

AT-RISK STUDENTS AND ARKANSAS CHARTER SCHOOL EXPANSION, PT. 2

"The students who go to charter schools are not those of great need but have support at home and are relatively high achieving." Little Rock School Board Member Baker Kurrus ("Little Rock Board Resisting 6 Charter Schools," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Sept. 28, 2007)

Second of a two-part series

(November 2007) Critics of Arkansas's charter school experiment, the Policy Foundation noted last month¹ perpetuate the stereotype that charters are established to benefit privileged children. They ignore that all three expansions (1999, 2005, 2007) of the Arkansas charter statute occurred after policymakers concluded charters serving at-risk students² serve an important role.

Two charters serving at-risk students have played important roles in this process. These charters are Wesley Elementary in Houston, Texas, discussed in last month's memo; and the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena, Arkansas, reviewed this month.

KIPP Delta College Prep & At-Risk Students

Established in 2002, the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School is an open-enrollment charter serving 330 students in grades 5-10. Only 12 percent of Phillips County adults are college graduates, and more than 85 percent of KIPP students qualify for the federal free or reduced-price meals program as a result of poor income levels. The KIPP charter is located in Phillips County, Arkansas. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Phillips County had a per capita personal income of \$21,196 (2005). The BEA reports this PCPI was 79 percent of the Arkansas average (\$26,681), and only 61 percent of the national average (\$34,471). Earning of persons employed in Phillips County decreased between 2004 and 2005, according to BEA. Arkansas and U.S. earnings increased in the same period. In sum, the KIPP charter is based in a county characterized by low educational and income levels.

1 "At-Risk Students And Arkansas Charter School Expansion, Pt. 1." Policy Foundation research memo (October 2007)

2 The at-risk student encounters significant obstacles to completion of an academic program.

KIPP Delta College Prep & Arkansas Charter Expansion

The performance of KIPP students on standardized tests led Arkansas legislators to exempt KIPP schools from the charter cap in the 2005 session (PA 2005 of 2005).

State Sen. Steven Bryles, D-Blytheville, a leader of this effort, is described in the following report by columnist John Brummett³:

"He's a moderate Democrat and bona fide education reformer noted, among other things, for sponsoring the legislation on public school accountability and the amendment in the recent special session to cushion the financial blow for East Arkansas schools that lose enrollment from year to year. He is altogether neutral on the pending proposals, but not about KIPP schools, by which he swears. He clings to his dream that Arkansas may get four new KIPP schools by 2009 and that one of them would be in Blytheville.

"Bryles said that when it comes to charter schools generally, he lives by two guiding principles. One is that "charter schools are a good and vital component of education reform, but not when they're dealt with willy-nilly or with a broad brush, but only with lots of advance study that doesn't sacrifice kids to a few years of failed experimentation." The other is that charter schools are especially tricky in the Delta "because special consideration has to be given to two complexities, one being race and the other declining enrollment."

"In other words, you need to be careful you don't license charter schools that would function effectively as segregationist academies. And you need to find a way to keep the Delta's conventional public schools adequately funded while you invite their enrollees to bail out for a charter school on the one hand and insist on distributing state aid on a per-pupil basis on the other."

Sen. Bryles sponsored PA 2005 of 2005. The charter measure was expanded again in 2007.

Conclusion

Critics continue to perpetuate the stereotype that charters are established to benefit privileged children. They overlook the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena, which played a key role in the second Arkansas charter act in 2005.

-- Greg Kaza

³ Brummett, John. "Charter schools: Ideals vs. gritty reality." Arkansas News Bureau. Nov. 16, 2006