

# KIPP Public Schools





## *Introduction*

The vast disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic prompted states and school networks to pause standardized tests and ask hard questions about the role and influence of traditional, once-a-year exams. This amounted to an opportunity to reimagine and redefine K-12 assessment and accountability alongside the students, families, teachers, and school leaders most familiar with the possibilities and pitfalls of our current approach. This opportunity underscored the need for efforts to reimagine assessments.

*The Innovations in Assessment and New Measure Grant Program*, founded in 2020 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Education First aims to do just this.

**The grant program supports a new approach** to assessment that measures student learning across multiple domains and captures their readiness for college or career, while continuing to provide the detailed data that an equitable approach to accountability requires. The grant program also supports a new approach to creating assessments: one that uses equitable, human-centered design principles to more broadly share planning and decision-making power and builds on the expertise of the people most proximate to the problem.

Five grantees are developing new measures to assess student learning across multiple domains. In contrast to traditional, top-down program design, these grantees are leading this work at the grassroots level, with a particular focus on how institutional, systemic, or ideological biases influence the experiences of some individuals and groups. These grantees are engaged in **human-centered equitable design**, using principles and practices that build on the expertise and experiences of students, families, and educators (informed by [Christine Ortiz's methodology](#)<sup>1</sup>).

The experiences of these grantees can inform assessments that more fully meet the needs of students, families, teachers, and school leaders. Such measures can capture the breadth of student achievement, with explicit connections to the broad range of knowledge and skills that nurture thriving adults across diverse cultures and communities. No one test will perfectly assess all that we need to know about student learning. A richer menu of options and base of knowledge rooted in the direct experiences of the people most proximate to the problem can support the high-quality measures of learning that all students and educators deserve.

### Equitable Design in Action



<sup>1</sup>Ortiz Guzman, Christine M., *Just Design, The equityXdesign Book*.

## Measure What Matters: A Holistic Approach to Shape Joyful, Affirming School Experiences

For a quarter-century, the KIPP network of public charter schools was known for the academic success of its high-achieving students, focus on academics and character, and detailed learning techniques. Its founders, two young Teach For America fellows, had built the nation's largest and most influential charter network with a simple set of directives: "Work hard. Be nice."

In 2020, KIPP **announced** it had retired the phrase, which "ignores the significant effort required to dismantle systemic racism, places value on being compliant and submissive, supports the illusion of meritocracy, and does not align with our vision of students being free to create the future they want." In an open letter to students and alumni, the vast majority of whom are Black and Latinx, co-founder David Levin **wrote**, "as a white man, I did not do enough as we built KIPP to fully understand how systemic and inter-personal racism, and specifically anti-Blackness, impacts you and your families – both inside of KIPP and beyond."

It was part of a revisioning at KIPP, which has adopted a new slogan: "Together, A Future Without Limits."

A new vision holds that KIPP schools should be joyful, identity-affirming, and academically excellent. Expanding on its traditional focus on supporting students "to and through" college, KIPP schools should prepare all students to thrive as their authentic selves in their chosen paths in adulthood.

As part of this work, KIPP is working to develop a new model to assess school culture—to "measure what matters." Existing methods of measuring school performance, which focus on counting negative outcomes, may unintentionally reinforce the problem that KIPP is trying to solve. By contrast, a new, student-centered, multiple-measures approach to assessing school culture encompasses qualitative and quantitative evidence that schools serve as joyful and healthy environments across four major domains: empathic interactions, equitable and anti-racist policies and practices, mental health and physical well-being, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

The KIPP CARE 360 Assessment tool flips the script when it comes

to data, trading suspension and dropout rates for quantifiable positive outcomes, such as the percentage of students involved in community activities. It also accounts for the experiences of end-users, and incorporates surveys, observations, and findings from focus groups to determine, for example, whether "curriculum and instruction reflect the cultures, norms, and values of our students and families" and if schools "use inclusive processes for personnel decisions."

Similarly, the process KIPP is following is a departure from its typical manner of operation. The new assessment approach is being developed and tested piece by piece, led by a cross-section of KIPP alumni, students, teachers, and families in dialogue with national leaders. Rather than network leadership developing and delivering what they deem as an excellent school to BIPOC students and families, those community members are leading a grassroots effort to redefine what an excellent KIPP school should be.



TOGETHER, A FUTURE WITHOUT LIMITS

## Key Facts

### Who:

KIPP Public Schools

### What:

As part of an ongoing commitment to become an anti-racist organization, revisit KIPP’s mission and transform policies and practices to create joyful, identity-affirming schools, including by developing:

- A stakeholder-led process to clarify an evolving new vision for school culture that prioritizes the perspectives of people most proximate to the problem, is explicitly anti-racist, and serves the holistic needs of BIPOC students to thrive in whatever post-secondary path they choose.
- A school culture assessment tool to “measure what matters,” including by focusing on positive outcomes, prioritizing the perspectives and experiences of end-users, and establishing metrics that support the holistic development and well-being of BIPOC students.

### Why:

In 1994, KIPP was launched as a disruptive force, to provide an alternative path to college for students in communities where many young people did not graduate high school. Its demanding college-preparatory programs produced academic gains for many students. But a singular understanding of post-secondary success did not fully reflect its BIPOC students’ diverse visions for the future, and aspects of the KIPP model reinforced oppressive policies and practices. New healthy school cultures are needed that will meet the needs of the whole learner and affirm students’ unique identities as BIPOC young people. Because assessment is a core action of the network, redefining metrics of success and how to measure them is a necessary driver of change.

### How:

KIPP leadership has been surveying alumni, students, families, and teachers for several years to determine how its schools and model can better fit their needs as part of an institutional commitment to undoing racism. Building on this work, KIPP gathered “empathy data” through surveys, focus groups, and a study of female leaders in the network to identify examples of student experiences that did and did not support its new vision. It then convened “Community Boards” of students, parents, teachers, and leaders, led by alumni, to test and modify aspects of the measurement system. Through this process, the KIPP CARE360 Assessment tool gained specificity, was refocused to measure positive rather than negative outcomes, and was expanded to include culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, among other changes. KIPP will pilot aspects of this tool with various schools and continue to refine it based on feedback from the people most proximate to the problem.

## Revamping an Approach to Educational Excellence

Originally called the Knowledge is Power Program, KIPP grew from a single program for fifth-graders in Houston to become the nation’s largest and most enduring charter-school network. Now known as KIPP Public Schools, the network includes 270 schools and more than 160,000 students and alumni across the United States. It is composed of 30 regional nonprofits and a centralized KIPP Foundation focused on research, training, and program development. The vast majority of KIPP students are Black, Latinx, or multiracial, and about nine out of 10 are from families experiencing poverty.

KIPP’s early growth and success were rooted in its original approach:

expanding student access to a rigorous, college-preparatory program in communities where high-school graduation and college persistence rates were historically low. Students attended longer school days and had more homework than their peers in neighboring schools. They were expected to follow detailed rules for academics and behavior, the so-called “no excuses” approach, with the goal of persisting “to and through” college.

KIPP students excelled on standardized tests and graduated from college at dramatically higher rates than students who had attended neighboring public schools. But as KIPP students

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graduated high school and entered adulthood, a new set of data from alumni showed that not all KIPP students found immediate success in adulthood. In addition, those alumni had a unique sense of how the KIPP experience did—and did not—fully meet their needs, including the systemic racism, anti-Blackness, and inequities experienced by BIPOC students and families.

Amid a racial reckoning across the United States and with insights from its alumni, KIPP several years ago began to examine its school policies and practices with an explicitly anti-racist lens. Schools across the network de-emphasized and discontinued many strict discipline practices and expanded the use of restorative justice to prevent and



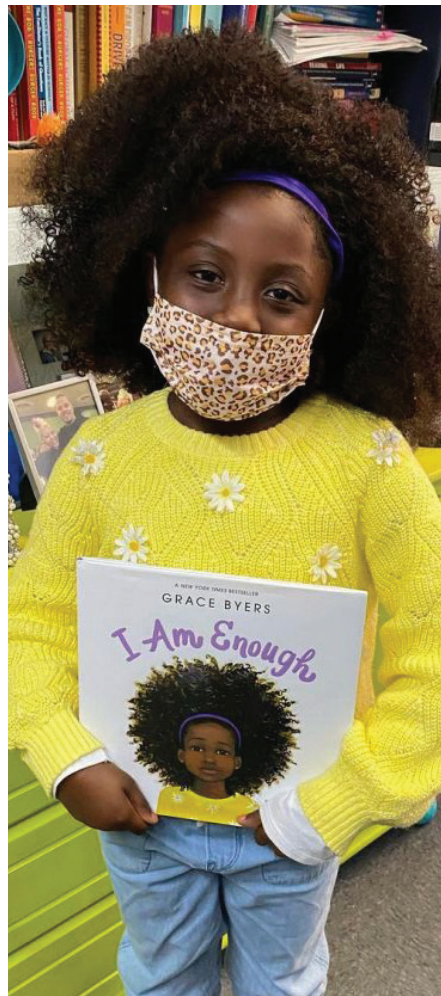
***“The opportunity we have here is to develop a tool that will hold us accountable to that north star of a joyful, identity-affirming student experience.”***

address conflict. In 2020, network leadership announced KIPP would work to minimize police and security presences on its campuses and intentionally embed anti-racist principles in its hiring materials and practices. KIPP also debuted a new organizational mission based on surveys of alumni, students, families, and educators: “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.”

In this vision, thriving, upwardly mobile futures for KIPP graduates could include college or other education and training toward a focused career, as well as community service, entrepreneurship, artistic

expression, or whatever path fits that student’s sense of authentic self and ideal role in their community. Healthy school cultures will examine and disrupt inequitable practices and policies rooted in white dominant culture, such as a narrow definition of achievement, and instead promote multiple ways to engage students.

Ensuring students have a joyful, identity-affirming, academically excellent school experience is at the core of this **new understanding of what KIPP schools should provide.**



***“Not every student has a place to learn and feel cared for by anybody else but their parents, that is where our responsibility comes in.”***

8th Grade KIPP Student  
Community Board Member

That goal is what informed KIPP’s assessment innovation work, said John Widmer, senior director of school culture at KIPP Foundation.

*“In the past, measures of the student experience have predominately rested on academic performance. At the same time, school culture is often thought of as discipline and managing behavior,” he said. “The opportunity we have here is to develop a tool that will hold us accountable to that north star of a joyful, identity-affirming student experience. And the process has allowed us to be very intentional about how we talk about that experience, and to think about what it actually looks like for our students.”*

## Co-Designing with Communities

### *Alumni and Community Boards Lead an Incremental Approach*

The project team’s work is part of a larger project at KIPP focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In addition to redesigning aspects of its operations and programs, KIPP also is working to redistribute power and center on the experiences of its students, families, and educators.

The team began its work by drawing on the self-study already underway at KIPP. Based on surveys and focus groups with students, families, alumni, and staff across the entire network, KIPP initially defined a joyful, identity-affirming school experience along three domains: Empathy-Driven Interactions; Equitable, Anti-Racist Policies and Practices; and Mental Health and Physical Well-Being.

This shifted during the second phase of the work, however, which was led by two alumni and stakeholders grouped into “Community Boards,” all based in New York City.

Board members were selected for the paid roles based on an application process and charged with reviewing, providing feedback,

and voting to decide what direction the KIPP CARE 360 Assessment tool should take. Regular prototyping meetings were focused on small, specific aspects of the assessment vision and began with open-ended prompts to spur conversation based on the board members’ perspectives and experiences. For example, the project team would draft open-response statements in the style of “Mad Libs” puzzles: “If your school was excellent in \_\_\_\_\_, then students and teachers would \_\_\_\_\_.”

Typically, KIPP would have taken a wholly different approach to this work—either with senior staff

developing an assessment tool in its entirety and presenting it for feedback, or by convening brainstorming sessions based on a blank slate. By contrast, this focused, collaborative, incremental approach, known as “little bets,” provided time and space to better reflect the needs of those most proximate to the problem in the assessment design, said Nell Etheredge Frame, senior manager for assessment products and strategy at the KIPP Foundation.

From one meeting to the next, community boards would convene and share ideas, and then see those





exchanges reflected in the next meeting’s materials. This stood in contrast to the typical extractive model of feedback, where the idea creation is the domain of one party (the network) and end-users are allowed to express opinions that may or may not enact change.

*“The ‘Little Bets’ approach created a true iterative design process where the Community Board felt like they owned the deliverable,” she said. “It wasn’t, ‘We made a grid, tell us what you think about it,’ which gives people a huge piece of information that is so overwhelming, there’s no way they could test all the elements in it. . . Using little bets let people cognitively dig into different elements of the concept, which improved the whole project.”*

In addition, this second phase of the work was led by predominately BIPOC stakeholders and alumni on the ground in one city, rather than KIPP leadership, who are not necessarily tied to a particular local community. As a regional leader of a community board said:

*“I found the Community Board process to model what flattening the hierarchy means in practice. Gathering feedback, being mindful but not deferential of power dynamics, and creating opportunities for direct dialogue and perspective-taking felt transformational to me.”*

A teacher, who was initially reluctant to dedicate time to the process, reflected:

*“This experience made me trust KIPP more, seeing the process for myself and talk and having us in different*

*spaces but then putting that brain power together was really effective. It gives me hope, especially since the passing of George Floyd there’s been so many statements and very little progress. It’s good to see actual tools being created that we can use and put into practice.”*

Widmer remarked that “the community boards and the alumni leading this work was the most impactful part.”

*“They did all the communication, the follow-up, the narration, and the voting. That shifts the relationships in this space. . . That speaks to ceding power.”*

## **A New Understanding of “What Matters”**

Over a period of months and six rounds of prototyping, the boards and alumni made several major changes to the tool.

In this first phase of the project, the team envisioned the three domains as an “if, then” hierarchy: If students experienced the three domains, then they would have experienced the target school environment. The domains would be measured to land on a school culture index score, which would then indicate the degree to which schools were serving as joyful, identity-affirming environments.



During prototyping, the Community Boards added a fourth domain: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. They redrew the visual representation of the four domains to place Joyful, Identity-Affirming Student Experiences at the center, with each domain in orbit and connected to that ultimate goal. They also expanded the information used to assess school culture to include surveys, focus groups, observations, and data.

The nature of the data considered, however, was radically changed during the process. Typically, school climate data counts negative outcomes, like incidents of rule-breaking and discipline. In rethinking school culture measure, board members revised the data to avoid deficit-based wording,

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 which they worried would contribute to actualizing those outcomes. Instead, data would quantify positive outcomes, such as rates of public affirmation, program participation, and students not experiencing school discipline.



One participating teacher said:

*“We wanted to create the metrics and priorities that we believe could create a joyful, culturally competent, and emotionally healthy space, where our children and adults want to be.”*

In addition, the idea of a single index “score” for each school was removed, both for practical and ideological reasons. From the organization’s perspective, the technical work and challenge of reliably generating an index score was not easily achieved. And from the community board perspective, a single score was not what they wanted.

*“The biases that come into a score, and the impact that that would have, recalled the way we tell single stories as opposed to the whole picture,”* said Widmer. *“So we felt like that index score was actually going against everything that we were trying to do.”*

Instead, the tool now features several student-level measures to determine if the students are experiencing identity-affirmation and joy. In addition to traditional measures of academic growth, it includes survey responses to statements like “I have teachers who I can be myself around” and observational data regarding participation in clubs and leadership-development opportunities. And it includes a similarly rich suite of information measuring whether the school has the positive and healthy environment necessary for such experiences, based on the four domains. Through prototyping, board members pushed for specific questions and experiences to be included as sources of evidence in the assessment.

## Looking Ahead

KIPP will begin to pilot aspects of this new assessment tool and community board process in the months ahead. In keeping with equitable design principles and the “little bets” approach, small aspects of these efforts will be tested separately by various KIPP regions and schools where there’s a natural fit with local priorities. These “mini-pilots” could include conducting surveys, auditing school handbooks for fit with the domains, and community boards reviewing data and holding schools accountable to revised goals. Those efforts will be based on “what regions are



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interested in or already have been working on,” said Etheredge Frame. The driving questions: are these the right things to measure? Are these the right ways to measure them?

In reflecting on the process to date, team members noted some logistical issues. First, the demands of the

community board commitment posed a challenge for some members. At the outset, the boards frequently met in a short span of time, and some members dropped out. While that allowed the project to gather momentum right away, it also appeared to accelerate attrition.

That balance of imaginative momentum and logistical constraints informs another potential challenge. So far, assessment design conversations have been more conceptual, with less focus on technical or data-analysis priorities. That may not ultimately be a barrier to implementation, but it might slow progress somewhat as regions look to implement these tools.

However, that may well be a reasonable cost for the benefits of,

as described by Etheredge Frame, “designing while suspending disbelief”—both in terms of innovating assessment at KIPP, and to inform similar equitable design processes to inform strategic planning across a range of other initiatives at the network.

*“Being under the umbrella of this innovations grant gave us more allowance to suspend disbelief and practicality,”* said Etheredge Frame. *“If our assignment had been, figure out how to measure school culture, I think we would have had more trouble ceding power. . . We would have had to design within boundaries because we would have had to been able to do it by tomorrow. The innovation structure gave us the support to say we’re seeking to develop a concept to break the mold.”*