

A Chance for Change

By Scott Shirey

The new year is almost here, and with it comes a chance for change in Arkansas. In January 2011, a new group of state legislators will take office, and we have an excellent opportunity to reevaluate how to address the state's most pressing issues, including perhaps the most fundamental of all: the quality of our public education system.

Our state leaders have always understood the importance of public education, but the need to improve our schools is more urgent than ever: less than 15 percent of students in low-income communities in Eastern Arkansas are prepared for college by the time they graduate high school. We must provide all Arkansas students, regardless of where they live, with a rigorous and supportive public education that prepares them for college and life.

As a veteran educator in the Arkansas Delta, I know that great schools and teachers can transform the life of a child. In 2002, I founded KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena and now serve as the Executive Director of the KIPP Delta network, which currently enrolls nearly 650 students at four schools—an elementary, middle and high school in Helena and a new middle school in Blytheville. KIPP Delta is part of the national network of KIPP public charter schools, which are dedicated to putting students in low-income communities on the path to college. In 2009-2010, KIPP Delta middle and high school students outperformed the local district in all tested subjects.

But we can't do it alone. In order for all children in Arkansas to succeed, we have to expand proven education reforms across the state. I have three recommendations for our state leaders:

Allow school leaders the freedom to hire the best teachers, regardless of certification. Research has shown that the quality of a teacher is the single most important factor in a student's education. To close the achievement gap in Arkansas, we need to get the best teachers into the schools that need them most. Currently, some of the most promising teaching candidates are being blocked from careers in Arkansas because of bureaucratic certification requirements. Meanwhile, principals at schools in high-need areas, including KIPP Delta, struggle to get enough traditionally-licensed teachers to fill their classrooms.

To increase the talent pipeline of teachers in Arkansas, we should support and expand non-traditional programs like Teach For America, which recruits and trains top college grads to teach in high-need classrooms. KIPP Delta has long relied on Teach For America to help staff our schools, and they are as highly trained and professional as any teacher out there. In fact, a recent study by the Tennessee State Board of Education found that Teach For America's teachers have a greater impact on student achievement than other new and veteran teachers.

Support facilities funding for high performing charter schools. Although charter schools like KIPP Delta are public schools, they receive less public dollars than their traditional counterparts, and no funding for facilities. As a result, charters have to use funds from their operating budgets to find, rent and refurbish school buildings. Because of this, their ability to grow is limited, even as more and more students seek to get in.

These schools need government support in order to meet that demand. With a relatively modest investment from the state—just \$250 per student—Arkansas can provide its top charter schools with long term facilities solutions, helping them expand to serve many more underserved students.

Give students more time to learn by expanding the school year. At KIPP Delta, our students spend about 50 percent longer in the classroom than their traditional public school counterparts. With that extra time, KIPP can provide not only rigorous instruction in core subjects, but also extracurriculars like sports, music and art.

Legislation has already been introduced in the Arkansas Senate to lengthen the school year for public schools statewide. But just giving the extra time is not enough; we need to make sure to include the “joy factor” in our schools. Our state legislators should focus on both expanding the school calendar and encouraging schools to make learning fun and exciting, so kids will stay engaged.

We now have a chance to change the face of public education in Arkansas. By helping our students get the best education possible, we can help them—and our state—rise to new heights.

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