Next year, 75 Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools will serve some 17,000 students in 19 states and the District of Columbia.
In 1994, fresh from a two-year stint with Teach For America, Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin inaugurated the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) in Houston with an enrollment of 49 5th graders. By this Fall, 75 KIPP schools will be up and running, setting children from poor and minority families on a path to college through a combination of hard work, long hours, innovative teaching, and a “no excuses” school culture.

Jay Mathews, education columnist at the Washington Post, has written for more than two decades about schools where children from low-income families succeed academically. His articles about mathematics teacher Jaime Escalante, whose disadvantaged East L.A. students regularly aced the AP calculus exam, inspired the film Stand and Deliver. Mathews also developed the Challenge Index for rating high schools according to their success in encouraging students to take college-level Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

Mathews’ latest book, Work Hard. Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America was published by Algonquin Books in January 2009 and chronicles how two young teachers created the most talked-about school reform in the U.S. today. The excerpts below tell the story of how the KIPP network began and reveal why the KIPP model works so well.
The Seeds of KIPP

In January 1992, as Levin and Feinberg were writing up their applications for Teach For America, a tall, dark-haired former U.S. Education Department policy aide named Scott Hamilton was showing up for his first day at a new job. He had been hired by the Washington office of the Edison project, an effort to improve inner-city schools and make a profit. The only person Hamilton found there was a talkative red-haired 23-year-old researcher named Stacey Boyd, in whom he took an immediate interest.

In the annals of the charter school movement, the meeting of Hamilton and Boyd would take on considerable significance, particularly in the history of KIPP. By the time they married in 1997, as Feinberg and Levin were completing the second year of their new schools, Hamilton was the chief charter school official for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Boyd was establishing what would be a successful Boston charter school as she completed her MBA at Harvard. By 1999, the couple was in San Francisco, where Boyd had started a new company, Project Achieve, developing a way to assess the progress of every child in a classroom. She was also working with schools in Chicago and had hired Colleen Dippel to help there. Hamilton was working in San Francisco for two of the richest people in the country, Don and Doris Fisher, founders of the GAP clothing stores. They wanted him to find education projects where money from their new Fisher Foundation could make a difference.

Boyd, Hamilton, and the Fishers were too busy to watch much television. None of them had seen the “60 Minutes” report on KIPP in September 1999. But several city mayors and state governors had, and were enthralled. Some called Feinberg and Levin, asking if they could open another 15 or 20 KIPP schools right away. Such calls were naive, but they intrigued Feinberg. He urged Levin to join him in the effort to take KIPP national. Levin agreed that something had to be done. He liked the idea of teaching successful inner-city teachers how they might start their own schools. Feinberg looked for people who, unlike them, knew something about building large organizations. One of his first calls was to Boyd. She was an entrepreneur. She was very familiar with how his school worked and what it could do. She was thrilled with the idea and called Hamilton right away.

Hamilton promised to check it out. In the back of his mind, though, was the memory of the Fishers’ cautionary note when they hired him. They said they did not want to start anything new. They were too old to launch another GAP. They wanted Hamilton to find worthwhile projects to support and help grow, but no start-ups. Hamilton visited KIPP Houston, observed Feinberg at full speed, and saw what Boyd was talking about. He visited KIPP New York and got a dose of Levin’s wily charm. Hamilton hadn’t discussed KIPP in any detail with the Fishers. At the end of
1999, Hamilton popped a tape of the “60 Minutes” report into the VCR in Don Fisher’s office. When the segment ended, Fisher’s comment was, “What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

“I don’t know yet, but something,” Hamilton said. “This is worth something.”

Dining at their favorite San Francisco restaurant, Plump Jack, Hamilton asked Boyd what she thought of an idea forming in his mind—business training for charter school founders, focused on what made KIPP work. Boyd liked it. Hamilton got moving, still not telling the Fishers what he was up to. They did not want to do anything new. What he was thinking was very new, and very big. He invited Feinberg and Levin to meet him in Chicago in late January 2000 to conceive a KIPP master plan. Each of them could bring one other person. Hamilton asked Boyd to come. Levin selected his sister Jessica. Feinberg brought one of his most innovative reading teachers, Elliott Witney, who would eventually become principal of the original KIPP school in Houston.

The conversation in a suite on the 37th floor of the Fairmont Hotel lasted eight hours. Hamilton began with a PowerPoint presentation. He predicted that by the third or fourth year they could be training 150 school leaders. What would the KIPP schools have in common? Hamilton brought in a large easel, flipping over each page as it filled with ideas. The big points seemed obvious: high expectations for all students, a longer school day, a principal totally in charge, an emphasis on finding the best teachers, rewards for student success, close contact with parents, a focus on results, a commitment to prepare every child for a great high school, and, most importantly, college. They decided to call the main principles the Six Pillars, later whittled down to five. Some people said it sounded too Islamic, too T. E. Lawrence. But the Five Pillars stuck.

Boyd thought the meeting was going too well. New organizations were breeding grounds for dissent. They had to talk about that. By afternoon she was at the easel, picking at scabs in the Levin-Feinberg relationship, looking for unresolved issues in what had been their surprising and exciting but largely unexamined success.

She saw the three big men at the table. (At 6-foot-4, her husband was taller than even the KIPP founders. Witney, aware he was the least prominent person present, was 5-foot-4.) They had plenty of youth and energy and big ideas, but how were they going to make decisions together? If two of them thought an applicant for the leadership program should be accepted, and the other disagreed, how would they resolve that? If one of them thought that corporate human relations training should have two full days in the leadership course, and the others thought it only needed a couple of hours, how would they work that out?

They nodded patiently and said they could handle that. The idea was to give each school leader the same freedom to innovate that Levin and Feinberg had enjoyed, just so they showed good results. They had the confidence of youth. Three of the six people in the room, Levin, Feinberg, and Witney, had not yet reached their 30th birthdays. The oldest person was Jessica Levin, about to turn 35.

Hamilton still had to persuade two members of a very different generation, Don Fisher, 71, and Doris Fisher, 68, to give a large chunk of their money to these kids. He took the Fishers to see Levin’s school, starting the tour in the P.S. 31 portion of the building so they could contrast the noise and disorder with the quiet intensity of KIPP’s fourth-floor sanctum. (Doris Fisher was pleased to discover that one of Levin’s grandmothers was the daughter of her father’s law partner.)

Hamilton spent several weeks writing and rewriting a business plan. It was going to cost at least $15 million. He did not think the Fishers were going to react very well. It was a start-up, and it wasn’t going to be a certain success. He confessed to Boyd a sense of doom, and a pugnacious willingness, if the Fishers said no, to quit and find some other backer for the KIPP expansion. He sent one copy of the business plan to each of the Fishers. Despite his apprehensions, the Fishers loved the idea.

Don said he had never thought of running schools in the same way he ran a company. But as he considered the KIPP plan, it dawned on him that schools were a business, and charter schools in particular were a business. They needed principals who were trained in management fundamentals and could make their own decisions. He might have sounded gruff after he saw the “60 Minutes” video, but he had actually been moved by it. He wanted to get going right away. He welcomed Feinberg and Levin to a meeting at his office overlooking San Francisco Bay.

“So Mike and Dave, you’re really thinking you can pull this off, huh?”

“Well, Mr. Fisher, I don’t know,” Levin said, “but we’d be more than happy to use your money to find out.”

It was eventually decided that Feinberg, with Dippel, would move to San Francisco to be the chief executive officer of the new KIPP Foundation. No one was surprised. Feinberg told friends, including Levin, that Levin would be content to raise enough money to fully endow his school, sign an agreement that would guarantee KIPP New York enough space for the next 100 years, keep teaching fifth-grade math, and be as happy as a pig in a barnyard. For a while they amused themselves by pretending the decision was up in the air. If they were in a bar with a dartboard, Levin would declare that the first to hit the bulls-eye would go to San Francisco.

Feinberg moved west and discovered that Don Fisher was even more impatient than he and Hamilton were. Laura
D’Andrea Tyson, the former chief economic advisor to President Clinton and the dean of the Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley, quickly said yes when Fisher, chair of her school’s board, asked if she could provide space and faculty experts for the business training part of what they were going to call the Fisher Fellowship leadership course. Feinberg, Hamilton, and Levin were pleased that Tyson, unlike other business school deans they contacted, did not suggest they involve education school faculty in the project. All three of them distrusted education schools. Feinberg and Levin planned to do most of their recruiting among Teach For America veterans like themselves. They thought such people would have the most drive and imagination, and the most experience improvising in difficult circumstances.

But it seemed to Hamilton they were rushing it. The original plan was to start that summer. The principals in training would take classes at Haas for two months, while they completed the paperwork that would launch their schools. In the fall they would work at one or both of the KIPP schools. By the new year, they would be in the cities they had chosen for their schools, recruiting teachers and students and finding a space for 70 to 80 fifth graders in the summer of 2001. Like Levin and Feinberg, they would add a new grade every year until they had fifth-through-eighth-grade middle schools of about 300 students.

It was already May. Hamilton felt they did not have enough time. They had selected four Fisher fellows. One dropped out, and the other three looked good, although headstrong. Susan Schaeffler, who would start the KEY Academy in D.C., and North Carolina teacher Caleb Dolan had rejected Feinberg and Levin’s request that they start schools in Atlanta, where Governor Roy Barnes was drooling over the KIPP results. The third fellow, a teacher at KIPP Houston named Dan Caesar, was happy to start a second school in Houston, as he was asked to do.

Hamilton went to see Don Fisher. “We’ve got to pull the plug,” he said. “We’ve got to take a breath and then do all this next year so we have time to plan it and do it well. I think we are just throwing stuff together here too fast.”

Fisher smiled. Feinberg, Hamilton, and Levin had no business training. He figured they would make mistakes. He explained to Hamilton, based on a half century of experience, that it was much better to get started and address problems as they came up, rather than sit at a desk and try to plan for everything that could go wrong. “Let’s keep throwing stuff together,” he said. “You are going to learn more by just getting started than you are going to learn over the next year studying this. Even if it is imperfect, I promise you it will be better this way.”

It’s the Teaching
By October 2005, a crisis had developed at one of Levin’s new schools, the KIPP STAR College Prep Charter School in Harlem. The sixth-grade math class was not going well. The new teacher was not performing up to the school’s standard. At almost any other public school, the problem would have been considered minor, and the solution long term. But Levin and KIPP STAR leader Maggie Runyan-Shefa were considering getting rid of the teacher right away, only three months into the school year.

The soft-spoken young man had come well recommended. He appeared to know his subject. He loved children. But he was a poor classroom manager and motivator. The aisles of his classroom were cluttered. His students were inattentive. A look at their work showed they were falling behind where KIPP wanted them to be.

In most urban schools such failings would have been difficult to detect because the standards were so low, a result of the widespread feeling that not much could be expected from such disadvantaged children. If a teacher’s flaws were enough to catch the attention of a principal, she would talk to him and ask that he observe some of the school’s veteran instructors. She would encourage him to borrow their techniques. She would never consider firing him in the middle of the term. Anyone she might be able to replace him with would almost certainly be worse.

In the normal course of events, the teacher’s disappointing performance might earn him a bad mark on his end-of-year evaluation, and a request that he take more courses and try harder. At the end of his probationary period, if he made no significant improvement, he might be let go. But by that point he would have been in the classroom for three years. The several dozen students he taught during that time would have had to settle for less than adequate instruction. Their chances of success in math in seventh grade, and beyond, would have been sacrificed to administrative inertia and no ready alternatives to bad hiring decisions.

KIPP schools were different. The longer school day made class schedules more flexible. The intense recruiting of the best available educators meant the administrators, including principals like Levin, Feinberg, and Runyan-Shefa, often had exceptional classroom skills and could take over a class if needed. If the sixth-grade teacher at KIPP STAR did not improve, Levin and Runyan-Shefa planned to turn the class over to the school’s vice principal, who had a master’s degree from Columbia University Teachers College. Runyan-Shefa, as well as Levin’s trouble-shooter Jerry Myers, had been working with the math teacher. Levin had stepped in one day, toward the end of the teacher’s lesson, to show him some techniques. He showed up the next morning to teach a complete class.
In the little world of KIPP math instructors, Levin was a legendary figure, the best math teacher many of them had ever seen. Runyan-Shefa hoped his reputation would help the young teacher see how much better he could be. Levin had observed the sixth-grade class. He had talked to the teacher and to Runyan-Shefa. He knew that one of the teacher’s stumbling blocks was one disruptive student. Levin had this in mind when he walked up the stairs of the five-story brick school on a residential Harlem street, and approached room 433, where the young teacher taught three classes of sixth-grade math every day.

The teacher had his 28 students lined up in the hallway, as he had been asked to do. Levin went to the front of the line and stood outside the closed classroom door. “Everyone face me, please,” he said. “Let’s go. I’m missing one person’s eyes.” He waited a moment. “Thank you. I wanted the joy of getting back with you today to finish up what we started yesterday. We need one minute in the room to finish setting up.”

Levin reached out to the 11-year-old chief miscreant, who had been asked to stand near the front of the line. He escorted the child, just him, inside the classroom. He shut the door, leaving the other members of the class, and their teacher, out in the hall while he had a private chat with the boy. He shook the sixth grader’s hand. “Hi. I’m Mr. Levin. You remember me from yesterday. You don’t know me very well, but I think you will find it a bad idea not to listen today. You will enjoy being my friend. Any other options are off the table.”

He asked the student about himself. He had the boy help him rearrange the desks and chairs, making the aisles wider and the rows straighter. He opened the classroom door and welcomed everyone in to start on their introductory problems. “Thank you. Go to your desks. We will do the first five problems. Don’t worry about putting stuff into your binders. We will all put it into our binders at the end. Directions are on the board. They are also on the sheet, to be done by yourselves. Any questions? Okay. I am missing one person’s eyes.”

He waited. It was time for the formal opening of the class. “Hi, Kippsters!” Levin said with a smile. Just two voices said, somewhat uncertainly: “Hi, Mr. Levin.”

“How many remember when I spoke to you last? How many of you actually remember what my name is? Veronica?”

“Mr. Levins?”

“Mr. Levin. There is no ‘s’. It is like the number eleven without the e in the front.”

He tried again: “Hi, KIPP STAR!”

“Hi, Mr. Levin,” came a somewhat louder response. He asked them to try again.

“I would like everybody’s attention, and do me a favor. When you bump into someone on the street, you don’t whine their name, do you? You don’t say (he adopted a very

“Hi. I’m Mr. Levin. You remember me from yesterday. You don’t know me very well, but I think you will find it a bad idea not to listen today. You will enjoy being my friend. Any other options are off the table.”
“Did you all know that smiling keeps your brain awake? You didn’t know that? When you sit up, you smile. Your brain gets oxygen and when your brain gets oxygen you are smarter and it makes you better looking, and some of you really need to smile a lot more. All RIGHT!”
passion. His students seemed to enjoy the vibe. “Raise your hands if you want a mild problem to start? How many want medium? Spicy?”

He started with medium. He called on several different children. He needed to be reminded of some of their names, but as the minutes passed he recognized more of them. No one could avoid participating. He kept moving around the room. “Raise your hand if I lost you. Raise your hand if this is seeming easier to you. Raise your hand if you are almost ready to do it by yourself.”

Every child had to get the concept. He was not going to pull too far ahead. “Raise your hand if you got it,” he said. “Everyone check me for a second. Everyone track me for a second. This is an important number. You have to pay attention here. This number cannot be bigger than what? This number cannot be bigger than what? Fatima?”

She gave an incorrect answer. He tried a few other students who did not get it. “One step too far,” he said. “Eyes up please. Eyes up. We will give you the next one on your own again. Watch this. We said we were going to be done by nine and we are pushing up on the time. You guys are pretty close, though. So watch this.”

The period was over. Twenty-eight children had watched intently and responded to questions for more than 45 minutes. They seemed to be holding their own. The class bad boy, Levin’s special project, had been a model student. The young teacher had taken many notes. There would be several more weeks of extra work for him. Then, still unsatisfied, Runyan-Shefa with Levin’s approval would find another job for him in the school not as demanding or as important as sixth-grade math.

The New York State Assessment tests were given to the KIPP STAR sixth graders the following spring. Seventy-three percent of the 78 sixth graders scored at the proficient level or above, compared to 45 percent of all sixth graders in the same Harlem district, and 60 percent of sixth graders in New York State [see Figures 2 and 3].

Ninety-two percent of those KIPP STAR sixth graders were from low-income homes. Ninety-seven percent were black or Hispanic. They had been taught to listen, think, and respond. For most of them it had worked. Their teacher had struggled, but for them the standards had remained high. They would be ready for seventh-grade math, which at KIPP schools was beginning algebra, begun two years earlier than at most American schools. 

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**Steady Rise** (Figure 2)

The impact of the instructional program and “no excuses” school culture becomes increasingly evident as students in KIPP’s mostly urban schools are more likely to outperform their district peers each year.

**Help Where It’s Needed** (Figure 3)

KIPP schools serve a student population that is predominantly low-income and minority.