



District
Management
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INTERVIEW

Be the Change: An Interview with Mike Feinberg

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teacher is not just teaching that
lesson, but is teaching about life.*

BE THE CHANGE:

An Interview with Mike Feinberg

Mike Feinberg is co-founder of KIPP, the Knowledge Is Power Program, the nation's largest network of charter schools. After two years of teaching fifth grade in Houston as a Teach for America corps member, Feinberg started KIPP with fellow corps member Dave Levin in 1994. KIPP schools focus on addressing the achievement gap and preparing students in disadvantaged communities to succeed in college. The development of character—cultivating traits critical to success in life—has been as central to the model as the teaching of rigorous academic skills. In 2000, Don and Doris Fisher, founders of The Gap, approached KIPP about replicating their success nationwide; the KIPP Foundation was thus created to recruit, train, and support educators to open and operate KIPP schools across the country. KIPP has grown to a national network of 125 schools in 21 states and Washington, D.C. Over 85% of KIPP students are low-income, and 95% are African American or Hispanic/Latino. Nearly 80% of students completing eighth grade at a KIPP school go on to attend college.

Feinberg holds a B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and an M.Ed. from National Louis University. Among the numerous awards he and co-founder Dave Levin have received for their work, the two were named to the list of “America’s Best Leaders” by *U.S. News & World Report* and received the Presidential Citizens Medal in 2008.

In this edited interview, DMC CEO John J-H Kim and Mike Feinberg discuss building a sustainable and effective organization, cultivating culture in an organization, and developing character.

FAST FACTS: KIPP

125 schools (70 middle schools, 37 elementary schools, and 18 high schools)

21
states

41,000
students



87%
students of
low-income
families

95%
African
American
or Latino
students

80%
of KIPP
alumni have
attended
college

62% of KIPP students
outperform their national
peers in math by the end
of eighth grade



Mike Feinberg, co-founder of KIPP, the Knowledge Is Power Program

Let's start with the evolution of KIPP. The five pillars that compose your core operating principles—high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, power to lead, and focus on results—make it clear that you have always thought about culture in your approach to education. But has character development and culture always played the same important role in KIPP schools that it does today?

Yes, it has. What changed, I think, is how we express it and deliberately plan for it. When Dave and I started KIPP in the mid-1990s, we were doing a lot of culture work and a lot of character work, but we weren't calling it that. We looked at our mentor teachers, people like Harriet Ball and Rafe Esquith, and we realized that what they were doing to be effective with their kids was the sum of all the parts. You can't simply work on how to teach reading, how to teach fractions, or how to teach the scientific method. These are isolated silos. Rather, you need to focus on the whole package: the classroom environment and the culture have to encourage kids to work together as a team, to support one another, and to get excited about the challenge of difficult academic tasks.

“At any given moment, a good teacher is not just teaching that lesson, but is teaching about life.”

At any given moment, a good teacher is not just teaching that lesson, but is teaching about life. Whether it's a science, history, reading, writing, or math lesson, when a kid starts to give up, that's when you stop teaching the actual lesson itself and start teaching how to try your best and not give up. So we weren't calling it “culture” or “character,” but by all means we were doing it. Along the way, when we started thinking about how to teach it to other people, we knew we needed to be more deliberate so that we could teach people what to look for and how to do it themselves. And that's where we started getting into how to create culture, how to foster culture, how to nurture it, and then how to teach character from there. →

KIPP's Seven Keys for Implementing Character in Your School

1

Believe It and Model It

Breathe life into the James Baldwin quote: "The children are ours. Every single one of them. ... Children have never been very good at listening to their elders but have never failed to imitate them."

2

Name It

Give the intangible and often-unnamed a name. Only by labeling and talking about the character strengths that Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson identified can we embark on the journey to develop them.

3

Find It

Introduce kids to real-world and fictional examples that display the various character strengths.

4

Feel It

Help kids and adults feel the positive effects of focusing on, and developing, their own character strengths.

5

Integrate It

Create dual-purpose experiences and lessons that involve the character strengths.

6

Encourage It

Provide people with growth mindset praise (i.e. precise, descriptive praise) around character.

7

Track It

Record and discuss progress toward character goals regularly.

Clearly, you believe that you can teach character to students.

Sure. No one is born gritty. No one is born learning how to be a good teammate. Those things, somehow or someway, are taught or not taught; later in life, you are either able to do it or not able to do it.

And how do you teach grit?

We certainly don't try to create Grit Class on Thursdays from 1–2 PM. We learn what grit looks like in the classroom, lunchroom, bathroom, school bus, and schoolyard, and then capitalize on teachable moments, both positive and negative, when our kids have opportunities to display or not display grit. The same holds true for other character strengths that we want our children to learn to help them in college and life.

I think many of our readers would probably agree that a lot of these behaviors can be taught to students. But, let's talk about the teachers and other adults. Are you looking for people who have this understanding of culture and character? Or are you trying to teach the adults as well?

Dave and I earned our doctorates in the School of Hard Knocks. We made a thousand mistakes. It was one thing to do it ourselves in our classrooms. The minute we started schools and became leaders, we quickly realized there was a need to teach these things to the adults as well as to the kids. In fact, the adults needed to learn it quicker and better to be able to teach it to the kids.

But we also quickly realized that adults don't learn as well as kids do. It's not impossible, but as a general rule, it's easier to teach children a lot of these things than to teach adults. And maybe that's not just a cultural thing; the neuroscience is showing that younger brains are wired to learn more easily. But we realized that we absolutely had to teach adults about creating culture and nurturing character. It goes back to that old quote by James Baldwin: "Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they never fail to imitate them." We can't expect kids to learn the culture and learn character if the opposite is being modeled for them in science class.

So it took screwing this up in a lot of different ways to figure out how you teach this to adults, but eventually we learned to look for teachers who were already on the same page, which was the best scenario, or for teachers who at least did not have a fixed mindset and were willing to learn and grow.

And how do you find these people?

There were several teachers whom I met in school parking lots at 6:00 at night; I would see them walking to their cars. Right away, the fact that these teachers were still there at 6:00 at night told me that they were the type of teachers I wanted to talk to: they were there late to put in the extra effort.

It's also networking. When I hired my first few teachers, I learned that the ones with the same core beliefs did the best, and I asked them to think about where they taught before. What other teachers in your old building taught like you or had the same perspective as you on school and on life? They would recommend different teachers we could talk to, and we'd expand the Rolodex of like-minded thinkers.

So traditional approaches had limited effectiveness for you. You really have to network to find people who share that passion and energy around these beliefs.

Exactly.

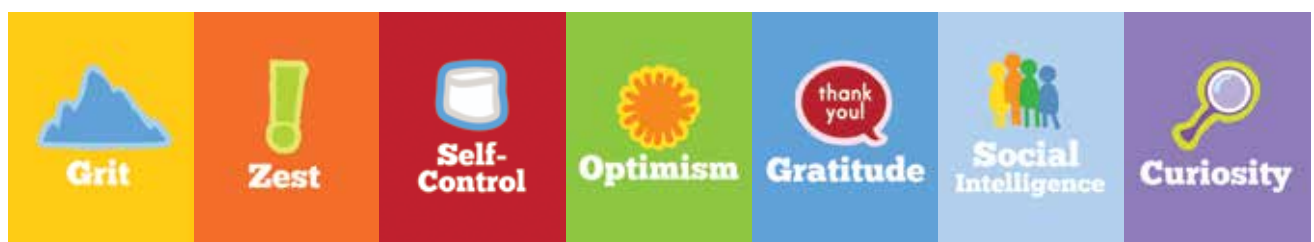
Once you find your teachers, what do you teach them? Probably no one comes with the whole package. When they come to you with part of the package and a lot of potential, and you've got to teach them the rest, what do you do?



KIPP students are always expected to try their best.

For a while, we thought we were looking for people who were aligned on values, but we learned that values were not the starting point. The quick analogy is that Enron had values. They could chisel them into beautiful granite walls in their lobbies in Houston. It took a long time to verbalize, but over time, we learned that the non-negotiable was core beliefs; we needed to start with people who shared the same core beliefs. They must firmly believe that there are no shortcuts; that all children not just can but will learn; that there is value in creating a strong team and family. They respected that we visited kids and their parents in their living rooms and said, "If you come to KIPP, we'll do whatever it takes to get you through college," and that we would follow through on that promise. →

KIPP Character Strengths:



So you really have to start with quite a bit. If the beliefs are not there, teaching the values is going to be difficult.

If someone isn't intrinsically motivated by the commitment they make to children and parents, then you can put them in professional development sessions, you can give them case studies, you can debrief after good decisions or bad decisions, but it's going to go in one ear and out the other.

“It took a long time to verbalize, but over time, we learned that the non-negotiable was core beliefs; we needed to start with people who shared the same core beliefs.”

What I can't teach is beliefs. But with shared beliefs as a platform, it is then possible to teach values, or at least make people aware of what values align with those beliefs. Then the parts that are taught are how you operationalize the values, which are the operating norms of the organization: what we all commit to do, how we do our work, how we work together, and how we deal with conflicts and problems that arise. As long as you start with a platform of shared core beliefs, values can be taught. Otherwise, you might as well be speaking Greek.

KIPP Houston Public Schools has recently begun collaborating with Spring Branch Independent School District and Yes Prep Public Schools in what is called the SKY Partnership to create a model of collaboration for public schools and Charter Management Organizations. That provides interesting opportunities for all parties. How is that going?

The concept is to create a school-within-a-school to promote professional development for leaders and teachers by circulating best practices to promote innovation and a culture reflecting KIPP's principles. Technically, all the kids are still Landrum Middle School (Spring Branch Independent School District) children. When you look at test scores, you don't see "KIPP." But, when you walk into the building, you can walk left to Landrum or right to KIPP. You're still in the Landrum band or the Landrum football team, but you're in KIPP classrooms, a separate world inside a world.

Are the adults in these classrooms hand-chosen by you, or are they teachers who already worked in the district?

All of the core content teachers are KIPP teachers. The school leader recruited them individually. The extra-curricular teachers (band, choir, and PE) are Spring Branch teachers and teach both Landrum Middle School and KIPP Courage children. Over time I would be shocked if one or more teachers from the KIPP classrooms didn't go across the hallway and wind up teaching in the other school in the building.

Mike Feinberg's Biographical Timeline

<p>1991 B.A. from University of Pennsylvania</p> 	<p>1991-1994 Teach for America: taught fifth grade in Houston</p> 	<p>1994 Co-founded KIPP</p> 	<p>1995 Established KIPP Academy Houston</p>	<p>2000 Co-founded the KIPP Foundation</p> 
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Do you see a very different culture evolving and developing in the two different parts of this same building?

Yes and no. Yes, there are two separate schools, so by definition they have different cultures even though they are in the same family. We're not twins, but we're cousins. At a family reunion, when you see your aunts and uncles and cousins, not everybody is the same, but you are usually surprised at how much you have in common. We tried to make sure that we started on the same page; for example, we put the principal in the same leadership training program that the KIPP school leader was trained in—he got “KIPPnitized,” as we like to say. They're kind of speaking the same language, which is great to see. It allows them to look at each other as cousins, not just as colleagues or rivals, and that was a helpful way to kick it off.

This partnership is one part of KIPP's expansion, but there are also 125 wholly owned KIPP model schools across the country now. From the founding vision you and Dave had when you started your first two schools to the way that it's grown over the years, do you feel that you have successfully replicated the kind of culture and environment that you wanted?

John, you're asking a deep question. This question is why Dave and I need to go to therapy. As founders, do we look at carbon copy #125 and think, “It might be blurry around the edges, but by and large it's a good copy, so let's put it on the wall”? Yes and no. The overarching big things, yes, I think we've successfully replicated. →

“You're not going to get kids to do their homework if teachers don't do their lesson plans. You're not going to get kids to play nicely together on the playground if the teachers go into the teacher's lounge and gossip about one another.”



KIPP students exhibiting the J-factor

2004

Named an Ashoka Fellow, awarded to leading social entrepreneurs with innovative solutions and the potential to change patterns across society

2005

M.Ed. from National Louis University



2006

Along with Dave Levin, awarded the Thomas B. Fordham Prize for Excellence in Education, and the National Jefferson Award for Greatest Public Service by a Private Citizen

2008

Along with Dave Levin, 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

2009

Along with Dave Levin, awarded the Charles Bronfman Prize



I think the basic beliefs, the sense of possibility, the spirit of believing in what's possible, and the focus on the kids are all there.

What Dave and I sometimes question—and we might be unfairly hard on ourselves—is whether the spirit is still there: the J-factor—the joy factor. Some of our schools have it more than others. This is something you can teach, certainly, but there's no way of measuring it except by being in a classroom, being in a school, and thinking about the feel and mood of the place.

“The superintendent is not seeing or meeting or hiring or working with every single teacher, so the critical path is the school leader, the school leader, the school leader.”

Right. The intangible joy. That's very important.

I mean, a party is a party is a party. But, just because there is a party doesn't mean that it's going to be fun, and then there are always different levels of fun. It's the exact same thing in each classroom and each school. Are the kids truly enjoying themselves? Beyond being pushed, beyond learning, are they happy and having fun? There are direct and indirect things that teachers and leaders can do or not do that cause the classroom or school to be more fun or less fun, more enjoyable or less enjoyable. I don't know how well we've done that.

What's the recommendation you would make to your successor or to others to make sure that that sense of joy isn't lost but strengthened?

The answer is to have a school full of faculty who are aligned on beliefs and values and get the J-factor as well. But how do you do that? The

superintendent is not seeing or meeting or hiring or working with every single teacher, so the critical path is the school leader, the school leader, the school leader. The school leader is the person who is hiring teachers, potentially getting rid of teachers, and most importantly, owning and creating the specific culture for that school.

There are lots of levers that you get to pull as superintendent, but the most important one to pull in order to be more effective for the individual kid and in the individual classroom is the selection of the school leaders and building principals. Going back to the James Baldwin quote, you have to ask how well those in charge are modeling behavior. How effectively are they finding and teaching other people to live the James Baldwin quote?

Clearly you believe in modeling behavior. You must “be the change,” as Gandhi says.

Have you heard the sugar story about Gandhi? A woman brings her son to Gandhi and says, “I need your help, my son is eating way too much sugar.”

He says, “Sure. Come back in a week.”

She thinks it's a little bit strange, but she goes all the way back home, waits a week, comes all the way back to see him, and says, “Gandhi, I've waited a week. Now will you help my son stop eating so much sugar?”

He says, “Sure.” He looks at the boy and says, “Son, please stop eating so much sugar.”

“That's it?” she asks.

“Yeah, that's it.”

“Well, if that's all you were going to do, how come you couldn't have said that a week ago?”

And Gandhi replies, “Because a week ago, I hadn't given up sugar yet.”

You're not going to get kids to do their homework if teachers don't do their lesson plans. You're not going to get kids to play nicely together on the playground if the teachers go into the teacher's lounge and gossip about one another. This is commitment with a capital C: committing to teach in a high-performing, transformative school, KIPP or otherwise, is not just about committing to lesson plans or delivering instruction and assessment. It's committing to a way of life.

KIPP Framework for Excellent Teaching

BELIEFS

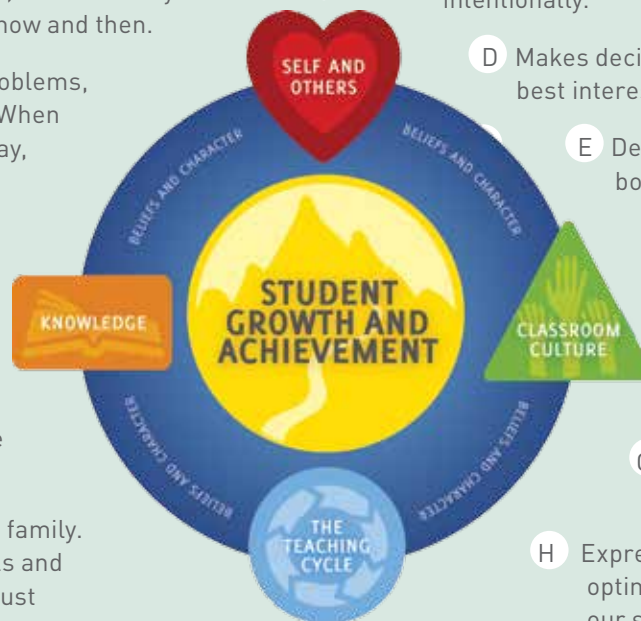
I believe that...

- A All children can and will learn.
- B Accountability starts and ends with me.
- C Differences among people exist and are a source of strength.
- D The future matters; so does every moment between now and then.
- E When there are problems, we find solutions. When there is a better way, we find it. When a teammate needs help, we give. When we need help, we ask.
- F With deliberate practice, I can constantly become a better teacher.
- G We are a team and family. We teach in schools and communities, not just in classrooms.

CHARACTER

An excellent KIPP teacher...

- A Has grit. Gets stuck and does not stay there.
- B Is zesty. Finds passion, joy, and adventure in the work.
- C Values relationships and builds them intentionally.
- D Makes decisions with students' best interests in mind.
- E Demonstrates self-control, both work-related and interpersonal.
- F Keeps commitments made to students, families, and colleagues.
- G Takes time to show gratitude.
- H Expresses and maintains optimism about the future of our students and our schools.



And how do you help parents be a part of that change? Because even with KIPP's extended hours and additional days, students are only spending so much time in school.

The parents are our partners. Beyond teaching teachers to do this, parents are the other adults who have a lot to learn, too. No one is born knowing how to be a good parent. I certainly wasn't; I'm still working on it myself. We want to build relationships with parents and spend time with them so they learn our values too. Now, we're certainly more flexible and patient with parents than we are

with our own teachers. Kids do not get in trouble for what their parents do or do not do. But at the same time, our lives are a lot easier when we're aligned with our parents, and when the kids go home and get the same message they are getting from us. So it behooves us to be on the same page with our parents and build these relationships with them, so we're all singing the same song to the kids.

Singing the same song is the key. Having a strong culture with a consistent message is what makes the difference. ♦