

December 2016

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Recommended Citation

Maranto, Robert; Moore, Sarah B.; and Ritter, Gary (2016) "Does KIPP Grow Advantaged? Analyzing KIPP Campuses Over Time," *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*. Vol. 23: No. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.tsu.edu/jpmssp/vol23/iss2/6>

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Does KIPP Grow Advantaged? Analyzing KIPP Campuses Over Time

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Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools are regarded as among the most academically successful schools serving high poverty populations. KIPP schools serve students that are more likely to be poor and from racial minorities than their peers in nearby traditional public schools. Nevertheless, it is possible that, as parents become aware of KIPP's seemingly successful track record, the student population at KIPP might become less disadvantaged over time. Using Common Core data, we examined demographic changes in 81 KIPP schools that opened between 1995 and 2011, finding no quantitative evidence that KIPP students are growing more advantaged over time. Interviews with KIPP leaders suggest that such stability may reflect purposeful marketing aimed at attracting the most disadvantaged students, though more research is needed.

The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter school network has been praised by a range of policy-makers and journalists, who argue that its flexibility and mission focus succeed in improving achievement for disadvantaged students¹. KIPP alumni are roughly four times more likely to graduate from college than disadvantaged young people generally (Mathews 2009; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003; Maranto and McShane 2012; Barth 2011; Betts and Tang 2011; Macey, Decker, and Eckes 2009). Further, a range of studies using different methodologies have demonstrated that, after controlling for student characteristics

¹ While there is a broad literature addressing advantage and disadvantage in educational institutions, there is no agreed upon definition of either of these terms. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on two groups of students who have historically been underserved by educational institutions in the United States – students of racial minority backgrounds and economically disadvantaged students. This definition is clearly appropriate for our analysis here as KIPP has been developed with the explicit goal of providing high quality schooling to poor and minority students.

and prior performance, students learn substantially more in KIPP schools than in other traditional public and charter schools. These findings have been obtained in both lottery studies comparing comparable students who did and did not win lotteries to enter KIPP (Tuttle, Clark, Bing-ru Teh, Nichols-Barrer, Gill, and Gleason 2010; Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathack, and Walters 2011), and in studies using “virtual twin” statistical methodologies (Woodworth and Raymond 2013).² Some evidence indicates that KIPP succeeds in part by selecting and developing mission oriented leaders and empowering those leaders to choose staffs and control resources; thus devolving authority down to the campus level, where knowledge is greater (Shuls and Maranto 2013; Maranto and Shuls 2011).

At the same time, some of KIPP’s seeming academic success likely reflects “choice and commitment,” which is indeed one of the organization’s “five pillars,” along with high expectations, more time, power to lead (for principals), and a focus on results (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003). Not all parents and children will *choose* the additional time and effort inherent to the KIPP school model. This has led critics like Horn (2011) to charge that KIPP “creams” by selectively admitting higher performing students and formally or informally expelling relatively low performing students. Horn and to a degree Thomas (2013) fear that the presumably harsh discipline at KIPP and similar so-called “No Excuses schools”³ may lead more disadvantaged students to transfer or drop out in relatively larger numbers.

Here, we will empirically investigate the possibility that KIPP schools, over time, enroll relatively more advantaged and fewer disadvantaged students. Our primary question will be addressed by descriptive analyses of students enrolled in KIPP and those enrolled in school districts in which KIPP campuses locate. The data employed here will be administrative data from KIPP, from the national Common Core of Data published by the National Center for Education Statistics, and from the state databases in states in which KIPP schools are located. Further, we will add richness to the analyses with qualitative information from KIPP school leaders in eight schools that have operated for more than eight years.

Critics of market theory propose that the extension of school choice, even if the choice is limited to disadvantaged parents, will over the long term have deleterious impacts on the traditional public schools and on social and economic cohesion. Expanding school choice could encourage parents to view public education as a fundamentally private good, encouraging parents with greater resources to desert traditional public schools and carve out quasi-private educational enclaves. This would remove from traditional public schools their most well-prepared students and the parents most able to employ political activism to improve these important community-based institutions. These negative outcomes, according to critics, are likely to occur even if these market-based options are limited to only economically-disadvantaged families. Accordingly, a range of market critics caution against choice-based solutions in public goods generally and education in particular (Henig 1994, Wells 1993).

However, market proponents argue that increased schooling options could have

² For a meta-analysis see Betts and Tang (2011).

³ Interestingly, the *No Excuses* label was popularized not by KIPP leaders but by scholars Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003). KIPP leaders now regard the label as pejorative, and not reflecting the realities of schooling at KIPP. KIPP defenders like Boyd, Maranto, and Rose (2013) see the label as possibly reflecting new KIPP campuses, but not campuses where a culture of high expectations has been established, which instead have a “softer side.” Indeed their fieldwork suggests that established KIPP campuses may have more secure, playful, and personalized cultures than traditional public schools in similar high poverty settings.

positive effects in terms of equity and social cohesion. In traditional public school systems, a family's schooling options are almost entirely dependent on housing choices, which in turn are largely constrained by household income. The net effect is that neighborhoods are largely segregated along racial and class lines. As a result, most students attend traditional schools that are as racially and economically segregated as the neighborhoods in which they reside. School choice, however, has the potential to unlock the schooling choice from the housing choice; students can choose to travel across racially segregated neighborhood and district boundaries and attend socially-integrated schools (Greene, 2005).

These theoretical arguments form a broad framework guiding our tests of whether one specific set of market options – KIPP charter schools – tends to serve more advantaged families over time, as market critics fear.

To clarify, as a matter of policy and state law, in each state where KIPP operates, all public charter schools (including KIPP) which have more applicants than available seats *must* determine admission by random lottery, so that every applicant has an equal chance of gaining admission to the school. Thus, KIPP schools (and all public charter schools) are prohibited by law from selecting students based on academic ability or other characteristics associated with advantage.

Nevertheless, there are numerous avenues through which KIPP schools might enroll more advantaged students, either purposely or inadvertently. By locating in relatively advantaged or at least “transition” neighborhoods, KIPP schools could attract a higher socioeconomic status clientele; indeed, some inner city traditional public schools have become known as “elite” schools as their neighborhood demographics changed (Stillman 2012) or as attendance zone policies *were changed* by education policy-makers seeking to please middle and upper income parents (Cucchiara 2013). At times, very subtle differences in location can have substantial impacts on enrollment. For example, one longtime KIPP regional leader recalled that:

The first location was two-thirds African American and one third Puerto Rican. Then we moved six blocks and it went to about 90-10. I was new to the city and didn't realize at the time that we had crossed a neighborhood boundary. I had no idea the shift would have that much impact (phone interview, August 25, 2014).

Second, by either purposely or inadvertently recruiting parents and students who are more invested in education, KIPP and similar schools may attract students who are less disadvantaged and thus easier to educate. Indeed KIPP demands that parents new to KIPP sign a contract promising to send their children to school ready to learn. Such requirements are unusual in traditional public school general programs, though magnet schools and particular programmatic options within traditional public schools, such as gifted and talented programs, often have such requirements (or even more selective, test-based admissions policies).⁴

⁴ When asked how they would respond in circumstances in which students signed the KIPP contract while parents or guardians refused to do so, KIPP leaders said that they would admit such students, even though it would violate school policy. One KIPP regional leader in the Northeast said that while KIPP uses contracts as a culture building device *after* school lotteries are held, certain other charter schools may employ contracts *before* lotteries as a way to discourage less serious parents, or more disadvantaged parents from even entering a school lottery. Indeed one such city charter school held its lottery at a suburban country club

In addition to these hypothetical static relationships are at least four additional dynamic processes that might tend to make KIPP student composition more advantaged over time. First, the KIPP network generally has gained considerable acclaim in recent years (*e.g.*, Mathews 2009); indeed, in our fieldwork parents and students noted hearing about KIPP while watching Oprah Winfrey. As KIPP schools become known as college prep schools, they may attract relatively more advantaged parents and students. Apart from any national reputation, a local campus may develop its own following over time, eventually becoming part of the community. All eight KIPP leaders interviewed said that the number of parents entering the school lottery rose the longer a campus operated. As one Northern KIPP principal put it:

The thing that has changed over time is that we now have long waiting lists before we even start recruiting kids, based on how many siblings, cousins, friends, and neighbors want to come to KIPP. So more parents are interested because they or someone close to them has had a positive experience at KIPP in the past (personal communication, August 21, 2014).

To the extent that this increased interest in attendance at KIPP occurs disproportionately among more advantaged families, the fraction of KIPP students who are disadvantaged could decrease over time.

Second, both in KIPP summer schools (which prepare new students) and through the year, a higher workload may lead a disproportionate number of more disadvantaged students to transfer back to traditional public schools, or to drop out entirely. While more disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out or transfer out of *all* schools, the higher workload at KIPP may have further impacts.

Third, at least at the high school level, KIPP schools cannot afford certain high cost extra-curricular activities, most notably football, and this too could affect the composition of students. Again, to the extent that economically disadvantaged students might be more likely to transfer to traditional public schools to participate in sports, the fraction of KIPP students who are economically disadvantaged could decrease over time. Finally, the level of discipline at KIPP schools may lead to disproportionate attrition among more disadvantaged students, as indeed KIPP critics like Horn (2011) assert.

While each of these four scenarios is plausible, there is little systematic descriptive research on the student composition at KIPP schools and how it might change over time. Thus, our goal in this analysis is straightforward: describe the student composition, in terms of racial background and economic disadvantage, of the students at KIPP schools. We will consider the composition of KIPP students overall and in the initial years of the charter schools; moreover, and most importantly for the question at hand, we will examine changes over time for the set of KIPP schools that have been open for more than five years.

Of course, looking at the students in KIPP schools without considering the composition of students in traditional school districts would leave out important information. For example, if the student population at KIPP did not change over a five year-period, but the students in the nearby district schools became markedly more disadvantaged, this would actually represent a relative change in KIPP students. Thus, in addition to presenting the student data for KIPP schools, we also present the descriptive statistics for students in the nearby traditional public school districts in the relevant time periods.

(phone interview, August 25, 2014.)

In the sections that follow, we begin by considering the existing research, some empirical and some not, on the composition of students served by KIPP charter schools. We then briefly describe our specific research questions and methods before presenting results. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for the continuing debate on whether policymakers should promote KIPP charter schools as part of a strategy for improving educational outcomes for children in high poverty areas.

Literature Review: Does KIPP serve the most disadvantaged?

We will summarize research on how KIPP siting decisions seem to reflect mission, review two studies which suggest that KIPP's seeming academic success reflects higher student attrition rather than greater student level academic progress, and compare those with more precise campus level studies. We conclude by suggesting that KIPP schools, like rapidly growing charter schools generally, should be seen as dynamic rather than static.

KIPP Siting Decisions

As noted above, KIPP's stated mission is to prepare disadvantaged students for college. KIPP location decisions, and its appeals to staff and parents, suggest prima facie evidence of attempts to realize that mission (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003; Mathews 2009). Unlike for profit charter operators, KIPP schools do not disproportionately locate in states which spend more on education (Maranto and Ritter 2014). Nationally, KIPP students are roughly 95% African American or Hispanic and 87% eligible for free or reduced lunches, somewhat more disadvantaged than the school districts they locate in (Tuttle et al. 2010; Angrist et al. 2011). Moreover, from published accounts (e.g., Mathews 2009) and from our fieldwork at 11 KIPP sites in four states, the founders of individual KIPP campuses intend their schools to serve the most disadvantaged students, those unlikely to choose schooling options through housing markets or by negotiating complex school bureaucracies, as parents with more resources do (see Cucchiara 2013, 61-64). Similarly, Maranto and Shuls (2011, 53) report that in Arkansas, KIPP Delta's new campus in Blytheville intentionally located at a site that as one KIPP mom, herself a low-income African American complained, "seems like a downgrade" compared to district schools in "better" neighborhoods. The principal explained that KIPP needed to be where parents most needed alternatives; in many cases, this may well be in the "toughest" neighborhoods. Further, unlike most charter schools, KIPP schools typically provide bus service, to assure that parents lacking cars can still choose KIPP. In short, evidence indicates that KIPP leaders attempt to attract and serve the most disadvantaged students.

Do their efforts succeed? Two recent studies focused on KIPP achievement and attrition have shed light on the characteristics of KIPP students as compared to their peers in nearby traditional public schools. Both found that KIPP schools, overall, serve students more likely to be eligible for free or reduced priced school lunches and more likely to come from racial minority groups. Miron, Urschel, and Saxton (2011), using data from 59 KIPP schools open in 2008-09, find that 94% of KIPP students were African American or Hispanic, as compared to 82% of the students in the host traditional districts. Miron et. al. also found that KIPP students were more likely to be eligible for free or reduced school lunch (77% in KIPP compared to 71% in host districts).

A widely cited series of KIPP analyses by Mathematica researchers over the past several years examined achievement, attrition, and student characteristics of KIPP students compared to their original traditional public schools. In the final report of the series, Tuttle et. al. (2013) examine students in 43 KIPP middle schools and also find that the students

entering KIPP schools are more likely to be from poor and racial minority households. 80% of the students in the KIPP feeder schools were African American or Hispanic, compared to 96% of KIPP students. 83% of KIPP middle school students were eligible for free or reduced lunches as compared to only 75% of the students from the feeder schools.

Overall, the existing research makes clear that KIPP schools locate in areas serving poor and racial minority students: students who ultimately enroll in KIPP are more likely to be African American and low-income.

Turnover and Attrition in KIPP Schools

Of course, the fact that KIPP school leaders aim to open schools in neighborhoods serving disadvantaged students does not preclude the possibility that student attrition at KIPP is abnormally high. In that case, such attrition could lead to KIPP enrollments being more advantaged. In the widely cited report, Miron, Urschel, and Saxton (2011) argue that KIPP has substantially higher student turnover than traditional public school districts where KIPP schools are located. The authors maintain that this, rather than better teaching and more time spent learning, explains KIPP's seeming academic success. Unfortunately, Miron et al. compare turnover in *single* KIPP campuses with that in *whole school districts* they are located in; thus a traditional public school student who transfers (or is forcibly assigned) to a different school in the same district, even an "alternative" school, is *not* counted as a case of attrition or turnover using this methodology. Given that all high poverty schools have considerable student turnover, using the whole district (typically large districts with hundreds of schools) as the unit of analysis assures that KIPP schools, most of which are *single* sites, will look bad by comparison. (In fairness, the authors acknowledge this issue.) In a more appropriate analysis of relative attrition, Nichols-Barrer, Tuttle, Gill, and Gleason (2011) compare *school level* turnover between KIPP schools and traditional public schools in the nearby district. The Mathematica researchers find that about half of KIPP campuses have somewhat higher turnover than nearby traditional public schools, while about half have somewhat less. Still, certain KIPP campuses, particularly in their early years, had high turnover (e.g., Woodworth, David, Guha, Wang, and Lopez-Torkos, 2008). Nationally, however, there are no measurable differences.

Similarly, in their widely publicized study comparing KIPP schools with traditional public district schools in Texas cities, Vasquez Heilig, Williams, McSpadden McNeil, and Lee (2011) relied on faulty comparisons in their finding that KIPP suffered higher student attrition. During much of the time period of the study, KIPP did not have any high schools in Texas. The authors' analyses compared KIPP *middle* schools to district *middle and high* schools; thus KIPP middle school students who then went to non-KIPP high schools were counted as KIPP "leavers" even though *there were at that time no KIPP high schools for them to attend*. Further, the authors find that KIPP schools in Texas have far higher African American dropout rates than do Texas traditional public schools. This may be true, but only if the reported 84-88% graduation rate for African American students attending Texas traditional public schools (see table 7 in the article) is in fact accurate. These reported graduation rates are far higher than those resulting from cohort analyses done for students of all races by Michael McShane (personal communication, April 12, 2012).

In contrast to these studies which rely on institutional self-reports and measure student turnover at a high level of aggregation, studies which make *school level* comparisons do not find systematic differences in student retention, at least as measured in terms of ethnicity, FRL status, or educational performance. Indeed, KIPP recruits students with math and reading scores somewhat below the mean for nearby traditional public schools, and

KIPP's gains in measured student achievement cannot be explained statistically by differential recruitment or enrollment mortality. KIPP schools, like nearby traditional public schools, are overwhelmingly low income and minority (Tuttle et al. 2010; Angrist et al. 2011).

Maturing Campuses, Dynamic Markets

One weakness of both campus-level and district-level quantitative studies of KIPP student attrition is that both typically treat school markets as static rather than dynamic. As Smarick (2012), Smith, Wohlstetter, Farrell and Nayfack (2011), and Kayes and Maranto (2006) show, well-run new charter schools are likely to refine their operations at one or two campuses, and then, if they succeed, grow over time if the charter operators choose to do so and receive external support. That growth is likely to change school culture, and may also impact student demographics. Even in urban traditional public schools, as fieldwork by Stillman (2012) in New York and Cucchiara (2013) in Philadelphia shows, campuses serving disadvantaged students which begin to serve more advantaged populations can reach a tipping point in which demographics and culture change rapidly once an “elite” reputation is established, often by individual active parents.

KIPP is expanding rapidly, and even KIPP backers like Mathews (2009) admit that individual campuses have had high attrition, particularly in their first year, before the school culture became more settled. This is also a theme of Boyd et al. (2013), whose fieldwork in KIPP campuses over an eight year period indicates that like most growing charter schools, KIPP schools change over time, with discipline becoming less strict as school culture solidifies.

Dynamic culture and marketing changes could result in KIPP serving either more or less advantaged students over time. Older KIPP campuses seem to have less student turnover, suggesting that fewer more disadvantaged students find high levels of discipline a difficult fit, or are flunked or “counseled” out (Tuttle et al. 2010; Nichols-Barrer et al. 2011). On the other hand, a campus with an established reputation may attract more motivated and thus possibly less disadvantaged parents and students. Some KIPP leaders are aware of this possibility, a point we revisit below.

In short, there is reason to think that KIPP leaders make good faith efforts to attract and serve the most disadvantaged students. But will their efforts succeed over time? Most KIPP campuses have waiting lists, meaning that they cannot serve all the students whose parents wish them to attend. As a KIPP campus gains an appealing reputation over time, it is likely that more advantaged families may begin to actively seek to place their students in KIPP schools. Thus, it is certainly possible that, as communities become more familiar with KIPP schools, KIPP campuses will serve a greater percentage of middle income students over time. However, we can find no studies looking at changes over time. This is an important oversight. Researchers need to understand KIPP, and other growing charter networks, as dynamic rather than static. Shifts in local reputations, area demographics, and school policies may interact to impact school demographics. There is a need for research exploring whether the measured demographics of KIPP students shift *over time*. We will offer a first cut at answering this question.

Research Questions and Methods

As stated above, the aim of our study is to describe the student composition, in terms of racial background and economic disadvantage, of the students at KIPP schools as compared to their peers in neighboring traditional public school districts. Specifically, we present the data for KIPP schools and the surrounding traditional schools in three different

time periods and samples of KIPP schools. First, we present the student composition comparisons using the most recently available data for all KIPP schools currently in operation. This will provide important baseline information of the overall student body enrolled in KIPP schools, and will situate our data within what has already been shown in the research regarding the overall characteristics of KIPP students (e.g. Tuttle et. al. 2013 and Miron et. al. 2011).

Second, because KIPP school leaders are intentional in their initial siting decisions to seek out disadvantaged students from the very start, we compare the demographics of KIPP students with those of their peers in nearby traditional public schools for the initial year of operations for all KIPP schools that opened up across the United States between 1995 and 2005. These data will further our understanding, in a systematic way, of the extent to which KIPP schools leaders are successful in serving marginalized students from day one of school operations.

Finally, we conclude with the question that underlies this study: to what extent do the characteristics of KIPP students change over time relative to broader community? Here, we base our conclusions on the large set of KIPP schools that opened their doors any time between 1995 and 2010.

The empirical data employed here will be administrative data from KIPP central and publicly-available data from the national Common Core of Data published by the National Center for Education Statistics. In cases of missing data (mostly, these cases involved free and reduced price lunch data), we consulted databases provided by state education departments in states in which KIPP schools are located. In total, we consider data from 109 KIPP schools (and 109 host districts) in nearly 20 different states⁵; these 109 schools represent all KIPP schools in operation in 2011-12.

Of course, this strategy is limited by the use of local traditional public school district as the point of comparisons. As Miron et. al. (2011) noted, local districts generally provide a fair and sensible comparison group. However, large differences can exist within districts, and especially within the types of large urban districts in which most KIPP schools reside. A better analysis would employ school-level address data linked with census data to provide a more accurate neighborhood comparison group. Nevertheless, for our most important across-time analysis, the district-level comparison data are nearly as useful as they can indicate any broad changes in community characteristics that we might expect to influence KIPP student composition.

The variables we consider as indicators of “disadvantaged” are straightforward and are clearly connected to our two previously-mentioned criteria for identifying underserved groups of students. We compute and present the fraction of students in KIPP schools (and their host districts) that are:

- From racial minority backgrounds (specifically we present the % of students who are African American and the % of students who are Hispanic)
- From households eligible for free or reduced priced lunches, according to the federal National School Lunch Act; this figure is an imperfect but commonly-used proxy for economic disadvantage (Duncan and Murnane 2011).

⁵ For example, the KIPP schools in this analysis were located Arkansas, California, Colorado, Washington DC, Florida, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and in numerous other states.

In addition to these descriptive quantitative analyses, we will add richness to the discussion with qualitative information from KIPP school leaders in eight schools in eight different states that have been operating for several years. In August 2014 we contacted five KIPP principals and longtime teachers we had prior contact with, as well as a randomly chosen group of ten principals and e-mailed and phoned in requests for 15 minute interviews, in accord with the protocols approved in University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board Protocol 14-07-019. Each were at campuses which had been in operation for at least six years. Four of the KIPP staff we had prior contact with, as well as four of the randomly selected staff, agreed to be interviewed; thus eight were interviewed from August to December 2014. In each case we asked the following open ended questions:

- *How long have you worked for this KIPP campus? When did you start working for KIPP generally? What were you doing before that? Why did you start working at KIPP?*
- *Why do you think parents choose your campus? Has that changed over time?*
- *Have your recruitment methods changed over time?*
- *Demographically and in terms of attitude, how do your kids compare with those in nearby district schools? Has that changed much over time? Have KIPP students become less disadvantaged over time compared to nearby district school students?*

Results

We begin with a cross-sectional examination, using the most recent data available, of key student characteristics of KIPP schools and their neighboring districts. As of the 2013-14 school year, there were 141 KIPP schools across the nation: 47 elementary schools, 74 middle schools, and 20 high schools.⁶ In 2013-14, KIPP reported that 88% of the students it served were eligible for free-or-reduced lunch meals (a low-income indicator), and 97% of the students it served were minority (non-white), with 58% identifying as African-American and 37% identifying as Latino. Furthermore, KIPP reported that 15% of its students are English Language Learners (ELL) and 10% receive special education services.

While this information is interesting, these figures cannot be compared with traditional district figures because not all district data needed for the cross-sectional comparisons are available from a common data source for 2013-14. Using 2011-12 data, the most recent set of federal data from the Common Core of Data, Table 1 below presents descriptive information on KIPP schools and traditional school districts. The traditional school districts represent the host districts of the KIPP schools; that is, the traditional district in which each KIPP school is located. As KIPP schools are charter schools, students may be drawn from many districts for any given KIPP school; however, for the purposes of comparing KIPP to its neighbor, we choose to compare the KIPP schools to their “host” school district.

⁶ Figures drawn from KIPP 2013 Report Card: <http://www.kipp.org/reportcard>

Table 1: Cross-Sectional Comparison of Student Characteristics at KIPP Schools and Local Traditional Public School Districts, 2011-12

	KIPP School	Local District	Difference
Number of KIPP Schools	109	109	
Students Enrolled	41,184	12,035,838	
Average Enrollment	378		
Average Number of Years Open	4.31		
Percentage of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch	86.7%	73.8%	+12.9%
Percentage of Minority Students (overall)	97.8%	87.1%	+11.6%
Percentage African-American Students	60.5%	44.1%	+16.4%
Percentage Hispanic Students	34.6%	35.4%	-0.8%

Note: This table includes data from a total of 109 KIPP schools with a total of 109 host districts (all KIPP schools in operation in 2011-12). Data are from the Common Core of Data; however, when data points were missing from the Common Core of Data, data were drawn from KIPP and from state department of education databases

Just as the earlier research on this question has found, we observe that KIPP schools in 2011-12 continue to serve much higher proportions of African American students than do their host districts (61% vs. 44%). While the Hispanic population at KIPP schools is nearly identical to that of the host districts (around 35%), KIPP schools continue to serve disproportionately high levels of minority students overall, relative to host districts. Moreover, based on the imperfect (but best available) measure of economic disadvantage, we find that KIPP schools serve relatively higher numbers of high poverty students, as measured by the fraction of students who are eligible for free or reduced price school lunches. In 2011-12, of the more than 40,000 in the 109 KIPP schools, 87% of were eligible for free or reduced price school lunches (FRPL), as compared with 74% in the local traditional districts. Indeed, of the 109 KIPP schools, 94 schools had FRPL rates that were greater than that of host districts.

While these figures are consistent with the previous literature (Tuttle et al. 2010; Nichols-Barrer et al. 2011) and the objective of KIPP school leaders to serve students most in need, they paint a picture of all KIPP schools, regardless of “age”. That is, some of these 2011-12 schools have been operating for 2 years while others have been serving students for 12 years. For us to begin to consider how KIPP schools and students change over time, we first have to consider the composition of KIPP schools in their earliest years. Thus, in Table 2 below, we present data on the composition of students in *first year KIPP schools*. The schools in this analysis are drawn from the set of KIPP schools that opened between 1995 and 2011.

Table 2: Cross-Sectional Comparison of Student Characteristics at KIPP Schools and Local Traditional Public School Districts, *First Year of Operation* for KIPP Schools Opened Between 1995 and 2011

	KIPP School	Local District	Difference
Number of KIPP Schools	94	94	
Students Enrolled in Year 1	10,932		
Average Enrollment in Year 1	116		
Percentage of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch	84.3%	70.9%	+13.3%
Percentage of Minority Students (overall)	96.1%	86.4%	+9.7%
Percentage African-American Students	62.2%	46.3%	+15.9%
Percentage Hispanic Students	31.6%	35.1%	-3.5%

Note: This table includes data from a total of 94 KIPP schools with a total of 94 comparison districts. While there were a total of 109 KIPP schools that opened between 1995 and 2010, data on the schools and their peer districts from the Common Core of Data were only available for 94 schools.

Our look at KIPP school characteristics in their first year of operation reveals few, if any, surprises. Just as we found with the overall KIPP data, KIPP schools in their first year serve high numbers of African American students (62% compared to 46% in local districts). In the initial years of operation, KIPP schools serve slightly fewer Hispanic students (32%) compared to the local districts (35%). Consequently, it does appear that KIPP school leaders have succeeded in choosing initial school sites that enroll racial minority students; 94% of students in first year KIPP schools were either African American or Hispanic, as compared 81% of the students in the local traditional public school districts. Similarly, first year KIPP schools served large numbers of low income students. Since 1995, of the more than 10,000 who attended 94 KIPP schools in their first year, 84% of were eligible for free or reduced price school lunches (FRPL), as compared with 71% in the local traditional districts. Indeed, of those 94 first year KIPP schools, 79 schools had FRPL rates that were greater than those of host districts.

In sum, these figures show that, in alignment with goals of KIPP school leaders, based on either siting decisions or recruiting strategies or both, KIPP schools do serve a high percentage of low-income and minority students in their first year of operation.

This result leads into our final section focused on the key question of our paper – how do KIPP student characteristics change over time? To assess this question, we consider the set of KIPP schools that have been opened between 1995 and 2011 and present changes in demographics over time, for the KIPP schools and for the local host districts. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Comparison of Student Characteristics at KIPP Schools and Local Traditional Public School Districts

	KIPP School			Local District		
	Year 1	2011-12	Change	Year 1	2011-12	Change
KIPP Schools	81	81		81	81	
Students	9,020	29,989		9,014,696	9,046,345	
Average Enrollment	111	370				
Average Years Open	3.99					
% of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	84.0%	87.0%	+3.0%	69.7%	75.4%	+5.7%
% of Minority Students (overall)	96.2%	98.0%	+1.8%	87.2%	87.9%	+0.7%
% African-American	64.5%	63.8%	-0.7%	47.2%	44.9%	-2.3%
% Hispanic	29.5%	31.4%	+1.9%	34.6%	36.6%	+2.0%

Note: This table includes data from a total of 81 KIPP schools with a total of 81 comparison districts. While there were a total of 99 KIPP schools that opened between 1995 and 2011, data on the schools and their peer districts from the Common Core of Data were only available for 81 schools.

The figures presented in Table 3 are similar to those in Tables 1 and 2. The sample of schools is smaller because we can only include the 81 schools for which we have student characteristics data from the school’s first year of operation and from the most recent year. Nevertheless, the results are similar. KIPP schools serve high numbers of African American students in the first year of operation and in the most recent year (65% in year one compared to 64% in 2011-12). KIPP schools serve slightly more Hispanic students over time (29.5% in year one compared to 31.4% in 2011-12). Thus, overall, the fraction of minority students served by KIPP has gone up slightly over time, just as has the fraction for the same minority students in the neighboring public schools districts.

The story is similar for low income students. In the first years of operation, 84% of the students in these 81 KIPP schools were eligible for free or reduced price school lunches; in these same schools, the number increased slightly to 87%. In 50 of the 81 KIPP schools analyzed, the student population was more economically disadvantaged in 2011-12 than in the school’s first year. In a slight deviation from earlier findings, the FRPL in the local traditional public school districts, while still well below that of the KIPP schools, did increase by 3 percentage points more over time. That is, in the first year of operation, the FRPL rate at KIPP schools was 15 percentage points higher than in the neighboring district; by 2011-12, the KIPP rate was 12 percentage points higher than in the local district. Arguably, since the mean KIPP FRL rate reached 87% compared to 75.4% for district schools, a poverty ceiling effect for KIPP schools relative to district schools explains the greater relative increase in student poverty for the latter.

The overall message of these analyses is straightforward: KIPP schools initially serve students that are more likely to be economically disadvantaged and from racial minority backgrounds than are their peers in the local host districts. Over time, the differences between the KIPP students and the local traditional public school students remain static. Our interviews with KIPP school leaders lend some insight into these decisions made by KIPP and will be described in the discussion section below.

Discussion

In accord with prior work (Tuttle et al. 2010; Nichols-Barrer et al. 2011), our findings indicate that KIPP students are somewhat more likely to be economically disadvantaged, and somewhat more likely to be African American or Hispanic than are traditional public school students in the districts served. Along these lines, a teacher told us of his 11 years teaching at KIPP in a major southern city “[this city] is quite a polyglot area except for no white kids. I have taught 1100 kids over the years and I have had one white kid, so we don’t completely reflect [city] but there is that variety” (phone interview, August 8, 2014).

Further, we find no evidence that KIPP campuses grow more or less “elite” over time. Over time KIPP campuses have served somewhat higher proportions of FRL students, but those changes in the aggregate mirror changes in their home districts. Similarly, KIPP campuses have grown marginally more Hispanic and less African American over time, but again, these changes mirror district trends, suggesting broader demographic shifts rather than conditions unique to KIPP.

These broad statistical conclusions accord with the perceptions of the KIPP leaders from eight cities we interviewed. Seven of the eight saw few demographic changes in their schools, relative to nearby traditional public schools. For example, as a Northern KIPP principal put it:

In terms of demographics, we have a higher percentage of non-white students than [local district] public schools and a higher percentage of free and reduced lunch... ___ is an interesting city with a substantial white middle class population as well as impoverished, predominantly Latino neighborhoods and a wide variety of recent immigrants. We tend to draw more from the diverse areas (we hope to) and less from the white middle class areas, although we do have some white middle class students and families (personal communication, August 22, 2014).

Similarly, a longtime Southern KIPP site leader recalled that:

I don’t think that the people we have served have changed very much. I think that we have changed more than our parents have. I think some of our parents in the beginning wondered what the hell are these people doing...Which goes back to something I did [once] 13 years ago which we got from Houston where kids would originally have to sit cross legged two days until they earned their seats, and people still talk about it, so I think we’ve changed and evolved more than our families have. We don’t do crazy things anymore (phone interview, August 14, 2014).

Only one of the eight KIPP informants, the southern teacher quoted above, reported that his campus had grown more upper income over time:

We’ve been discovered by a new group that has really changed the look of our campus, and that is first generation African immigrants. We are primarily still Hispanic, but our black percentage grows a little bit every year. It’s probably 25% now, and that 25% is split almost equally between African Americans and immigrants from West Africa, primarily Nigeria... We’re of course not a 100% FRL lunch group any more. We’re probably in the mid-80s. There are a few more affluent

families now, probably more among the African American population. One lady told me that our kids are going to college and we will save the cost of a private school, so we are sort of the free private school alternative to the private schools, but I have primarily heard that from the African American moms. There are a lot more kids being picked up by mom or dad, now (phone interview, August 8, 2014).

Interestingly, the northeastern KIPP leader interviewed reported a substantial increase in the percentage of special education students, though they were not sure of the cause:

If there has been any shift it is more kids with IEPs, 26% now, and that is more because we have a reputation as doing a good job at serving students with special needs, and I think we have gotten more effective at identifying and serving kids with special needs, so it could be identification (phone interview, August 25, 2014).

On the other hand, a KIPP leader in a northern city reported special education percentages slightly below those of district schools:

We've seen some decline in special education percentage though anecdotally we've noticed that the level of need of our special education students has increased (more kids that qualify for substantially separate classes for example) (personal communication, August 22, 2014).

Such variability suggests the importance of local context in determining campus demographics, for both KIPP and other public schools of all kinds. In short, the relationships between school reputation, recruitment and demographics are not simple.

Possibly, one reason why KIPP has not grown elite is the efforts of KIPP leadership to assure that their campuses serve the students that “most need them,” as several put it. A northeastern KIPP leader recalled that at one point the school “did change demographically, and then we made a change and now it is back.” As a new KIPP principal the individual “had to hustle the first two years to fill our classes, and I am a Fisher Fellow, and that is just expected the first year, that you will go to the churches and the supermarkets and the festivals and knock on doors, and do all the other things you have to do to recruit your first class.” Finding it “incredibly difficult” to recruit a second new class while running the school, the site leader decided to innovate:

So then we told our parents for every two applications you bring us we will give you one Old Navy gift card for 10 dollars, and it worked. At the time I thought it was the best 200 bucks I ever spent. It got us 90 kids, but what I didn't realize at the time was that it skewed our kids, because our parents would come in and say “hi, I got you two A students.” That third group came in at a totally different baseline than the prior two groups. It was a different world for them, and it was not by anything intentionally we did but just by that change in recruiting. That third class was only 77% free and reduced lunch where we average in the 90s, and they were close to grade level in reading and math coming into the school. Now after that year, when we realized what was going on, we had gone back to pounding the pavements, and recruiting the way we had before, and since then our entering students have had baseline test scores of two to three grade levels behind in reading and math, and back in the 90s FRL. [Currently] we definitely could fill our seats without doing student

recruitment. We could just hang a banner and let that be our recruiting, but we don't. We still go to the supermarket and the churches because we do not want to skew our population. We want everyone to know that they can enroll in our lottery if they choose.

In the leader's view that meant KIPP was serving the students that most needed KIPP. Certainly, with a waitlist roughly equal to enrollment, the school no longer needed to recruit to maintain its viability.

Conclusion

In accord with prior school level studies, we find that KIPP schools in aggregate serve students who are somewhat more likely to be poor and from racial minority backgrounds than their peers in the host traditional public school districts. We find no evidence that KIPP schools grow more "elite," which is to say less disadvantaged over time. Serving the same market niche over time is remarkable given how rapidly the KIPP network has grown. In at least one case in our small qualitative sample, this niche stability reflects purposeful efforts by KIPP leaders to recruit the most disadvantaged students. In short, in the aggregate KIPP schools seem to fulfill their stated mission of serving the most disadvantaged students. These findings accord with prior work suggesting that policy-makers concerned about better serving disadvantaged students should support expansion of KIPP, and perhaps of similar charter organizations.

That said, findings must be considered tentative, in part since the school district is a high level of aggregation. Additional research might collect time series data from traditional public schools at the campus level rather than at less precise district level. Additional work might also collect data on the ESL and special education students served. Unfortunately, this data is difficult to collect over time even the district level. As always, more research is needed.

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