

Climbing the Mountain, to and through College

An Interview with Richard Barth,
Chief Executive Officer, KIPP Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Richard Barth assumed his current post in December of 2005. Barth came to KIPP from Edison Schools, where he served as President of District Partnerships. Earlier, he was one of the founding staff members of Teach For America. He earned a B.A. in American History from Harvard University and is an Aspen Institute-New Schools Fellow. He currently sits on the board of directors of The Broad Center for the Management of School Systems, General Assembly, and ROADS Network Charter Schools. Barth was named a 2014 Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneur of the Year and Harvard University's Chief Marshal for 2014 Commencement ceremonies.



Richard Barth

COMPANY BRIEF KIPP—the Knowledge Is Power Program (kipp.org)—is a national network of open enrollment, college preparatory public charter schools with a track record of preparing students in underserved communities for success in college and in life. KIPP was founded in Houston in 1994 and has grown to 162 schools serving more than 59,000 students in 20 states and Washington, D.C. More than 95 percent of students enrolled in KIPP schools are students of color, and more than 88 percent are from low-income families. KIPP's college completion rate is above the national average for all students and four times the rate for students from low-income families.

Would you talk about the history of KIPP and how it has evolved?

The original idea has remained fundamentally unchanged from its origins in 1994. Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin—two fifth-grade public school teachers in Houston with Teach For America—knew that kids could do so much more than they were doing, but they also knew that they were going to have to do things differently. They stepped back to rewrite the way fifth grade works to make sure their students, the majority of whom were living in poverty, were given more time to master the work. They wanted to make sure that character was emphasized as much as academics and that they were operating with super-high expectations with a focus on results.

Since the beginning, starting with just 47 fifth graders, we have constantly searched for

what it takes to continually help KIPP students (we call them “KIPPsters”) climb the mountain to and through college. This 20-year story has been characterized by constantly asking ourselves what we have learned from what we have done, and what we need to do differently next year to make sure our students are successful in college.

We had gone from a fifth-grade program in Houston to a middle school program in the Bronx and Houston. We saw our eighth graders going off to high school, many of whom no longer

focused on college. After four years of KIPP, we realized that a middle school focus wouldn't be enough. So we expanded from just fifth grade to middle school, then to Pre-K through 12th grade.

Today, we have educated nearly 60,000 KIPPsters in 20 states. On top of that, we have another 12,000 alumni in college.

Our mission is unchanged: to help students succeed in college and life. Our evolution is simply to do what we can to get them there.

How have you been able to find a niche that works and why hasn't there been more of an impact on education?

What is different today compared to 20 years ago is that, at that time, there were few examples of kids growing up in low-income communities that were thriving in public school.

We now have hundreds of schools across the country where kids, growing up in some of the most challenging circumstances, are being put on a more level playing field. We're unleashing the talent that we always knew was there.

More corporate leaders, executives, and entrepreneurs are seeing that entirely different outcomes are achievable and are investing in KIPP.

In 2000, Doris and Donald Fisher provided philanthropic seed money to replicate our model through training educators to start new KIPP schools.

Eli Broad has been a tremendous investor, helping us grow charter schools that work in Los Angeles and across the country. Les and Abigail Wexner helped get KIPP off the ground in Columbus, Ohio, showing people what is possible in public education. Reed Hastings is on our board, and is constantly challenging my thinking about how to approach growth and scale.

Is it ultimately the private sector that could change public education in America?

Students living in poverty in America are largely educated in public schools, which are funded by public dollars. But the private sector can be a catalyst for change allowing KIPP to scale in a way that permits for broad public-sector adoption.

The private sector has also used its influence to attract the attention of civic leaders. KIPP would not be where it is today were it not for private sector support.

With your rapid growth, is it challenging to maintain standards?

We get better as we get bigger. We've doubled the number of students served in the past five years and our student achievement results are better than when we started.

We're growing as fast as we can, but no faster than our commitment to performance will allow.

Would you talk about the partnerships you have built around higher education?

Three years ago, we started finding institutions that wanted to support the mission of helping first-generation kids climb the mountain to and through college. We now have 65 university partners around the country, ranging in size and selectivity, whose leaders have committed to the success of our kids. We have 29 students at the University of Pennsylvania and 29 at Franklin & Marshall. We also have 81 students at San Jose State and 75 at University of Houston.

Do you need to be engaged in the kids' lives outside of school to facilitate the process?

To realize the goals we have set, the engagement with families has to be greater and we have to keep innovating.

At the core, the definition of what a school does or does not do in our case is going to be driven by our aspirations. We're always going to be pushing the bounds of what school is.

In Houston, we're partnering with local health clinics and nonprofits to create a mixed-use community center inspired by Warren Buffet's Purpose Built Communities. The well-being of our students and their families impacts whether or not they can climb all the way to and through college, so we work to address the challenges they face.

Poverty impacts kids and families, and it increases the degree of difficulty, but it's not a reason for us to stop innovating. ●