

Kudos for KIPP

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Rare is the occasion when these columns have reason to applaud more spending on public schools. But news that the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) will receive \$65 million to create new schools in Houston is worth a standing ovation.

KIPP academies are charter schools, which are public schools freed from the grip of the public education bureaucracy. Charter schools can employ lengthier school days and longer school years than union work rules typically allow. They can pay teachers based on skills and performance rather than seniority. And charter school principals can fire and replace staff who are underperforming.

In return for such liberties, charter schools are held accountable for producing results in the classroom. And no charters in the country have made better use of their independence than KIPP. The brainchild of two Teach for America alums, Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg, the first KIPP school was started in Houston in 1994. There are now 52 schools nationwide serving 12,000 kids. More than 80% of KIPP students are low income and 95% are black or Latino, yet they regularly outperform their traditional public school counterparts in math and reading tests. Waiting lists are commonplace.

Charters nationwide now number more than 4,000 and enroll more than a million students. The public school establishment and its political supporters continue to talk about closing academic achievement gaps, but charters like KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Achievement First and others are actually getting the job done. These schools provide educational choice for people who otherwise have none. And their success is directly linked to their ability to innovate and operate outside of the union box.

This week KIPP announced the results of its most successful fundraising campaign ever, and the money will help spawn 42 new schools in Houston over the next decade. Donors include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Doris and Donald Fischer

Fund, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation and the Walton family. All are veteran advocates of school reform, and it's encouraging to see them endorse successful models like KIPP.

Outside pressure is essential to reforming public education, and KIPP says it wants to "create a situation where both KIPP and [the Houston school district] benefit from the healthy competition when there are multiple public schools serving the same community."

Houston schools can certainly use the competition. With just over 200,000 students, the school district is the nation's seventh-largest. KIPP aims to expand its student body to around 10% of that number, which might be enough to exert pressure on district schools to improve or close down. Last year more than 50 district schools, or roughly one out of six, failed to make adequate yearly progress as mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and nearly half of the district's high schools were rated "academically unacceptable."

By contrast, KIPP students were acing state tests. At the KIPP Academy Middle School, 99% of eighth-graders scored "proficient" or "advanced" in math and reading. The corresponding results for their district counterparts were 57% and 79%. No wonder the current KIPP waiting list in Houston is 2,500 students long.

KIPP's accomplishments are all the more impressive when you consider that charter schools in Texas receive no public funding for buildings and \$1,200 to \$1,800 less than the \$9,000 per student the state spends on other public schools. More evidence, we'd say, that what public schools need is not more tax dollars but more autonomy to utilize the ample resources they already have.