SCHOOL: KIPP KC

YEAR: SY2022-2023

DATES: April 12th and 13th, 2023

**School Overview and History**

KIPP:KC is part of a national network of free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory charter schools with a track record of preparing students in educationally underserved communities for success in college and in life. KIPP:KC opened its first school, KIPP Endeavor Academy, in 2007 with approximately 31 fifth grade students. In the fall of 2021, KIPP:KC opened their first high school beginning with 9th grade. KIPP:KC serves students from every zip code in the city, but aims to bring the opportunity for quality education to those students living in areas without access to high-performing schools.

The mission of the school is “together with families and communities, we create joyful, academically excellent schools that prepare students with the skills and confidence to pursue the paths they choose- college, career, and beyond- so they can lead fulfilling lives and build a more just world”. It now currently serves 767 students in Grades K-10 in two locations (KIPP Endeavor Academy, and KIPP Legacy High School). KIPP:KC is completing the first year of its second five-year contract and second year sponsored by the Commission. 77.5% of the student body is African American, 16% is Hispanic, and the rest a mix of multi-racial, white, Asian and Native Hawaiian. 100% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 6.3% are homeless, 10.2% receive special education services, and 10.8% are English language learners.

**Site Visit Process Overview**

MCPSC conducts compliance site visits every year with KIPP:KC, as they hold a 5-year charter. The team consisted of Tonya Richardson, Program Specialist for the Missouri Charter Public School Commission, and Marisol Rodriguez, Founder of Insignia Partners. Insignia Partners has been contracted to serve as the Site Visit Coordinator for the Commission’s site visits in 2023.

## Jana Cooper, Executive Director, organized the focus groups and interviews. The site visit included interviews or focus groups with the Executive Director, all Director-level staff, all Principals and Assistant Principals, the Regional Operations Directors, the K-8 Operations staff, the middle school Dean, teachers at all levels, families, students and the board. The site visit team observed the April 17th board meeting.

Observations were not intended to assess the academic quality of the school, or the actual performance of any group or individual, but were focused on all compliance issues as outlined in the Site Visit Protocol.

**General Observations**
When the first KIPP school opened its doors in 1994 there was a very clear educational and behavioral model. As KIPP grew and expanded nationally, so did the “KIPP way.” The “KIPP way” was implemented when KIPP Endeavor opened its doors and remained so for the first five or six years. Both with the impacts of the pandemic, and a shifting of KIPP National for schools to be more autonomous and trauma informed, KIPP: KC is struggling to find its identity. As one person stated, “As we shifted to be more trauma informed and use those practices to build the vision we have lost sight of what it means to be on both ends of the spectrum.” Many described KIPP:KC as not holding students accountable, being reactive instead of proactive, and not a consistent K-12 school.

KIPP is also experiencing growing pains with principals moving up to the regional team and new principals being promoted. The high school opened this year, but the facility was not ready and thus they are sharing a building that has not been ideal. This year was described as harder than the year following COVID due to the behaviors of students and the lack of consistent accountability and support.

Overall, there was still a feeling of hopefulness from everyone we spoke to. There was trust in the Executive Director to make the necessary changes. The new high school building will be ready for the next school year and will provide a better experience for KIPP high schoolers. The regional team had plans to meet over the summer months to lay out a collective vision and get clearer on roles and responsibilities. Nothing uncovered in the pages that follow appeared to be a surprise and were all things that leadership identified as areas they planned to work on.

**Findings**

**Criteria 1: Faithfulness to Charter**

***Areas of Strength***

Empowerment was consistently mentioned as the focus of KIPP, which is aligned with KIPP’s Power to Lead motto.

KIPP conducts an EKG (evaluation process) frequently to engage staff and uncover areas for improvement. EKG’s have kept the regional team informed and engaged in the successes and areas of growth for each school, thus there did not appear to be a disconnect between the schools and the leadership team sometimes found at other schools.

***Areas of Growth***

It was difficult for anyone we spoke with to articulate what the mission of KIPP is, or what makes KIPP, KIPP. This is not to say that good things aren’t happening at the school, but there didn’t seem to be a focus or goal that everyone was driving towards. As one person stated “What is the mission? I think we have lost that and no one understands what our mission is?” Another suggested that it might be time for KIPP:KC to revisit the mission, vision, and goals both of the system and of each school.

The board worked with Kent Peterson to develop a strategic plan several years ago but it was unclear if the board is using this to drive a strategy or if the staff is implementing it at this time. One board member noted that strategic planning conversations had started at the beginning of the year but have since died down.

**Criteria 2: Students’ Opportunities to Learn**

***Areas of Strength***

KIPP is using numerous data points to understand where their students are academically. They use A-Net (2nd – 8th grade), Dibbles Testing (for students in needs of interventions), formative assessments, staggered quizzes through Illuminate, foundation lit data, among others. Data team meetings occur weekly. KIPP has clearly created a data culture throughout the system.

KIPP has created and is implementing a process to support students with a wide range of needs. Everyone could describe the MTSS process from the initial referral, to intervention identification, to attempting different strategies with a student (which is tracked using Panorama) to finally being referred for services, the processes was clear and understood by all. There is a Support Human’s Team that conducts Tier Three interventions and ensures that services are completed.

KIPP has partnered with University Health which is providing additional support to students and staff. Additional wraparound services include harvesters and a book mobile which provide additional support to families.

The elementary school is the most rooted of the three schools in Conscious Discipline and the middle school plans to implement it fully next year.

Parents believe that KIPP is holding their students to high expectations – even though teachers did not always feel this to be true. Parents praised KIPP’s engagement of the student body and events like interviews and career fairs.

Safety in the big picture did not appear to be a concern. There is third party security, heavy regulation around who can and cannot enter the building, policies in place for safe schools, and frequent efforts to update all security protocols. The board praised the ED’s communication to them when incidents occur and felt appropriately informed.

***Areas of Growth***

High school teachers reported feeling as though high school students were not held accountable or treated as high school students. As one teacher stated “KIPP is a school of love, but they give too much and baby students instead of building them up.”

KIPP’s Power to Lead model has created some inconsistency from school to school. Some noted that this was okay up to a point, but there will be an effort to be more consistent in the year to come. There is a desire for a clearer direction from the regional team, especially around academics, for all of KIPP. Because there is “no stamp or clear vision on what KIPP holds true” there is a lot of “conflict and variance” especially around accountability.

As one teacher noted, KIPP KC has “never really knocked it out of the park with academics” and teachers expressed a desire to “get much clearer on what we are paying attention to”. As with many schools, KIPP paused a focus on academics and focused more on SEL during the pandemic. Teachers are now frustrated with the lack of academic focus and expressed a need for KIPP to “get back to our values” and KIPP as a college preparatory school.

The KIPP curriculum for ELA was reported to be strong, but nationwide KIPP is struggling with math. The data from A-Net reported to the board was self-described as “concerning” although some of this may be due to an earlier test date. There is a need for better advanced curriculum at the high school level and electives and non-core teachers asked for more resources.

Although the process for identification is strong, SPED appears to be a growth area for KIPP. There appears to be mixed support between the schools with some saying SPED needs additional support and others saying they have the support they need (especially in ELA and math). Some noted push in services while others stated it was up to the teacher to give required minutes and services. Additionally, some noted that the MTSS system still needs “a lot of work” and that the behavior team is not consistent.

Communication was a pain point for parents. Although they know who to take their concerns to for an immediate response, parents felt as though they didn’t get consistent communication from the school and teachers. One parent noted “the communication gap is KIPP wide”.

Behavior expectations and accountability, both from adults and students, appears to be unevenly implemented throughout the KIPP system. There was a feeling that if the school is going to use a student handbook then the expectations in the handbook need to be implemented at all levels and with fidelity. Teachers especially felt as though “no one knows what the lines are, the lines aren’t enforced, and so kids push their boundaries.” The Wellness Lab, was taken away because students were “acting out” and “using it as a cop-out. One teacher bluntly put it “the Wellness Lab is not working.” What was described as a non-traditional and equity-driven approach to behavior issues does not appear to be working.

Although safety plans, policies, and protocols are in place, the communication around these appears to be lacking. Interviewees noted that there has been pushback from staff on some of the safety protocols and miscommunication around expectations.

**Criteria 3: Instructional Leadership**

***Areas of Strength***

Core teachers reported professional development as being data driven and helping in developing teachers to take their teaching practices to the next level. Coaches appear to give helpful feedback, even on things like lesson plans.

Teachers praised the LETRs training and find it really helpful.

The KIPP Foundation provides support and coaching to building level principals, which was described as helpful but principals were also looking for increased support to ensure they are the “best principal possible”. One person noted that the KIPP Foundation was the “secret sauce” to what makes KIPP work.

Except for the middle school, retention rates appear to be strong within the KIPP system with teachers typically leaving one position for another within the system.

When asked about their relationship to their direct supervisor, almost all staff at every level reported to have a trusting, open, and healthy working relationship with each other. Employees feel valued and respected, and feedback is given in a manner that appears to support growth and not degrade or devalue. Overall, the adult culture in all the buildings was described as a sense of community and the feeling that adults care about each other.

***Areas of Growth***

Although core teachers reported receiving quality professional development, elective teachers expressed a desire for PD more relevant to them. They also were unclear who evaluates them and felt unsupported and under- resourced (except for the art teacher who reported having everything they need).

The high school staff also reported not understanding who correct points of contact are and not having a clear sense of roles and responsibilities.

Burnout was mentioned numerous times by individuals at all levels. Administration noted that the additional tasks they are assigned do not allow them to focus. Teachers also noted that while the school day is shorter than it used to be, the extra responsibilities required of them also burns them out by the end of the day. There was a feeling that the current model was “unsustainable”.

Morning huddle got mixed reviews with some teachers appreciating the community it builds while others saying it was a waste of time and often the information shared could have been an email. Overall, it appears that processes and procedures change every year which has led to a feeling of “reinventing the [proverbial] wheel” every year. Some noted that there needs to be an onboard of the “KIPP way” for staff and students so that administration doesn’t have to be as reactive in dealing with behaviors. Some also asked for shared values around school culture. Three new principals this year has also been difficult with “too much newness”.

Although the adult culture is caring, some believed that this causes a lack of accountability. Accountability was also described as different at each school, leading some teachers to ask what does development and growth look like consistently across all three school?

Middle school retention rates are struggling with only about 25% of teachers planning to return at the time of the site visit (compared to 90% at the elementary and high schools).

Core teachers have a clear evaluation systems based on A-Net data, dibbles growth, and content specific data. Most of the administration team was also clear, including the Executive Director, on their evaluation processes. However, assistant principals reported not having a clear or formal evaluation system.

**Criteria 4: Organizational Viability**

***Areas of Strength***

The board holds an annual retreat each year where they conduct a self-assessment. They have been supported by Kent Peterson over the last few years in strengthening their board practices.

KIPP:KC partners with EdOps to provide financial support. The board stated that they are currently on track to hit their charter’s financial goals, and noted that this was due to some tightening of teacher and supply expenses, along with the recent change to cut some bussing routes.

The board is very focused on ensuring that teachers are paid well and would love to be the highest paid charter school in the city. There was a clear desire to ensure that the board is focused on how to support teachers, students and families in their priorities.

***Areas of Growth***

As with many schools in the Kansas City area, transportation issues plagued KIPP this year. This led the board to make a hard, but strategic, decision run fewer bus lines.

Operations continues to be a challenge at KIPP. The position has turned over numerous times and while staff has stepped up to do what needs to be done to fill the gaps, everyone agreed that a strong operations person needs to be a priority hire.

When it comes to resources, most teachers reported having the supplies they need, while sometimes supplementing with their own money. However, almost all noted that there could be additional human capital resources to support things like the library, cafeteria, substitutes, etc. Teachers noted having to fill these roles. Many noted that the Elementary/Middle school building has no additional space.

A few compliance issues were noted and mentioned to the team to rectify. Those included: the school is required to post an American flag; say the Pledge of Allegiance, and participate in the Family Care Service Registry. Staff noted they would rectify this immediately.