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Boot Camps and Science Camps:

Comparing the KIPP and Harmony Charter School Networks

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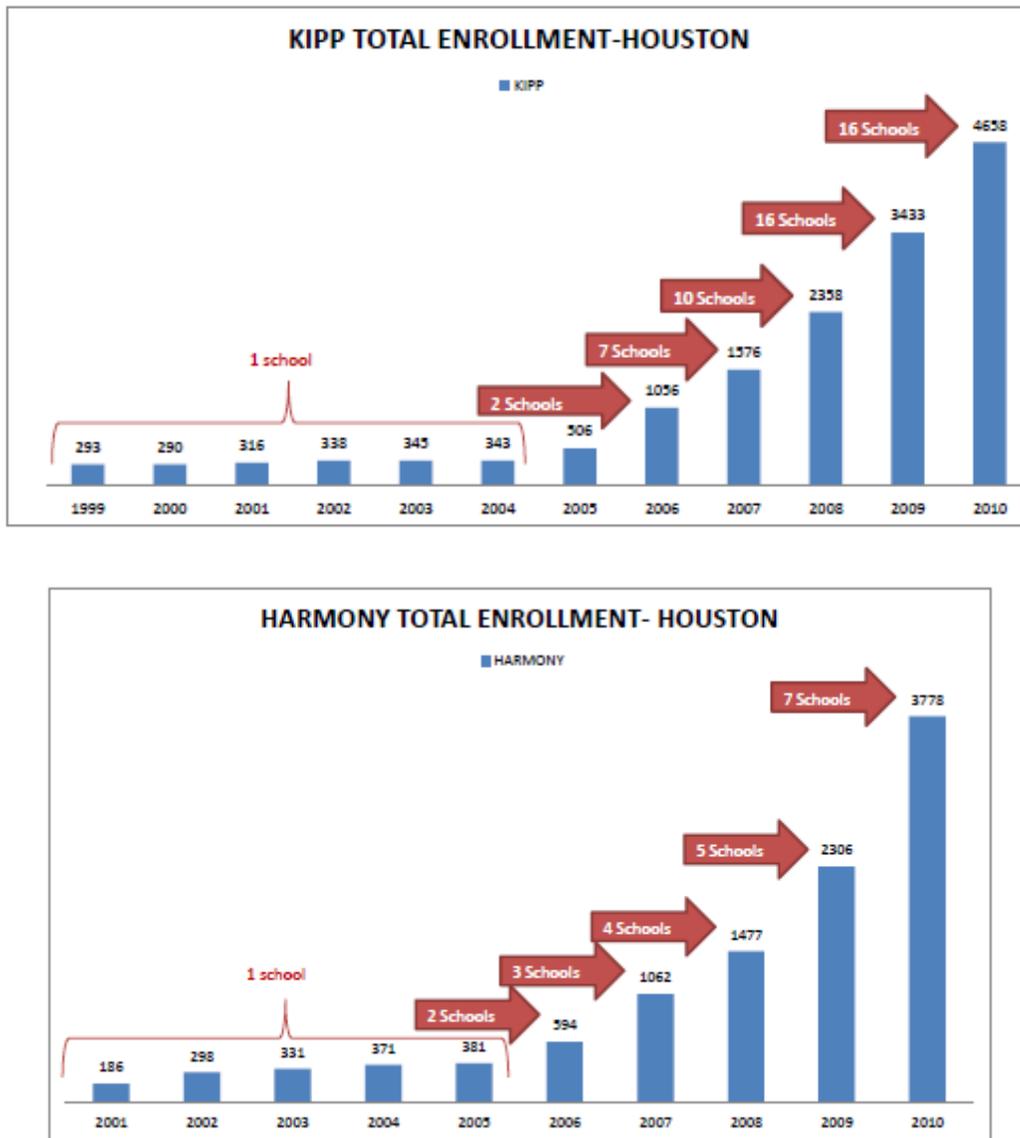
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The Obama administration has encouraged "high quality" charter school networks to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students, viewing this as a struggle for civil rights (Maranto and McShane 2011; Paige and Witty 2010). The best known of these is the 109 campus strong Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which started in Houston in 1994. KIPP now serves 32,000 students in 20 states and the District of Columbia, more than 90% African American or Latino/a, and more than 80% low income (KIPP Foundation 2011). Journalists (Mathews 2009; Guggenheim 2010) and scholars (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003; Maranto and Maranto 2006; Macey et al 2009; Maranto and Shuls Forthcoming) find that KIPP prepares disadvantaged students for college. The first national, methodologically sophisticated evaluation found that KIPP students learn far more than counterparts in comparable traditional public schools, with student turnover similar to that in comparison schools (Tuttle et al 2010).¹ Yet KIPP's "paternalism" offends progressive critics (*e.g.*, Horn 2011). In contrast, the Houston based Harmony charter school network has attracted little notice until recently, even though its 37 Texas schools now serve 16,000 (mainly disadvantaged) students, with academic results comparable to KIPP. The Texas Education Authority ranked 16 of the 28 Harmony campuses operating in 2009 as excelling, and only two as merely average, despite the organization's rapid growth (Maranto 2011; Saul 2011). Each model seemingly succeeds, but how do they differ? In contrast, the Houston based Harmony charter school network has attracted little notice until recently, even though its 37 Texas schools now serve 20,000 (mainly disadvantaged) students, with academic results comparable to KIPP. The Texas Education Authority ranked 16 of the 25 Harmony campuses operating in 2009 as excelling, and only two as merely average, despite the organization's rapid growth (Maranto 2011; Saul 2011). Each model seemingly succeeds, but how do they differ?

¹ Miron et al (2011) claim that KIPP has relatively high student turnover, but this analysis misleads since *all* high poverty schools have considerable turnover, and most KIPP sites are single campuses which Miron compares with the *whole districts* (usually large districts) they are located in. Using this method a student in a traditional public school district that switches schools or is assigned to another school within the district, even an "alternative" school, is not counted as turnover. In contrast, *school level* comparisons find KIPP turnover to resemble that for nearby district schools (Tuttle et al 2010).

Method. This is part of a long term project on high poverty/high achievement schools. From 2005 to 2011 I have done fieldwork at ten KIPP schools at six sites in four states, including one site and three schools in Houston. In 2010-11 I did fieldwork at eight Harmony sites in and near Houston, as well as at four schools in Arkansas and Oklahoma founded by Harmony associates. This work offers an understanding of the differences and similarities of the two charter organizations, mainly through comparisons of the Houston schools. As an aside, these networks and the high poverty/high achievement Yes Prep schools rose in Houston largely since the city has a very large TFA (Teach For America) chapter, considerable philanthropic support, supportive political leadership when Rod Paige served as Houston Independent School District (HISD) superintendent, and cheap land and construction costs, meaning that once successful charter operators refined their operations at one or two sites they could expand rapidly (Maranto 2011), as indeed KIPP and Harmony did. (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1.



Founders and Personnel

KIPP was founded by dedicated TFA teachers motivated by a social justice mission: remaking inner city schools so that their students could succeed in college and life. The organization has always emphasized dedication, and the willingness to do whatever it takes to prepare students. KIPP's oft quoted "five pillars" are high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, power to lead, and focus on results. As part of the power to lead, KIPP makes great efforts in recruiting and training its school leaders, selecting about 4% of applicants. Principals typically come from within the network. Designated school region directors (regions and sites within regions often include several schools) and even principals typically spend a year in full time training, with exceptions in the manner of battlefield promotions (Maranto and Maranto 2006). Teachers lack tenure, their job security depending on their ability to raise measured student academic performance. The KIPP Foundation, which owns the KIPP name and has removed it from a few schools, judges schools by test scores, but also by financial sustainability, student and staff turnover, and parent and teacher satisfaction surveys (KIPP Foundation 2011). The network relies heavily on TFA, perhaps to a greater extent than it does traditionally certified teachers from colleges of education.

Harmony teachers also lack tenure, are not always certified, and to a significant degree are judged by test scores. In other ways, however, the two networks are very different. The Harmony Public Schools were founded in 2001 by then fisheries biologist Soner Tarim and a core group of other members of the Turkish Students Association at Texas A&M, mainly scientists who after tutoring American born undergraduates came to the realization that American schools, despite employing traditionally certified and trained teachers, do not do an adequate job of science and math instruction. Tarim saw a market niche, and obtained a charter for a STEM school. Like KIPP's founders, Harmony's founders were also idealists, dedicated to spreading STEM education, particularly to low income students. In addition, while there are no formal affiliations, some Harmony staff (though not its leaders) are inspired by Fethullah Gulen, a Sufi Imam often described as a sort of Turkish Billy Graham and now semi-retired in Pennsylvania. Gulen urges followers to practice tolerance toward those of all faiths, and emphasizes science, education, and ethical business practices. This fits with American public education traditions, in which successful educators have often been inspired by religious motives to serve children of all faiths (Peterson 2010). Further, even Harmony critics (e.g., Saul 2011) have found no evidence that Harmony schools promote Islam, or indeed any other religion, though fieldwork suggests that they are more tolerant of Christian religious displays than nearby traditional public schools (Maranto 2011). Most Harmony principals and central office administrators are Turkish immigrants, typically with science or engineering backgrounds, though the network is becoming more diverse over time. Very few Harmony students and relatively few teachers, with the notable exception of science and math teachers, are Turkish immigrants. Harmony schools teach science and math as stand-alone subjects taught by specialized teachers in early elementary school, in contrast to KIPP and to traditional American public schools. It is difficult for most American public schools to attract science and math teachers to low income communities. Harmony does so through its global connections, recruiting talented Turkish educators, often with doctoral degrees from good universities, who are quite pleased to teach *in America*. Roughly a fifth of Harmony teachers and a larger percentage of science and math teachers have H-1B visas. Harmony leaders understand the talent pool in Turkey. Given the status afforded teachers in

Turkey, and the significant number of young Turks who want to live in the U.S., Harmony has had few difficulties recruiting.

Key Inputs: Culture and Technology

As both critics (e.g., Horn 2011) and supporters (Hess 2010) point out, with the notable exception of a blended campus in Los Angeles, most KIPP schools are not terribly innovative; rather they offer an old fashioned emphasis on discipline, skillful teaching, and academic rigor. In accord with one of the five pillars, KIPP features more time to learn since it serves relatively disadvantaged students. Table 1 compares the time requirements for the HISD schools and for Houston’s KIPP and Harmony schools. KIPP requires about 22,440 more minutes of instruction annually than Harmony or HISD, an additional 47.75 days (27.3%).

TABLE 1

Inputs	HISD	KIPP	Harmony
Annual days of school	175*	190	175
Mean high school day (minutes)	470	551	470
Spending per student			

*In fall 2011 HISD increased the school year to 190 days, matching KIPP (*Houston Chronicle* 2010).

All successful schools manipulate students into a culture of legitimate authority and predictable (rather than authoritarian and unpredictable) rules, to assure that learning can take place free of disciplinary distractions and bullying (Wong and Wong 1997; Arum 2003). For cultural reasons the emphasis on authority may vary by community. Schools in disadvantaged, high crime communities may need more intensive and extensive emphasis on culture development to assure that schools offer safe environments for learning (Payne 2008). As fieldwork shows (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003; Maranto and Shuls Forthcoming), KIPP staff call, and indeed often badger newly admitted KIPP parents to attend the individual "commitment meeting," at which the parent, the KIPPster, and a KIPP staffer read their respective KIPP *Commitments to Excellence*, promising to do whatever is necessary to assure academic success. Usually these take place in the home. All three sign, and then another staffer photos all three displaying the signed commitment. Teachers and administrators often do other home visits, frequently visiting the same family more than once. Perhaps even more important, KIPP uses summer school and the first days of school to inculcate new students into the KIPP culture, from the proper way to raise hands to the proper way to eat breakfast and dispose of trash, summarized by the broad slogan "work hard; be nice" and more specific slogans and chants like "leave it better than you found it," and "read baby read!" KIPP summer school is not easy; indeed it can be described as a kind of boot camp. Through this, KIPP molds a culture of hard work, effort, and constant academic growth for students to "climb the mountain to college." KIPP teachers have cell phones for students to call them after hours, modeling hard work for their students. At the summer school I observed only six of 64 students were pulled out, and two of those later returned. (One of the students pulled out, a white female, had a parent who seemingly did not know initially that the KIPP campus was mainly minority.)

Like KIPP, Harmony pays attention to culture, typically starting new campuses with experienced principals and 40% or more experienced staff. Harmony teachers and staff also do home visits, at which they explain the "triad": If the school, student, and family all do their part the child will attend and succeed in college. In effect Harmony, like KIPP, seeks parents to co-produce public education. Yet to a greater degree than KIPP, Harmony substitutes technology for culture building. Harmony designed software enables parents and principals to see student assessments and disciplinary records in *real time*, and Harmony leaders encourage parents to stay on top of their students. This means that Harmony can get by with less effort molding student behavior and culture. (This also allows school leaders to see which teachers use what forms of discipline, leading to various conversations.) KIPP leaders tend to see long hours as part of the organization's commitment to equity, and to success for all. Harmony, in contrast, takes a more individualized approach. When asked why Harmony does not have a longer school day and year (like KIPP), a Harmony leader seemed puzzled, explaining that this was not necessary. Rather than having more time for everyone, Harmony software enables teachers to diagnose student weaknesses and prescribe additional work for *individual students and small study groups* in the specific areas or even topics in which they needed help, often on a *weekly* basis. Further, Harmony requires all students above the elementary school level to take part in project based learning through science, engineering and language fairs, in part to make learning socially desirable and to make it an activity that can bring honor to the entire school, rather than a zero-sum game within a classroom. Harmony schools, and indeed other schools founded by Turkish immigrants, have large trophy cases near their entrance to display academic trophies. (On other hand, Harmony offers few sports save soccer, which costs little and is beloved by Turkish staff.) Indeed one administrator insisted that if remedial study groups and activities such as science fair and robotics competition were counted, Harmony's hours would resemble KIPP's: "The official instructional time is misleading since so much more is going on" (phone interview, August 19, 2011).

TABLE 2. Student demographics (from the Texas Education Authority at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/>)

	Black	Hispanic	Asian	White	Econ. Dis.	Total
HARMONY CHARTER	22.7%	29.8%	28.6%	18.5%	53.2%	3778
KIPP CHARTER	28.4%	70.3%	0.8%	3.7%	90.9%	4658
HOUSTON ISD	27.1%	61.8%	3.3%	7.6%	79.9%	200944

Quite possibly, Harmony schools can get by with somewhat less emphasis on culture building since they have somewhat less disadvantaged students. As Table 2 shows, in Houston KIPP's student body seems more disadvantaged than that of HISD; while Harmony's seems less so. Only about half of Harmony students are low income, compared to roughly eight of ten for HISD and more than nine of ten KIPPsters. Notably, KIPP intentionally locates in low income communities, while Harmony has campuses all over the region, locating where parents request a campus or where suitable sites can be purchased. (Outside of Houston Harmony attempts to

locate in college towns and develop partnerships with colleges.) Harmony’s leadership seems to enjoy the challenge of locating in different communities. Nearly half of Harmony students are Anglo or Asian, compared to about one of ten for HISD and less than one of 20 KIPPsters. While both KIPP and HISD provide transportation for students, Harmony does not, suggesting that Harmony parents might have somewhat greater commitment. One Harmony leader observed that since his schools are STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), this shaped which parents choose the school: “Asian parents will drive across town for a science and math school.” Even at Harmony, however, most parents are disadvantaged. Many Harmony parents are Hispanic and Asian immigrants, leading some in the organization to speculate that as immigrants, Harmony leaders understand other immigrants.

TABLE 3. Test scores (from the Texas Education Authority at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/>)

Proficiency ratings on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)

	ELA	Math	Writing	Science	Social Studies	All Tests
KIPP CHARTER	89.5%	90.3%	97.2%	81.1%	98.8%	76.9%
HARMONY CHARTER	95.9%	92.3%	96.9%	91.9%	98.8%	88.3%
HOUSTON ISD	87.0%	81.0%	93.0%	80.0%	94.0%	72.0%

Commended on the TAKS

	ELA	Math	Writing	Science	Social Studies	All Tests	Total Tested 201010
HARMONY CHARTER	42.1%	35.3%	41.5%	38.5%	45.8%	19.6%	2,670.0
KIPP CHARTER	32.6%	29.7%	40.1%	21.3%	54.7%	13.1%	2,850.0
HOUSTON ISD	28.0%	27.0%	38.0%	25.0%	40.0%	13.0%	122,715.0

Conclusion

As Table 3 shows, both KIPP and Harmony seem successful. HISD is among the best urban school districts in the nation (Ouchi 2009). Yet despite spending comparable amounts, Harmony schools have consistently better standardized test scores---perhaps in part reflecting students served. KIPP also does somewhat better than HISD, despite serving a more disadvantaged population. While we do not have student turnover figures for Harmony and HISD, KIPP Houston has only 10% annual student attrition, impressive for a high poverty school. In the past, KIPP had high teacher turnover, though in recent years KIPP has reduced turnover, at least in Houston, through reshaping school culture to emphasize teams rather than individualism. This seems to have made teaching for KIPP less stressful. As a KIPP principal put it (phone interview, April 5, 2011):

Now initially with the individual approach people would do a great job in the classroom, but then when personal problems hit they would burn out. Now the team approach keeps burnout low. I think people used to say 'how the heck can I have kids if I work for KIPP,' and we have eliminated that by being more flexible so people are not in it alone.

The annual retention rate within Houston KIPP schools is now 78% (KIPP Foundation 2011, 54). Harmony has also evolved over time, developing its own home visit protocols, developing its assessment and instructional software, and making minor changes such as realizing that an hour lunchtime was simply too long for American students.

Founded by Turkish immigrants with backgrounds in science and engineering, Harmony takes a more individualized and business oriented approach to schooling, while KIPP employs culture building techniques similar to those of elite military organizations (*e.g.*, Ricks 1997). For new students, KIPP schools emphasize values and procedures, with students programmed to study hard, exhibit ethical behavior, and focus on college. This is not elitism in its usual meaning. KIPP purposely recruits very disadvantaged students, attempts to retain low performers, and demands that its teachers and leaders work harder than its students. KIPP leaders and teachers attempt to treat “KIPPsters” equally, imposing a longer school year and school day on students no matter their individual needs. KIPP also stresses teamwork and community: KIPPsters are encouraged to help rather than compete against their peers, so all can succeed. However, Social Justice theorists (Horn 2011) complain that KIPP promotes traditional values of hard work, achievement, and class mobility. Harmony schools also promote these values, but through different means. Harmony seems to be able to rely more on parents as part of the triad for achievement. Rather than prescribing more schooling for all students, Harmony uses constant measurement at the classroom level to individualize instruction. (KIPP leaders expect KIPP to evolve in this direction.) Harmony thus employs technology to make schooling more efficient, if perhaps less egalitarian. Harmony also stresses varsity academic competitions aimed at making learning a high status activity honoring a whole school, rather than a zero-sum competition within a school. The different approaches of KIPP and Harmony reflect the visions of their founders, as well as cultural differences in the communities served by each.

Quite possibly, the approaches of the two organizations will over the long term influence HISD. Indeed the district recently lengthened the school year (though not the school day) to match KIPP (*Houston Chronicle* 2010). In the future HISD might well copy Harmony's use of information technology to partner with parents and individualize instruction, with what will likely be positive results.

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