

October 29, 2010

Dear colleagues:

I have just returned from a fascinating 3 day tour of excellent primary and secondary schools in the Atlanta area. I think some of you may be interested in what I saw and learned. The annual trip is sponsored by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (within which I am part of a one year fellowship) and is paid for by sponsors. I highly recommend the tour, which occurs annually.

We visited a mix of standard public schools and (public) charter schools. (Charter schools are publicly licensed, use tax dollars, and are required to admit all applicants eligible in terms of residence.) Many of the schools we visited served poor district populations, as evident in the table below (% free/reduced lunch). These schools were NOT chosen to be representative, but to exemplify possibilities for creative design and high achievement.

School	% black	% Hispanic	% free/reduced lunch**
<b>Part of regular public school system</b>			
Da Vinci Academy at South Hall Middle School, Hall County Schools	2	10	20
Smokey Road Middle School, Coweta County Schools	33	4	59
Norcross High School, Gwinnett County Schools	31	29	54
The New Schools at Carver, Atlanta Public Schools	96	2	89
<b>Charter public school system</b>			
Sawyer Road Elementary School, Marietta City Schools	34	42	72
KIPP South Fulton Academy, Fulton County Schools.	97	2	67
Charles R. Drew Charter School, Atlanta Public Schools*	97	1	84

\*Charles R. Drew Charter School subject of [Atlanta Journal-Constitution article](#), Sunday Sept. 12, 2010.

\*\* Free lunch at  $\leq 130\%$  poverty level, reduced cost lunch at  $\leq 185\%$  poverty level.

I won't give portraits of each school, but rather describe a few and note a few general themes and highlights.

The Da Vinci Academy (Gainesville, Ga.) is a program for 6-8 grade students within a regular public school—thus, not a charter. It chooses children with a passion for science, the arts, and/or technology. It uses principles of thought developed by Da Vinci to provide an environment where the passions of these children are encouraged while still addressing the requirements of the state standards. The school building is basic. Instead of janitors, the children are responsible to clean the school. They bring their own lunches. One feature of the school which several of us found disappointing was a substantial underrepresentation of minority students in the program.

The Sawyer Road Elementary (charter) School, despite a large proportion of relatively poor children (72% receiving free or reduced cost lunch), has pursued excellence by adopting the International Baccalaureate Program (IBP) for all of its children. A focus of IBP pedagogy is “knowledge construction,” a term I have not heard much of since philosophy courses during graduate school. The idea is that knowledge is built, “constructed,” by the child’s exploration of its sources and components. This approach encourages healthy skepticism and problem solving rather than passive learning. Students are also encouraged to become entrepreneurs and to respond to societal needs. Sawyer makes use of multiple partnerships with other organizations, including businesses and the arts.

Norcross High School (Gwinnett County) also serves a high proportion of minority students and a relatively poor population, with 54% receiving free or reduced cost lunch. It has a very strong culture of learning and success. They “refuse to allow failure.” They closely monitor the progress of their students, and when a student is having difficulty, they require tutoring. They offer Advanced Placement (AP) and IBP courses and allow all students the opportunity to take these classes. I was very impressed to note that the IBP curriculum included a course on the theory of knowledge; I read the line three times to make sure I was not deceiving myself. The school has raised both the floor and the ceiling of student achievement, and in 2010, their graduation rate was 81%. The school has a strong culture of success and achievement. Gwinnett County was awarded a prize of \$1 million Broad Prize for Urban Education as the most outstanding school system in the nation. At the lunch the school provided, we were entertained by a very impressive string quartet.

The energy at the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) South Fulton Academy is palpable. The population at this school is 97% black and 67% receive free or reduced cost lunch. (KIPP was founded by two teachers from Teach for America in the mid 90s and now has 99 schools in the nation, with approximately 26,000 students.) Children enter the school well below grade level in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and leave the school after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade well above grade level. Nationally, 85% of KIPP graduates have gone to college. The culture of learning, results, and commitment are strong and clear. A KIPP principal described his efforts teaching at a regular public school as “teaching with my hands tied behind my back.” In KIPP the principals have much flexibility in adjusting their curriculum and scheduling and other features to respond to student needs. I watched a science teacher Socratically grilling his student about the conservation of energy, encouraging the student to think and speak on his feet in front of classmates and (to his dismay) bus tour observers, but also encouraging a deep understanding of the concept. KIPP requires more time in school than regular schools. The KIPP school day runs from 7:30 am to 5:00 every day, includes every other Saturday, and extends for 3 weeks during the summer. Pupils and their parents sign a contract when entering the school, committing themselves to the principles of the school. Waiting on line at the cafeteria, I spoke with 3 students, a girl and two boys, with whom I also had lunch. The girl, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, wanted to be a linguistic anthropologist, and she was thrilled to learn that I am an anthropologist. The boys did not know yet what they wanted to be. One of the boys said he had not wanted to go to the school because he had heard it was hard—until he met the other boy who became his best friend.

Charles Drew Charter School (East Lake, Atlanta) was founded in 2000 and was Atlanta’s first charter school. It serves children from the age of 3 through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The East

Lake community is itself a miracle, from what we briefly learned, having been transformed from a high crime, violent, drug associated neighborhood to a peaceful community by the collaboration of a wealthy philanthropic Atlanta developer and community leaders. The neighborhood is 97% black and 67% of students receive free or reduced cost lunch. The early childhood program focuses on school readiness and is guided by Comer Yates, who also runs the Atlanta Speech School. The approximate annual cost of educating a child at Drew is \$10,000—about \$1000 more than the mean for Georgia, but well within the range for Georgia schools. I spoke with a girl who was working by herself and interpreting written text on a computer; she told me, “I’m not proud of myself. I keep making mistakes.” As I watched her, she proceeded to improve her answers.

All of the schools we visited encouraged **involvement in the arts and in athletics**. (We were hosted by the Woodruff Arts Center and had the good fortune to listen to D’Vine, a fabulous acappella trio. The Director of the Woodruff Foundation, Joe Bankoff, reminded us of the fundamental importance of the arts in education—for discipline, for social learning, and, I would add, for experiencing and portraying the world in a different way.)

Many of these schools paid close attention to all of their students, even following them for years after leaving the school. When a child was having difficulty, they sought him/her out and addressed the problem.

This attention to each student was closely aligned with a school culture of refusing to allow failure.

Many of the programs emphasize active learning, “the construction of knowledge.”

I observed teams of students learning together in classrooms and several teachers in a room teaching children at different levels.

All the schools had active arts programs and all had physical activity.

Many of these schools had partnerships with other community agencies, including businesses, the arts, YMCA’s. Many also involved parents.

I confess that began the trip with a prejudice. I was troubled by the notion of charter schools because I fear that they will drain both funds from the regular public schools and attention and effort directed toward the improvement of regular public schools. This view of charters seems to be confirmed in “Waiting for Superman” whose message seems to be to forget about the failing regular public schools and seek out charters. Following this trip, I have modified my prejudice. While my concern for the regular public schools remains, I have three additional thoughts: First, if children have a clearly superior alternative to the regular public schools in their districts, we should not deprive them of that opportunity while we work to improve the regular system. Second, some regular schools have managed to work within the constraints of the public school system to produce what appears to be excellent education. Third, the models developed by charter schools may provide useful insights for improving the regular public system.

Regarding regular public schools, it is truly astonishing to me that, given that these schools have existed for more than 100 years and that millions, probably billions of students have gone through them, taught by millions of teachers, . . . , we still are not able to consistently educate our students—all or most students—in these schools. I doubt it is for lack of study or research. What do we not know about pedagogy and school management? Or is it lack of political will, or lack of commitment to equity? I have personally experienced an excellent education (if I say so myself) and I have now witnessed excellence even in challenging circumstances. So I am seriously puzzled.

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