

Washington, DC charter school wins Race to the Top grant

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The US Department of Education recently announced that the Knowledge Is Power Program of Washington DC (KIPP DC) has been declared the winner of a grant from the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) program. KIPP DC is a public charter program that houses more than 3,000 students at more than 10 locations in the district. The \$10 million grant will go to the program's Capital Teacher Residency training facility that is currently housed with another local charter, E.L. Haynes.

News of the grant's announcement prompts the question: "What exactly is KIPP and how does it function?"

Across the nation, KIPP operates more than 120 schools that serve roughly 40,000 students. A brief browsing of the list of registered charter schools in the District of Columbia turns up KIPP schools as among some of the most widespread, with 10 facilities now operating and a new K-8 (Kindergarten through eighth grade facility) to be opened at Webb Elementary, a former public school that was closed in 2008.

The sizeable number of KIPP schools are a function of a clause passed by the district that limits any new public educational space to charter school use only. This means that under no circumstance shall there be any new *public* schools admitted into the DC school district.

KIPP schools are often touted by their advocates as maintaining high-quality student performance while at the same time keeping to an "open-enrollment" requirement, like that at public schools. This, however, was exposed as a farce in a recent study.

The study, released last year by Western Michigan University, found that while on average KIPP schools enrolled more lower-income students than did

traditional schools (77 versus 71 percent), the charters enrolled less than half the number of children with disabilities when compared to traditional facilities. Similar trends were observed in the enrollment of children with English as a second language (5.9 compared to 12.1 percent and 11.5 to 19.2 percent, respectively).

In general, KIPP schools spend only \$460 per student on student support services, less than half of that spent in regular public schools. The report states: "Because traditional public schools have a higher proportion of students...with severe and moderate disabilities, the burden of having to subsidize their education falls more heavily on them."

In addition to this, the study found that KIPP received a third more funds per pupil overall than traditional schools (\$18,491 compared to \$12,000) while spending *less* on instruction (\$4,617 compared to \$6,196).

Also detailed was the fact that KIPP schools suffer from higher levels of student attrition than do their traditional counterparts. Across the K-8 levels, the study found that 15 percent of students "disappear" from KIPP grading rolls each year. This is compounded when taking several other categories into consideration. Overall, the study found that 40 percent of male African-American students in grades 6-8 are dropped from the rolls each year, presumably while KIPP keeps the students' funding. That these factors contribute to significant "performance advantages" for the KIPP charter school model goes without saying.

Some of the main donors to the program include the Walton Family Foundation (WFF), run by the owners of the Wal-Mart retail chain, the Broad Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Fund.

The connection to the Walton Family is telling. DC Schools chancellor Kaya Henderson recently based her

decision to close 20 “underperforming” public schools in the District on a report by the Illinois Faculty Fund (IFF), which had received a \$100,000 loan from the WFF to conduct its research. Likewise, Carrie Walton-Penner of the WFF sits on KIPP’s national board of trustees (see “Washington, DC chancellor announces closures of dozens of public schools”).

KIPP and other charters also maintain ties to the city’s Democratic Party apparatus.

The DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB), tasked with overseeing the licensing of charters in the city itself, has connections to KIPP. This is primarily through KIPP DC’s chairman Terence Golden, who also chairs the education think tank Fight for Children with PCSB member John McKoy, as well as former DC mayors Adrian Fenty and Anthony Williams.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was quoted saying he was “absolutely agnostic” on the picking of the charter as a winner, and that politics played absolutely no role. This couldn’t be any further from the truth.

The Obama administration’s education “reform” policies, of which RTTT is a main component, have never been about increasing school performance levels, let alone improving children’s education. RTTT is in fact built upon the No Child Left Behind legislation enacted under the Bush administration, which penalized students and teachers in cash-starved school districts.

The Obama White House and Secretary Duncan have pursued a blatant policy of vilifying teachers and promoting the spread of privately run charter schools, where there is little oversight on how funds are spent to educate students. These policies are of a piece with the bipartisan claims in Washington that there is “no money” for social programs and other basic rights won over decades, including public education, and that the social gains of the working class must be subordinated to the corporate drive for profit.

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[7 December 2012]



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