Once you’ve figured out how to create a school that can dramatically change the life prospects of poor kids, what better than to build more of them?

With 57 schools serving more than 14,000 students and plans to open dozens more, KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) is the darling of the school reform world. Ten years ago, KIPP was a pair of high-performing schools in poor neighborhoods in Houston and the South Bronx. But KIPP founders Michael Feinberg and David Levin wanted more, and with the financial backing of Don and Doris Fisher (founders of the Gap), they began replicating their schools across the country.

In this issue, we asked Julie Bennett, a business writer specializing in the study of franchises, to take a look at the rapid expansion of KIPP and other brand-name schools (“Brand-Name Charters,” features, page 28). Thinking of schools as franchises will no doubt raise a few hackles. As Diane Ravitch has written, “Schools are not like businesses or hamburger franchises. They are vital parts of their communities.” And compared with fast-food restaurants, the work done in schools requires a great deal more education, experience, skill, and smarts. But it’s hard to object to the basic idea behind the expansion of KIPP: once you’ve figured out how to create a school that can dramatically change the life prospects of poor kids, what better than to build more of them? And there’s some evidence that franchise-like connections between schools are beneficial in other countries.

In Chile, where a market-based approach to education has been in place for decades (and nearly all students attend private or public schools funded by vouchers), schools that are part of a network (which can resemble a franchise) are more effective than stand-alone schools (see “Scaling Up in Chile,” research, page 62). The authors suggest some reasons schools that are part of a network may outperform other schools: they can take advantage of economies of scale, and links between schools can facilitate the flow of information (to share best practices, for instance).

In “Brand-Name Charters,” Bennett contrasts two approaches to expanding the supply of effective schools (or hamburger joints or coffee shops). Most school management organizations in the United States (nonprofit and for-profit) embrace a corporate growth model, following the same detailed recipe again and again to develop additional sites. They identify what works and then assemble the components (for example, phonics-based reading, a content-rich curriculum, a longer school day) in highly recognizable schools with close ties to the central office. KIPP has more closely followed a franchise approach, hiring chefs with potential, training them well, and arming them with a thick cookbook of instructions. They identify great school leaders through a highly competitive screening process and teach them how effective schools work before sending them off to start their own schools (with relatively little meddling from the central office).

But while KIPP schools resemble franchises in some ways, the organization has gone beyond the franchise model in allowing school principals freedom to innovate. Perhaps in recognition of the fact that schools are not hamburger joints, KIPP principals are taught what has worked in other KIPP schools (and much more), but are encouraged to use whatever works in their own school. Only when it comes to replicating the culture of KIPP—that is, organizing new schools around KIPP’s founding principles of high achievement and no excuses—are school leaders expected to toe the KIPP line. While this loose franchise approach allows outstanding principals to exercise the kind of autonomy that is believed to be a key to effective schools, some fear that KIPP will eventually run out of school leaders equal to the task.

Bennett argues that replicating quality schools quickly is crucial to the success of the charter movement, and if done right these brand-name schools will be an important tool in the quest to reduce the achievement gap. Indeed, one advantage of the franchise approach is that it allows schools to scale up quickly. Growth is inevitably slower in a centrally managed organization because central office staff can only open so many new schools at a time. While there is always a tension between growing rapidly and maintaining quality, KIPP shows that good schools can be replicated, perhaps more rapidly than anyone expected. But it is too soon to know if such success is the exception or the rule.

— Marci Kanstoroom