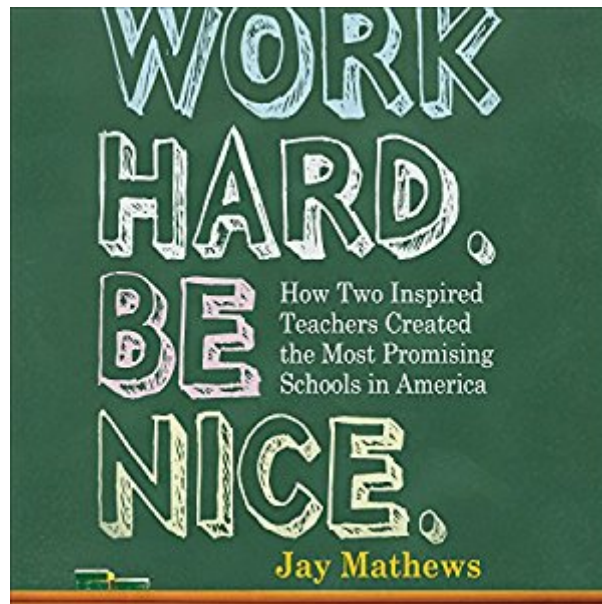


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# Work Hard. Be Nice.: How Two Inspired Teachers Created The Most Promising Schools In America



## Synopsis

When Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin signed up for Teach for America right after college and found themselves utter failures in the classroom, they vowed to remake themselves into superior educators. They did that and more. In their early twenties, by sheer force of talent and determination never to take no for an answer, they created a wildly successful fifth-grade experience that would grow into the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which today includes 66 schools in 19 states and the District of Columbia. KIPP schools incorporate what Feinberg and Levin learned from America's best, most charismatic teachers: lessons need to be lively; school days need to be longer (the KIPP day is nine and a half hours); the completion of homework has to be sacrosanct (KIPP teachers are available by telephone day and night). Chants, songs, and slogans such as "Work hard, be nice" energize the program. Illuminating the ups and downs of the KIPP founders and their students, Mathews gives us something quite rare: a hopeful book about education.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

To their credit, no one in the KIPP story, neither the writer of this book, nor the teachers themselves, claims that the KIPP program is a panacea for all the ills of education among disadvantaged students. Nonetheless, I imagine that many of this book's readers are teachers like myself who continue to look for ideas and strategies proven successful in schools, especially among struggling students. I opened this book hoping that I might encounter an idea to apply in my own classroom or to bring up as an option for my school administrators as they look for ways to improve. This is not

that kind of book. Halfway through *Work Hard, Be Nice*, I realized that the heart of the KIPP method--extended teaching hours, Saturday school, summer school, evenings spent with students' families and a cell phone at hand to ensure that students can reach the teacher for homework help--was a recipe for teacher burn out. No one should be surprised by KIPP's success; these students get nearly twice as much attention as most students do. Unfortunately, KIPP's success seems to be built upon the backs of young, energetic teachers who do not yet have families and who do not seem to have a personal need for down time. For those of us who are committed to teaching as a lifetime profession, the book simply underlines what we already know: there are no short cuts, and there is never enough time to do all that we would like to for our students. Five years into my career, I knew that I had to adopt some limits to the time I would give my students. If I didn't, I would end up leaving a career I loved. I began to limit my workday to eleven hours. That gave me one additional hour of prep and assessment time for each hour I spent with students.

Jay Mathews's book is a good story and description of the history and accomplishments of the KIPP schools. Among its strengths are the following:

1. It is a well-written and highly engaging book. The personal stories of KIPP's founders are interwoven with their battles with institutions in a manner that attracts and keeps the reader's attention.
2. The book includes some detailed stories of what goes on within KIPP schools. The book does a good job of describing key KIPP program elements that include longer school days and school years, more homework, more teacher home contact, along with an eclectic group of pedagogical techniques.
3. The book highlights the contribution to the KIPP model of teachers Harriett Ball and Rafe Esquith, who greatly influenced KIPP's founders.
4. The book is fair in discussing some criticisms of the KIPP model, including that it may select more motivated students and parents in some cases, and may lead to selective dropouts of students who do not progress as well.

Among its weaknesses are the following:

1. I was surprised that the book did not more extensively discuss WHY KIPP appears to be successful. To what extent can KIPP's effects on academic achievement simply be attributed to its students spending more time in school? It would be interesting to discuss this with KIPP teachers, students, and parents, and with educational researchers who have observed KIPP. There are empirical estimates available of how time in school affects achievement gains, and it might be interesting to see whether KIPP performs better or worse than one would expect given the increased time it implies in school.
2. The report did briefly discuss some of the empirical research on KIPP's outcomes.

I read this book on a plane. It's a fascinating story, but could have used some serious editing,

particularly with respect to chronology. There was too much jumping ahead and then rewinding, which was confusing, especially because the story moved between New York and Houston after the first several years and it was sometimes hard to keep straight which school we were reading about. I don't like the recreated dialogue convention -- obviously, no one was taking notes during all of these conversations and confrontations over more than a decade. And do all of the physical descriptions of the major players (other than the two teachers) really add to our understanding of this story? Do we really need to know when Feinberg and his wife-to-be began their physical relationship? With regard to the small section devoted to empirical research, I believe that the author has too easily dismissed the observation that the students attending KIPP schools are not randomly selected. Although their family socioeconomic background may be identical to students who are languishing in nearby non-KIPP public schools, each of the KIPP students who perseveres in this program, and their parents or other relatives, has freely chosen to be there -- to do the extra work, to put in the extra time, and to push themselves. The relatively high dropout rate in some KIPP schools illustrates that this approach is not a panacea for all lower-income students, especially those non-immigrant students whose parents are so mired in their own dysfunction that they would never even consider a program like KIPP. (The differences the teachers noted between the Hispanic immigrant families in Houston and the mostly black families in New York was profound, and perhaps deserved more attention in the book.

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