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KIPP shows how sacrifice, dedication pay off for all

By Maureen Downey

One of the most controversial statements in education — at least based on the responses I receive from teachers — is the claim that all students can learn to high standards.

Teachers describe untenable situations where learning does seem just about impossible: third-graders who fall asleep because they watched cable movies all night; middle-school students still counting on their fingers for simple subtraction; 13-year-olds whose reading ability barely rises above picture books.

Yet some programs do make great strides with such hard-to-educate kids. One of the most celebrated is the Knowledge is Power Program or KIPP, the model of schooling calling for dawn-to-dusk education developed by two young Teach for America teachers in a Houston middle school.

In transforming low-achieving poor kids into Houston's top performers, KIPP co-founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin didn't do anything that different than what all good teachers do; they just did a lot more of it.

That may both explain the strength and frailty of the KIPP model, which has now spawned 66 schools nationwide, including two in metro Atlanta. At KIPP, students are in school from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the week, plus a half day every other Saturday and three weeks in the summer. Teachers give students their phone numbers so kids can call with homework questions. Full-time teachers work a 50-hour week.

I wonder how many teachers or parents are ready for that level of commitment and sacrifice. On a national School Matters blog about KIPP, one

poster wrote: "We must never mistake these isolated examples as the norm. They aren't. Nor must we ever believe that these isolated cases can be reproduced nationwide. They can't. KIPP relies on energetic idealists in their 20s who are single and have no kids to work 10-hour days, an extra day on Saturday and an extra month in the summer. There are only so many people who are willing to do this."

KIPP also asks a lot of students and families, who may tire of the rigor and the hours. Indeed, of the fifth graders who entered KIPP schools in San Francisco in 2003, 60 percent left the program before completing eighth grade.

In Atlanta last week, KIPP Foundation president and CEO Richard Barth said such high attrition

rates slow down as schools and expectations become more established. The national student attrition rate of "mature" schools is 8 percent, he said. KIPP is also expanding its model to elementary schools and high schools, believing that it must reach kids earlier and

stay with them longer to ensure academic success. The nonprofit is also trying to create better work-family balance for teachers through job sharing and flex-time.

In the interview, Barth was accompanied by KIPP board member Michael Lomax, the former Fulton County Commission chairman and Dillard University president who now leads the United Negro College Fund. Noting that Dillard had admitted valedictorians from New Orleans high schools who required remedial reading and math, Lomax cited a need for greater rigor and time on-task for all U.S. students.

"If you look at what is happening in other countries — China, Japan, Norway — we are not as rigorous as they are, even in our suburban white schools," says Lomax. "I believe we will find that KIPP is not just a model for teaching low-income students, but for all students."

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But would teachers embrace a model that not only calls for more rigor and more time, but is based on a core belief that all kids — even those from wretched homes with no books, no rules and no discipline — can be taught to high standards?

Barth suggests that it's not the students who have daunted teachers and caused them to lose faith, but the absence of leadership, a shared vision and a voice at their schools.

"A lot of teachers are in survival mode," says Barth. "A lot of their cynicism comes from working in highly dysfunctional environments."

Too often, Barth says, people refuse to recognize the work, structure and commitment that gird successful programs such as KIPP. "People in general want to believe we do it with pixie dust," he says.

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