

New Jersey

A novel charter school sets great expectations

TEAM Academy starts at students' homes

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The way Greta Boughton saw it, the visitors in her livingroom were bringing a message of hope.

The leaders from the new TEAM Academy charter school, opening this fall in Newark's South Ward, were visiting all 80 families whose children will attend the school in September. And over iced tea in Boughton's home on Nye Avenue, school director Ryan Hill laid out all the rules and expectations of his novel school, with Boughton's hopes for her jittery 10-year-old, Anthony, rising with every word.

The long school day, Saturday classes, summer sessions, intense schoolwork and strict rules, but also big rewards and an early path to college.

"So many things will change for Anthony," said Boughton, a medical secretary at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center. "The school environment, his education, his whole character."

With TEAM Academy, Newark becomes the latest district nationwide to join a small but powerful school network that has become a kind of phenom in urban education.

The school, located in a former Catholic school, will be one of 15 cast in the KIPP Academy mold, a network of middle schools that started in Houston and the Bronx in the mid-1990s and has expanded into another dozen schools from Washington, D.C., to Oakland.

With a combination of clever marketing, unceasing energy, and a track record that so far is hard to impugn, the KIPP schools -- short for "Knowledge Is Power Program" -- have caught the attention of President Bush and other national leaders as evidence that high-performing inner-city schools don't need to be a contradiction.

In its first charter schools in Houston and New York City, test scores rose from some of the lowest to the highest of any middle schools in their respective districts. The same gains have been posted in newer schools in Washington and Gaston, N.C., and another 10 schools are to open this year.

The approach isn't anything new in education, just a lot more of it.

Students go to KIPP schools for 220 days, spanning 11 months, a total of nearly 40 days more than New Jersey's norm. The class day runs from 7:25 a.m. to 5 p.m., along with a half-day on Saturday. Students are expected to complete two or more hours of homework every night.

But that's just the schedule. Rules are unbending: students late to school must come back with a parent at their side. No excuses for missed homework, either, especially with teachers each armed with cell phones to handle students' questions 24 hours a day.

Another thing about the homework: all written work must come with the proper heading, with name, teacher and KIPP's motto, "work hard, be nice."

KIPP's big on slogans, led by its so-called "Five Pillars," including starting with expectations that not only will students improve but they'll excel to levels that "will enable them to succeed in the nation's best high schools and colleges."

Hill, a clean-cut Midwesterner, carries a missionary's zeal as director of the Newark school, and acknowledges a rector's quality to his pitch. "We preach quite a bit," he said.

Just 25 years old, Hill taught two years in a New York City elementary school under Teach for America, the national program that places high-end college graduates into urban classrooms.

KIPP's founders, both Teach for America alumni, have drawn many of their school leaders from the program's ranks, and Hill signed on last year, attending KIPP's leadership training program in California and then beginning the work to open the Newark school this winter.

"Newark is certainly a place with a history where failure had become a norm," said Mike Feinberg, one of KIPP's founders, "and we are definitely excited at the chance to contribute in reversing that trend."

Approved by the state in the spring, Hill recruited other Teach for America teachers -- all in their 20s -- to join him at TEAM Academy, helped by the lure of \$50,000-plus salaries, and began pitching the school to Newark families wherever he could, including in Newark elementary schools.

"I was so impressed with his tenacity and the fact he could make this happen," said Marilyn Pfaltz, a Summit public relations executive who was integral in KIPP finding a Newark location. "He's such an understated individual but never takes no for an answer."

He has had to hear a few "maybes," though, especially involving the renovations at the former St. Charles Elementary School on Custer Avenue. The plan was to have the school ready to open for a summer session this month, but work has taken longer than expected and the opening bell was moved back to Sept. 3.

It will be one of four new charter schools opening in New Jersey this fall, bringing the total number of the independent public schools to 52, serving about 14,300 students. Charter schools are funded by their local districts, but operate outside the governance of the local school boards.

In the meantime, Ryan and his staff have made home visits to all 80 students who will be in the three fifth-grade classes. The plan is to expand to 320 students in Grades 5-8.

"We have a lot of high expectations for Anthony," Hill began his talk in the Boughtons' apartment, recently. "If we didn't come in here and explain them, it wouldn't be fair. But now that we are, we will hold him to these expectations."

Hill assured Anthony and his mother that he will do fine, "but there are habits built in all kids, and he may get in trouble for things he didn't used to."

There's the "bench," the spot at the back of classrooms where students serve in-school suspensions. And, conversely, good behavior wins students "paychecks" that can be redeemed for school supplies and snacks.

Going over written "contracts" with both mother and son, Hill stressed the rules about tardiness, a concern for Greta Boughton, who conceded she herself isn't the most punctual person. "You are going to find there are very few schools as strict as we are," Hill said.

But he assured the family that the benefits are huge, with college the ultimate goal. In fact, Hill said one of TEAM's chief tasks will be to get Anthony into a high school that will best prepare him for college.

"It probably won't be a regular high school in Newark," he said, "because we want you to go to a high school that makes sure you go to college. When Newark schools do that, we'll send you there."

It was pretty heady stuff for a 10-year-old, and Anthony was anxious. His mother ribbed him that all his hand-wringing will rub the skin right off his palms. But he was ready to try, sitting up straight and keeping eye contact, just like the KIPP contract says.

"I am a little nervous about getting there on time every day," he admitted.

In preparation for the new school year, Anthony's mother has brought up an old school desk from the basement, as well as hung a new bulletin board and some inspirational posters.

"It's just so exciting," she said. "I know he can do it, just never been made to before."