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Kids Through College: How Helena-West Helena and KIPP Delta are Serving ALL Students


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Kids Through College: How Helena-West Helena and KIPP Delta are Serving ALL Students

Two years ago, KIPP Through College advisors from KIPP Delta Collegiate High School started working at Central High in Helena. What’s happened since reveals the power of collaboration and suggests best practices for all schools.

Helena-West Helena

Central High in Helena, AR is seated at the heart of Phillips County in eastern Arkansas, near the Tennessee border and the Mississippi River. It is a beautiful, historic town struggling to keep up in a rapidly changing world economy. In 1960, Phillips County was home to almost 44,000 residents; fifty-five years later that fell to barely 19,000. The Great Recession hit hard, with unemployment rising to 20% in 2013 before stabilizing to 7.7% in 2015-16. In 2015, fewer than 75% of all adults 25 or older had at least a high school diploma, and fewer than 13% had at least a bachelor’s degree. The district was taken over by the state in 2011 because of fiscal distress, and remained under state control until 2015. In 2011, when Helena-West Helena was taken over, 72% of seniors graduated on time. Despite these challenges, the district did not give up on its mission to “produce graduates who are fully prepared for life after school as productive, responsible citizens.” By 2013-14, Central High had increased its graduation rate to 74%, and was hungry for more improvement.



KIPP Delta Collegiate

In 2006, Central High faced competition from a new charter high school in Helena, KIPP Delta Collegiate High School (DCHS). A part of the growing KIPP Delta Public Schools network, DCHS was founded with the mission to “empower students from underserved communities to develop the knowledge, skills, and character traits necessary to pursue a college education and a life of value, joy, and integrity.” In a



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city with a shrinking population, a new school could be viewed as unwelcome competition and a threat to the stability of Central High. By the start of the 2014-15 school year, however, Central High was optimistic about the opportunities provided by KIPP Delta, not just for students attending KIPP, but also for the almost three times as many students still attending Central High.

KIPP Through College

In 2011, KIPP released a report detailing the success rate of its first middle school students in college, finding that 33% of students who completed middle school with KIPP had graduated from a four-year college. While this was higher than the national 30.6% of 25-29 year olds with a bachelor’s degree, it fell short of KIPP’s internal goal of having 75% of all its students to earn at least a bachelor’s degree. Part of KIPP’s response to this was to refocus on supporting students after graduating

from high school, renaming its KIPP to College program as KIPP Through College (KTC) and doubling down on its efforts to support students through their postsecondary career. KIPP has also created partnerships with universities around the country, with universities reserving seats for KIPP students who meet their admissions criteria, and, critically, guaranteeing funding for KIPP students who meet all admissions criteria. The efforts seem to be paying off—in 2015, 44% of all KIPP alumni had earned a bachelor’s degree. While still falling short of KIPP’s 75% goal, it represents real progress over four years, and indicates that KIPP may have a program with real benefits for students. In the 2014-15 school year, with enthusiastic college advisors from KIPP Delta Public Schools, a supportive principal at Central High School, a tireless graduation coach at Central High, a cadre of supportive senior English teachers at Central High, and a grant from the Walton Family Foundation, the program was brought in to serve students in their junior and senior years at Central High.

Expanded Services for Students

With the district still under state control, the collaboration between KIPP Delta and Central High was able to proceed despite hesitation on the part of the advisory board, which was understandably concerned that the KIPP advisors would try to recruit students away from Central. To help assuage these concerns, advisors were barred from recruiting for KIPP, and were only allowed to work with students in their junior and senior years. Two years later, with the benefits of the collaboration clear to administration and the district returned to local control, the college advisors are beginning to work with students in lower grades as well to avoid a perpetual game of catch-up.

At the beginning of the first year, the Walton grant funded 1.5 additional college advisors placed at Central High; that was increased to 2 full additional advisors by the end of the first year. Having that extra personnel was critical, according to Doug Bielemeier, the Graduation Coach at Central High. The KIPP Through College advisors were non-district staff totally focused on college support. Having two dedicated advisors who could not be pulled to help with testing efforts was

Student Spotlight: Ke’yon Demps

Ke’yon Demps is an entering freshman at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, having graduated from Central High School in 2016. Throughout his time at Central High, Demps mostly worked with “Mr. B” (Doug Bielemeier), who gave him “space to operate” on campus and talked with him about his professional goals. Demps also worked with Tomisha Gant, a KTC advisor who was so integrated into the fabric of Central High that Demps didn’t realize she was from KIPP. Gant helped Demps send his transcript to UA as part of the application process, helping him navigate the logistical hurdles of applying to college. Demps also appreciated having Gant as a role model in the school, seeing her as a “prominent woman” and a “face of my race” who was making a difference in his school community. These and the stories of other students highlight the success of the collaboration between KIPP DCHS and Central High School in Helena, AR.

hugely beneficial, according to Bielemeier. What did the advisors do while at Central High? According to Amy Charpentier, the KIPP Through College director at KIPP DCHS, in the first year they focused on streamlining processes and making sure they had direct contact with every student multiple times throughout the year.

Before the collaboration, students registered for the ACT individually, by going down to the counselor’s office and signing up for the test online. In one day of the first year of the program, the KTC advisors registered all 120 seniors for the ACT by taking students in groups to the computer lab. According to Bielemeier, having the support resulted in 75% more students receiving college advising services—before, only the 25% of students who were really invested in the process would seek out his office. By providing extra personnel and relieving the burden on overwhelmed counselors, says Charpentier, the program has helped guarantee that students aren’t falling through the cracks. According to Charpentier, the KTC advisors find something that resonates with every student, whether that is a four-year college, technical school, the military, or just having a job lined up after graduation. Students are pushed to think about professional opportunities and long-term careers, beyond entry-level positions in the fast-food industry, says Bielemeier.

While KIPP has long tracked the success of their students after they leave the school, the practice is not widespread in public education. At Central High, the administration kept records on whether or not students graduated, and that's where the trail stopped. Bielemeier kept lists of students he knew who went to college, but there was no systematic record-keeping of whether students were applying to college, being accepted, persisting, or graduating. Thanks to the partnership with KIPP, those records are now readily available, and they're put to use before the students even leave Central. KTC advisors conduct audits of student transcripts to make sure they're taking the right classes to get into college, record student ACT scores and show them to the principal as a measure of the school's success, and keep data on college applications, acceptance, and persistence.

Another important aspect of the program, notes Bielemeier, was the funding from the Walton Foundation that allowed for college visits to all five of the major in-state universities. Rather than choosing a college based on what they read online, Bielemeier said, the trips allowed students to get a feel for the campuses and where they could see themselves fitting in.

A Community Effort Paying Off

Charpentier estimates that college attendance rates among Central graduates soared by 105% in the first year of the program. But, she notes, that success is due in large part to the hard work of the Central High community. Teachers in the English department, for example, worked on college application essays with their seniors, and invited KTC advisors into their classrooms for ACT registration. Teachers invited parents to come to the school after hours to get information about the ACT, the college application process, and the ins-and-outs of postsecondary financial aid.

While we don't have good data on college application, acceptance, and persistence rates of Central High students before the collaboration began, we do know what's happening now: **95% of seniors from**

KIPP and Central High applied to college in the 2015-16 school year. 98% of KIPP Delta graduates were accepted to college, as were 93% of Central High students. Although the KTC advisors are paid through the grant, they spend all of their time at Central High School, and most students don't even realize they're from KIPP. It's just about working together to serve students and a community in need.

KIPP's goal is continue building capacity at Central High, and turn the program over completely to Central High after another year of intense collaboration. After that, says Charpentier, they hope to sustain a professional learning community and provide training for the Central college advisors. The Walton grant will end, and the details of the program may have to adjust moving forward. The intense community support for the program, as well as its evident success, makes Charpentier optimistic that it will continue meeting the needs of students after it's handed over to the district.

Beyond providing services to students while they are in high school, KTC advisors follow students to college, checking in on their academic and social progress throughout their postsecondary tenure. Such support can be critical for students who are leaving home for the first time and may be first generation students. Providing this support allows students to persist in college and access the resources they need to be successful. This also includes support back in Helena, when students are visiting home over breaks, and for parents struggling with the distance of their child's college.

Continuing Challenges

In addition to providing college counseling services to their students, KIPP also has partnerships with universities. These partner universities may reserve seats for KIPP students who meet their admission requirements, or guarantee funding for KIPP graduates admitted to the university. These partnerships can be crucial for students. Unfortunately, only the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville has extended its partnership with KIPP to include students from Central High. Charpentier said that they had students from Central this year who were accepted into Hendrix, but couldn't attend because of financial constraints. Expanding such

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partnerships is a key focus for KIPP moving forward.

Additionally, while college application rates are up among seniors in Helena, both KIPP and Central can improve in their graduation rates. In 2014-15, KIPP had an overall graduation rate of 81%, but a 24% gap between non-TAGG students (100% graduation rate) and TAGG students (76% graduation rate). Central High had a graduation rate of 77% overall, with a 16 percentage point gap in graduation between TAGG and non-TAGG students. While the collaboration has led to clear benefits for students so far, continued collaboration can continue to help both schools improve.

The Promise of Collaboration

It's easy to find stories of adversarial relationships between charter and traditional public schools in the media. In the city of Helena, AR, however, two schools have managed to overcome that distrust in order to bring a promising program to students. At KIPP Delta, faculty saw top students graduating from local high schools and attending community colleges when their GPA and ACT scores would have gotten them admission into selective four-year colleges in Arkansas and beyond. At Central High, a school counselor, 12th grade teachers, and an optimistic principal saw an opportunity to broaden pathways of opportunity for their students. From this, a successful collaboration has blossomed and strengthened over the past two years. For all school leaders interested in helping their students navigate the difficult journey from high school to, and through, college, this story stands as a reminder that high school graduation is not enough. Students need to know what courses they need to take in high school, what ACT score they need to get into college, how they can receive financial aid, how to write their application essays, and to get letters of recommendation. Students entering college need continued support to make the academic, social, and financial transition successfully. As Charpentier said, it's not just about success for KIPP students or Central students, but success for the whole community.

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