

Bridge to Somewhere: Families in this Arkansas town are offered another option for their children's education

By Vaughn Stewart III



Photo by Vaughn Stewart III

Leaders in Helena, Ark., attribute part of the town's resurgence to the KIPP Delta Charter School.

Editor's Note: This is the second in a three-part series on community development efforts in Helena-West Helena, Ark., that may be instructive for Anniston.

HELENA-WEST HELENA, Ark. — The teacher guides his orchestra with a felt-tip baton. The children's eyes follow his movements while they sing.

"I have nine. You need two. Do I have enough? Yes! Press in the bottom number: seven!" they chant.

"Say 'need.' You need two," the teacher chides a student who botched the fifth word of the tune, but still managed the correct answer.

This seems like a trivial error, but Marcus Nelson demands perfection. The girl corrects her mistake the second time around.

At most schools, Nelson's status as the principal would mean his days teaching subtraction and division would be numbered. At most schools, even full-time teachers don't come in at 7 a.m. in the middle of the summer to tutor three students.

But that's what Nelson is doing, because KIPP is not your average school.

The Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, opened the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena, Ark., in 2002. KIPP is the largest chain of charter schools in the country.

Charter schools are public schools that receive public money, but are not governed by the same rules and regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Charters can therefore pay teachers for performance and lengthen the school day, week and year. Alabama is one of nine states without legislation allowing charter schools.

Last year, former Gov. Bob Riley pushed for charter school legalization but met opposition from Democrats and the Alabama Education Association, the state's largest teachers union. The bill died in the Legislature.

After years of decline, this small eastern Arkansas community, buoyed by a swell of new leaders and a comprehensive strategic plan, has started to rebound. Community leaders say that educational progress, represented by KIPP Delta and Teach For America, is a driving force behind the town's revitalization.

"When the bell rings, we don't stop. We just keep going," Nelson said, "And I think that's the mindset that educators and administrators should have."

'Dedicated administrators, teachers, and parents'

Nelson returned to his hometown of Helena seven years ago to join the KIPP Delta faculty. It was a difficult decision. But as he recalls his students' accomplishments, Nelson knows it was the right one.

One student entered KIPP Delta in 2002 at the bottom of his class. After eight years at KIPP, he is now enrolled at Vanderbilt University on a full scholarship.

Another boy, in the special education program, once announced to the class that he wanted to be a chef when he grew up.

“Everyone knew that he couldn’t read. They laughed and of course I exploded,” Nelson recounted. “I told him that if he works hard, he can get there.”

This fall, that student will attend Johnson and Wales University, one of the most renowned culinary schools in the world.

KIPP Delta’s success is not merely anecdotal, Nelson said. The school consistently outpaces state averages in test scores, despite its high concentration of students in poverty. Around 90 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, which means their families earn incomes near or below the poverty line.

To make up for these disadvantages, KIPP Delta runs from 7:25 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays, holds occasional Saturday sessions, and convenes for three weeks in the summer.

KIPP Delta also requires teachers, parents, and students to sign a “Commitment to Excellence,” agreeing to always perform their best. Failure to live up to these expectations can lead to termination for teachers and a return to traditional public education for families.

“We all know that kids from low-income communities aren’t getting the same education as kids from more affluent areas,” Nelson said. “The hard part about this work is that it is hard. It takes dedicated administrators, teachers, and parents to come together and not feel sorry for a kid, but teach a kid.”

Though KIPP’s longer school day and mandatory summer session may not seem like a child’s utopia, families in Helena are lining up to enter the lottery for admission to the school. A lack of facilities—many classes at KIPP Delta are taught in renovated

trailers—means that as many as 50 students per grade remain on the waiting list.

The state has twice taken over the Helena-West Helena school district, citing financial distress. The district houses nearly 3,000 students; KIPP Delta enrolls around 650.

‘Good communities have good schools’

After decades of a dwindling population and an ailing economy, Helena-West Helena, a Mississippi River town of around 15,000, has experienced a renewal. Perhaps no one is more responsible for this renaissance than Joe Black, the president of Southern Bancorp Capital Partners. His organization is a nonprofit subsidiary of Southern Bancorp, the country’s largest rural development bank.

Southern has spearheaded the town’s resurgence through grants, loans, and grant-writing, including more than \$3 million for the KIPP Delta Charter School.

Black said that KIPP Delta’s success has been an integral component of the town’s resurgence.

“The performance level of the public school system is what impacts your community. Look around. Bad communities have bad schools. Good communities have good schools,” Black said.

“Direct correlation,” he added, smacking his hand on the desk for emphasis.

Some studies, like one conducted by Stanford University in 2009, have concluded that most charter schools perform on par with or worse than traditional public schools. Charter skeptics argue any positive results should be discounted because only the most conscientious parents bother to sign their kids up, biasing the sample.

However, some charters, including most KIPP schools, produce extraordinary results. A 2010 study by Mathematic Policy Research found that “for the vast majority of KIPP schools in the evaluation, impacts on state assessment scores... are positive, statistically significant, and educationally substantial.”

Anniston City Schools ranks 105th out of Alabama's 124 school systems in test scores.

"Because of the social system, it is very easy to say 'Those kids can't learn.' Well, KIPP has kicked that to hell. They're one of the top-performing schools in Arkansas," Black said.

"If you don't start out even, somebody's got to run faster if you want to keep up," he added.

Smart people stay to help

Two former members of Teach For America founded the first KIPP school in 1994. TFA is a national nonprofit organization that recruits bright college graduates and places them into low-income school districts.

The relationship between the two organizations lives on in Helena. Out of KIPP Delta's 16 teachers, 12 are current or former TFA teachers.

When asked where KIPP would be without Teach For America, Nelson simply replied, "It wouldn't."

TFA's impact on Helena doesn't stop there, however. Though most TFA alumni return to Northeast or West Coast comfort after their two-year commitment is up, some stay to rebuild Helena outside the classroom.

Doug Friedlander is one of those who stuck around. He arrived in Helena in 2004, a few years after graduating with a degree in physics from Duke University. Two years later, when his commitment was over, Friedlander was too excited to leave. He's now the executive director of the Chamber of Commerce of Phillips County, more than a thousand miles away from his hometown of Long Island, N.Y.

Two employees with Southern Bancorp are also soldiers in Helena's growing army of former TFA educators. So is Friedlander's girlfriend.

"I think this place is on the verge of a renaissance. I wanted to be a part of it. I had an opportunity to make a difference so how could I not stay? It's a no-brainer," Friedlander said.

Friedlander sprinkles TFA maxims into conversation and attributes his ability to run an efficient meeting to hours spent in laconic TFA conference calls. He said that the organization provided an "external infusion" of young leaders into Helena, which must be matched by an "internal infusion" of locals.

"TFA happened to be the pipeline for young leaders who brought the necessary competence, integrity and vision," Friedlander said.

Will Staley and Terrance Clark are often confused with the flocks of young teachers who stroll through downtown to lunch at Blues Bayou Café or shop at the Cotton and Kudzu Mall. Staley and Clark, who arrived in Helena after earning art degrees in Kansas City, Mo., and Brooklyn, N.Y., admitted that adjusting to life in a small town was challenging. Though without the prevailing culture of young, idealistic teachers, they said it would've been much tougher.

"When someone asks, 'Are you a teacher?' I hear, 'How are you doing? I accept you,'" Clark said.

Staley and Clark run a creative consulting firm called Thrive Inc. It organizes marketing campaigns for local businesses, classes for budding entrepreneurs and an art walk for local artisans and musicians.

"TFA brings 300 people to the region every year. You don't need all 300 to stick around. You just need 5 or 6," Clark said. "There's a wind of change happening."

Staley summarized his colleague, "You guys should try to get TFA in Anniston."