquisition of social skills? Approaching the issue from the opposite side of the spectrum, is it the absence of behavioral or emotional problems? Is it escape from an impoverished or high-crime neighborhood? It is important to determine what educational success means today, because this definition inherently guides the content, structuring, and measurement of public education reform measures.

The second question to keep in mind is whether the nontraditional methods that help disadvantaged students succeed in charter schools can and should be transferred to public schools in general. Is this even a goal of the charter school movement? Are there hidden costs in such a transfer that would counterbalance the gains to be made in traditional public schools?

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

In order to understand the emergence of, and current issues facing, the charter school movement in America, it is important to know its historical context. In the early 20th century, John Dewey, a philosopher and psychologist who promoted “child-centered education,” rose to prominence. Dewey criticized rote memorization and the rehearsal of

facts as teaching methods, and believed that a proper education ought to combine abstract theory with real-world applications. The teacher should be a facilitator, he argued, leading naturally curious children to construct their own answers to problems through creative discussions and activities. Dewey's ideas have survived to the current day in the form of "progressivist" techniques (Education Encyclopedia 2007). While these techniques still enjoy support from many educators, others claim that that Dewey's theory has been ill applied in modern times, and that progressivism does not lead to the acquisition of basic skills, but rather to "perfectly intelligent students who haven't memorized the multiplication tables and thus cannot grasp factoring polynomials" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003:61).

At the same time in which Dewey was promoting his approach to education, another movement, dubbed "administrative progressivism," concerned itself with structural changes at the federal, state, and local levels of government. These changes included the creation of counseling programs, the consolidation of many small high schools into larger centralized ones, the differentiation of curricula (e.g., through tracking systems), the standardization of teaching and testing methods, and the growth of federal and state educational bureaucracy (Education Encyclopedia 2007). Many of these changes characterize our current public education system, and many have been—and are today—hotly disputed. The centralization of schools has led educators to question the effect of larger classes on learning. The practice of tracking has led psychologists and sociologists toward concerns about the "self-fulfilling prophecy," in which children who are placed in lower tracks come to believe they are intellectually incapable of higher achievement, and then confirm their own expectations through maladaptive behaviors

(e.g., being disruptive in class, or not doing homework). The growth of bureaucracy and decrease in control at local levels was the very policy that gave rise to the charter school movement, and it plays a central role in debates over the possibility of transferring effective charter school methods to traditional public schools.

The administrative changes of the early twentieth century were followed by further structural changes based on Civil-Rights activism. During this time, the U.S. recognized the devastating effects of segregation and discrimination on the achievement of Black students nationwide. Racial integration and busing, as well as affirmative action, were established in the hope of eliminating the achievement gap. Unfortunately, these reforms did not produce the success that had been expected, as many schools are still plagued by *de facto* racial and socioeconomic segregation, and the achievement gap remains today.

If “Civil Rights” was the motto of the 1960s and 70s, “high standards” became the motto of the latter 20th century. Until the 1990s, high school graduation required no more than four years of Ds. In 1996, the National Education Summit set the tenets of “standards-based” reform: high expectations and standards for all students, increased accountability systems in the schools, and standardized tests to measure the acquisition of a predetermined set of core academic skills (Eakin 1996).

The most recent product of the “high standards” movement is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. A revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, NCLB requires states to administer standardized reading and math tests to public school students each year, with the requirement that all students be performing at 100% proficiency by the year 2014, regardless of their current record. Any schools failing to

demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are subject to a number of remedial processes, including additional instruction time, administrative changes, or takeover by an outside program. In addition, NCLB emphasizes school choice: students in failing schools may be offered money for tutoring, vouchers to attend a different school, weekend classes, or other kinds of help (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003).

One of the most powerful criticisms of the NCLB is its definition of educational success as measured exclusively through test scores. Many critics argue that such assessments are culturally and racially biased, while others protest the oversight of other equally important performance variables, such as accruing social skills, creativity, and behavioral improvement. With respect to these criticisms, this paper acknowledges that test scores are not a sufficient measure of achievement, as they reveal only a “baseline” or “snapshot of achievement” (Cook 2007). Nevertheless, they represent a “huge leap forward in education” by revealing the national achievement gap and allowing parents and communities to hold their educational administrators accountable for results (Cook 2007).

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT’S DEBUT

In addition to reforms within the realm of traditional public education, there have been a number of recent movements toward education outside the mainstream. Many of these are rooted in political, philosophical, or structural motivations. Some are geared toward “at-risk” students, while others seek out students who are “gifted,” or who require specialized education due to psychological impediments or the need for intensive English language instruction. No matter what the motivations or specific goals, all founders of alternative schools believe that one or more aspects of traditional public schooling hinder

adequate learning.

The various forms of alternative education may be grouped into four general categories: alternative school, independent school, home-based education, and school choice. Within school choice are two different types of schools: magnet schools and charter schools. Magnet schools educate students according to a particular theme, such as performing arts or science and engineering, and employ a competitive application process. The overarching goal of magnet schools is to offer all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status (SES), the chance to develop special talents. Charter schools do not require a certain prior level of academic achievement as part of the application process, and thus tend to attract students of “disadvantage,” whether because of poverty or minority status. Like magnet schools, however, they are “nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools” (WestEd 2000, para. 1). The “charter” is a contract outlining the school’s mission, program, population served, and methods of assessment. Essentially, the charter represents a trade-off: the charter school is given administrative autonomy in exchange for accountability. The entities that hold the school accountable are its sponsor—the local public school district’s board of education, a public or private college, a private person, or a private organization—as well as the families whose children attend it (Huff n.d., para. 3).

The charter school movement has arisen from a long line of alternative education efforts, including the above-mentioned alternative and magnet schools, as well as vouchers, privatization, and community parental empowerment, to rectify educational inequities in the public system. In the 1970s, Ray Budde, a retired school teacher and

early visionary of the charter school movement, proposed to a New England school board that public education needed more rigorous curricula, stricter graduation standards, higher teacher accountability, preschool programs to aid young parents, and a greater emphasis on skills needed in the workplace (Zavislak 2002). In the 1980s, Albert Shanker, past president of the American Federation of Teachers and considered by some to be the “father” of charter schools, campaigned for the incorporation of a more flexible schedule, greater accountability, and greater structure in the U.S. public education system. Charter schools, Shanker argued, would provide parents and teachers with the choice to participate in an experiment in which “innovation, dedication, and persistence” were the core values (para. 7).

Guided by these core values, the movement today pursues several different goals, including equitable learning, choice for parents, accountability, and innovation. Another important goal is professional development: the continuing education and support of teachers in developing and implementing curricula. Finally, the movement aims to improve public education. This goal is perhaps the most important one in terms of applied value, and yet it is also the most ambiguously defined. If the charter school movement—or certain schools within it—lead to academic success for children of poverty or minority status, are the strategies that lead to these results meant to be applied to the traditional public school realm? Perhaps a better question is, *can* such strategies be applied to the traditional public school realm, or do they only work within the context of schools freed from bureaucratic regulations? These questions reiterate those asked at the beginning of this paper, and today’s policymakers are eager to answer them. Before this can happen, however, we must know whether or not charter school methods are indeed

working.

CHARTER SCHOOL PERFORMANCE: GETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

Knowing the history and goals of the charter movement provides a helpful context in which to evaluate its performance record. One fact is clear: in only sixteen years, charter schools have spread like wildfire over the U.S. map. The first charter school law was passed in 1991 in Minnesota, and since then more than 40 states have followed suit. Charter schools are therefore one of the leading innovations in education policy, but because of their newness, as well as the paucity of sophisticated and comprehensive accountability measures, it has been difficult to ascertain whether or not these schools are producing successful results.

A number of attempts have been made in recent years to evaluate the performance of charter schools across the nation, but few have used reliable assessment and control measures. In 2004, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) used data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to show that average academic achievement is higher in regular public schools than in charter schools (both overall and for low-income students). This dealt a serious and surprising blow to charter school supporters, who had been singing the praises of the relatively new movement. These supporters quickly rallied together and published a report objecting that the data was methodologically flawed because it did not control for important differences in demographic background and prior achievement. More careful data collection, they claimed, would reveal that students attending charter schools are actually more disadvantaged than students in public schools, and thus lower scores could be expected from charter school students. Moreover, they argued, charter schools generally need a

few years to “work out the kinks” that come with being less regulated and therefore freer than regular public schools to adopt unorthodox administrative and teaching strategies (Carnoy et al. 2005:15). For these reasons, charter schools’ low NAEP scores could not be counted to mean that they were in fact less effective than regular public schools.

In the wake of the uproar between the AFT and charter supporters, a handful of studies have amalgamated—and, in the cases of flawed methodology, reevaluated—data from a number of charter school evaluations. In addition, they have proposed new methodological standards of evaluation meant to prevent the misinterpretation of data. The studies cited here were conducted by Martin Carnoy and colleagues (2005), who summarized their findings in *The Charter School Dust-Up*, and by Bryan Hassel and Michelle Terrell, from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2006).

One of the most common methodological flaws in academic performance evaluations today is the failure to adequately disaggregate data along important demographic lines. Carnoy and colleagues (2005) found that, although the AFT study took into account the variables of race, ethnicity, and lunch-eligibility, the study overlooked differences in schools’ qualifications for lunch-eligibility (which could be as much as 50%), parental education and occupational prestige levels, and other neighborhood and school variables. Similarly, Hassel and Terrell (2006) found that schools are chartered by different types of entities, are funded differentially, and take different approaches in their educational philosophies and administrative structures. In addition to race and income level, students may differ according to special needs and their degree of prior academic attainment (p. 6). Unfortunately, many studies fail to differentiate among schools according to these characteristics, leading to the loss of

important insight into the schools' performance records.

Another common methodological flaw is the failure to assess performance in terms of "value added." In other words, if we want to know how much "value" (in terms of factual knowledge, reasoning abilities, social skills, or other variables) a particular school contributes to a student, we must measure that individual's performance at two different times and compare the scores. Many studies, however, utilize the "point-in-time" method, in which the scores of two different populations (e.g., one group of 4th graders in charter school and another group in regular public school) are compared at one time. Such a method fails to account for gains or losses in performance that occur for a single population over time. Sometimes studies use a slightly more insightful method, in which scores from a single grade within a school are compared across time (e.g., the percentage of 5th grade students performing at grade level from 2003 to 2004). Nevertheless, even this method fails to reveal "value added" because the demographic composition of students may change from year to year (Hassel and Terrell 2006, p. 5).

A final flaw in many evaluations is the failure to conduct a truly sound comparison. Hassel and Terrell (2006) emphasize the need to control for certain intangible variables, such as differences in motivation, when comparing charter and regular public school students. This "minimizes the chance that charter school attenders are somehow different from non-attenders in ways that influence achievement, such as their motivation, the level of challenge they bring to the school, or the engagement of their families" (p. 5). Though this criticism is a valid one, it may be impossible to address. Charter schools by definition are schools of choice, and they tend to attract students who are especially motivated to achieve.

SURVEY SAYS... A LACKLUSTER PERFORMANCE

Fueled by the lack of adequate methodology in many previous studies, the evaluations of Carnoy and colleagues (2005), as well as Hassel and Terrell (2006), provide sophisticated and comprehensive analyses of charter school performance. Carnoy and colleagues' (2005) main focus is to reevaluate the NAEP data from the 2004 AFT study, but they also include a variety of studies from across the U.S. Hassel and Terrell (2006) also evaluate a large sample—58 studies in total—but, unlike Carnoy's group, they include a number of less methodologically sound ones. Both research groups are careful to outline the weaknesses as well as strengths of their studies, and to highlight especially those ones that compare only demographically similar sets of students.

Carnoy and colleagues (2005) found that, contrary to the claims of charter school “zealots,” charter schools do not enroll students that are more disadvantaged than their regular public school counterparts. On average, charter school students are more likely to be black (31% of charter students, as compared to 17% of regular public school students), and therefore disadvantaged in terms of racial minority status. At the same time, charter and regular public schools have similar proportions of low-income students (47% and 46%, respectively), indicating that on average, racial minority students in regular public schools are more disadvantaged than those in charter schools (p. 33). Moreover, public schools have a greater percentage of low-income students among each racial group for which test scores are reported (i.e., Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites). In sum, the “zealots” claims that charter schools reach out to the “disadvantaged of the disadvantaged” are not true (p. 33).

The evidence that charter schools enroll students that are less disadvantaged than

their regular public school counterparts suggests that these students should produce higher scores than their regular public school counterparts. Despite this logic, Carnoy and colleagues' (2005) analysis of the re-adjusted NAEP and other state-level data reveals that charter school students produce the same or lower scores than other public school students in nearly every demographic category. Moreover, black, low-income, and inner-city charter school students' scores are all significantly lower compared to those of black, low-income, and inner-city regular public school students, respectively. Thus, in the three most typical categories of disadvantage, charter schools show no more promise (and sometimes less promise), in terms of test scores, than regular public schools.

Hassel and Terrell's (2006) analysis of charter school performance is a bit more hopeful, though less conclusive. In 16 of the 33 "change over time" studies, charter schools produced greater overall academic gains relative to their traditional public school counterparts. Of the remaining 17 studies, 6 found comparable gains between charter and regular schools, and only 4 found that charters were underperforming. The last seven found charter schools' gains to be greater for certain types of schools, including those that serve disadvantaged students (p. 2). If it seems strange that these results are more optimistic than those of Carnoy and colleagues (2005), it ought to be noted that Hassel and Terrell's (2006) work reflects the opinion of a national charter school foundation, and may be oriented toward a particularly positive interpretation of results.

Similar to the results on performance, there are mixed outcomes for the "age-of-school" hypothesis, which says that charter schools improve as they "work out the kinks" and gain experience. Carnoy and colleagues (2005) find that, in the majority of studies they analyzed, charter schools active for 4 or more years have lower scores than more

recently established charter schools. These researchers conclude that either charter schools do not actually improve with experience, or newer charter schools have tended to enroll fewer disadvantaged students than in years past. On the other hand, Hassel and Terrell (2006) find that, of 12 studies on the “age-of-school” hypothesis, a full 9 reported improvement of charter schools with age, while only one reported deterioration (p. 7).

In summary, the performance of charter schools on average is at best mixed, and at worst, unimpressive. Evidence largely indicates that the average charter school does only as well as, or slightly worse than, its regular public school counterpart. This gives rise to an important question: ought the success or failure of the charter school movement to be evaluated on the basis of its average performance? In *Dust-Up*, the results of different charter schools are aggregated, yet this method masks the reality that a number of these schools are producing spectacular results, even while a similar or even greater number of others are performing dismally. Perhaps the existence of a spectacular minority in itself should be considered a success, and attention should be given to which strategies they are employing to produce such results in traditionally “at-risk” children.

A SPECTACULAR MINORITY

In 2001, President George W. Bush passed the NCLB Act into law, dramatically increasing the accountability of public schools within each state. Many social scientists and educators denounce the use of standardized tests as accurate measures of achievement, while others point out the strength of the correlation between standardized tests and subsequent college performance (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, chap. 2). Regardless of the criticisms, NCLB has forced into the limelight two shameful facts long overdue for attention: the overall math and reading performance of U.S. students is

embarrassingly mediocre compared to that of other industrialized nations (Hussey and Allen 2006); and there is a profound academic achievement gap between white, Asian, and high-SES students on the one hand, and black, Hispanic, and low-SES students on the other. In light of these facts, and of the quickly approaching 100% proficiency deadline, educators and policymakers are scrambling to discover the strategies that will reach the traditionally unreachable.

The scramble for proficiency has brought the charter school movement, with its emphasis on experimentation, flexibility, and accountability, to the forefront of education policy. Despite a number of “loser” schools, the movement has also produced a number of unmistakable winners. Schools in which the majority of students are black and impoverished—i.e., the “disadvantaged”—are reporting scores that far outshine those of their demographic counterparts in regular public schools. The immensity of these results indicates that there is something different about the methods and philosophies of these charter schools that makes them work. Through in-depth analyses and comparisons within this spectacular minority, researchers and journalists alike have come to identify a number of common strategies that may, in time, be transplanted into the larger struggling public school system. The following sections discuss the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)—one of the most successful charter schools, at least in terms of test scores, to date—focusing on its strategies for success, outcomes, criticisms, and implications for the future of education policy.

KIPP: CHARTER SCHOOLS’ LATEST STAR

Imagine walking into a school with walls lined by banners proclaiming, *All of us will learn. There are no shortcuts. Be nice!!! Work hard!!! No excuses.* Down the

hallway rings the chant of the school's newest group of students: "All of us will learn. Read, baby, read!" Entering one of the classrooms reveals over thirty seats, the majority of which are filled with black and Hispanic students whose eyes are fixed upon the teacher at the front of the room, whose pointer fingers are following the lines in their texts, and who are raising their hands eagerly and reporting intelligent answers when called upon. There is something drastically different about this place compared to other schools; the air itself is filled with promise, scholarly excitement, and discipline. These are the children whom society and statistics predicted to fall through the cracks of public education, yet now they are among the top-performing students in the country.

There are a number of charter programs in the U.S. that can boast an experience like the one above, yet few of these schools are as well-known or as large as KIPP. With already 52 schools in operation, KIPP plans to open another segment near its founding place in Houston, TX, which will increase the number of KIPP schools in that district fivefold (Radcliffe & Mellon 2007). KIPP, a self-proclaimed "national network of free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory public schools in under-resourced communities throughout the United States" (KIPP), has also been called "the nation's most interesting and most successful response so far to the problem of low achievement in inner city and rural public schools" (Mathews 2005, para. 1).

Several studies have provided convincing evidence of this "successful response." In 2002, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research group called the Education Performance Network (EPN) of New American Schools (NAS), evaluated three KIPP schools separately: the KEY Academy in the District of Columbia, the Gaston College Preparatory in North Carolina, and the 3D Academy in Houston, TX. In each of the

evaluations, the group sought to answer what percent of 5th grade KIPP students were making normal gains between the years of 2001 and 2002, whether those gains were statistically significant compared to prior (pre-KIPP) achievement, and whether the KIPP 5th graders were outperforming their traditional public school counterparts. The group collected a host of data, including NCE scores, scale scores, performance levels, and prior achievement information, whenever available. The research group was also careful to measure the test scores of the same individuals over time, in order to increase the likelihood that gains represented actual value added, and could not be attributed to other external variables.

In general, the studies found that, across all 3 schools, KIPP students were making significant gains in math and reading, and that these gains were significantly larger than those of their traditional public school counterparts. Several findings are worth noting in detail. At the KEY Academy, students in all demographic subgroups increased their math scores an average of 23.5 points, and their reading scores an average of 12.1 points, from the fall of 2001 to the spring of 2002. At Gaston Prep, 82% of special education students passed the state reading test in Grade 5, while only 11% of those same students had passed in the previous year. Gaston's performance was also higher than any other school in its county. Finally, at the 3D Academy, the average passing rate on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) improved for all demographic subgroups in both the reading and math tests.

In 2005, another independent group, the Educational Policy Institute (EPI), surveyed the results on the Stanford Achievement Test of a single cohort of 5th graders across 24 different KIPP schools in the years 2003-2004. They found that these cohorts

posted gains that were significantly larger than that which is considered normal—that is, a growth score of zero on the normal curve equivalent (NCE). Specifically, the cohorts improved their performance an average of 9 to 17 points across all state tests, and only one of the cohorts actually regressed in its performance.

In the same year as the EPI conducted its study, the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) collected outcomes from 5th, 6th, and 7th graders attending the Memphis KIPP DIAMOND Academy in its second year of operation, from 2003-2004. Similar to the methodology of the EPN study, CREP compared the performance of each KIPP student to a demographically similar counterpart from a nearby neighborhood school. In 8 out of 9 analyses, KIPP students outperformed their neighborhood counterparts, though the differences were only significant for the 5th and 6th grade cohorts. In addition, although KIPP students did not significantly differ from their neighborhood counterparts in “Proficiency” standings, they were more frequently represented in the Proficient and Advanced categories, and less frequently represented in the Below Proficient categories, for both the Reading and Mathematics tests.

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

The results from these studies provide strong evidence that, across the country, KIPP schools are helping low-income and other underserved students attain the knowledge and social skills required to succeed in college and life beyond it. KIPP attributes its success to the application of several important principles. These principles are indicated in its relatively simple mission statement:

There are no shortcuts to academic success. Outstanding educators, more time in school learning, a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum, and a strong culture of achievement and support help our students make significant academic gains and continue to excel in high school and

college (KIPP).

Packed into this concise statement are the keys to unlocking the not-so-secret strategies to success that KIPP employs. Longer hours, high expectations, character education, and a community of dedicated educators, parents, and students are among the most important characteristics that set apart KIPP from traditional public schools. The following sections outline each of these strategies in detail.

Choice and Commitment

The KIPP Academy in South Bronx, NY, is a middle school including grades 5-8. All of its students are either Black or Hispanic, and come from low-income families. Students interested in attending the 5th grade enter a lottery and are randomly chosen for interviews. If chosen, they sign a contract promising to “work, think, and behave in the best way [they] know how and... do whatever it takes” to help themselves and their classmates learn (Chubb and Loveless 2002, p. 140). In addition, their parents sign a separate contract agreeing to help their child in the best way they know how, and to make themselves available to their child and to the school. Most importantly, these parents assume ultimate responsibility for their child’s actions (p. 141).

One question that should arise here is whether or not these parents, most of whom are working at least one low-income job, have the time to devote the kind of commitment KIPP seeks. Fortunately, this seems to be the case, at least overall. With few exceptions, all that parents are expected to do is check their child’s homework and make sure they get to school every day. *Washington Post* writer Jay Mathews writes, “KIPP, I think, makes parents better by giving them something to do, and yet does not put so heavy a burden on them that they might collapse under the strain” (Mathews 2005, para. 18).

KIPP does not expect all of its parents—especially those with significant time constraints, and those taking care of children without a marriage partner, as a large percentage of poor parents do—to participate in the school community. Nevertheless, many KIPP parents choose to do so. At the flagship Houston middle school, parents serve as chaperones for school trips, Saturday school supervisors, sports coaches, office workers, board members, homework helpers, after-school transportation, cafeteria servers, and fundraising committee members (Paige et al. 2004). Their intimate involvement facilitates an atmosphere in which parents and school collaborate, and which recognizes parents as a crucial link in the chain of their child's educational success.

Longer Hours, Less Wasted Time

The KIPP movement also commits the school and students to longer hours. At KIPP South Bronx, teachers engage in 67% more instructional time than in regular public schools. Students begin the day at 7:25 AM, and generally leave at 5 PM, assuming they have no other work or activities to finish that day. In addition, students attend half-day Saturday classes and three weeks during the summer. The simple reasoning behind longer hours is that students who have fallen behind their proficiency-level counterparts need to learn not only that which their current grade level requires, but also that which they have failed to acquire in earlier grades. There is no magic formula for learning here: the greater the skill deficit, the more time needed to catch up.

High Expectations

Teachers in KIPP as well as other successful charter schools recognize that most if not all of their students enter the program well below academic proficiency, but they do not equate this underperformance with innate inability. On the contrary, they expect more

diligence and creativity from their students than most traditional public school teachers do of the average student. These teachers do not view the poverty or maladaptive behavioral patterns of their students as permanent handicaps, but as temporary obstacles to be cleared along the path to achievement.

KIPP teachers believe that a critical step in this path is the internalization of the belief that one is capable of such high achievement—something social psychologist Albert Bandura has termed “self-efficacy.” When combined with experiences of success and the encouragement of role models (which in this case are teachers, peers, and parents), a high sense of self-efficacy can lead to impressive gains at previously formidable tasks.

KIPP schools convey high expectations by employing strategies that reinforce hard work and other adaptive behaviors in their students. At KIPP South Bronx, students chant in unison such statements as “We listen carefully at all times,” or “We stay focused to save time” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003:70). Each classroom bears the name of a different college (p. 74). Even peer pressure becomes a positive force, as students are encouraged to reinforce positive behavior in their classmates.

To an incoming group of fifth-graders, [KIPP co-founder Dave] Levin explains... If you make other students feel bad, they won't concentrate in class. They'll be thinking about how to get back at you. And that will make you feel terrible, and around and around it will go... “You are all KIPPsters,” he concludes. “We're only worried about everyone moving ahead together.” The stress on teamwork is a strategy to alter both behavioral norms and the academic culture (p. 70).

Character Education

Closely related to high expectations is character education, in which students are taught specific social skills and self-regulatory behaviors that contribute to academic and

personal development. Examples of good behavior include “dressing for success,” maintaining eye contact, and standing when greeting someone (Chubb and Loveless 2002). In addition, all KIPP students learn the acronym “SLANT”: Sit up. Listen. Ask and answer questions. Nod your head so people know you are listening and understanding. Track your speaker by keeping your eyes on whoever is talking. Such behaviors are not taught explicitly in private schools, because teachers assume (and are usually correct) that middle- and high-SES students learn them from their parents even before entering kindergarten (Tough 2006). In contrast, kids from at-risk homes generally enter grade schools lacking this tacit know-how, and must be taught it in the same way that fractions, vocabulary, and times-tables are.

One way that good behaviors are reinforced is through an incentive system of reward and punishment. Good behavior is rewarded with KIPP dollars, which may be exchanged for goodies at the school store. Bad behavior is punished in a variety of ways. One of these is “going to the Porch”: the child who has disobeyed must wear his or her KIPP shirt inside-out for the rest of the day, and is not allowed to talk to or eat with friends. From a psychological behaviorist standpoint, this technique is a type of negative punishment in which the removal of a pleasant stimulus—in this case, recognition from one’s peers as a fellow KIPP student—weakens one’s tendency to exhibit undesirable behavior. Another negative punishment used in KIPP is the revocation of KIPP dollars, as well as other privileges. The benefit of using negative as opposed to positive punishments, which apply aversive consequences (e.g., yelling or giving demerits) to the behavior, is that the misbehaving student stands to lose something that is meaningful to her (e.g., positive peer regard). She does not simply accrue something that could be more

or less burdensome or even reinforcing to her (as is the case with verbal reprimands, which divert attention toward the student and away from learning).

Professional Development

In *No Excuses*, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom cite Japan's system of continuing professional development as a key component in the country's educational success. They highlight the "lesson study," in which a school's teachers, principal, and other chief administrators work as a team to create detailed lesson plans. These plans cover "the problem with which the lesson should begin, the exact wording and numbers to be used, the various strategies that students might suggest... [and] the questions teachers should ask" (2003:52). Moreover, the system provides mentorship for new teachers, as more experienced ones provide constructive criticism and praise for good ideas along the way.

Few U.S. public schools can claim the quality of professionalism and teamwork that Japanese schools have. At the KIPP academies, however, professional development is a defining characteristic. The very nature of work at KIPP—which demands long hours, constant availability to the students, and high levels of motivation—would likely leave its teachers burnt out and embittered if there were no system of support. A KIPP school's team meets often to review curricula, techniques for classroom management, and the organization of materials, as well as to provide feedback and recognition of each other's hard work and good ideas (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003:53).

Back to the Basics

A final strategy for success employed in the KIPP schools is the mastery of a core set of basic academic skills. This stands in contrast to recent applications of progressivism, in which the teacher does not teach skills directly, but expects students to

“construct their own answers to problems” naturally through “discussion, collaboration, and discovery” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003:61). KIPP, on the other hand, believes that a solid grounding in facts must be combined with abstract reasoning, because ability to do the latter is useless without a supply of the former. KIPP focuses relentlessly on “high student performance on standardized tests and other objective measures” and expects students “to achieve a level of academic performance that will enable them to succeed at the nation's best high schools and colleges” (Cook 2007).

ANSWERING THE CRITICISMS

A number of charter schools across the nation have found success through applying strategies like the ones above. Nevertheless, every success story has its criticisms. For successful charter schools like KIPP, there are two in particular: the claim that kids who attend KIPP are not truly representative of disadvantaged children, and the doubt that strategies employed by these schools can be applied to traditional public schools.

The first of these criticisms has to do with representation: do KIPP schools truly reach the most disadvantaged among all students? In *The Charter School Dust-Up*, Carnoy and colleagues (2005) argue that, of the few KIPP evaluations that have published “pre-KIPP” scores of the entry performance of their students (e.g., the EPN study of 2002), none have been able to conclude that KIPP enrolls the truly “disadvantaged of the disadvantaged”—that is, those students who are not only low-SES minorities, but who also produce the lowest test scores, have low levels of motivation and parental support, and come from single-parent homes (Carnoy et al. 2005:33). Some KIPP analyses even showed that the entering 5th graders were already outperforming their

demographically similar public school counterparts, based on end-of-4th grade scores (p. 54).

Tied into the problem of representativeness is that of “self-selection” bias in studies that compare successful charter schools with traditional public schools (Carnoy et al. 2005:19). KIPP enrolls students who are especially motivated to succeed, and whose parents are actively engaged in their children’s education. These characteristics, Carnoy and his colleagues (2005) argue, are just as important as race or income level in performance analyses, and ought to be considered before criticizing the traditional public school system for its relative underperformance.

Jay Mathews, who has written many KIPP articles for the *Washington Post Online*, acknowledges that the “self-selection” objections of Carnoy and colleagues (2005) may well be true. Regardless of this, he argues, it must not be forgotten that KIPP students are still among the most disadvantaged children in the U.S. The vast majority come from Black or Hispanic families and qualify for federal lunch subsidies. Still, at KIPP they have far outperformed students in other programs that seek to help such children. “Whatever their starting point, [students in KIPP] have gone much further on the road to academic proficiency than even children in communities where family incomes and parent motivation are higher” (Mathews 2005, para. 10).

Mathews’ point may be used to address an even broader concern related to representation; namely, whether or not charter schools indirectly threaten the well-being of the “disadvantaged of the disadvantaged” when these children are left behind in the traditional public school system by their more motivated counterparts (Carnoy et al. 2005:33). More specifically, those left behind lose the positive academic and social

influence that their more motivated counterparts once exhibited while attending traditional public schools (Carnoy et al. 2005). The flaw in this concern lies in the fact that many highly motivated yet disadvantaged children, for one reason or another, never attend charter schools like KIPP. They remain in the traditional public school system, where they do not perform any better, on average, than their less motivated counterparts. Thus if any damage in learning occurs for less motivated students when their more motivated peers depart, it is likely very small. Moreover, this damage is logically preferable to the alternative situation of keeping the more motivated students in their traditional schools, where both they and their less motivated counterparts would continue to flounder. Thus, in the search for a solution to the problem of unmotivated disadvantaged students, we ought not simply to blame charter schools, but to look for other programs that would more effectively reach this subgroup of the disadvantaged.

The second of the two criticisms aimed at successful charter schools is that even if such schools do in fact produce impressive gains in underserved children, the strategies that they use may not be transferable to the public school system in general. Looking back at the KIPP strategies mentioned earlier in this paper, many of them may only be possible in schools with the kind of freedom that KIPP and other charter schools have. In other words, the characteristics that set apart charter schools from traditional public schools—greater flexibility and freedom from bureaucratic regulations—are those that enable them to succeed. Charter schools are free to hire unlicensed but academically exceptional teachers, to restructure the school day and curriculum as they see fit, and to control budget allocations (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003). In the final chapter of *No Excuses*, the Thernstroms suggest that the best solution for public education would be to

make every (urban) school a charter school, giving principals more autonomy, parents greater choice, and schools greater incentive to provide adequate instruction.

The Thernstroms' suggestion seems a bit short-sighted. It is important to remember that charter schools in general have not outperformed, and in some cases have even underperformed, traditional public schools. Thus, the same characteristics that allow some charter schools to excel, also allow other charter schools to fail. A large part of KIPP's (and others') success owes to the presence of dynamic individuals who use their freedom wisely. Therefore, applying the freedom of charter schools to traditional public schools likely would not improve the public education system overall.

Despite the concern that the transfer of most of the characteristics which make charter schools successful would not necessarily make traditional public schools successful, perhaps the transfer only of isolated characteristics (e.g., longer hours, professional development, or increasing school administrative autonomy) would have gainful effects. Mayor Bloomberg is currently pursuing this idea in New York City, specifically with regard to increasing individual principals' autonomy in their schools. Nevertheless, this move is not without criticisms of its own—namely, the worry that increasing the autonomy of principals would decrease the power of teacher unions, leading to the exploitation of teachers in terms of salary, curriculum, and length-of-day decisions (Hunsinger 2007).

The important point to remember here is that a charter school succeeds when the necessary characteristics are all present at the same time. Unfortunately, there is no one formula that guarantees success: the type and number of necessary characteristics varies from school to school. The hope of the charter school movement, then, ought to be in

finding those characteristics which *in general* produce spectacular results for nontraditional schools, and which may be translated to their traditional school counterparts.

CHARTER SCHOOLS: REMAINING QUESTIONS

This paper has covered a variety of issues surrounding the charter school movement, and yet many questions remain unanswered. These are concerned mainly with goals and measurement in the education of the underserved. What is “success”? Is it a college degree? Is it a certain income or career level? Is it changes in social skills, decreases in problem behaviors, or psychological well-being? Moreover, with the recent emphasis on accountability, we need accurate measures of progress toward the goals we propose.

Most charter schools, as well as the NCLB, define success as the attainment of basic skills which will carry the student through college and beyond, and measures these skills through standardized tests. Critics of these tests propose portfolios, classroom grades, and other less objective data as better measures of overall ability and skill acquisition. Peter Cook, a Teach for America educator looking to start a KIPP school in Greater New Orleans, believes that success is when students have the ability “to reach their fullest potential as individuals,” but that such a goal is too subjective to be measured. Longitudinal studies ought to pursue the possibility of measuring such variables in the future. For the time being, “we need to use the best predictors of success that we have to gauge our performance, and they happen to be test scores, college acceptance rates, etc.” (2007). Despite the criticism that such a philosophy leads to “teaching to the tests,” the truth—at least in schools like KIPP—is that emphasizing high

standardized performance simply reinforces individual growth and goal attainment. “At the end of the day it’s not about whether [one] passed any single test, but whether [one has] mastered the material [he or she] was supposed to” (Cook 2007). Such a view of success is likely to lead educators and policymakers closer to the goal of eliminating the achievement gap in America today.

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