

**No Excuses: A Critique of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) within
Charter Schools in the USA**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to proffer a critical perspective about a specific brand of American schools within the larger charter school movement: the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). KIPP is currently receiving wholesale acclaim as a radical alternative to public schooling “that works.” While KIPP schools ostensibly claim that college acceptance for all students is their primary goal, the principles and practices that undergird their mission are founded upon capitalistic and militaristic ideals that run counter to the ideals of democratic education. I argue that KIPP schools merely preserve the status quo by asking students to overcome overwhelming disparities through “hard work” and “motivation,” instead of addressing the structural sources of poverty and poor academic achievement—i.e., the unequal distribution of resources in schools and society. By subscribing to a dictum of *no excuses*, KIPP essentially puts the onus on the victims of poverty and institutional racism. This clearly conveys the fallacy to urban students that failure in this society will solely be a reflection of not working long and hard enough, or simply not complying with rules set by those with authority.

Introduction: Sensationalizing School Reform

Although I seldom watch television, a few years ago, I was lured by the sound of CNN's Anderson Cooper and Oprah Winfrey exalting "a radical new type of schooling" that had dramatically "turned student's lives around." Was this, as Tyack and Cuban (1995) put it, just another shooting star reform destined to burn out in due time? Or were Cooper and Winfrey really on to something? What I saw was certainly nothing new: two highly-educated white men, claiming they had the new fix for urban schools; a group of downtrodden, poor kids of color in school uniforms reciting their times tables aloud in chorus; and an extended school day and year buttressed by claims of extra homework assignments. In fact, the schools – Knowledge is Power Program (best known as KIPP schools) – looked more like a military school than anything that remotely resembled a progressive pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. The TV segment went on to describe how KIPP schools differed from the typical public school, which I summarize in the following sections.

An Overview of KIPP

KIPP was conceived in 1994 by two Ivy League grads and former *Teach for America* protégés, David Levin and Michael Feinberg. While working in the Houston public school system, they grew flustered with "variables" that they felt stymied their pedagogical creativity and severely limited their ability to close the racial achievement gap. As subordinate-ranking classroom teachers, they felt their only viable option was entrepreneurship; so they worked hard to produce an educational concept that would alleviate the tensions of what they perceived to be the result of an over-centralized bureaucracy. Consequently, they came up with the blueprint for KIPP (Headden, 2006). While still wanting to deliver services exclusively to urban youths, Feinberg and Levin sought to redefine some of the basic programmatic regularities (Sarason, 1971) featured in most public schools by extending the instructional day in addition to holding classes on Saturdays and for three weeks during the summer—all without the traditional degree of oversight from the district central office. Based on the personal conviction that all children could achieve high academic success, they adopted a slogan that was consistent with this assumption: *No Excuses*. KIPP schools would operate on the ideology that "there are no shortcuts to success" (KIPP Foundation, 2006a). Given this mantra, KIPP

would attempt to eliminate the variables that Levin and Feinberg perceived to be the major contributors to the academic failure of urban students—namely, lack of time, low expectations, compulsion, and bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy is often used as a pejorative term by school choice advocates who believe that hierarchical systems of governance are inherently inefficient (see Chubb & Moe, 1990). KIPP schools are governed by an open-enrollment organizational framework, meaning that KIPP schools are not accountable to teacher unions and the local school district in the same way that traditional public schools are. Principals have the flexibility to appropriate public funds the best way they see fit, choose from a wider range of curricular and instructional approaches, lengthen the school day and year, and hire and fire teachers with greater ease. As Michael Feinberg (2005) notes, this allows KIPP schools to stay lean on administrative staff and instead funnel more resources directly into classrooms.

Debate over the amount of time spent in school both daily and annually and its relationship with student achievement has abounded in recent decades. While students at a nearby regular public middle school begin classes at 9:20 a.m. and are out by 4:00 p.m., at most KIPP schools, the instructional day begins at 7:30 a.m. and lasts until 5:00 p.m. Attendance is also compulsory on every other Saturday from 8:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., in addition to three weeks of full-day instruction in the summer. Altogether, KIPP students gain 62% more instructional time than their public school counterparts (KIPP Foundation, 2006a): Regular public school students (i.e., middle school students) spend approximately 1,200 hours in school each year; KIPP students are in school about 1,944 hours per year. Feinberg (2005) has likened the KIPP experience to students receiving five years worth of education in only three years. Also, teachers are “on-call” 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and are provided with cell phones for students to contact them at will with questions about homework (Feinberg, 2000; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Feinberg (2000) claims that it is not unusual for some students and teachers to stay at school until 9:00 p.m.

Students and parents actively choose to enroll in KIPP schools rather than being assigned to a particular school by ZIP code, as conventionally done in American public schools. Admission is not extremely rigorous, at least in the academic sense. Students

are accepted purely on the contractual agreement that they will embrace KIPP's *Five Pillars* of success (a point I will return to specifically in a later section), with the caveat that teachers can be fired and students can be expelled for failing to uphold the *Commitment to Excellence* contract (see Appendix for sample copy).

Teacher expectations about students' abilities have the potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies in student achievement outcomes (see Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1960). Students are held to "high expectations for academic achievement and conduct that make no excuses based on the students' backgrounds" (KIPP Foundation, 2006a). Moreover, "students, parents, teachers, and staff create and reinforce a culture of achievement and support through a range of formal and informal rewards and consequences for academic performance and behavior" (KIPP Foundation, 2006a). KIPP students are given two to three hours of homework each night and can earn KIPP currency for working diligently. A unique characteristic of KIPP schools is that they openly subscribe to the mission of placing all students in post-secondary institutions of education. Classrooms are named after the college that the residing teacher attended. Graduating eighth graders are encouraged to join the *KIPP to College* alumni program, which provides ongoing support "to continue to use the scholarly habits, knowledge, and qualities of character learned at KIPP" (KIPP Foundation, 2006b).

Beating the odds has been the linchpin of KIPP's success thus far and is likely the primary reason for its widespread popularity in the U.S. Despite serving a high-poverty, high-minority student body, KIPP schools are apparently outperforming many public schools with similar student body characteristics. The KIPP Foundation even claims that its schools cater to a more challenging student body than the typical urban public middle school. For instance, even though African-American and Hispanic students make up 70% of the student enrollment in urban public schools, KIPP serves a student population that is 95% African-American and Hispanic. Sixty-three percent of students at the typical urban school receive free or reduced lunch; at KIPP schools nationwide, 78% of the students have their lunch subsidized (Educational Policy Institute [EPI], 2005).

Critics of KIPP: Please Stand Up?

Critics of KIPP are hard to find. Popular press accounts have dubbed KIPP the savior of a failing public education system in the U.S. Since its inception, KIPP has received face-time on American television shows like *60 Minutes*, *Oprah Winfrey*, and *PBS's Making Schools Work*, in addition to garnering attention in high-profile magazines like *U.S. News* and *People*. Students from KIPP Academy in Houston even made a national TV appearance at the 2000 GOP Convention (Hendrie, 2002). Since that same year, Doris and Donald Fisher of GAP, Inc. have donated \$38.5 million, which helped to establish the KIPP Foundation, a non-profit organization whose purpose is to help train KIPP school leaders and replicate the schools nationwide (Duxbury, 2006). Although much criticism has been published about charter schools in general—the Edison Schools in particular (see Saltman, 2005)—hardly any criticism of KIPP is available in extant literature (Mathews, 2004; Saltman, personal communication, June 22, 2007).

Although only three empirical studies on program effects have been published as of 2006, they have all been generally favorable in terms of student achievement gains. The first study, commissioned by New American Schools (NAS), surveyed fifth graders across three KIPP schools to determine their academic gains over one school year and compared them with annual gains of fifth graders enrolled in surrounding local public schools. Despite the authors' claim that "each school increased levels of academic achievement performance for students, regardless of background or label" (Doran & Drury, 2002, p. 27), KIPP students did not fare all that spectacularly across the board. For instance, fifth graders at 3D Academy in Houston scored only just as well as other similar students in the Houston Independent School District (HSID). One might reasonably presume that 62% more time in school would provide at least a slight advantage, but in this case it did not. The draw in achievement comparisons between KIPP and regular public schools is not too disappointing until one considers that KIPP students spent nearly 750 more hours in school than their counterparts! Had they spent the same amount of time in school, would it not be safe to presume that the KIPP students would have been easily outperformed? Furthermore, claims that students from the KIPP DC/KEY Academy in Washington D.C. made greater achievement gains in math than

students at any other middle or junior high school in the D.C. area were tempered by the use of a fall administration of the test to serve as a proxy for end-of-the-fourth-grade-year achievement benchmarks. Given that student achievement typically regresses over the summer months, the KIPP students' fall-of-fifth-grade test scores were likely lower than their spring-of-fourth-grade scores, which would predictably yield a higher difference in comparisons. In my review of the original study conducted by researchers from NAS (Doran & Drury, 2002), it was not evident that either the control or experimental group scores were statistically adjusted for the threat of regression. The point is that although KIPP students appear to do better in some cases, the jury is still out on its wholesale efficacy.

The other two studies offered more of the same results, but with a significant degree of cautious optimism. Ross et al. (2005) conducted a year-long mixed methods study on school climate and achievement outcomes at a KIPP school in Memphis and found that KIPP students demonstrated “significantly higher achievement” (p. 24) than control students on four out of six fifth-grade tests. Again, these results are hardly laudable since KIPP students had much more time-on-task than the students in the control group. (I will expound on the issue of extended time in a later section of this paper.) In similar fashion, but with a much larger study sample, EPI (2005) found statistically significant gains across 24 fifth-grade KIPP cohorts. Although KIPP students showed a “dramatic increase well above normal growth rates in reading, language, and mathematics” (p. 12), the study design had several limitations, including a lack of a control or matched comparison group and the use of aggregated school-level data.

One of the prominent American writers about KIPP is educational columnist Jay Mathews of *The Washington Post*. He has followed the development of KIPP schools for the last half-decade, and seems to offer unequivocal support for the movement. Despite his general affinity for KIPP, he has exposed some of the program's failures—not because he wishes to cast it in a negative light, but rather, because of his draw toward the type of cut-throat accountability that KIPP espouses. In one of his most recent articles on KIPP, he highlights some of the less-than-stellar outcomes (which are conspicuously missing from the collection of press reports on the KIPP website):

Most of the schools are showing healthy gains in nearly all grades, but some are not. KIPP L.A. Prep in Los Angeles reported a drop in reading from the 40th to the 39 [sic] percentile for sixth-graders in spring 2005. Sixth-graders that same year at the KIPP South Fulton Academy in Atlanta dropped from the 44th to the 38th percentile in reading, and sixth-graders at the KIPP Ascend Charter School in Chicago dropped from the 35th to the 34th percentile in reading. The KIPP Ujima Village Academy in Baltimore was significantly above the average scores for that city in reading, but its seventh-graders showed a drop from the 38th to the 33rd percentile on the Stanford 9 reading test in spring 2005. The KIPP Reach College Preparatory school looked impressive when compared to the average for other public schools in Oklahoma City, but its seventh-grade's reading score dropped from the 63rd to the 43rd percentile in spring 2005 compared to what those same students did the previous spring.... Two schools, the KIPP Chicago Youth Village Academy and Atlanta's KIPP Achieve Preparatory Academy, have had the right to use the KIPP name revoked effective at the end of this school year.... there were many efforts to help them, but the Chicago school still “struggled with low enrollment and low reading scores relative to the district average” and the Atlanta school “struggled with financial reporting and viability and did not properly administer voluntary tests that would demonstrate growth over time” (Mathews, 2006, ¶24-28).

In spite of the shortage of KIPP’s critics and the media’s early tendency to sanctify its mission and romanticize its efficacy, the most troubling aspects of the movement have little to do with improved test scores. Thus far, the attention that KIPP has received in academia and the press has focused on achievement gains while ignoring the more dire sociopolitical concerns. This, however, is not at all unusual (Saltman, 2005). Researchers and scholars of American education typically focus on flaws in research design or methodology at the expense of the more critical social implications. The widespread popularity of a “whatever works” mentality lures many scholars toward debates about efficacy in quantifiable terms (e.g., effect sizes, standard deviations, standard error) and away from the dangerous utilitarian assumption that schools exist to prepare workers for the economy. Put another way, placing value on achievement outcomes has become a reflexive tendency; thinking about underlying social and political ramifications has not.

KIPP: Radically Different or More of the Same?

David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) suggest that in spite of the incessant claims of radical change in education, reformers tend instead to merely tinker with the routines and regularities that have long stood the test of time. Public appeal to such regularities (e.g., teacher-centered instruction, testing, etc.) has as much to do with this constancy than most school reform critics are willing to concede (Cuban, 1993). Put differently, as Sarason (1971) prefers, “the more things change, the more they remain the same” (p. 58). Although Anderson Cooper’s conception of the term *radical* is likely different than my own, as Jeffrey Mirel (2001) has observed, “break the mold” reform designs — in the vein of A.S. Neill’s Summerhill School — are simply not amenable with hegemonic extramural forces (e.g., push toward national standards, prevalence of standardized testing, consumer demands, etc.). These compelling forces severely limit the degree of radical change reformers can embody in their approaches while retaining a substantial degree of appeal to potential consumers. Therefore, policy talk about radical change is often heavy on rhetoric, but tenuous on actual promise.

Despite being celebrated as something starkly different from the norm, KIPP schools still have egg-crate classrooms bounded by walls, within which an adult teacher leads a group of younger students in daily lessons about reading, writing, and arithmetic. In fact, Ross, McDonald, Alberg, Gallagher, and Calloway’s (2005) ethnographic study of a KIPP school in Memphis revealed that the dominant instructional strategy was teacher-centered, and that “team teaching, multi-age grouping, systematic individualized instruction, individual tutoring, parent/community involvement (in the classroom), sustained reading, independent inquiry, computer for instructional delivery, performance assessment, and student self-assessment were very rarely or never observed” (p. 21). In short, KIPP may appear to be a radical approach on the surface because of its extended school day and its categorization as a charter school, but in reality, it is bounded by rather conservative, traditional practices.

Premise for Critique

What little criticism of KIPP exists is generally representative of arguments proffered by typical charter school opponents. Primarily, KIPP schools have been criticized for creaming the best and brightest students (Mathews, 2005; Rothstein, 2004).

Rothstein's (2004) accusation was based on the fact that of all the fifth-grade students at a KIPP school in the Bronx, 41% entered at or above grade level in reading and 48% entered at or above grade level in math (which is not much different than the 50% one might expect, given a normal distribution). Because students choose to enroll in KIPP schools, Rothstein argues, they are a more motivated subsample than the general urban student population, hence the higher achievement gains.

Other critics bemoan a form of social Darwinism inextricably linked to the charter school ideology (see Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Holme, 1999). That is, only the academically privileged or motivated students survive, while others are inevitably pushed out (back into the traditional public schools). In fact, KIPP's Commitment to Excellence contract is rather blunt about this in warning students that "failure to adhere to ... [the contract] can cause me to lose various KIPP privileges and can lead to returning to my home school" (KIPP Foundation, 2006c). Critics often use such arguments in countering claims that charter schools offer the panacea to failing public schools, and in suggesting that charter schools can never feasibly be taken to scale across the nation.

Still, many critiques of public education, in general, focus on the clash between market ideology and democracy. Because the goals of education in the U.S. have largely been driven by interests of *social mobility* and *social efficiency*—as opposed to *democratic equality*—an education like the one KIPP claims to offer is becoming increasingly more of a private good, which typically works to the detriment of educating students for the public good. David Labaree (1997) articulately outlines the intrinsic tension between these two, and is therefore worth quoting at length:

Unfettered economic freedom leads to a highly unequal distribution of wealth and power, which in turn undercuts the possibility for democratic control; but at the same time, restricting such economic freedom in the name of equality infringes on individual liberty, without which democracy can turn into the dictatorship of the majority. Each generation of American reformers has tried to figure out a way to preserve the Jeffersonian ideal of political equality in the face of the Hamiltonian reality of economic inequality—and to do so without stifling the productivity of the market economy (p. 41).

The tension between democratic politics and capitalist markets has been pronounced in the recent decades of education reform, and KIPP schools are certainly not insulated from this debate, as their mission is clearly driven by market ideals.

KIPP's Pillars to success are inherently undemocratic and smack of an individualistic orientation that ultimately rewards and punishes students to the extent that they themselves are willing and able to work hard to overcome the conditions of poverty. Moreover, the social climate at KIPP schools is imbued by a distinctly capitalistic and militaristic ideology. In short, KIPP's approach does little to address the plight of low-income students or alter the status quo.

The Five Pillars

KIPP schools are ideologically undergirded by five Pillars, according to the KIPP Foundation (2006a): (a) *high expectations*, (b) *choice and commitment*, (c) *more time*, (d) *power to lead*, and (e) *focus on results*. The premise behind the Pillars is that each component can and will offset the variables that lead to failure among poor, minority students. The two pillars I will pay particular attention to are “high expectations” and “more time.”

The Pretense of Time

One factor that most educators agree contributes to educational achievement (high and low) is the constrained resource of time (Lortie, 2002). Unsurprisingly, however, what no one can seem to form consensus on is exactly how much time is needed and how time should be spent. KIPP advocates clearly assume that the amount of time spent on instruction is highly correlated with higher achievement outcomes. Some even claim that time spent working in general is a reflection of ethic and individual dedication, and the simplest way to assert one's position in the American social hierarchy. Joel Spring (2003) argues that virtue and moral character in a consumerist society such as the U.S. can be traced back to the principles of 19th century Puritan work ethic. Unquestioned within this popular individualistic assumption is the idea that hard work is a reflection of moral excellence and invariably leads to social success. Thus, the easiest and most sensible way to explain poverty is to link it to poor work ethic or sheer laziness.

Conservative American political pundit Neal Boortz (1998) captures this ideology in claiming that the standard 40-hour work week is for “losers.... You don’t see highly successful people clocking out of the office every afternoon at five. Losers drive home in traffic. Winners drive home in the dark” (p. 49). (*I wonder if it has ever occurred to Boortz that, first and foremost, highly successful people do not clock in or out.*) KIPP’s co-founders clearly believe in this dictum. In a PBS interview with Hedrick Smith, Mike Feinberg’s words on the rationale behind an extended school day hold an eerie resemblance to those of Boortz:

Every single school in this country has a teacher car in the parking lot at seven o'clock in the morning and that car is still there at five, six o'clock in the evening. What's different at KIPP is that all the cars are there at seven in the morning and all the cars are there at five o'clock in the afternoon (Feinberg, 2005, ¶72-73).

The question that appeals to most, however, is not a political one, but a question of science. In short, does more time equal more learning? The concept of more time equating to more learning is a dangerous assumption that perhaps John Goodlad (2004) summed best:

If our interest is in quality educational experiences, we must not stop with providing only time. I would always choose fewer hours well used over more hours of engagement with sterile activities. Increasing... [time] will in fact be counterproductive unless there is, simultaneously, marked improvement in how this time is used (p. 283).

Using Goodlad’s reasoning, I would argue that more time spent in a school that promotes undemocratic practices such as militaristic discipline, pro-consumerism, and authoritarian modes of instruction (all of which I will address in subsequent sections) is actually worse for students.

Another time-related concern is the caution of teacher burnout associated with extended work hours, which is also related to the practical question, Who will be willing to teach in such schools? One of the most consistent findings about why people choose education as a profession is because of the teacher’s work schedule (i.e., summers and

weekends off, early daily release time) and its conduciveness to raising children and spending time at home with family (Lortie, 2002). In fact, according to Feinberg (2005), the average KIPP teacher has only three to six years of teaching experience, and has no children at home. Moreover, given the grim numbers on teacher attrition in the traditional public school settings where teachers are only required to work about seven to eight hours a day, (see Darling-Hammond, 2003), one can only wonder how long the average KIPP teacher stays in teaching. Can not the same logic that Feinberg applies to students getting five academic years of education in only three years be applied to teachers feeling as if they've put in five years of work in only three year's time? Moreover, although KIPP teachers are compensated an extra 15 to 20% in annual salary (keeping in mind that KIPP schools operate 62% longer each year than traditional public schools), how fair is it that they only amass up to 3.6 years worth of salary over five years of working time?

Lost on all the policy discussion of whether more time-on-task is a practical solution to the achievement gap are the voices of the KIPP students who spend almost two-thirds more time in school than traditional students. The tendency for press accounts and research studies to totally whitewash the students' feelings about the protracted time in school is disturbing: Ross et al. (2005) merely dedicate two sentences to students' perspectives in their 43-page report on school climate outcomes:

When asked if it was easy or hard to adjust to the differences between KIPP and their previous school, several students mentioned getting out of school at 5:00 p.m. as a difficult adjustment ... most students appeared to view the extended hours at worst just a standard part of KIPP..." (p. 15).

While it is hard to argue that students should spend less time studying than they typically do (see Steinberg, 1996), asking poor students of color to put in 62% more time in a school like KIPP is simply more vexing upon closer inspection of the social climate that permeates KIPP's walls.

Militaristic Discipline

The parlance of war is nothing new to American education. Most visible to this day is the neoliberal treatment of the manufactured school crisis in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which unabashedly adopts militaristic phrases like “educational disarmament,” “unfriendly foreign power,” and “act of war.” According to Finley (2003), militarism further penetrates the academic structure of schools, as evident by the current (and perennial) push for standardization, tracking, rote and prescriptive learning, tougher academic requirements, additional courses, and longer school days and years. Militaristic discipline has essentially become entrenched in the some mainstream practices of behavior management. Immediately coming to mind is the image of Arnold Schwarzenegger, in *Kindergarten Cop*, who portrays a cop-turned-substitute-teacher who finds out rather quickly that the easiest way to manage a class of twenty unruly 5-year olds is to assume the role of a didactic drill sergeant. Even though they cater mostly to middle-school aged students, KIPP schools espouse a strikingly similar approach.

At a KIPP school I toured, it was not unusual to see students lined up against the walls of the hallway like soldiers while being lambasted by an angry teacher. Students who violate behavioral expectations, as referred to in the Commitment to Excellence contract, are stripped of the right to wear their KIPP shirts. (Other KIPP schools have sanctioned students by forcing them to wear their KIPP shirts inside-out all day long; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003.) Miscreants are routinely sent to a time-out area better known as “the bench” or “the dugout” (Ross et al. 2005). Even though such practices have been thoroughly shunned by prominent developmental psychologists such as William Glasser (1998) and Becky Bailey (2001), KIPP proponents utilize a “whatever works” mentality to the ends of compliance and academic achievement. Interesting and somewhat ironic, however, is the tendency for KIPP supporters to evade the negative connotation that comes with the militaristic characterization of KIPP schools. No one euphemizes KIPP’s harsh tactics better than co-founder Mike Feinberg (2000), who was confronted on this very topic during a radio interview by *The Connection*’s Christopher Lydon. Particularly interesting is Lydon’s use of the term “militaristic” in describing the social climate in KIPP schools, and Feinberg’s knee-jerk reaction to temper the negative connotation of that term:

Lydon: “KIPP sounds more like a military school than the typical public or private school. Their idea is a highly structured curriculum, conduct codes, a long school day—nine and a half hours—and rigorous disciplinary standards: students caught misbehaving have to wear their KIPP T-shirts inside out; girls can’t wear makeup; boys can’t wear hats; KIPPsters rap their multiplication tables and they chant slogans on the playground ...”

Feinberg: “It’s interesting that you use the word ‘military’ because, we don’t, you know, it paints a picture that I don’t think is quite accurate. If you go to KIPP right now, you walk around and see 323 children all with big smiles on their faces ... I would say that the school mirrors what happens in most families’ homes and what happens out there in life. And that is that there are expectations that are put forth to the children: When they do the right thing, good things happen; when they do the wrong thing, there are consequences ... in public education, we could easily create a bubble where everything is fair, where kids artificially are pumped up with self-esteem ... where everything is on an equal level, but that is not what happens as we know out there when it is time to apply to college or time to get a job out there in the real world ... we’re trying to prepare our kids to be able to be contributing members in our society.”

In one of the few qualitative studies conducted thus far, Ross et al. (2005) found that students rated the harsh disciplinary features as the worst thing about KIPP. Moreover, by consenting to the notion that the school should mirror the existing power relations of the larger society, Feinberg candidly condones the existing social inequalities and the maintenance of the status quo.

Although shrouded by claims that all KIPPsters will attend post-secondary education, it seems as though preparation for subordinate jobs may be the real mission behind KIPP. Saltman (2003) distinguishes between the two forms of militarized schooling in the U.S.: the more explicit *military education* and the more institutional *education as enforcement*. According to Saltman, education as enforcement is the result of corporate globalization, which is driven by the neoliberal pursuit of market values through practices such as scripting, standardizing, accountability, and testing (all of which are only enforceable through compliance). KIPP officials openly embrace these values, and like most schools in general, are clearly dedicated to a brand of efficiency that reduces basic human processes like learning and decision-making to tightly controlled and highly regulated activities. Any pretense of freedom is effectively

surrendered for the sake of docility and social control. But, again, Feinberg is impeccable when it comes to rationalizing and sugar-coating KIPP's harsh disciplinary approach: As he once stated in an interview, "I suppose some people think that KIPP is like the Army; that's their perspective. But I think as you spend some time here at our schools, you sense a whole lot of joy beyond the structure and discipline."

As easy as it may be to pan KIPP as overly harsh and controlling, pressure from parents and even teacher education programs only reinforce militaristic inclinations. As Brosio (1994) has argued, solely ascribing blame to schools themselves is distorting reality by vindicating others who are guilty by association. Parents clearly value a school's ability to maintain discipline, especially in the wake of several horrible acts of school violence like the one that occurred at Columbine High School in 1999. Even teacher education programs feed the social control machine by requiring courses that deal exclusively with the realm of behavior management. Because of the widespread support for more discipline and control in schools, particularly with middle- and high-school-aged students, some may continue to wonder, in spite of the arguments I have presented thus far: What is the problem with an approach that seems to make students do better in school? Simply put, the principles that undergird a militaristic paradigm and that of democracy just do not mix.

Although KIPP schools may masquerade as democratic institutions or schools of "choice," by reinforcing student obedience and conformity, its rigid disciplinary practices are clearly a means of preparing students for "participation in social, bureaucratic, and industrial organizations" (Cuban, 1993, p. 250). And because KIPP serves a predominantly low-income minority population, claims of racism and classism are not far-fetched. To help bolster this point, Brown (2003) argues that while a culture of privilege and freedom pervades the schools of the wealthy in the U.S., a culture of discipline and militarism suffuses the schools of color and the poor. Put differently, what would middle-class white suburbanites think about their children being placed on the bench during field trips, or having to wear their shirts inside out all day long for not completing homework assignments? This is not to treat the disparate cultures of suburban and urban families monolithically, but simply to underscore the implicit inequity of describing coercion and humiliation as "what works" for one group but as

outlandishly inappropriate for another. What works may be just another form of institutional racism and systematic stratification: “The ascendant culture of militarism in poor schools of color hearkens back to the legal and extralegal forms of coercion used by the early advocates and opponents of public education, imbued with the warning, ‘Stay in your place’” (Brown, 2003, p. 138).

A key aspect of indoctrinating and controlling students is also teaching them how to be good consumers, and KIPP officials make no attempt to hide the fact that they intend to run schools like mini-consumerist societies:

There are weekly paychecks in KIPP dollars that reflect such qualities as attendance, promptness, organization, and neatness, hard work, behavior outside of class, and the respect given to other “teammates.” Checks ... can be used to purchase school supplies and other items in the KIPP store. Those whose paychecks maintain a certain average are eligible for trips to places like Utah, California, and Washington, D.C. (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 72).

As Molnar (2005) argues, this conveys to children unequivocally that the good life is only possible through consumption, and that by working hard to purchase more is a sure-fire route to goodness and happiness. The implicit danger of this ideology is intensified when extended to low-income groups, simply because they have less of what it takes to consume (money and power). Sadly, in such cases, as Joel Spring (2003) argues, equality of opportunity to succeed and be happy has been supplanted with equality of opportunity to consume.

The widespread dominance of militarism and capitalism pervades far beyond the school walls and doesn't appear to be losing its grip on the organizational culture of schools, in general. In today's highly politicized environment, if approaches to education lack “scientifically-proven” success, or simply challenge the traditional hierarchical power structures, they might as well be relegated to the file drawer—along with hopes for restructuring the status quo. As Beaton (1999) argues, “you would think with practice, the adults in schools would improve and get creative in dealing with discipline. Instead, we seem to rely on coercion and compliance, resorting to clamping down, increasing our control, and pulling in the reins” (¶6).

No Excuses (not even Institutional Racism or Classism)

At first glance, KIPP's vehement defense of a zero-tolerance, no-excuses approach to academic success may seem unassailable on moral grounds. After all, like the majority of schools in the U.S., KIPP embraces meritocratic ideals and thus aims to inculcate students with abilities, values and beliefs that will potentially position them for success in a market-based capitalist social and economic system. KIPP teachers and administrators are certainly not unique in the fact that they expect all students to maximize their educational production in spite of any impeding external factors, such as the general lack of support from parents at home, or students' own lack of motivation to engage in studious behaviors. American public schools claim to give all students equal opportunity to be educated and to demonstrate mastery of educational goals — should some fail to do so, it is construed merely as a function of lack of will, either on the part of students alone or students and parents together. In a market-based social and economic system like the U.S., students who work the hardest, achieve the highest, and overcome any barriers that threaten their individual educational production accumulate more human capital than those who do not. The choice to work hard is supposedly what determines success, according to the ideology of meritocracy in an equal opportunity educational system. Whereas the typical American public school might embed this belief in a mission statement, KIPP underscores it by featuring it in its enrollment policy.

A critical inspection of the KIPP's modus operandi, however, reveals its deleterious underlying assumptions. Essentially, each of KIPP's Pillars to success conveys the message to urban students that failure in this society will solely be a reflection of not working long and hard enough, or mere complicity with rules set and enforced by authority figures. Moreover, contradictory notions of "choice" proffered by charter schools like KIPP convey to students that choice is virtuous only in the market-driven sense, so long as it complies with the rules of authority. Regarding school uniforms, Saltman (2000) elaborates on this:

The widespread use of uniforms in public schools to protect children from competition and choice is happening simultaneously with increasing calls for school choice. This means that even as consumerism and competition are seen as saving schools (choice), they are also understood as dangerous for students (students competing over clothing). This contradiction belies the fact that the uniforms function symbolically to suggest that the problems of public schooling derive from a lack of student discipline instead of from unequal distribution of resources in schools and communities ... [and] that the problems themselves derive not from market-driven injustices but from individual lack and cultures of pathology and deviancy (p. 96).

Essentially, Saltman agrees that when the true sources of social problems—the unequal distribution of resources in schools and society—are couched in the principles of individualism and free will, they appear as problems that can be solved by capitalistic and neoliberal values such as motivation, morality, competition, accountability, work ethic, and individual resilience. By signaling to those who are systematically oppressed that to escape from poverty depends solely on their willingness to embrace pro-capitalist, pro-consumer values, the true sources of social stratification remain unaddressed and are simply whitewashed as the direct result of shunning pro-capitalist values. By circumventing the causes of social inequalities and enforcing militaristic and capitalistic values upon marginalized students, KIPP schools do little to challenge subtle but nevertheless substantial forms of institutional racism and classism.

Conclusion

In spite of its ostensibly noble goals of closing the racial achievement gap and sending all of its students to college, the KIPP movement is inherently undemocratic because of its unabashed endorsement of capitalistic and militaristic values. While freedom and choice are important ideals associated with the American liberal tradition, the degree to which both are distributed among the citizens of this country is visibly inequitable. Choice for KIPP students is inextricably linked to their ability and willingness to comply with the Five Pillars, the Commitment to Excellence—both of which embody pro-capitalist ideals. Put differently, those who can't handle the “choice” to leave their zoned public middle school are driven out of KIPP because either they can't

uphold the contract, or because they simply decide that 62% more school time, two to three hours of busywork nightly, and the militaristic social climate is just not for them. As hopes continue to resonate that KIPP will eventually be taken to scale (since 1999, more than 50 KIPP schools have opened throughout the U.S.), the encouraging fact is that KIPP remains only a boutique movement among the mainstream.

Ironically enough, the potential demise of KIPP might be a direct result of its pervasive capitalistic and militaristic influences: Since its inception more than 10 years ago, 62% of KIPP's total funding has come from private sources (Duxbury, 2006). Perhaps as KIPP attempts to replicate its vision nationwide, its growing visibility will be accompanied by a more thoughtful and balanced critique of its mission and means of achieving that mission. In a society that is strongly built upon capitalistic and militaristic ideals, however, it is not likely that KIPP and other market-based alternatives to conventional public education will dissipate anytime soon unless the discourse about neoliberal policies that endorse such ideals are put up for public debate. Scholars and laypeople alike must seek to move these debates beyond the walls of the ivory tower, professional research conferences, and academic journals, and into mainstream media. Those who support a democratic approach to schooling must seek out ways to amplify their voices, not through obscure outlets like conference presentations, but popular arenas like local school board meetings, local news and media sources, and so forth.

We would also do well to educate our potential American teacher candidates about the harms of neoliberal educational policies and foster democratic practices and critique in our teacher education programs. This does not require indoctrination into leftist ideology, as many conservative critics might claim (see Gollnick, 2008), but rather a democratic approach to teaching that will ultimately make teacher candidates responsible for reflecting deeply on the social and moral implications of what and how they teach, thus helping them to recognize the potential shortcomings of sensationalized school reforms like KIPP.

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Brian Lack

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Appendix

Sample Commitment to Excellence Contract

TEACHERS' COMMITMENT

We fully commit to KIPP in the following ways:

- : We will arrive at KIPP every day by 7:15 A.M. (Monday-Friday).
 - : We will remain at KIPP until 5:00 P.M. (Monday -Thursday) and 4:00 P.M. on Friday.
 - : We will come to KIPP on appropriate Saturdays at 9:15 A.M. and remain until 1:05 P.M.
 - : We will teach at KIPP during the summer.
 - : We will always teach in the best way we know how and we will do whatever it takes for our students to learn.
 - : We will always make ourselves available to students and parents, and address any concerns they might have.
 - : We will always protect the safety, interests, and rights of all individuals in the classroom.
- Failure to adhere to these commitments can lead to our removal from KIPP.

X _____

Please print name(s) here.

PARENTS'/GUARDIANS' COMMITMENT

We fully commit to KIPP in the following ways:

- : We will make sure our child arrives at KIPP every day by 7:25 A.M. (Monday-Friday) or boards a KIPP bus at the scheduled time.
- : We will make arrangements so our child can remain at KIPP until 5:00 P.M. (Monday - Thursday) and 4:00 P.M. on Friday.
- : We will make arrangements for our child to come to KIPP on appropriate Saturdays at 9:15 A.M. and remain until 1:05 P.M.
- : We will ensure that our child attends KIPP summer school.
- : We will always help our child in the best way we know how and we will do whatever it takes for him/her to learn. This also means that we will check our child's homework every night, let him/her call the teacher if there is a problem with the homework, and try to read with him/her every night.
- : We will always make ourselves available to our children and the school, and address any concerns they might have. This also means that if our child is going to miss school, we will notify the teacher as soon as possible, and we will carefully read any and all papers that the school sends home to us.
- : We will allow our child to go on KIPP field trips.
- : We will make sure our child follows the KIPP dress code.
- : We understand that our child must follow the KIPP rules so as to protect the safety, interests, and rights of all individuals in the classroom. We, not the school, are responsible for the behavior and actions of our child.

Failure to adhere to these commitments can cause my child to lose various KIPP privileges and can lead to my child returning to his/her home school.

X _____

Please print name(s) here.

STUDENT'S COMMITMENT

I fully commit to KIPP in the following ways:

: I will arrive at KIPP every day by 7:25 A.M. (Monday-Friday) or board a KIPP bus at the correct time.

: I will remain at KIPP until 5:00 P.M. (Monday - Thursday) and 4:00 P.M. on Friday.

: I will come to KIPP on appropriate Saturdays at 9:15 A.M. and remain until 1:05 P.M.

: I will attend KIPP during summer school.

: I will always work, think, and behave in the best way I know how, and I will do whatever it takes for me and my fellow students to learn.

This also means that I will complete all my homework every night, I will call my teachers if I have a problem with the homework or a problem with coming to school, and I will raise my hand and ask questions in class if I do not understand something.

: I will always make myself available to parents and teachers, and address any concerns they might have.

If I make a mistake, this means

I will tell the truth to my teachers and accept responsibility for my actions.

: I will always behave so as to protect the safety, interests, and rights of all individuals in the classroom.

This also means that I will

always listen to all my KIPP teammates and give everyone my respect.

: I will follow the KIPP dress code.

: I am responsible for my own behavior, and I will follow the teachers' directions.

Failure to adhere to these commitments can cause me to lose various KIPP privileges and can lead to returning to my home school.

X _____

Please print name here.

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