



2013 Brock International  
Prize in Education Nominee

**Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin**

*Nominated by David Wick*

## **Mike Feinberg & Dave Levin**

### **Biographical Sketch**

In 1994, Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin co-founded the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). The following year, each went on to found the original two KIPP Academy's in Houston and the Bronx. Together with Doris and Don Fisher, founders of Gap, Inc., in 2000 they set out to replicate the success of their KIPP schools nationwide. Today, the KIPP network includes 125 schools serving more than 39,000 underserved students nationwide in grades PreK-12.

Both Feinberg and Levin were named Ashoka Fellows in 1994, awarded to leading social entrepreneurs with innovative solutions and the potential to change patterns across society. In 2006, they received the Thomas B. Fordham Prize for Excellence in Education and the National Jefferson Award for Greatest Public Service by a Private Citizen.



**NOMINATED BY:**

**DAVID WICK**

## Letter of Nomination

***"KIPP is the platinum standard for charter schools."* - Eli Broad, Philanthropist**

***"The most influential schools are the ones run by KIPP."* - New York Times, 11/26/06**

Dear Brock Prize Jurors,

I would like to thank the Brock Foundation for the opportunity to participate in the 2013 Brock International Prize in Education. In the following letter, I am pleased to nominate KIPP Co-Founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin for this prize the prestigious honor of being named Brock Laureate. I believe they are outstanding candidates for consideration and have outlined their innovative contributions to the field of education below.

In 2010-11, there were more than 5,200 charter schools operating in America. But, in the early 1990s, when KIPP Co-Founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin graduated college, few people had heard of charter schools and the number of charter schools nationwide could be counted on one hand.

As Teach for America (TFA) corps members, Feinberg and Levin met in 1992 after they signed on to teach fifth grade for two years in the low-income community of Northside in Houston, Texas. Filled with idealism, the two were quickly confronted, however, with the harsh realities of teaching in a large urban school district mired with bureaucratic barriers. As they struggled and worked hard to improve their own teaching, and learned all that they could from veteran teachers like Harriet Ball, the two found themselves increasingly asking questions such as:

*Why is the school structured this way? Why aren't students held to higher expectations? Why is the school day seven hours, and why is the school year 180 days? Why doesn't school prepare every student for success in college and in life?*

In an all-night brainstorming session in 1993, Feinberg and Levin sought to challenge these questions head-on. Together, they drafted an outline of what they believed to be an "ideal" school in which traditional barriers were removed and optimal conditions for learning created. Their plan included a core set of operating principles known as the "Five Pillars" which included high expectations for all, choice and commitment, more time in school, the power to lead for school principals, and a relentless focus on results.

But Feinberg and Levin didn't stop there. They presented their plan to district leaders in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and requested the opportunity to implement their vision with one class of fifth grade students. In 1994, with the school district's signoff, they launched the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). With 47 students and an unwavering commitment to hard work and high expectations, Feinberg and Levin delivered results. Although half of their students began the year with failing scores on the Texas state test, by the end of the year 98 percent passed both reading and math sections.

Fueled by a desire to serve more students and the knowledge of their current students' limited options for high-quality schools, Feinberg and Levin decided to continue and build upon what they had started. In 1995, they opened the first two KIPP middle schools; one in Houston, led by Feinberg, and one in the South Bronx, led by Levin. As charter schools, Feinberg and Levin were given the autonomy to create the school cultures they desired in exchange for student achievement results.

For the next five years, the two friends, alongside their dedicated school staff, focused on serving each of their students with excellence. Together, they learned all that they could about how to drive student achievement and prepare students for success in college and life. Then, in 2000, Don and Doris Fisher, co-founders of Gap, Inc., formed a partnership with Feinberg and Levin, establishing the KIPP Foundation, to replicate and grow KIPP to serve greater numbers of students in underserved communities across the country.

Today, with Feinberg and Levin's continued leadership, the KIPP model has been replicated in 125 schools nationwide that collectively serve more than 39,000 traditionally underserved students in grades preK-12, **including more than 600 students in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.** Moreover, during this period of rapid expansion, KIPP schools led and staffed by outstanding teams of educators have achieved a track record of sustained and consistent high results. These results led Bill Gates to remark:

*"Now, there are a few places -- very few -- where great teachers are being made. A good example of one is a set of charter schools called KIPP. KIPP means Knowledge Is Power...They take the poorest kids, and over 96 percent of their high school graduates go to four-year colleges. And the whole spirit and attitude in those schools is very different than in the normal public schools. They're team teaching. They're constantly improving their teachers. They're taking data, the test scores, and saying to a teacher, "Hey, you caused this amount of increase." They're deeply engaged in making teaching better." – **BILL GATES, 2009 TED Conference***

Every day, as a result of Feinberg and Levin's bold and pioneering leadership, KIPP students across the nation are proving that demographics do not define destiny. More than 87 percent of KIPP students are from low-income families and eligible for the federal free or reduced-price meals program, and 95 percent are African American or Latino. Nationally, over 95% of KIPP 8th grade classes outperform their local districts on state tests in math and reading. 94% of KIPP students have graduated from high school, and 84% have matriculated to college. In Oklahoma, the George Kaiser Family Foundation says:

*"KIPP Tulsa is the best example of a national charter model that focuses on at-risk students with a college prep curriculum." – **GEORGE KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION***

In community after community, KIPP schools are challenging the status quo, forcing individuals to step back and reassess what is possible for children growing up in America's most challenging neighborhoods. It is this shift in mindset that led author Malcolm Gladwell to observe in his bestselling book *Outliers*:

*“KIPP Academy seems like the kind of school in the kind of neighborhood with the kind of student that would make educators despair - except that the minute you enter the building, it’s clear that something is different. The students walk quietly down the hallways in single file. In the classroom, they are taught to turn and address anyone talking to them in a protocol known as ‘SSLANT’: smile, sit up, listen, ask questions, nod when being spoken to, and track with your eyes. On the walls of the school’s corridors are hundreds of pennants from the colleges that KIPP graduates have gone on to attend. Last year, hundreds of families from across the Bronx entered the lottery for KIPP’s two fifth-grade classes. It is no exaggeration to say that just over ten years into its existence, KIPP has become one of the most desirable public schools in New York City.” – **MALCOLM GLADWELL, *Outliers****

While Feinberg and Levin continue to focus on supporting the growth and quality of the KIPP network, the two are also dedicated to sharing all that they have learned with those who seek to eliminate educational inequality within the U.S. and internationally. Today, examples of KIPP’s impact beyond its own schools and students abound. For example:

- In 2011-12, KIPP offered 32 reform-minded district and charter management organization (CMO) leaders the opportunity to participate in an eight-month, KIPP-led training program on how to design an effective principal development program within their own organization. Collectively, this program has the potential to impact 3.1 million students across the U.S.
- Since 2003, the KIPP School Leadership Programs have trained 110 school leaders from other high-performing charter organizations giving them the skill and tools to open and lead their own schools.
- Last year, KIPP’s early-stage Global Fellows program trained educators from across the globe to open KIPP-like schools in their home countries (2 from South Africa and one from India). In 2012, KIPP will train an additional six Global Fellows.
- KIPP leaders, including Feinberg and Levin, play a central role on Capitol Hill advocating for legislation that will remove obstacles to charter school growth so that KIPP schools and others can develop and flourish. For example, KIPP has helped lead the charge that resulted in a new federal grant program to support the nation’s highest performing charter school models. To date, this grant competition has supported the growth of more than 250 new high-quality charter schools located in 17 states and the District of Columbia. In addition, KIPP leaders successfully advocated to change U.S.D.A. policies to ensure that all disadvantaged students attending an extended school day at traditional public schools and charter schools are eligible to receive an afternoon snack and school supper to nourish their bodies while they study and participate in enrichment activities.

These are just a few examples of how Feinberg, Levin, and KIPP are playing a role in ensuring that – year by year – more children wake up and head off to a school that is truly preparing them for a life of choices.

*“I want to say that I can't thank Dave and Mike enough— and the hundreds of dedicated leaders and teachers at KIPP who, every day, are bettering the lives of tens of thousands of students. You are living proof that in America, education truly can be the great equalizer. Finally, I want to give a special shout-out to KIPP for being the organization that has led the way in taking success to scale.” – **U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION ARNE DUNCAN, KIPP Annual Dinner, April 2010***

In the next five years, Feinberg and Levin have helped chart a course for KIPP's continued growth and impact. By 2015-16, 55,000 students attending KIPP schools will be on the path to a college degree, a path that fewer than 10 percent of American children from low-income families typically follow. In addition, KIPP as a network aims to serve as a catalytic force for change in underserved communities and a national system of schools that is leading the way on college completion. In his speech at the 2012 KIPP School Summit, President Bill Clinton praised Feinberg and Levin for what they created and implored the KIPP community to continue:

*"I wish there were 10 times or 100 times as many KIPP schools because you have proved that you have solved the number one challenge in American education...The reason that KIPP can work is that the circumstances of your birth are not destiny...You have proved you can replicate excellence. But it almost imposes an even bigger responsibility on you, both to keep growing, and to keep screaming until people can't bear to go to sleep at night without giving the children in their charge the opportunities that you have given to children all across America."* - **PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON, KIPP School Summit 2012**

It is my sincere pleasure to nominate Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin for the prestigious Brock International Prize in Education. For their unwavering commitment to underserved students everywhere and their innovative contributions to the field of education, I can think of no better recipients to receive the distinguished title of 2013 Brock Laureate. In 1994, the two made a promise to 47 students to do whatever it took to get them to and through college. Eighteen years later, that promise is being extended to more than 39,000 – and growing – KIPPsters.

Sincerely,

David Wick

# ARTICLES

## **Two Guys...and a Dream**

*By Susan Headden*

This story appears in the February 20, 2006 print edition of U.S. News & World Report.

Ask Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin what drove them to write one of the greatest educational success stories in recent times, and their answer seems reasonable enough: "ignorance." Except that the ignorance they speak of wasn't that of their students; it was their own. "We didn't know what we didn't know," says Feinberg. "No one said how impossible this was going to be."

That's a good thing. Because if these two Ivy League-educated white guys had really understood the challenges of teaching fifth graders in inner-city Houston when they started out 14 years ago, they might never have had the audacity to found the Knowledge Is Power Program, a national network of public schools that has posted stunning achievement gains and shattered all manner of myths about the academic capabilities of minority kids.

As it was, Feinberg and Levin had confidence but no clue. For Feinberg, the realization came on the first day of school, the minute he said, "Hi, I'm Mr. Feinberg. You can call me Mr. F." Levin, a fellow Teach for America recruit, didn't fare much better. When the school added 17 kids to the 11 he had started with, Levin put them in groups facing each other. "What no one had told me," he recalls, "is that they were from rival gangs." There were bets--a running pool with odds--of whether he would make it past Thanksgiving.

**Raising eyebrows.** Sorely humbled, the two resolved to learn everything they could about how to connect with the 10-year-old mind. "For two years we worked really hard," says Feinberg. "And as with anything, your skills get better with time."

And yet, like most idealistic teachers, Levin and Feinberg remained frustrated by institutional barriers. They could get superior results, they knew, only if they had the freedom to teach the way they wanted and considerably more time on task. So one night in 1993, while listening to U2's *Achtung Baby* on repeat play, they brainstormed until dawn and arrived at a plan for a fifth grade that embodied their belief in high standards, hard work, and a focus on results. Today, KIPP boasts 44 middle schools, two high schools, and one prekindergarten from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. And the results are raising eyebrows throughout the educational world. KIPP students consistently outperform their counterparts in traditional public schools on standardized tests, and more than 80 percent of KIPP students from the classes of 2004 and 2005 are enrolled in four-year colleges.

The premise of KIPP is simple: Do whatever it takes to learn. Under a contract signed by students, parents, and teachers, students go to school from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. every weekday, every other Saturday morning, and for an extra month in the summer--over 60 percent more class time than the average school year. Teachers are on call 24-7 to answer questions about homework (the better they teach, the fewer the calls), and parents are held accountable.

**Carrot--and stick.** A "no excuses" culture of strict discipline prevails. Should a student forget his homework, he is banished to the doorway of the class--forbidden to speak to



classmates, yet still taking in the lesson. If a single child fails to look at the teacher, the instructor will stop the whole class until he does. Once, when an exasperated Feinberg couldn't get a student to do her homework, he went to her home and, with her mother's permission, hauled the family's 37-inch TV out of the living room and installed it at the front of his classroom. When the student delivered, she got the TV back.

At the same time, KIPP students are offered novel incentives to work hard and behave. They earn--or lose--points toward a weekly "paycheck," a chit that can be cashed for books or T-shirts at the school store or the privilege of attending a weeklong field trip at the end of the school year.

The impact of this carrot-and-stick approach is dramatically evident at the KIPP school housed in Independent School 151, a dingy industrial-style building in New York's bleak South Bronx. In the main lobby, visitors are greeted by two New York City policemen and posted tips on preventing grand larceny. Lined up for lunch, the kids are shouting, shoving, and demonstrably ignoring reprimands from a hall monitor. Upstairs, on the KIPP floor, is a very different scene: In hallways lined with A-grade work and pennants from teachers' alma maters, uniformed students stand silent and still. What's remarkable is that both groups of students come from the same neighborhoods and demographic.

Above all, though, it is passionate teaching that makes KIPP work. And Feinberg and Levin, no slouches in the passion department themselves, have handpicked and nurtured exceptionally smart, creative, and energetic educators who are willing to give their utmost to reach their students, even if it means leading them in silly multiplication-table raps. "Traditional education for the hip-hop generation," Levin calls it. When a teacher asks a question, most of the hands in the room fly up.

It is a crucial part of the founders' mission to foster a culture in which these kinds of teachers can thrive. "We don't have a monopoly on hardworking teachers," says Feinberg. "All over the country there are teachers' cars in the parking lot at 7 in the morning that are still there at 5 at night. But they are often working alone. At KIPP, *all* the cars are in the parking lot at 7, and they're still there at 5."

Finding qualified teachers to sign on to this cruise, however--even with the higher salaries KIPP pays--is a growing challenge, one that Feinberg and Levin say they can't solve without taking control of the training and certification process themselves. Already, KIPP runs a training program for principals at the Haas School of Business at the University of California-Berkeley. Extending that to teachers is an ambitious goal, one that would very likely require new legislation in individual states. But Levin, nothing if not persistent, insists that anything less is just tinkering around the edges. "Teaching has to become one of our society's most critical professions, rewarded and respected," he says. "And the cartels that control entry--the unions, the education schools--need to be addressed."

Certainly, when they chose the classroom, neither Feinberg nor Levin imagined he was entering a glamorous or lucrative field. "How many of those women on *Sex and the City* ever dated a teacher?" Levin wants to know. Feinberg, who majored in international relations at the University of Pennsylvania, likes to say that he became a teacher because Mardi Gras coincided with the administration of the law school entrance exam. But both men were possessed of a strong social conscience and a wide reformist streak. "My

personality is not to sit and watch a problem develop but to do something about it," says Feinberg. "Not that I don't sometimes make it worse, but at least I do something."

**"Moral compass."** The two met on the first day of Teach for America training when Feinberg was angling to meet another new teacher. The woman needed a ride to the store, but Feinberg didn't drive a stick shift, so for cover, he asked Levin to come along. He didn't know that Levin, raised in Manhattan, couldn't drive a stick either. Friends ever since, they embarrass each other with praise. "Dave is one of the most passionate and loyal people I have ever met," says Feinberg. "There are lots of fakes and phonies when it comes to friendship, but Dave is the exact opposite. And watching him teach ... he just creates this aura around him." Says Levin, "Mike is like a moral compass. You think that if you follow him, you must be on the right track of life."

Although they share many traits, including refreshingly restrained egos, each brings complementary skills to the enterprise. One who has had a chance to observe the two in action is Don Fisher, the founder and chairman emeritus of the Gap clothing chain and the principal benefactor of the KIPP Foundation. Levin, says Fisher, is "a visionary," a man with so much enthusiasm "he can't finish his sentences." Feinberg, he says, is a great operations man. Neither, he says, is fond of spending time behind a desk. When Fisher asked Levin to be the CEO of the KIPP Foundation, Levin said he would accept only if he could teach at the same time. (Fisher later persuaded Levin to look outside for a CEO, and in Richard Barth, Fisher says, Levin "hit a 10-strike.") Feinberg, too, admits that "liability insurance is not the sort of thing that gets me psyched to get up in the morning." But he sees running the business as a means to an end. And for both men, the end is a return to teaching fifth grade.

Yet as perennial students themselves, both Feinberg and Levin have relished their lessons in such business disciplines as financing and fundraising, and as they did as rookie teachers, they have learned by making mistakes. "We'd become good at managing 10-year-olds," says Feinberg, "but we had no clue of how to manage adults."

One of the big lessons, he says, was "how to balance a sense of urgency with maturity." The urgency comes from the need to play catch-up with kids who are starting from so far behind; at the KIPP D.C. Key Academy in Washington, D.C., for instance, the average fifth grader enters with the test scores of a third grader. "The fifth grade is like the fourth quarter, when you've had the two-minute warning and you're down by a touchdown," Feinberg says. "You can still win, but every second counts." Yet his impatience, he admits, has sent him into some headlong dives. He recalls the day a bad ice storm slammed into Houston. "Other schools were closing, but I demanded that the buses come and pick the KIPP kids up. Could I have let the kids spend just *one* day at home watching TV and not put them at risk?" he asks. "Yes."

Critics of KIPP are hard to find, but those who have raised concerns cite the rigid discipline and its practice of paying for progress. If students are used to being bribed for performance, how will they do when the only reward is in the learning itself? In response, Feinberg and Levin say the paycheck is but one tool in a whole bag of incentives. Playing for the love of the game, they say, is simply not realistic for the whole group. "Some kids are interested and motivated from the word *go*," says Levin. "But the majority are not, so the rewards are like a crutch to get them walking on their own."

A bigger question for KIPP's founders, and for public education in general, is whether the success of their program can be replicated elsewhere. Some observers argue that KIPP parents, however underprivileged, are inherently more motivated than the parents of other public school kids. To which Feinberg responds: "More motivated? They have to answer a knock on the door and listen to us for an hour and sign their name? How difficult." Levin invites doubters to compare the statistics of KIPP kids when they enter the program and when they leave. "The kids in fourth grade started out with the same low scores, the same sorts of disciplinary problems," he says.

**Final exam.** Looking back over a decade in the classroom, Feinberg and Levin cite the sorts of triumphs and failures familiar to any adventurer in the blackboard jungle. "There have been so many nights being up until midnight after waking up at 5 a.m. and voice mails from parents yelling at me like I'm a little worse than the devil," Feinberg says. Levin, too, takes an emotional beating almost daily. Even as he has grown as a teacher and an administrator, he says, "it doesn't mean the problems in students' lives get any easier to handle--the crises of confidence, the lack of skills, the peer pressure. Every day there are moments." But every day, too, he says, the disappointments are canceled out by the rewards.

In the rewards department, Feinberg recalls a recognition ceremony for eighth graders at a KIPP school in Houston. (The "G" word is reserved for high school and college.) A few of the students had been accepted to parochial high schools, but they couldn't afford the tuition. So their peers held a car wash for them: They raised \$360--matched by Feinberg's mother--and announced a scholarship fund. "There was not a dry eye in the house," says Feinberg. "I told them, 'You have passed my final exam, not in math or English but in the most important subject of all, and that is life.'"

Levin has no shortage of such moments of his own. But he leaves it at this: "We don't go to bed at night," he says, "wondering why we are on the planet."

### **Dave Levin**

**BORN** March 16, 1970. **EDUCATION:** B.A., Yale University. **FAMILY:** Single.

**QUOTE:** "People want to replicate parts of what we are doing, but it's the totality of the efforts that make this work, and they all pale in comparison with the personal connection; if you just had great teachers, it would work."

### **Mike Feinberg**

**BORN:** Oct. 20, 1968. **EDUCATION:** B.A., University of Pennsylvania. **FAMILY:**

**Married; one child. QUOTE:** "I believe that if you are passionate about making things happen and keeping the faith and working hard, then you have reason to believe that good things will happen. Not every day, but most days."

## **America's Best Leaders: Mike Feinberg & David Levin, Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)**

By EDDY RAMÍREZ

U.S. News & World Report

November 19, 2008

Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin are cofounders of the Knowledge Is Power Program, a network of high-achieving, publicly financed but independently run charter schools that serves mostly low-income minority children in 19 states and Washington, D.C. The following are excerpts of conversations with U.S. News's Eddy Ramírez.

**Feinberg on Levin:** Dave is the quarterback on the field who remains cool under pressure. We had a former student who passed away in 2002. I couldn't disconnect from the emotion of it. I called Dave and said, "I need your help," and he was on the first plane to Houston. He got involved in helping the family with the arrangements and was incredibly supportive in moments when I wasn't being very strong. I tend to run straight ahead, thinking that if I run into the wall enough times, eventually it will come down. Dave's the one who says, "Well, Mike, you can do it that way, but if you walk to the side, there is a door." He knows when people need a pat on the back or a shove on the butt.

**Levin on Feinberg:** After Hurricane Katrina, there were thousands of families relocated to Houston, and Mike spearheaded an effort to open a school for several hundred kids. They put the school together in a couple of weeks, and the school had tremendous success. He never loses sight of the goal—no matter how difficult the challenges are. It goes back to his belief that promises to children are sacred. If Mike says something is going to happen, it's going to happen. Leadership is often a lonely task, and I feel blessed that the last 16 years I've been able to share this journey with Mike. There is no way we could have done this without each other.

# The New York Times

September 14, 2011

## What if the Secret to Success Is Failure?

By PAUL TOUGH

Dominic Randolph can seem a little out of place at Riverdale Country School — which is odd, because he’s the headmaster. Riverdale is one of New York City’s most prestigious private schools, with a 104-year-old campus that looks down grandly on Van Cortlandt Park from the top of a steep hill in the richest part of the Bronx. On the discussion boards of [UrbanBaby.com](#), worked-up moms from the Upper East Side argue over whether Riverdale sends enough seniors to Harvard, Yale and Princeton to be considered truly “TT” (top-tier, in UrbanBabyese), or whether it is more accurately labeled “2T” (second-tier), but it is, certainly, part of the city’s private-school elite, a place members of the establishment send their kids to learn to be members of the establishment. Tuition starts at \$38,500 a year, and that’s for prekindergarten.

Randolph, by contrast, comes across as an iconoclast, a disrupter, even a bit of an eccentric. He dresses for work every day in a black suit with a narrow tie, and the outfit, plus his cool demeanor and sweep of graying hair, makes you wonder, when you first meet him, if he might have played sax in a ska band in the ’80s. (The English accent helps.) He is a big thinker, always chasing new ideas, and a conversation with him can feel like a one-man TED conference, dotted with references to the latest work by behavioral psychologists and management gurus and design theorists. When he became headmaster in 2007, he swapped offices with his secretary, giving her the reclusive inner sanctum where previous headmasters sat and remodeling the small outer reception area into his own open-concept work space, its walls covered with whiteboard paint on which he sketches ideas and slogans. One day when I visited, one wall was bare except for a white sheet of paper. On it was printed a single black question mark.

For the headmaster of an intensely competitive school, Randolph, who is 49, is surprisingly skeptical about many of the basic elements of a contemporary high-stakes American education. He did away with Advanced Placement classes in the high school soon after he arrived at Riverdale; he encourages his teachers to limit the homework they assign; and he says that the standardized tests that Riverdale and other private schools require for admission to kindergarten and to middle school are “a patently unfair system” because they evaluate students almost entirely by I.Q. “This push on tests,” he told me, “is missing out on some serious parts of what it means to be a successful human.”

The most critical missing piece, Randolph explained as we sat in his office last fall, is *character* — those essential traits of mind and habit that were drilled into him at boarding school in England and that also have deep roots in American history. “Whether it’s the

pioneer in the Conestoga wagon or someone coming here in the 1920s from southern Italy, there was this idea in America that if you worked hard and you showed real grit, that you could be successful,” he said. “Strangely, we’ve now forgotten that. People who have an easy time of things, who get 800s on their SAT’s, I worry that those people get feedback that everything they’re doing is great. And I think as a result, we are actually setting them up for long-term failure. When that person suddenly has to face up to a difficult moment, then I think they’re screwed, to be honest. I don’t think they’ve grown the capacities to be able to handle that.”

Randolph has been pondering throughout his 23-year career as an educator the question of whether and how schools should impart good character. It has often felt like a lonely quest, but it has led him in some interesting directions. In the winter of 2005, Randolph read “[Learned Optimism](#),” a book by Martin Seligman, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania who helped establish the Positive Psychology movement. Randolph found the book intriguing, and he arranged a meeting with the author. As it happened, on the morning that Randolph made the trip to Philadelphia, Seligman had scheduled a separate meeting with David Levin, the co-founder of the [KIPP network of charter schools](#) and the superintendent of the KIPP schools in New York City. Seligman decided he might as well combine the two meetings, and he invited Christopher Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan, who was also visiting Penn that day, to join him and Randolph and Levin in his office for a freewheeling discussion of psychology and schooling.

Levin had also spent many years trying to figure out how to provide lessons in character to his students, who were almost all black or Latino and from low-income families. At the first KIPP school, in Houston, he and his co-founder, Michael Feinberg, filled the walls with slogans like “Work Hard” and “Be Nice” and “There Are No Shortcuts,” and they developed a system of rewards and demerits designed to train their students not only in fractions and algebra but also in perseverance and empathy. Like Randolph, Levin went to Seligman’s office expecting to talk about optimism. But Seligman surprised them both by pulling out a new and very different book, which he and Peterson had just finished: “[Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification](#),” a scholarly, 800-page tome that weighed in at three and a half pounds. It was intended, according to the authors, as a “manual of the sanities,” an attempt to inaugurate what they described as a “science of good character.”

It was, in other words, exactly what Randolph and Levin had been looking for, separately, even if neither of them had quite known it. Seligman and Peterson consulted works from Aristotle to Confucius, from the Upanishads to the Torah, from the Boy Scout Handbook to profiles of Pokémon characters, and they settled on 24 character strengths common to all cultures and eras. The list included some we think of as traditional noble traits, like bravery, citizenship, fairness, wisdom and integrity; others that veer into the emotional realm, like love, humor, zest and appreciation of beauty; and still others that are more concerned with day-to-day human interactions: social intelligence (the ability to recognize interpersonal dynamics and adapt quickly to different social situations), kindness, self-regulation, gratitude.

In most societies, Seligman and Peterson wrote, these strengths were considered to have a moral valence, and in many cases they overlapped with religious laws and strictures. But their true importance did not come from their relationship to any system of ethics or moral laws but from their practical benefit: cultivating these strengths represented a reliable path to “the good life,” a life that was not just happy but also meaningful and fulfilling.

Six years after that first meeting, Levin and Randolph are trying to put this conception of character into action in their schools. In the process, they have found themselves wrestling with questions that have long confounded not just educators but anyone trying to nurture a thriving child or simply live a good life. What is good character? Is it really something that can be taught in a formal way, in the classroom, or is it the responsibility of the family, something that is inculcated gradually over years of experience? Which qualities matter most for a child trying to negotiate his way to a successful and autonomous adulthood? And are the answers to those questions the same in Harlem and in Riverdale?

**Levin had believed** in the importance of character since KIPP’s inception. But on the day of his trip to see Seligman, he was feeling a new urgency about the subject. Six years earlier, in 1999, the first group of students to enter KIPP Academy middle school, which Levin founded and ran in the South Bronx, triumphed on the eighth-grade citywide achievement test, graduating with the highest scores in the Bronx and the fifth-highest in all of New York City. Every morning of middle school they passed a giant sign in the stairwell reminding them of their mission: “Climb the Mountain to College.” And as they left KIPP for high school, they seemed poised to do just that: not only did they have outstanding academic results, but most of them also won admission to highly selective private and Catholic schools, often with full scholarships.

But as Levin told me when we spoke last fall, for many students in that first cohort, things didn’t go as planned. “We thought, O.K., our first class was the fifth-highest-performing class in all of New York City,” Levin said. “We got 90 percent into private and parochial schools. It’s all going to be solved. But it wasn’t.” Almost every member of the cohort did make it through high school, and more than 80 percent of them enrolled in college. But then the mountain grew steeper, and every few weeks, it seemed, Levin got word of another student who decided to drop out. According to a report that KIPP issued last spring, only 33 percent of students who graduated from a KIPP middle school 10 or more years ago have graduated from a four-year college. That rate is considerably better than the 8 percent of children from low-income families who currently complete college nationwide, and it even beats the average national rate of college completion for all income groups, which is 31 percent. But it still falls well short of KIPP’s stated goal: that 75 percent of KIPP alumni will graduate from a four-year college, and 100 percent will be prepared for a stable career.

As Levin watched the progress of those KIPP alumni, he noticed something curious: the students who persisted in college were not necessarily the ones who had excelled academically at KIPP; they were the ones with exceptional character strengths, like

optimism and persistence and social intelligence. They were the ones who were able to recover from a bad grade and resolve to do better next time; to bounce back from a fight with their parents; to resist the urge to go out to the movies and stay home and study instead; to persuade professors to give them extra help after class. Those skills weren't enough on their own to earn students a B.A., Levin knew. But for young people without the benefit of a lot of family resources, without the kind of safety net that their wealthier peers enjoyed, they seemed an indispensable part of making it to graduation day.

What appealed to Levin about the list of character strengths that Seligman and Peterson compiled was that it was presented not as a finger-wagging guilt trip about good values and appropriate behavior but as a recipe for a successful and happy life. He was wary of the idea that KIPP's aim was to instill in its students "middle-class values," as though well-off kids had some depth of character that low-income students lacked. "The thing that I think is great about the character-strength approach," he told me, "is it is fundamentally devoid of value judgment."

Still, neither Levin nor Dominic Randolph had a clear vision of how to turn an 800-page psychology text into a practical program. After that first meeting in Seligman's office, Levin and Randolph kept in touch, calling and e-mailing, swapping articles and Web links, and they soon discovered that they shared a lot of ideas and interests, despite the very different school environments in which they worked. They decided to join forces, to try to tackle the mysteries of character together, and they turned for help to Angela Duckworth, who at the time was a graduate student in Seligman's department (she is now an assistant professor). Duckworth came to Penn in 2002 at the age of 32, after working for a decade as a teacher and a charter-school consultant. When she applied to the Ph.D. program at Penn, she wrote in her application essay that her experiences in schools had given her "a distinctly different view of school reform" than the one she started out with in her 20s. "The problem, I think, is not only the schools but also the students themselves," she wrote. "Here's why: learning is hard. True, learning is fun, exhilarating and gratifying — but it is also often daunting, exhausting and sometimes discouraging. . . . To help chronically low-performing but intelligent students, educators and parents must first recognize that character is at least as important as intellect."

Duckworth's early research showed that measures of self-control can be a more reliable predictor of students' grade-point averages than their I.Q.'s. But while self-control seemed to be a critical ingredient in attaining basic success, Duckworth came to feel it wasn't as relevant when it came to outstanding achievement. People who accomplished great things, she noticed, often combined a passion for a single mission with an unswerving dedication to achieve that mission, whatever the obstacles and however long it might take. She decided she needed to name this quality, and she chose the word "grit."

She developed a test to measure grit, which she called the Grit Scale. It is a deceptively simple test, in that it requires you to rate yourself on just 12 questions, from "I finish whatever I begin" to "I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one." It takes about three minutes to complete, and it relies entirely on self-report — and yet when Duckworth took it out into the field, she found it was remarkably predictive of



success. At Penn, high grit ratings allowed students with relatively low college-board scores to nonetheless achieve high G.P.A.'s. Duckworth and her collaborators gave their grit test to more than 1,200 freshman cadets as they entered West Point and embarked on the grueling summer training course known as Beast Barracks. The military has developed its own complex evaluation, called the Whole Candidate Score, to judge incoming cadets and predict which of them will survive the demands of West Point; it includes academic grades, a gauge of physical fitness and a Leadership Potential Score. But at the end of Beast Barracks, the more accurate predictor of which cadets persisted and which ones dropped out turned out to be Duckworth's 12-item grit questionnaire.

Levin and Randolph asked Duckworth to use the new methods and tools she was developing to help them investigate the question of character at KIPP and Riverdale, and she and a handful of Penn graduate students began making regular treks from Philadelphia to New York. The first question Duckworth addressed, again, was the relative importance of I.Q. and self-control. She and her team of researchers gave middle-school students at Riverdale and KIPP a variety of psychological and I.Q. tests. They found that at both schools, I.Q. was the better predictor of scores on statewide achievement tests, but measures of self-control were more reliable indicators of report-card grades.

Duckworth's research convinced Levin and Randolph that they should try to foster self-control and grit in their students. Yet those didn't seem like the only character strengths that mattered. The full list of 24, on the other hand, felt too unwieldy. So they asked Peterson if he could narrow the list down to a more manageable handful, and he identified a set of strengths that were, according to his research, especially likely to predict life satisfaction and high achievement. After a few small adjustments (Levin and Randolph opted to drop love in favor of curiosity), they settled on a final list: zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism and curiosity.

Over the course of the next year and a half, Duckworth worked with Levin and Randolph to turn the list of seven strengths into a two-page evaluation, a questionnaire that could be completed by teachers or parents, or by students themselves. For each strength, teachers suggested a variety of "indicators," much like the questions Duckworth asked people to respond to on her grit questionnaire, and she road-tested several dozen of them at Riverdale and KIPP. She eventually settled on the 24 most statistically reliable ones, from "This student is eager to explore new things" (an indicator of curiosity) to "This student believes that effort will improve his or her future" (optimism).

For Levin, the next step was clear. Wouldn't it be cool, he mused, if each student graduated from school with not only a G.P.A. but also a C.P.A., for character-point average? If you were a college-admissions director or a corporate human-resources manager selecting entry-level employees, wouldn't you like to know which ones scored highest in grit or optimism or zest? And if you were a parent of a KIPP student, wouldn't you want to know how your son or daughter stacked up next to the rest of the class in character as well as in reading ability? As soon as he got the final list of indicators from Duckworth and Peterson, Levin started working to turn it into a specific, concise

assessment that he could hand out to students and parents at KIPP's New York City schools twice a year: the first-ever character report card.

**Back at Riverdale**, though, the idea of a character report card made Randolph nervous. "I have a philosophical issue with quantifying character," he explained to me one afternoon. "With my school's specific population, at least, as soon as you set up something like a report card, you're going to have a bunch of people doing test prep for it. I don't want to come up with a metric around character that could then be gamed. I would hate it if that's where we ended up."

Still, he did think that the inventory Duckworth and Peterson developed could be a useful tool in communicating with students about character. And so he has been taking what one Riverdale teacher described as a "viral approach" to spreading the idea of this new method of assessing character throughout the Riverdale community. He talks about character at parent nights, asks pointed questions in staff meetings, connects like-minded members of his faculty and instructs them to come up with new programs. Last winter, Riverdale students in the fifth and sixth grades took the 24-indicator survey, and their teachers rated them as well. The results were discussed by teachers and administrators, but they weren't shared with students or parents, and they certainly weren't labeled a "report card."

As I spent time at Riverdale last year, it became apparent to me that the debate over character at the school wasn't just about how best to evaluate and improve students' character. It went deeper, to the question of what "character" really meant. When Randolph arrived at Riverdale, the school already had in place a character-education program, of a sort. Called **CARE**, for Children Aware of Riverdale Ethics, the program was adopted in 1989 in the lower school, which at Riverdale means prekindergarten through fifth grade. It is a blueprint for niceness, mandating that students "Treat everyone with respect" and "Be aware of other people's feelings and find ways to help those whose feelings have been hurt." Posters in the hallway remind students of the virtues related to CARE ("Practice Good Manners . . . Avoid Gossiping . . . Help Others"). In the lower school, many teachers describe it as a proud and essential part of what makes Riverdale the school that it is.

When I asked Randolph last winter about CARE, he was diplomatic. "I see the character strengths as CARE 2.0," he explained. "I'd basically like to take all of this new character language and say that we're in the next generation of CARE."

In fact, though, the character-strength approach of Seligman and Peterson isn't an expansion of programs like CARE; if anything, it is a repudiation of them. In 2008, a national organization called the Character Education Partnership published a paper that divided character education into two categories: programs that develop "moral character," which embodies ethical values like fairness, generosity and integrity; and those that address "performance character," which includes values like effort, diligence and perseverance. The CARE program falls firmly on the "moral character" side of the divide, while the seven strengths that Randolph and Levin have chosen for their schools

lean much more heavily toward performance character: while they do have a moral component, strengths like zest, optimism, social intelligence and curiosity aren't particularly heroic; they make you think of Steve Jobs or Bill Clinton more than the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. or Gandhi.

The two teachers Randolph has chosen to oversee the school's character initiative are K.C. Cohen, the guidance counselor for the middle and upper schools, and Karen Fierst, a learning specialist in the lower school. Cohen is friendly and thoughtful, in her mid-30s, a graduate of Fieldston, the private school just down the road from Riverdale. She is intensely interested in character development, and like Randolph, she is worried about the character of Riverdale students. But she is not yet entirely convinced by the seven character strengths that Riverdale has ostensibly chosen. "When I think of good character, I think: Are you fair? Are you honest in dealings with other people? Are you a cheater?" she told me. "I don't think so much about: Are you tenacious? Are you a hard worker? I think, Are you a good person?"

Cohen's vision of character is much closer to "moral character" than "performance character," and so far, that vision remains the dominant one at Riverdale. When I spent a day at the school in March, sitting in on a variety of classes and meetings, messages about behavior and values permeated the day, but those messages stayed almost entirely in the moral dimension. It was a hectic day at the middle school — it was pajama day, plus there was a morning assembly, and then on top of that, the kids in French class who were going on the two-week trip to Bordeaux for spring break had to leave early in order to make their overnight flight to Paris. The topic for the assembly was heroes, and a half-dozen students stood up in front of their classmates — about 350 kids, in all — and each made a brief presentation about a particular hero he or she had chosen: Ruby Nell Bridges, the African-American girl who was part of the first group to integrate the schools in New Orleans in 1960; Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit vendor whose self-immolation helped spark the recent revolt in that country; the actor and activist Paul Robeson.

In the assembly, in classes and in conversations with different students, I heard a lot of talk about values and ethics, and the values that were emphasized tended to be social values: inclusion, tolerance, diversity. (I heard a lot more about black history at Riverdale than I did at the KIPP schools I visited.) One eighth-grade girl I asked about character said that for her and her friends, the biggest issue was inclusion — who was invited to whose bat mitzvah; who was being shunned on Facebook. Character, as far as I could tell, was being defined at Riverdale mostly in terms of helping other people — or at least not hurting their feelings.

Randolph told me that he had concerns about a character program that comprised only those kind of nice-guy values. "The danger with character is if you just revert to these general terms — respect, honesty, tolerance — it seems really vague," he said. "If I stand in front of the kids and just say, 'It's really important for you to respect each other,' I think they glaze over. But if you say, 'Well, actually you need to exhibit self-control,' or you explain the value of social intelligence — this will help you collaborate more

effectively — then it seems a bit more tangible.”

When I spoke to Karen Fierst, the teacher who was overseeing the character project for the Riverdale lower school, she said she was worried that it would be a challenge to convince the students and their parents that there was anything in the 24 character strengths that might actually benefit them. For KIPP kids, she said, the notion that character could help them get through college was a powerful lure, one that would motivate them to take the strengths seriously. For kids at Riverdale, though, there was little doubt that they would graduate from college. “It will just happen,” Fierst explained. “It happened to every generation in their family before them. And so it’s harder to get them to invest in this idea. For KIPP students, learning these strengths is partly about trying to demystify what makes other people successful — kind of like, ‘We’re letting you in on the secret of what successful people are like.’ But kids here already live in a successful community. They’re not depending on their teachers to give them the information on how to be successful.”

**At KIPP Infinity middle school**, which occupies one floor of a school on West 133rd Street, across from the M.T.A.’s giant Manhattanville bus depot, report-card night last winter fell on a cold Thursday at the beginning of February. Report-card night is always a big deal at KIPP schools — parents are strongly urged to attend, and at Infinity, almost all of them do — but this particular evening carried an extra level of anxiety for both the administrators and the parents, because students were receiving their very first character report cards, and no one knew quite what to expect.

Logistically, the character report card had been a challenge to pull off. Teachers at all four KIPP middle schools in New York City had to grade every one of their students, on a scale of 1 to 5, on every one of the 24 character indicators, and more than a few of them found the process a little daunting. And now that report-card night had arrived, they had an even bigger challenge: explaining to parents just how those precise figures, rounded to the second decimal place, summed up their children’s character. I sat for a while with Mike Witter, a 31-year-old eighth-grade English teacher, as he talked through the character report card with Faith Flemister and her son Juaquin Bennett, a tall, hefty eighth grader in a gray hooded sweatshirt.

“For the past few years we’ve been working on a project to create a clearer picture for parents about the character of your child,” Witter explained to Flemister. “The categories that we ended up putting together represent qualities that have been studied and determined to be indicators of success. They mean you’re more likely to go to college. More likely to find a good job. Even surprising things, like they mean you’re more likely to get married, or more likely to have a family. So we think these are really important.”

Flemister nodded, and Witter began to work his way down the scores on Juaquin’s character report card, starting with the good news: every teacher had scored him as a perfect 5 on “Is polite to adults and peers,” and he did almost as well on “Keeps temper in check.” They were both indicators for interpersonal self-control.

“I can tell this is a real strength for you,” Witter said, turning to Juaquin. “This kind of self-control is something you’ve developed incredibly well. So that makes me think we need to start looking at: What’s something we can target? And the first thing that jumps out at me is this.” Witter pulled out a green felt-tip marker and circled one indicator on Juaquin’s report card. “ ‘Pays attention and resists distraction,’ ” Witter read aloud, an indicator for academic self-control. “That’s a little lower than some of the other numbers. Why do you think that is?”

“I talk too much in class,” Juaquin said, a little sheepishly, looking down at his black sneakers. “I sometimes stare off into space and don’t pay attention.”

The three of them talked over a few strategies to help Juaquin focus more in class, and by the end of the 15-minute conversation, Flemister seemed convinced by the new approach. “The strong points are not a surprise,” she said to Witter as he got up to talk to another family. “That’s just the type of person Juaquin is. But it’s good how you pinpoint what he can do to make things easier on himself. Then maybe his grades will pick up.”

A month later, I returned to KIPP to visit Witter’s classroom. By that point in the school year, character language had permeated Infinity. Kids wore T-shirts with the slogan “Infinite Character” and Seligman’s 24 character strengths listed on the back. The walls were covered with signs that read “Got self-control?” and “I actively participate!” (one indicator for zest). There was a bulletin board in the hallway topped with the words “Character Counts,” where students filled out and posted “Spotted!” cards when they saw a fellow student performing actions that demonstrate character. (Jasmine R. cited William N. for zest: “William was in math class and he raised his hand for every problem.”)

I came to Witter’s class to observe something that Levin was calling “dual-purpose instruction,” the practice of deliberately working explicit talk about character strengths into every lesson. Levin wanted math teachers to use the strengths in word problems; he explained that history teachers could use them to orient a class discussion about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. And when I arrived in Witter’s class at 7:45 on a Thursday morning in March, he was leading a discussion about Chinua Achebe’s novel “Things Fall Apart.” Above Witter’s head, at the front of the class, the seven character strengths were stenciled in four-inch-high letters, white on blue, from optimism to social intelligence. He asked his students to rank Okonkwo, the protagonist, on his various character strengths. There was a lot of back and forth, but in the end, most students agreed that Okonkwo rated highest on grit and lowest on self-control. Then a student named Yantzee raised his hand. “Can’t a trait backfire at you?” he asked.

“Sure, a trait can backfire,” Witter said. “Too much grit, like Okonkwo, you start to lose your ability to have empathy for other people. If you’re so gritty that you don’t understand why everyone’s complaining about how hard things are, because nothing’s hard for you, because you’re Mr. Grit, then you’re going to have a hard time being kind. Even love — being too loving might make you the kind of person who can get played.” There was a ripple of knowing laughter from the students. “So, yes, character is something you have to be careful about. Character strengths can become character

weaknesses.”

Though the seven character strengths aren't included in every lesson at KIPP, they do make it into most conversations about discipline. One day last winter, I was speaking with Sayuri Stabrowski, a 30-year-old seventh-and-eighth-grade reading teacher at KIPP Infinity, and she mentioned that she caught a girl chewing gum in her class earlier that day. “She denied it,” Stabrowski told me. “She said, ‘No, I’m not, I’m chewing my tongue.’ ” Stabrowski rolled her eyes as she told me the story. “I said, ‘O.K. fine.’ Then later in the class, I saw her chewing again, and I said: ‘You’re chewing gum! I see you.’ She said, ‘No, I’m not, see?’ and she moved the gum over in her mouth in this really obvious way, and we all saw what she was doing. Now, a couple of years ago, I probably would have blown my top and screamed. But this time, I was able to say: ‘Gosh, not only were you chewing gum, which is kind of minor, but you lied to me twice. That’s a real disappointment. What does that say about your character?’ And she was just devastated.”

Stabrowski was worried that the girl, who often struggled with her behavior, might have a mini-meltdown — a “baby attack,” in KIPP jargon — in the middle of the class, but in fact, the girl spit out her gum and sat through the rest of the class and then afterward came up to her teacher with tears in her eyes. “We had a long conversation,” Stabrowski told me. “She said: ‘I’m trying so hard to just grow up. But nothing ever changes!’ And I said: ‘Do you know what does change? You didn’t have a baby attack in front of the other kids, and two weeks ago, you would have.’ ”

To Tom Brunzell, who as the dean of students at KIPP Infinity oversaw the implementation of the character report card, what is going on in character conversations like that one isn't academic instruction at all, or even discipline; it's therapy. Specifically, it's a kind of cognitive behavioral therapy, the very practical, nuts-and-bolts psychological technique that provides the theoretical underpinning for the whole positive psychology field. Cognitive behavioral therapy, or C.B.T., involves using the conscious mind to understand and overcome unconscious fears and self-destructive habits, using techniques like “self-talk” — putting an immediate crisis in perspective by reminding yourself of the larger context. “The kids who succeed at KIPP are the ones who can C.B.T. themselves in the moment,” Brunzell told me. Part of the point of the character initiative, as he saw it, was to give their students the tools to do that. “All kids this age are having mini-implosions every day,” he said. “I mean, it's middle school, the worst years of their lives. But the kids who make it are the ones who can tell themselves: ‘I can rise above this little situation. I’m O.K. Tomorrow is a new day.’ ”

**For Randolph**, the experience that Brunzell was describing — the struggle to pull yourself through a crisis, to come to terms on a deep level with your own shortcomings and to labor to overcome them — is exactly what is missing for so many students at academically excellent schools like Riverdale. And perhaps surprisingly, it may turn out to be an area where the students at KIPP have a real advantage over Riverdale kids. On the professional development day in February when I visited Riverdale, Randolph had arranged a screening for his entire faculty of “Race to Nowhere,” a movie about the stresses facing mostly privileged American high-school students that has become an

underground hit in many wealthy suburbs, where one-time showings at schools, churches and community centers bring out hundreds of concerned parents. The movie paints a grim portrait of contemporary adolescence, rising in an emotional crescendo to the story of an overachieving teenage girl who committed suicide, apparently because of the ever-increasing pressure to succeed that she felt both at school and at home. At Riverdale, the film seemed to have a powerful effect on many of the staff; one teacher who came up to Randolph afterward had tears in her eyes.

“Race to Nowhere” has helped to coalesce a growing movement of psychologists and educators who argue that the systems and methods now in place to raise and educate well-off kids in the United States are in fact devastating them. One central figure in the movie is Madeline Levine, a psychologist in Marin County who is the author of a best-selling book, [“The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids.”](#) In her book, Levine cites studies and surveys to back up her contention that children of affluent parents now exhibit “unexpectedly high rates of emotional problems beginning in junior high school.” This is no accident of demographics, Levine says, but instead is a direct result of the child-raising practices that prevail in well-off American homes; wealthy parents today, she argues, are more likely to be emotionally distant from their children, and at the same time to insist on high levels of achievement, a potentially toxic blend of influences that can create “intense feelings of shame and hopelessness” in affluent children.

Cohen and Fierst told me that they also see many Riverdale parents who, while pushing their children to excel, also inadvertently shield them from exactly the kind of experience that can lead to character growth. As Fierst put it: “Our kids don’t put up with a lot of suffering. They don’t have a threshold for it. They’re protected against it quite a bit. And when they do get uncomfortable, we hear from their parents. We try to talk to parents about having to sort of make it O.K. for there to be challenge, because that’s where learning happens.”

Cohen said that in the middle school, “if a kid is a C student, and their parents think that they’re all-A’s, we do get a lot of pushback: ‘What are you talking about? This is a great paper!’ We have parents calling in and saying, for their kids, ‘Can’t you just give them two more days on this paper?’ Overindulging kids, with the intention of giving them everything and being loving, but at the expense of their character — that’s huge in our population. I think that’s one of the biggest problems we have at Riverdale.”

This is a problem, of course, for all parents, not just affluent ones. It is a central paradox of contemporary parenting, in fact: we have an acute, almost biological impulse to provide for our children, to give them everything they want and need, to protect them from dangers and discomforts both large and small. And yet we all know — on some level, at least — that what kids need more than anything is a little hardship: some challenge, some deprivation that they can overcome, even if just to prove to themselves that they can. As a parent, you struggle with these thorny questions every day, and if you make the right call even half the time, you’re lucky. But it’s one thing to acknowledge this dilemma in the privacy of your own home; it’s quite another to have it addressed in

public, at a school where you send your kids at great expense.

And it's that problem that Randolph is up against as he tries to push forward this new kind of conversation about character at Riverdale. When you work at a public school, whether it's a charter or a traditional public school, you're paid by the state, responsible, on some level, to your fellow citizens for the job you do preparing your students to join the adult world. When you work at a private school like Riverdale, though, even one with a long waiting list, you are always conscious that you're working for the parents who pay the tuition fees. Which makes a campaign like the one that Randolph is trying to embark on all the more complicated. If your premise is that your students are lacking in deep traits like grit and gratitude and self-control, you're implicitly criticizing the parenting they've received — which means you're implicitly criticizing your employers.

When I asked Randolph to explain just what he thought Riverdale students were missing out on, he told me the story of his own scholastic career. He did well in boarding school and was admitted to Harvard, but when he got to college, he felt lost, out of step with the power-tie careerism of the Reagan '80s. After two years at Harvard, Randolph left for a year to work in a low-paying manual job, as a carpenter's helper, trying to find himself. After college, he moved for a couple of years to Italy, where he worked odd jobs and studied opera. It was an uncertain and unsettled time in his life, filled with plenty of failed experiments and setbacks and struggles. Looking back on his life, though, Randolph says that the character strengths that enabled him to achieve the success that he has were not built in his years at Harvard or at the boarding schools he attended; they came out of those years of trial and error, of taking chances and living without a safety net. And it is precisely those kinds of experiences that he worries that his students aren't having.

"The idea of building grit and building self-control is that you get that through failure," Randolph explained. "And in most highly academic environments in the United States, no one fails anything."

Most Riverdale students can see before them a clear path to a certain type of success. They'll go to college, they'll graduate, they'll get well-paying jobs — and if they fall along the way, their families will almost certainly catch them, often well into their 20s or even 30s, if necessary. But despite their many advantages, Randolph isn't yet convinced that the education they currently receive at Riverdale, or the support they receive at home, will provide them with the skills to negotiate the path toward the deeper success that Seligman and Peterson hold up as the ultimate product of good character: a happy, meaningful, productive life. Randolph wants his students to succeed, of course — it's just that he believes that in order to do so, they first need to learn how to fail.

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# KIPP Shares Leadership Model With School Districts

By Christina Samuels, Ed Week, on March 21, 2012 3:42 PM

More than a dozen school districts are taking part in a leadership fellowship sponsored by the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) charter network, in order to learn how the network trains its school leaders. The KIPP Leadership Design Fellowship, which is funded through a \$50 million federal Investing in Innovation grant, has also brought together representatives from charter management organizations and educator training programs.

The group will meet at least three times between now and October, and will cover areas such as leadership development, principal training and residencies, and evaluation and support of school leaders. The first meeting is taking place this week in Houston. The districts did not have to pay to participate in the program. A full list of the participants can be found [here](#). The districts participating include those with KIPP schools in their communities, such as New York and Denver, as well as smaller districts without KIPP schools, like West Contra Costa in California and Ascension Parish in Louisiana, about 65 miles west of New Orleans.

KIPP has trained more than 100 school founders and leaders, said Steve Mancini, the public-affairs director for KIPP, which has 109 schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia, educating 33,000 students. The organization plans to use part of its i3 grant to expand its operations to serve 55,000 students by 2015.

Mancini said that KIPP wanted to be a "convener of a conversation" about leadership training. "We do think we have a model that could be helpful to others," Mancini said.

This is not the only example of school districts attempting to learn from charter networks. The Houston district is in the middle of an experiment to turn around some of its lowest-performing schools by importing the best practices of charter schools, including KIPP, which was founded in the city. I wrote an article about that work earlier this month.

KIPP's signature training program is the year-long Fisher Fellowship, which operates in three phases, Mancini said; a 6-week summer institute where potential school founders learn about KIPP culture and operations; a residency where leaders spend several weeks in two or more KIPP schools shadowing the principal, and finally a school design phase, where leaders return to their communities and begin hiring teachers and recruiting students. The charter school network also has training programs for teacher leaders and future assistant principals. The participants in the fellowship will be exposed to all parts of KIPP's training programs, Mancini said.

# VIDEOS

**THE STORY OF KIPP**

<http://vimeo.com/17441563>

**DAVE & MIKE TALK ABOUT KIPP**

<http://vimeo.com/12841287>

# BIOS

## **Dave Levin**

Dave Levin is a native of New York City, where in 1995 he co-founded – and currently serves as superintendent of – KIPP NYC, the family of all KIPP programming in New York City.

After graduating from Yale University in 1992, Levin joined Teach for America and taught fifth grade in Houston, Texas. In 1994, he co-founded the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) with Mike Feinberg and won the Jefferson Award for outstanding community service in the city of Houston. In the same year, he earned Teacher of the Year honors from his school in Houston and an outstanding teaching award from Teach for America. Passionate about innovative teaching, Levin co-authored KIPP Math, a comprehensive math curriculum for students in grades five through eight that culminates in students completing a two-year high school Algebra I course by the end of eighth grade. Levin also has a master's in education from National Louis University.

In the spring of 2000, Levin and Feinberg were approached by Doris and Don Fisher, founders of Gap, Inc., to replicate KIPP's success nationwide. Together they co-founded the KIPP Foundation which supports the opening, growth, and evaluation of KIPP schools around the country. KIPP has grown from two schools serving 400 kids in Houston and New York City to 99 schools serving over 27,000 kids in 20 states and the District of Columbia. 88% of the KIPP alumni have matriculated to four-year colleges and universities, and KIPP has quadrupled the college graduation rate for kids from underserved communities.

In 2007, Levin, along with Norman Atkins from Uncommon Schools and Dacia Toll at Achievement First, co-founded UKA (Uncommon Knowledge and Achievement) and launched Teacher U, now named Relay Graduate School of Education, in partnership with Hunter College. Relay is a master's program designed to prepare teachers with the best of both theory and practice so that their students can develop the transformative academic and character skills needed to succeed in college and life.

In the spring of 1999, KIPP was named one of the 25 most effective schools in the nation in low-income communities. Of these 25 schools, Levin was selected as one of the seven most effective principals. He is the recipient of the Robin Hood Foundation's John F. Kennedy, Jr. Hero Award in Education and an Ashoka Fellowship, awarded to leading social entrepreneurs with innovative solutions and the potential to change patterns across society. Levin also served on the New York State Commission for Education Reform. In 2010, Levin and Feinberg spoke at TED on the topic of how to reform America's public education system. Most recently, they were awarded the Thomas Fordham Foundation Prize for Valor; the National Jefferson Award for Distinguished Public Service by a Private Citizen; the Charles Bronfman Prize, an honorary degree from Yale University; and the Presidential Citizen's Medal, our nation's second highest presidential award for a private citizen. Levin and Feinberg's work is the subject of the best-selling book *Work Hard, Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created America's Most Promising Schools*.

Levin speaks regularly to groups from across the country on issues relating to leadership, teaching, coaching, transforming education, character development, motivation, and parenting. Levin plays an active role in the leadership of KIPP NYC, the KIPP Foundation and Relay School of Education.

## Mike Feinberg

Dr. Mike Feinberg is Co-Founder of the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Foundation and the Superintendent of KIPP Houston, which includes 20 public charter schools: ten middle schools, seven primary schools, and three high schools. To date, 90% of the KIPPsters who have left the KIPP Houston middle schools have gone on to college. Mike received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Pennsylvania in 1991 and a Masters of Education from National-Louis University in 2005. In 2010, Yale University awarded Mike an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters. After graduating from Penn, Dr. Feinberg joined Teach For America and taught fifth grade in Houston, Texas. In 1994, he co-founded KIPP with Dave Levin and established KIPP Academy Houston a year later. In 2000, he co-founded the KIPP Foundation to help take KIPP to scale. Today, KIPP is a network of 109 high-performing public schools around the nation serving 33,000 children. In 2004, Dr. Feinberg was named an Ashoka Fellow, awarded to leading social entrepreneurs with innovative solutions and the potential to change patterns across society. In 2005, Mike was the commencement speaker for the University of Pennsylvania College of Arts and Sciences. Also in 2005, he led the effort to start a public K-8 school in Houston for Hurricane Katrina evacuees from New Orleans. The school, NOW College Prep (New Orleans West), opened in 10 days. In 2006, Drs. Feinberg and Levin were awarded The Thomas B. Fordham Prize for Excellence in Education, and the National Jefferson Award for Greatest Public Service by a Private Citizen. In 2008, Mike and Dave were named to the list of “America’s Best Leaders” by *U.S. News & World Report* and received the Presidential Citizens Medal in the Oval Office of the White House. In 2009, they were the recipients of the Charles Bronfman Prize as well as the Manhattan Institute’s William E. Simon prize for Lifetime Achievement in Social Entrepreneurship. And in 2011, they were awarded the Guardian of the Human Spirit award by the Holocaust Museum Houston given to dedicated Houstonians who have worked to enhance the lives of others and to better humankind. Dr. Feinberg and Dr. Levin’s efforts became the story told by Washington Post reporter, Jay Mathews, in his book “Work hard. Be nice.” KIPP has been featured on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *CBS 60 Minutes*, *ABC World News Tonight*, and in *The New York Times*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Washington Post*, and more. Mike is married to Colleen Dippel, and they have two children: Gus, age 6, and Abadit, age 1, who they adopted from Ethiopia in 2011.

# **Books of Note**

Matthews, J. (2009). **Work Hard. Be Nice.: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America.** Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

Tough, P. (2012). **How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character.** Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Gladwell, M. (2008). **Outliers: The Story of Success.** New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.