

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette -“Editorial: Another expansion at the Good Education Factory”

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Who says no good news ever comes out of the Delta? The KIPP charter school in Helena-West Helena, Delta College Prep, is practically a Good News Factory. Even better, it's a Good Education Factory—and the factory is expanding. That's what happens when you're doing fine work, turning out a great product, meeting consumer demand and exceeding expectations. All of which Delta College Prep has been doing for five years now.

To review, which is what the students at Delta College Prep do non-stop: Some 93 percent of the school's students scored Proficient or better on Arkansas' end-of-course exam in algebra. Last year, KIPP's eighth-graders scored 91 percent in math, and 84 percent in language on the SAT. As fifth-graders, those same kids had scored 29 percent in both. That's gettin' it done.

Surely, even the most cynical, anticharter, anti-reform, status-quo educantist would have to admit, however grudgingly, that Delta College Prep must be doing something right.

Now the news: Delta College Prep, which started with 65 students in elementary grades five years ago, is opening a high school. There'll be 315 students in grades five through 10 when classes start on August 20th.

The new principal of Delta College Prep High is to be Luke VanDeWalle, an Illinois native and graduate of Purdue over in Indiana. But we won't hold his Yankee bona-fides against him, especially given what he's doing. Mr. VanDeWalle has been teaching in Helena, including at the KIPP school, for long enough to qualify for Arkie status. And those algebra scores we mentioned earlier? He had a lot to do with those; he can be proud of those kids. So can all of us.

Now all those high-achieving KIPP students in the lower grades can keep on keepin' on—right into college, we hope—at the new KIPP high school. Next on the ambitious agenda for Delta College Prep: A K-12 campus in downtown Helena. It'll occupy some 11 acres across several now blighted blocks. The school has already secured the land thanks to a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. Now it just has to raise the rest of the \$25 million.

All of which brings us to the not-so-good news: The idealistically naive folks at KIPP Delta thought they were doing such a good job at actually educating our kids that they asked the Legislature for help in the form of an appropriation. Senate Bill 458 was developed to help high-performing charter schools in high-poverty neighborhoods build and renovate their facilities. (Can you say Delta College Prep?) It was a \$7 million appropriation. And it passed. Way to go, legislators! But the Ledge hasn't yet anted up the money to fund the appropriation. No way to go, legislators! What's the hold-up, folks? Is there some county fair or duck-calling stage that needs the money instead?

Mike Beebe, are you listening? If anybody can get the Ledge to act, it's the governor of Arkansas. If memory serves, when Governor Beebe was Candidate Beebe, he made a lot political hay bragging on the success of Delta College Prep. So how about putting the state's money where your campaign rhetoric was, Governor? Chances are, you'd get a dandy photo-op out of the deal, turning the shovel before the cameras as KIPP broke ground for its new high school.

What say, Mike Beebe? What say, legislators? Aren't politicians always talking about doing right by our kids, and rewarding educational achievement? Here's your chance, folks. Just do it.

—————Best wishes, mazeltov, congratulations, etc., all around: Scott Shirey, the 31-year-old brains behind the operation at Delta College Prep—not to mention its heart, soul, spirit and drill sergeant—has recently married a Helena girl. So this Massachusetts native should be around these parts for a while, spreading the gospel of education reform in the Delta and beyond.

It's clear that Mr. Shirey, having been in the South long enough to understand and embrace regional customs, has married way over his head. All Southern men do.