

New charter school expands its reach

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When you first walk into KIPP Durham College Prep School, you may not notice anything out of the ordinary. The walls are covered in colorful posters. The occasional child can be seen walking through the hallway.

But if you look at the floor the child is walking on, you may notice some black lines: the remnants of a basketball court.

"We are using whatever space we have," said Anders Campbell, the principal of KIPP Durham. "The teachers literally built this school."

They assembled the desks. They painted the walls. They constructed a school in an old gymnasium for students and staff, who consider each other family.

The New School

KIPP is a nationally renowned charter program that extended to Durham in 2015 to prepare low-income and minority children for college.

KIPP, which stands for Knowledge Is Power Program, has 183 schools across the country, with seven in North Carolina.

KIPP Durham is part of the Eastern North Carolina region, which includes KIPP GCP Pride High School in Gaston. In the eight years that the Gaston high school has had a graduating class, 100 percent of the students have earned acceptance to a four-year college.

Campbell wants similar results in Durham.

"Everything we do is gearing kids towards a life of opportunity," Campbell said. "We all operate off the belief that everyone wants to be successful. It's about providing the supports to make that happen."

The Community

Charter schools are not always well-received in a community. A common argument is that they take some of the best students away from the public school system. But KIPP Durham doesn't turn anyone away.

The school is tuition-free, has extended school hours and unlike most charter schools, provides bus transportation. And to introduce KIPP to the com-



Math teacher Hannah Akpaete encourages fifth-graders to raise two hands to answer and ask a question at the same time. (Staff photo by Ryan Wilusz)

munity, Campbell went door-to-door and asked if anyone was interested.

He ended up with 93 black and Latino fifth-graders. Ninety-seven percent of those students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

They are the "Pride of 2023." And KIPP Durham takes pride very seriously, Campbell said.

While academic rigor is something that KIPP Durham provides, the teachers are also expected to help build character.

Unique Rules

All KIPP Durham students start their first day in plain white shirts. By demonstrating good behavior and a willingness to learn, they acquire their uniforms.

"We believe that everything is earned," Campbell said.

Jakari Ewing earned his uniform in just a couple days. But not everyone has had a smooth transition.

"Some people are still adjusting to it," Ewing said. "But we are trying to help each other as a pride to get better and to build a better community so we can hopefully build a better world."

But just as uniforms are earned, they can be taken away. This concept is called "bench," and is KIPP Durham's primary form of discipline. The school wants the students in the classroom as much as possible so they are always learning, Campbell said.

Think Critically

While the curriculum is aligned with the Common Core, KIPP Durham teaches students conceptually rather than procedurally. The school avoids multiple-choice questions and pushes kids to think critically, Campbell said.

"The reason education is important is because it's going to take you someplace," said Birdie Rodriguez, a history teacher at KIPP Durham. "It's not about passing the EOG to move on to the next grade. It's for life."

In fact, math teacher Hannah Akpaete said she didn't mention the EOG, or North Carolina End-of-Grade test, to her students until three weeks ago.

The school teaches math, language arts, science, history and physical education. The students start each day with breakfast and a computer program before heading to three 65-minute classes. Following those classes, they eat lunch and go to their remaining two classes. The 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. day ends with an extra dose of reading and math.

Inside the classroom, participation and energy is encouraged. When a question is asked, students raise two hands to symbolize answering and asking a question to extend the conversation.

If a student is struggling to answer, classmates wiggle their fingers toward the student to "show love." And if a student can't hear what someone is

saying, they gesture for the person to “turn up.”

“Tell them you want to hear what they’re learning,” Akpaete told her class. “You want to hear their knowledge.”

Work Pays Off

The students have proved they are learning. In the first four months of school, average reading levels showed a year’s worth of growth.

Cynthia Vargas is the office manager at KIPP Durham, a KIPP Houston alumna and a mother of a current KIPP Durham student.

She considered having her daughter repeat third grade because she struggled to balance reading and math. But since she transitioned to KIPP Durham, she has three A’s and one B.

“She’s a problem solver now,” Vargas said. “She’s definitely become very independent.”

Akpaete has witnessed more independence in all of her students. She has encouraged them to figure out problems on their own and be confident in their answers.

“We are encouraging students every day,” Akpaete said. “We are pouring into students emotionally and mentally and letting them know you got this.”

Beyond Academics

The encouragement goes beyond academics. KIPP Durham teaches students about the social injustices they may face in life and how to deal with them. Campbell said he looks for teachers who want to continue fighting the civil rights movement.

“We believe that students can beat the statistics,” Akpaete said. “We can’t change your circumstances, but that doesn’t have to affect your success in class.”

Whether it’s having private conversations over lunch or opening the school on weekends, Akpaete said teachers are always building relationships with students.

The teachers don’t mind staying late with children to avoid the troubles that may be waiting for them at home. And they do not mind connecting children with the East Durham Children’s Initiative if their families are struggling financially, Rodriguez said.

“I don’t want to go home at 5:30 and live another life,” Rodriguez said. “This is what drives me, and everyone has the same mindset.”

That includes Campbell, who spends

the bulk of his time teaching kids in the classrooms despite being the principal.

Rodriguez, who previously taught for Durham’s public school system, said the staff is united in a way she has never experienced.

“We have really become a family,” she said. “While that may look troubling from the outside, this is what drives me, and this is what I am passionate about.”

Big Changes

The family will expand next year when a new group of fifth-graders enter KIPP Durham and the current students move to sixth grade.

Campbell said he is excited for the new additions to the school, including a band program for all students.

But next year’s biggest change is moving KIPP Durham into the old Holloway Street School. Some of the parents went to elementary school at Holloway, and Campbell said there is a sense of pride in the transition.

The building has been undergoing renovations and will provide KIPP Durham with extra classrooms and a cafeteria. The newly painted walls of KIPP Durham’s current building will be knocked down, and the space will be converted back into a gymnasium for students.

And as KIPP Durham continues to expand, the staff hopes that the community will continue to accept them.

“I want the community to trust KIPP Durham with their students but also trusting that we aren’t saviors,” Akpaete said. “We aren’t trying to say we are trying to fix you. We are trying to empower.”