

August 4, 2007

**CROSS COUNTRY**
**Smart Growth**

 By **KANE WEBB**
*August 4, 2007; Page A6*

HELENA, Ark. -- A walking tour of this Mississippi River town's past, present and future could start at Bubba's Blues Corner at the south end of Cherry Street, a whisky bottle's throw from the Mighty River. Bubba Sullivan has a little of everything in his shop, including a healthy dose of Helena blues history (free of charge) and old 45 rpm records (25 cents each). Keep walking past the broken bottles and dilapidated buildings until you're across from the old train depot. Turn into what looks like a strip mall store that might sell wicker chairs and scented candles (or in this town, second-hand clothes and garage-sale trinkets).

And then welcome to one of the best schools in Arkansas, maybe the South. A school that's so good both candidates for governor last year -- Democrat Mike Beebe and Republican Asa Hutchinson -- couldn't utter a sentence on education without mentioning it. It is the KIPP Delta College Preparatory School. (KIPP stands for Knowledge Is Power Program, a Brooklyn-born system of 57 charter schools nationwide.) It is filled with kids eager to be there even though the school meets almost all year long and every day but Sunday.


Scott Shirey runs the place. He's 31 years old and a native of Massachusetts. He filtered through the KIPP system and came out to Phillips County, one of the poorest in the country, where he started Delta College Prep five years ago with 65 students and the support of community leaders desperate for something -- anything -- to jumpstart their tired town. All else had failed -- from government handouts to gambling across the river.

Helena's KIPP school is working in two ways. First, it's educating the kids. An important task for a school, don't you think? Before KIPP, Helena's kids were getting scores around the 17th percentile in language and 18th percentile in math on the Stanford Achievement Test. Only a few years later, those same kids are averaging around 76th and 82nd, respectively. Last year, KIPP's eighth-graders scored in the 91st percentile in math and the 84th in language on the SAT. As fifth-graders, those same kids scored in the 29th percentile in both math and language.

KIPP is also helping to revitalize this impoverished area. The school's current downtown location was the first new construction in Helena in 10 years. Now that the school has grown to 315 students in grades five through 10, there's talk about expanding.

Actually, there's a lot more than talk. Just last week, the national KIPP charter school outfit in San Francisco named Luke VanDeWalle the principal of the new Delta College Prep High. Mr. VanDeWalle, an Illinois native and graduate of Purdue University in Indiana, is a former member

**DOW JONES REPRINTS**

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

of Teach for America. For the past three years, he's been teaching math at Mr. Shirey's school -- and doing quite a job. At last report, 93% of the Delta College Prep students scored proficient or better on Arkansas's end-of-course exam in algebra. Soon-to-be Principal VanDeWalle's high school opens later this month in a renovated train station.

But maybe not for long. Led by local investors at Southern Bancorporation and Southern Financial Partners, the community is out to raise \$20 million for a K-12 Delta College Prep campus. It'll consume several blighted blocks of downtown, now home to broken liquor bottles, crumbling sidewalks and weeds -- not to mention the abandoned buildings and long-abandoned businesses. KIPP has already secured the land through a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. Now it has to raise the rest of the money.

In a state under a court order to fix its public schools, there aren't many examples of educational excellence. But because KIPP schools are charter schools, they operate free of the bureaucratic baloney that chokes the creativity out of so many traditional public schools and their teachers. And Delta College Prep is a different kind of charter school. You notice it right off. World map-sized posters of students' test scores decorate the hallways -- the way you'd see a "Go Team!" banner at a public high school.

"We're comfortable discussing data," Mr. Shirey told me. "We aim for absolute transparency," which sharpens the attention of both students and teachers.

Mr. Shirey notes proudly that he's run off three teachers this year but not many students, even though homework runs about two hours a night after a long school day. There's a dress code and detailed instructions about how to behave in class, right down to when to raise your hand. Parents and students and teachers all have to sign a "Commitment to Excellence Form" outlining life at Delta College Prep.

Teachers tend to be young and not from around Helena -- Mr. Shirey's staff has included recent graduates from Cornell, Purdue, Notre Dame, New York University and Spelman. Still, Delta Prep's Wyvonne Sisk, a teacher for 38 years, won a \$10,000 Kinder Excellence in Teaching Award last year. Ms. Sisk had retired from teaching in nearby schools but was attracted back to work by this innovative charter school.

Earlier this year, the school received a grant from the Delta Regional Authority, a federal-state partnership devoted to regional economic improvement. DRA money typically goes to water systems and rail spurs, not schools. But to quote Pete Johnson, federal co-chairman of the DRA: "As we travel the region, we're holding up the KIPP school and Helena as examples of what children can accomplish when you go outside the restraints of the public-school system. . . . Unless you change the educational system in weak counties, you're not going to change the counties."

For its next act, KIPP is expected to transform downtown Helena (technically Helena-West Helena -- the towns recently consolidated) and revitalize the city center, while serving as an economic engine for an area with double-digit unemployment that's been losing population for decades. Since 1950, Phillips County has lost more than half its population. Down here, the goal after graduating high school -- if you graduate high school -- is to *get out*.

A school transforming a community economically and maybe even emotionally? It does sound kind of nutty. Unless you're here and walking the dilapidated landscape that could be the future

home of the KIPP Campus. Unless you listen to Mr. Shirey. ("Those would be athletic fields," he says, pointing at a vacant lot.) Unless you see the kids at Mr. Shirley's school wearing "There are no shortcuts" T-shirts. Unless you check out those test scores. Then you think maybe anything is possible. Even in the Delta.

*Mr. Webb is a columnist for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette in Little Rock.*

**URL for this article:**

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118618703415787941.html>

**Copyright 2007 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved**

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

## RELATED ARTICLES AND BLOGS

---

### Related Articles from the Online Journal

- [Tort-a-licious: The Trials of Law School](#)
- [More Schools Likely to Spur Diversity via Income](#)
- [School Choice and Racial Balance](#)
- [Success in Philadelphia](#)

### Blog Posts About This Topic

- [Educating Children, Revitalizing Neighborhoods](#) blogforcox.com
- [Top 10 Charter & Performance School Increases 06-07](#) district299.typepad.com

[More related content](#) Powered by Sphere 