



What Do We Know About the Outcomes of KIPP Schools?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Although many consider KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) to be a prototype charter school operator that merits expansion and replication, few systematic and independent assessments of it are available. A large-scale study incorporating a randomized design has begun, but until that study is complete policymakers need to learn what they can from existing evidence. This brief reviews seven studies that attempt to answer questions concerning whether and to what degree KIPP schools raise student achievement. In weighing the evidence, it is necessary to consider issues raised by two different types of validity. The first is *internal validity*: Are the inferences about cause and effect in a given study well grounded? The second is *external validity*: Which lessons from studies of particular schools might apply more generally across schools in other locations and further in the future, providing useful guideposts for policy?

Conclusions

- The weight of the evidence suggests that students who enter and stay in KIPP schools tend to perform better than similar students in more traditional public schools.
- This does not appear to be attributable to a selective admissions process. KIPP serves minority and high-need students, many of whom performed poorly before they entered the schools. Some unobservable biases may be present in student motivation and support, but except for a tendency to attract more girls than boys, there is as yet no strong observable evidence of a systematic selection bias.
- Where it has been monitored, student attrition is high and seemingly selective. Those who leave KIPP tend to have been performing less well than those who stay, and at least one study suggests that those who leave were lower-performing when they entered. Such attrition, if it were taken into consideration, would reduce the size of gains in reports that simply compare KIPP eighth graders with those in their host districts. However, the evidence does not go so far as to suggest that attrition fully accounts for the observed KIPP advantage.
- Most of the studies are limited to early KIPP schools and students in their first or second year. Studies that follow cohorts over time seem to show that gains persist, but there is no evidence that early gains grow into progressively higher gains in later years.
- Few studies look deeply inside the KIPP process; those that do show that teacher enthusiasm is high but that demands on teachers and leaders are great,

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- resulting in high turnover and an unrelieved pressure to find and train new people. The implications for the expansion and sustainability of the KIPP model are still not clear.

Recommendations

- Policy makers at all levels of government should pay attention to KIPP and consider it a possible source of information and guidance for their decisions.
- Although KIPP may yield useful information, policymakers and others should temper their interest in the operation with wariness and realistic expectations. There are significant unanswered questions about how expansion might affect outcomes, especially in relation to the difficulty of sustaining gains dependent upon KIPP's heavy demands on teachers and school leaders. Moreover, it is not realistic to think that the KIPP model is a panacea for distressed systems. It is possible that only a small proportion of students and families will be able to meet the demands KIPP imposes on them; even those enthused when they begin the KIPP regimen tend to leave in high numbers.
- Policymakers, accordingly, should treat KIPP schools as potential tools that may contribute to—but not substitute for—systemic improvement.
- Policymakers should be aware that KIPP has prompted some district interest in longer school days, weeks, and years. However, an extended schedule sometimes brings parental objections as well as potential taxpayer objections to the additional expense. With no strong evidence yet linking extended scheduling to KIPP success, policymakers might best encourage it as a school-level (rather than district-wide) option while concurrently promoting a combination of experimentation and careful analysis of consequences.
- Researchers should help provide better data on patterns of movement in and between charter schools and traditional public schools, including information on why students leave and how their mobility affects student and school-level performance.