

What 'Yes, We Can' Should Mean for Our Schools

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Friday, January 9, 2009; Page A17

In 1994, we founded KIPP, the Knowledge Is Power Program, by starting one middle school in the South Bronx and one in Houston. Today, KIPP is a growing network of 66 public charter schools serving 17,000 children in 19 states and the District. Eighty percent of our alumni from those first two schools have now gone on to college. More than 90 percent of KIPP students are children of color, and 80 percent qualify for the federal free or reduced-price meal program.

At KIPP, we believe that "the actual proves the possible." [Barack Obama's](#) election embodies this credo.

As Obama and Education Secretary-designate [Arne Duncan](#) begin to shape the policies that will drive the new administration, we would like to offer five concrete thoughts from the field on how to channel Obama's "yes, we can" spirit into substantive education reform:

- First, Obama should use his ability to inspire Americans to set a goal for our educational system akin to putting a man on the moon. Much as President [John F. Kennedy](#) did with the space program in the 1960s, Obama could establish a paradigm-shifting goal -- ensuring that within 10 years every child in America will be on track to earning a college degree or completing a meaningful career training program. Achieving this goal would significantly enhance the opportunities our children will have over their lifetimes, especially in our new global economy.

Second, perhaps the single greatest lever for raising expectations and achievement for all children in America would be the creation of national learning standards and assessments. With KIPP schools operating in 19 states, we have seen how the maze of state standards and tests keeps great teachers from sharing ideas, inhibits innovation, and prevents meaningful comparison of student, teacher and school performance. Rather than there being 50 different standards, Obama could unify the country around a common vision for the kind of teaching and learning we need to prepare our children for the future.

- Third, as president, Obama could help build enthusiasm and respect for all who enter the teaching profession. Obama could sound a clarion call about the crucial role that teachers play in the nation's economic and social well-being; he could raise awareness, alter public perceptions, and motivate countless people to become and remain teachers. Alternative programs for recruiting and training teachers, such as [Teach for America](#), have already begun to generate tremendous interest in teaching among top college graduates. We need to build on this momentum to attract an ever-growing number of talented people to this important profession.

- Fourth, we should assess teachers on their demonstrated impact on student learning, not whether they hold a traditional teacher certifications. At KIPP, we have the ability to hire, fire and reward principals and teachers based on their students' progress and achievement. If we are going to hold all public schools accountable for their results -- and we should -- we need to grant this same power to all public schools. Otherwise, public schools will not meet the goal of providing a world-class education to every child.

· Finally, we urge Obama to follow through on his campaign pledge to double federal funding for public charter schools with proven results. Because of technicalities in state laws, successful charter schools looking to open new campuses are often ineligible for federal money set aside for new charter schools. Along with granting successful charter schools access to federal funds, we should provide these schools with the space to operate. If Obama includes funds for infrastructure projects in his economic stimulus package, we hope that charter schools will be given the same access to facilities funding as any other public schools.

Our students are full of hope for the future. They see in Barack Obama the embodiment of the opportunities and change they aspire to in their own lives. We believe that this new administration can shift the priorities and practices in our public schools so that the next generation of young people will build a better tomorrow for themselves and for us all.

Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, both alumni of the Teach for America program, co-founded the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) in 1994. The Agenda is an occasional series on policy issues facing the Obama administration.