

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock) – “Teacher From KIPP School Tapped as Head of Another”

By Cynthia Howell
July 9, 2009

LITTLE ROCK — Maisie Wright, who most recently worked as a math and science teacher at KIPP Delta College Prep charter school in Helena-West Helena, will head a new KIPP school that is on the drawing board for opening in 2010-11 in one of three Arkansas Delta cities.

KIPP stands for the Knowledge Is Power Program, which is a national charter school system that started in Houston, but has grown to 82 schools in 19 states and the District of Columbia for the coming 2009-10 school year.

Wright, a 2006 graduate of Cornell University, is participating in a year-long leadership training program that began this week at New York University in preparation for heading the Delta school that will open with fifth-graders only. Grades will be added annually until kindergarten through 12th grades are established.

“Ms. Wright was an outstanding teacher at KIPP Delta College Prep and she has the skills and knowledge to ensure that all of the students at her new school will reach their academic potential,” Scott Shirey, executive director of KIPP Delta Public Schools in Arkansas, said in a news release.

Wright is an alumna of the Teach For America initiative, in which recent college graduates commit to work for two years as teachers in high-poverty urban and rural schools.

Blytheville, Pine Bluff and West Memphis have been selected by the KIPP organization to compete for the new KIPP campus which, if approved by the Arkansas Board of Education, will be the fourth KIPP school in the state but the first outside Helena-West Helena, said Steve Mancini, director of public affairs for KIPP.

The establishment of a new school in 2010-11 and growth over time to 12 KIPP schools - three schools in each of four cities by 2019 - will be funded in part with a recent grant of \$1.5 million from the Walton Family Foundation of Bentonville and \$447,500 from the Louis Calder Foundation. In all, the organization has raised nearly \$5 million toward its goal of \$8 million by 2013.

Factors that will be considered in selecting a city for the new school in 2010 include community support, parent demand, and the availability of facilities and funding.

KIPP Delta is seeking proposals from community members in the three targeted cities. The request for proposals is posted on its Web site: www.kippdelta.org.

Letters of intent from community coalitions are due July 24. Full applications are due Aug. 21, and a selection of a city for a school site will be announced Aug. 30.

Of the three targeted cities, only Pine Bluff is already the site of an existing charter school, Hope Academy Charter School, which serves grades five through eight.

Rep. Stephanie Flowers, D-Pine Bluff, said Wednesday that she was unaware of any organized effort as yet by Pine Bluff parents or residents to respond to the call for KIPP school proposals.

“I do agree that something definitely needs to change in regard to the learning environment and curriculum,” Flowers said, adding that the problems she sees are not so much local in origin but are the result of state and federal laws that require students to undergo standardized testing.

That results in “teachers not being able to do anything more than teach to the test and kind of skip over the fundamentals of learning,” she said.

Sen. Steve Bryles, D-Blytheville, said there have been many discussions about a possible KIPP school in Blytheville.

“It’s mostly been at my instigation,” Bryles acknowledged about those talks. “I’ve been a brokenrecord advocate for KIPP expansion.”

Bryles said he has been interested in the KIPP program since before its inception in Helena-West Helena and has taken several groups of Mississippi County civic and government leaders to see KIPP Delta College Prep in Helena-West Helena in recent years.

He said he believes fully developing a KIPP system of charter schools is the right action to take economically, legally and morally, and he is optimistic that the Blytheville area will produce a proposal for a KIPP school.

“If we know there is a way to improve education, it is incumbent upon us morally to try it,” he said. “A good education is the only path to sustained success. I mean there are not going to be enough winners of the lottery.”