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KIPP schools show off for tour

Board members stop by Delta

By Kenneth Heard

HELENA-WEST HELENA — Jakerious Smith greeted visitors to the Knowledge is Power Program Delta Public Schools in Helena-West Helena on Tuesday with a firm handshake and a flurry of Spanish.

“Hola,” he said, welcoming guests with “hello” in his favorite subject. “Como estas?” he asked, which means, “How are you?”

Jakerious, a 6-year-old kindergartner at the KIPP Delta Elementary Literacy Academy charter school, served as part of a welcoming committee Tuesday to greet several national KIPP administrators who toured the schools and listened to success stories from the system’s first senior class, set to graduate in May.

“We’re touring our schools across the country,” said Richard Barth, the chief executive officer for the program, which was founded in 1994 in Houston. “We wanted to see KIPP schools in action.”

Barth and other national board members talked with elementary and middle school students Tuesday and attended a luncheon where two graduating seniors and an eighth-grade student spoke.

The other visiting board members were Doris Fisher, the co-founder of the Gap clothing company; her son, John Fisher; and Carrie Walton Penner, the newest member and granddaughter of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton.

The public charter school system formed in Helena-West Helena in 2002 now has an enrollment of 500 students, said KIPP Delta Public Schools Executive Director Scott Shirey.



Photo by Kenneth Heard
Knowledge is Power Program national board member John Fisher reads to elementary school students Tuesday at the KIPP Delta Public Schools in Helena-West Helena during a tour of the school.

Charter schools are supported by taxpayers and are operated according to the terms of a charter, or contract, with the state. The schools receive state funding per pupil but don’t receive millage money.

“When KIPP was formed, we had a ‘Yes, we can,’ attitude,” John Fisher said. “We wanted to demonstrate that kids who come from poverty backgrounds can perform academically on the level with anyone.”

Nationally, there are 82 Knowledge is Power Program schools in 19 states and Washington, D.C., with a total enrollment of about 20,000. More than 90 percent of the schools’ enrollment is black or Hispanic.

The KIPP Delta Public Schools in Helena-West Helena are the only Knowledge is Power Program charter in Arkansas. Plans call for a new school to open in Blytheville later this year.

In Helena-West Helena, 97 percent of the KIPP charter school system’s students are black or Hispanic.

Enrollment is open to any student who chooses to attend, Shirey said; at times administrators hold lotteries when applicants outnumber the classroom seats available.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, 34.9 percent of the residents of Phillips County live below the poverty level, more than twice the state average of 17.3 percent. Free or reduced lunches are provided to 89 percent of the KIPP charter school system's students.

"There are those who will say this is the 'lost generation,'" John Fisher said. "We're proving that wrong."

Benchmark Exam scores show students at the KIPP Delta Public Schools perform higher than the state average and their peers at the Helena-West Helena School District.

The Helena-West Helena School District loses from 30 to 80 students a year to the KIPP Delta Public Schools, said Eric Cooper, assistant superintendent.

"It's hurting us with declining enrollment," Cooper said. "If this trend continues, we'll be in bad shape in a few years."

"But we want to build a partnership with KIPP," he added. "We don't want to look at it like we're bad neighbors. We want to learn from them and help our students."

During Tuesday's luncheon, eighth-grader Jukurious Davis, 14, learned he was accepted to attend St. Paul's School, a college-preparatory school in Concord, N.H.

"As a young man from Helena, I have limited access," he said.

"At first, I didn't like the long hours," he said, referring to the 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. school day. "But I got used to it. I don't believe I'd have the chance [to attend St. Paul's School] if I wasn't here."

Senior Domonique Bragg broke down in tears while speaking at the luncheon, noting she plans to attend Vanderbilt University this fall.

"I don't know where I'd be without this," she said. "My life has changed because of it."

Fellow senior Abba Colbert said, "There were times I wanted to quit. But because I stayed, my future looks bright."

She plans to attend Hendrix College in Conway this fall.

While the school may turn out successful students who go off to college, Helena-West Helena Mayor James Valley said it's his job to provide opportunities so students can return.

"I think KIPP's impact is amazing," Valley said. "I think education and economic development go hand in hand. Our challenge is for us to draw them back here."

After completing their tour of the KIPP Delta Public Schools, administrators were scheduled to visit another KIPP charter school today in New York.

"We're not using magic. There's no pixie dust," Barth said of the school's success stories. "We just have people doing what it takes to get these results."