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Charter school banks on results

By Dave Williams

One of Atlanta's longest-running networks of charter schools has hit the halfway mark in a \$6.5 million capital fundraising drive just eight months into the effort.

But with the focus of the campaign about to change, the hardest work is yet to come, said Tom Pritchard, board chairman for KIPP Metro Atlanta and president of E² Capital Group LLC.

"It's not the greatest fundraising environment I've ever been in ... [but] it's gone terrifically well," he said. "We've approached the foundation market thus far. Now, we're turning to the corporate and major individual donor categories."

Pritchard said the KIPP schools sell themselves to prospective donors as part of a charter-school movement that is rapidly gaining converts in Atlanta and across the state as it scores academic successes.

There are 121 charter schools in Georgia now, compared with 35 five years ago. Enrollment during the same period has grown from 17,000 students to 65,000.

Although charter schools are part of public school systems, they are given freedom from some of the laws and regulations that apply to other public schools in exchange for meeting performance goals set in their charters.

That extra leeway is paying dividends. According to a report released by the Georgia Department of Education at the end of December, the state's charter high schools had an 81 percent graduation rate during the 2008-09 academic year, compared with 78.9 percent in Georgia public high schools overall.

Also, 61 percent of charter schools exceeded the student performance of their two closest traditional public schools.

Charter schools achieved those results with an overall student population that was 43 percent African-American, compared with the statewide average of 38 percent, and with 60 percent of their students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches, compared with 53 percent statewide.

Minority and low-income students tend to score lower on standardized tests than their white and more affluent counterparts.

"In Georgia, the evidence is very clear," said Kelly McCutchen, president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation. "Charter schools are doing very well academically with a poorer, more diverse student body."

The two oldest KIPP Metro Atlanta schools, both of which opened in 2003, rank high among Georgia's charter schools, with enrollments made up mostly of low-income minority students.

KIPP WAYS Academy, in the Atlanta Public Schools system, and KIPP South Fulton Academy in East Point, part of the Fulton County school district, were in the top 20 "No Excuses" schools in the state last year, a list of high-poverty-rate schools compiled by the Georgia Public Policy Foundation.



Byron E. Small

Top-notch: David Jernigan, KIPP Metro Atlanta's executive director, and Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Beverly Hall strive to give students the best education.

The two KIPP schools, which serve students in the fifth through eighth grades, also outperformed their peers statewide on all 16 Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests administered in those four grades.

Despite such positive results, charter schools have stirred some controversy.

The public school systems in Fulton, Gwinnett and DeKalb counties have filed a lawsuit challenging a 2008 law that created a state commission with the power to approve charter school applications over the objections of local school boards.

"Many school systems have gone through the process and approved charter schools," said Herb Garrett, executive director of the Georgia School Superintendents Association. "But that doesn't mean you approve everything that comes before you."

Indeed, the Atlanta school board rejected 11 of 13 charter-school applications last year.

But the city school district has been a strong supporter of KIPP Metro Atlanta.

"They create programs that can serve as a laboratory for innovative ideas," said Allen Mueller, charter schools coordinator for Atlanta Public Schools. "It truly is a partnership. We've learned a lot from each other."

The KIPP schools are characterized by a disciplined approach to learning that puts students in the classrooms for longer hours than students in traditional middle schools.

School starts at 7:30 a.m. and goes until 5 p.m., and students attend classes for a half day every other Saturday. There's also a two to three week summer session.

"That's what's required when you take kids who are a grade or two behind, as some of these kids are," Pritchard said. "They're not going to catch up without working hard."

"We're going into the areas where the kids need help the most," added Jack Ward, retired CEO of Russell Corp. and another KIPP Metro Atlanta board member. "We deliver that."

The fundraising campaign is for renovations at KIPP South Fulton and KIPP STRIDE Academy, a third middle school opened by KIPP Metro Atlanta last summer in southwest Atlanta. Each school needs about \$3 million in upgrades, said David Jernigan, KIPP Metro Atlanta's executive director.

Plus, a fourth KIPP middle school is due to open in Atlanta this summer.

"Although we get public tax dollars for operations, we don't necessarily get money for capital improvements," he said.

Jernigan said KIPP's corporate structure makes the national chain of charter schools appealing to prospective business donors.

Besides a full-time professional staff that works out of KIPP Metro Atlanta's offices downtown, the local organization's board of directors is stocked with corporate leaders.

"It's not enough to get academic results," Jernigan said. "We have to manage taxpayer dollars well."

But as KIPP Metro Atlanta prepares to make its case for funds to the corporate community, Pritchard said its best selling point remains its academic results.

"A lot of people here are interested in improving education for lower-income minority kids," he said. "Once we get the word out, we don't have to push it too hard. People understand the need."

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