

Issue BRIEF

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The Founding of an Urban Charter School: Three Years of Academic Growth and Key School Characteristics

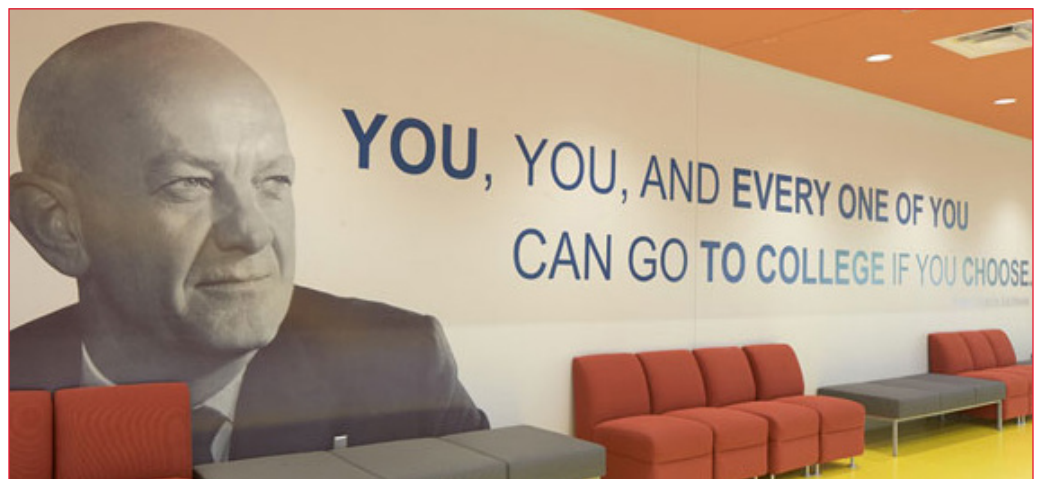
For many years, the Kauffman Foundation has focused efforts on improving education for children in Kansas City. Prior to opening the Kauffman School, the Kauffman Foundation operated several programs that addressed the challenges faced in urban education, such as Project Early (an early childhood program), Project Choice (a high school dropout prevention program), and the Kauffman Scholars program (an after-school college preparatory program). The success of these programs led Foundation leaders to consider the impact they might have on students in Kansas City if they established a charter school. The path they followed and the lessons they learned may be of interest to those working to found and/or improve charter schools.

FOUNDING THE KAUFFMAN SCHOOL TO SERVE KANSAS CITY'S NEEDIEST STUDENTS

In March 2009, the Foundation established a school design team, composed of Foundation education experts and the founding executive director of the Missouri Charter Public School

Association. This team was tasked with designing a school that would address two challenges experienced by families in Kansas City and other urban school districts:

- Providing high-quality educational alternatives to the district's public schools, and
- Raising the academic achievement of children from low-income families.



Urban parents want high-quality educational choices for their children

From a review of Kansas City's assessment data, the School design team learned that, during the 2008–2009 school year, charter school enrollment accounted for one-third of all public school enrollment in Kansas City (North 2009). In addition, among Kansas City's charter and non-charter schools, only 16 percent of the middle schools and 7 percent of the high schools had at least 50 percent of students reaching proficient or better on statewide mathematics assessments in 2009 (Richardson 2009).¹ From the Foundation's perspective, these data suggested that Kansas City families had a need for alternatives to the city's regular public schools, and that current charter and non-charter public schools were struggling to help students achieve.

The Foundation intended the Kauffman School to serve Kansas City's low-income families. Thus, the decision about the School's physical location was informed by the desire to place a high-quality charter school in close proximity to the target population. From a review of demographic data on Kansas City, the School design team learned that the majority of the City's low-income population lived in the eastern part of the city, yet the majority of the city's 23 charter schools were located in the western part of the city. In response to this discrepancy, the Foundation selected a location in the eastern part of the city, so that the School would be in proximity to its target students. Using data on household income by zip code, the design team identified five sections of the city with high concentrations of low-income families. Students living within the boundaries of these five zip codes were given (and continue to be given) first preference for enrollment.²

Kauffman School students have achieved over 1 year of academic growth in core subjects every year since the School opened

An analysis of data from the School's first three years (2011–2012, 2012–2013, and 2013–2014) shows that the goal of having students grow at least 1.25 years for every year they attend the Kauffman School, in all three subjects tested by the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) (mathematics, communication arts, and science; see Figure 1) has been achieved thus far. The average student at the Kauffman School entered the School substantially below the state average in terms of math and



reading scores. Three years after enrollment the average Kauffman student performed above the state average in those two subjects.

Students attending the Kauffman School achieve approximately 1.35 additional years of learning growth in mathematics by the end of their third year at the School. Before entering the Kauffman School, the average Kauffman student scores at the 36th percentile in the state mathematics test. Three years after enrolling in the Kauffman School, the average Kauffman student would move to the 58th percentile (based on impact estimates). Moreover, this three-year gain in mathematics performance represents about a 57 percent reduction in the mathematics achievement gap between 7th-grade black and white students in Kansas City.

Students attending the Kauffman School achieve approximately 1.29 additional years of learning growth in reading by the end of the third year at the School. The average Kauffman student moves from the 39th percentile to the 55th percentile after three years. This three-year gain in reading performance represents about a 45 percent reduction in the reading achievement gap between black and white students in 7th grade in Kansas City.

The estimated impact of the Kauffman School after one year of enrollment is largest in science. In their first year in the School, Kauffman students achieve approximately 1.08 additional years of learning in science compared with students at other Kansas City schools. This represents about a 40 percent reduction in the science achievement gap between black and white students in 5th grade. However, this science impact estimate should be interpreted with caution, because there was no prior year science exam that could be used in the analysis (instead, prior reading and mathematics scores were used as baseline controls) and the state science assessment is not offered every year.

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¹ Prolonged poor academic performance in the district contributed, in part, to the Kansas City school district losing its accreditation in 2011—the same year the Kauffman School opened. At the time of this writing, the district is provisionally accredited.

² The School also offers bus transportation for students who live more than one mile away, thereby providing access to the School to students of need across the city. During the School's second year of operation, the Foundation identified an additional zip code with a high concentration of low-income students and offered first preference for enrollment to students living in this section of Kansas City as well.

Additional years of learning for EMKS students compared to their peers in Kansas City

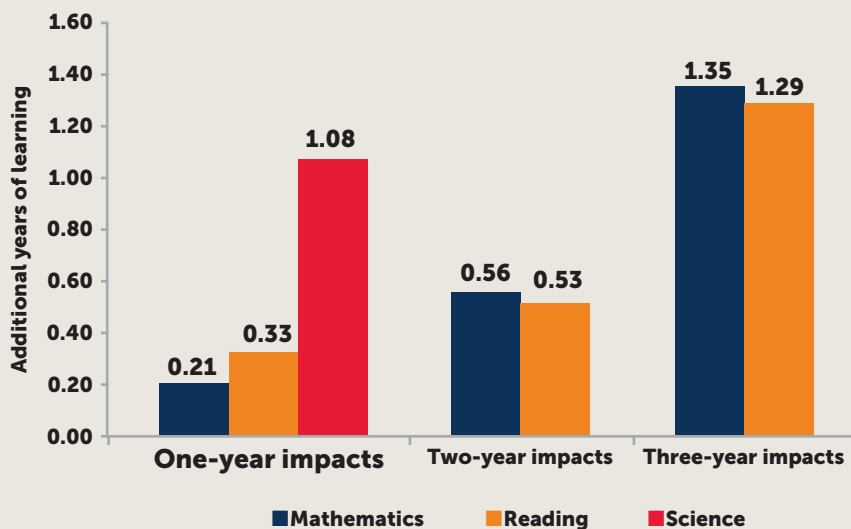


Figure 1

KAUFFMAN SCHOOL'S ACHIEVEMENT GAINS MAY BE LINKED TO ITS KEY DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS

During the School's planning phase, the School design team made extensive efforts to learn about the best practices of successful charter schools, a process the team described as the "year of learning." The team conducted a thorough review of research literature on charter schools and visited successful charter schools in New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Wisconsin to learn more about the variables that contributed to the success of those schools. Based on this research, the design team identified seven characteristics that would be necessary for the Kauffman School's success, and that were incorporated into the School's design: (1) high attendance and behavioral expectations, (2) ambitious academic goals, (3) extended school day and year, (4) increased time for math and reading instruction, (5) intensive data-driven decision-making, (6) extensive teacher professional development, and (7) well-established cultural norms.

1. High attendance and behavioral expectations

Recognizing that students must be in school in order to meet its academic growth targets, the Kauffman School set 95 percent as the daily attendance goal. Upon enrollment in the Kauffman

School, students and families are informed that students should have fewer than 10 absences each year and those with 10 or more absences, excused and unexcused, may be retained in their current grade. The Kauffman School advises students and parents that colleges review students' attendance records as part of the application process, which is another reason to minimize absences.

In addition, the Kauffman School implemented a system of behavioral expectations and school rules designed to minimize distractions and maximize instructional time. According to the Kauffman School's Handbook (Ewing Marion Kauffman School 2014), the Kauffman School's discipline system utilizes merits to reward student behavior (for example, displaying leadership or good citizenship) and demerits for non-compliance with School policies and procedures (for example, not following directions or violating the uniform code). Students may be required to serve detention during school hours as a result of earning three demerits in one day (Ewing Marion Kauffman School 2014).

Students are expected to demonstrate active behavioral and cognitive engagement following the SLANT method (Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod your head, and Track the speaker.) During class, students are expected to speak in a voice that is confident and loud enough for everyone to hear—what the Kauffman School refers to as their "college voice."



2. Ambitious academic goals

According to the Kauffman School's charter application, the Kauffman Foundation expected that incoming students would be one to three years behind grade level. The Foundation estimated that students, on average, would need to achieve at least 1.25 years of academic growth during each year of enrollment to be at grade level by the end of 8th grade and prepared for high school. The Foundation therefore set 1.25 years of academic growth as an explicit charter goal for the Kauffman School to achieve. In addition, daily homework, referred to as "life work," is mandatory and students serve detention if they do not turn in these assignments.

3. Extended school day and year

The Kauffman School's design team anticipated that ensuring 1.25 years of growth each school year would require additional instructional time. During the Kauffman School's first year, students received 37.8 hours of instruction per week (Richardson 2009). In the Kauffman School's second year, the instructional time was shortened to 36.5 hours per week in response to feedback from students, parents, teachers, and staff that the longer school day was too difficult for everyone to manage. In the third year of operation, the instructional time was slightly reduced to 36.2 hours per week. According to the Kauffman School calendar, there were also seven additional days of instruction during the school year, which when combined with the longer school days equates to approximately five additional weeks of school per year compared to traditional public schools in Kansas City.

With the longer school day, the Kauffman School provides students with opportunities for additional learning and relationship-building with their teachers and peers. For example, students receive additional instructional support during the Kauffman School's "Focus" class period. During Focus, struggling students receive additional instruction and practice in any subjects in which they need help, and high-performing students can receive advanced instruction. The Focus class is approximately 35 minutes long and is offered during the last period of every school day.

4. Increased math and reading instructional time

The School design team determined that its students would need more instructional time



specifically in mathematics and reading to catch up academically. Each day in Year 1, Kauffman students attended a double period of mathematics (104 minutes), a nonfiction reading class (50 minutes), a writing class (50 minutes), and an extended period of literature study (80 minutes). During Years 2 and 3, students continued to have a double period of mathematics (100 minutes) and three periods (150 minutes) of instruction related to ELA and reading.

5. Intensive data-driven decision-making

With its strong emphasis on data and results, the Kauffman School employs a large assessment portfolio so that teachers and administrators can make data-driven decisions about how to adapt instruction to best meet students' needs throughout the school year. Teachers receive training to understand and use the various data sources to monitor students' learning and to adjust curriculum and instruction as necessary. In addition to teacher-developed "exit tickets,"³ quizzes, and tests to measure understanding and academic progress, the School's assessment portfolio includes the following:

- Achievement Network (ANet) assessments in math and reading, revised by Kauffman School teachers to be consistent with Missouri State Standards, administered every six weeks⁴
- Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress (STEP) assessments to measure students' reading growth, administered six times per year

**NEVER
NEVER NEVER
GIVE UP.**
WINSTON CHURCHILL

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³ Exit tickets are short questions or tasks that students complete at the end of the class period. These enable teachers to track the progress of their students' understanding of the course material on a regular basis.

⁴ Kauffman School staff revised all of the ANet assessments in Year 1 and some of the ANet assessments in Years 2 and 3. Kauffman School staff also created a similar set of assessments to measure student learning in science.

- Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) assessments in math, reading, and science, administered twice a year
- Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) standardized tests in math, reading, and science, administered annually

In addition to assessment data, the Kauffman School also tracks and monitors students' behavioral data (for example, merits, demerits, and detentions). As part of this effort, professional development sessions often focus on classroom management and student behavior.



6. Extensive teacher professional development

The School places a significant emphasis on teachers' professional development, with teachers experiencing (1) frequent observations and feedback from administrators (about once per week); (2) weekly individual coaching sessions (provided by the principal in Year 1, by the principal and instructional coaches in Year 2, and by the principal, chief academic officer,⁶ and instructional coaches in Year 3); and (3) weekly group-based professional development sessions every Friday afternoon, focused on various topics related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Gentile et al. 2014). The Kauffman School also promotes classroom observations through the physical configuration of the building: by design the classrooms have large interior windows that allow any adult in the hallway to see what is happening in any classroom.

7. Well-established cultural norms

The Kauffman School takes an intentional approach to establishing a culture that consists of shared values, expectations, and norms. School leaders continuously communicate the values, expectations, and norms to all school staff, students, and families. The School design team articulated its expectations for the Kauffman School's culture and the importance of a strong school culture in their early planning documents: "Research, school visits, and advice from charter school practitioners and experts all emphasize the vital importance of a strong culture as essential to school success" (Richardson 2009).

The team highlighted some of their expectations for the Kauffman School's culture, including, but not limited to: (1) a clearly defined and consistently implemented discipline system; (2) visible and frequently communicated "school vocabulary"; (3) school uniforms or other special clothing; (4)

required family meeting for all incoming students before attending the Kauffman School; and (5) disciplinary merit/demerit systems. The hallmarks discussed to this point reflect the Kauffman School's implementation of these expectations.

For School leaders, consistent implementation of these elements is key to the Kauffman School's ability to maintain a strong and readily visible culture. For example, students' uniforms are inspected daily to ensure strict adherence. The Kauffman School also established common classroom procedures that are implemented across classrooms to ensure that students are having a consistent classroom experience. For example, every teacher writes the daily learning target on the board. In addition, the Kauffman School engages in "cultural resets" with staff and students that aim to refocus everyone on the Kauffman School culture. For example, if it seems that teachers are not implementing the merits and demerits consistently or students are not adhering to school policies and norms, school leaders hold cultural reset meetings with staff and students.

STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND STAFF VIEWS OF WHAT HAS WORKED AND CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

As part of its commitment to improving the School, the Kauffman Foundation funds an annual intensive evaluation study, which includes classroom observations; surveys of students, teachers, and parents; focus groups with students and teachers; and interviews with parents, School staff and Kauffman Foundation staff. From these data, we learn something about what works at the Kauffman School and about ongoing challenges (Gentile et al., 2014).

What Works

- **High expectations.** The Kauffman School expects that all students maintain a life work (homework) completion rate of 95 percent or greater for each trimester. In year 3, the majority of students reported putting in their best effort on their homework. Teachers reported that the majority of students almost always completed their homework. The School has also achieved its goal of an average daily attendance rate of greater than 95 percent each of its first three years.

OUR PREP VALUES

Perseverance

We find a way or we make one.

Results

We show what we know.

Empathy

We notice. We feel. We act.

Passion

We put our hearts into what we do.

on this page

⁵ In Year 3, the same person served as principal and chief academic officer.



- **Increased instructional time.** Survey and focus group data suggest that the extended school day is a challenge for students. Teachers explained that some students, particularly those with siblings or friends in other school who get out of school at an earlier time, have a harder time with the extended school day. One student explained that he would prefer to get out of school at 3:00 because he is “just tired of getting home at 5:00” and then having to do homework. Despite their reluctance about the extended school day, many students reported learning more because of the longer school day.

- **Data-driven decision-making.** Teachers reported that the various sources of assessment data are useful for making curriculum and instruction decisions. Teachers used the assessment data to determine the material and skills students have mastered and those that they need to reteach. One teacher reported that aligning instruction with data has “helped our kids become more successful in the classroom.”

- **Sustained teacher professional development.** Both new and returning teachers frequently report that the Kauffman School’s professional development program is one of the things that most appeals to them about the Kauffman School. Many teachers reported that the Kauffman School provides more professional development than schools they worked at in the past. Teachers are especially appreciative of the one-on-one coaching they receive.

- **Well-established cultural norms.** School leaders feel that maintaining a strong culture creates an environment in which

teaching and learning can flourish because there is a shared understanding of the Kauffman School’s values, expectations, and norms among all stakeholders. The Kauffman School is deliberate in its implementation and oversight of its culture to ensure that all aspects of the culture are consistently implemented, distractions are minimized, and time for instruction and learning is maximized.

Challenges Encountered

- **Staff recruitment and retention.** Over the School’s first three years, staff recruitment and retention, particularly related to teachers, has been a challenge influenced by three factors: (1) the need each year to hire teachers for an additional grade level ; (2) the School’s practice of promoting teachers into leadership position; and (3) teachers choosing to leave. To meet this challenge, the School holds various teacher recruitment events, including open houses, and launched a fellowship program for teachers in the district focused on best practices in year 3. The School has a full-time talent recruiter on staff which reflects the importance of recruiting to the School.

The demands associated with working at the Kauffman School to attain its ambitious goals contributes to concerns about the School’s ability to retain teachers. Teachers report arriving to work early in the morning and staying after school to work, with some teachers working on the weekends to get all of their work completed. Foundation and School leaders are well aware of the challenges related to teacher retention and are working through strategies to address the problem (Gentile et al. 2014).

- **Suspension of students.** During the 2013–2014 school year, the Kauffman School suspended students at a significantly higher rate than other schools in Kansas City (Johnson et al. 2016). Overall, Kauffman students were 25 percentage points more likely to receive at least one in-school suspension and 17 percentage points more likely to receive at least one out-of-school suspension than were comparison students. The Kauffman School may be able to have positive impacts on its students despite its higher suspension rate because it offers students additional instructional time via its extended school day and year.

“This is the first year I’ve ever had a meeting with a coach one-on-one. I had an instructional coach at my previous school, but I never met with her and she never came to observe my class. Having someone to bounce ideas off of, and having someone come in and observe, and being able to see someone [else’s] classroom . . . that’s what leads to having really positive and productive meetings with my coach.”

—Kauffman School Teacher



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- **Maintaining School culture.** Each year, the School adds a new 5th-grade class of about 200 students, which will ultimately result in a fully enrolled middle school and high school (grades 5 through 12). As the School grows, administrators and teachers are attending to the issue of how to maintain and expand the School's culture. On the new campus, students and staff occupy different buildings based on grade level. This grouping has logistical benefits but poses challenges for instilling a common culture across school buildings and grade levels. Administrators and teachers are working on ways to maintain the School's hallmarks: ambitious academic achievement, high attendance rates, exemplary behavior, and a strong school culture (Johnson et al. 2016).

We are currently in the fifth year of the Kauffman School evaluation and will continue to examine the School's progress on the dimensions highlighted in this brief. Through this work we can continue to offer feedback to the Kauffman School and share findings with educators working to found and/or improve charter schools. As the Kauffman School continues to grow, the lessons learned may provide valuable insight for the field of education on ways to develop school structures and climates that play a transformative role in students' academic lives.

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