
Case Study: KIPP Central City

New Orleans, LA | Grades 4-8 | 100% African-American | 95% Free and reduced lunch | Founded in 2007

It Starts at Home

"The movement must extend beyond the school into the students' homes, where the parent-school relationship becomes key," says Todd Purvis, the former principal of KIPP Central City who is now chief academic officer for KIPP New Orleans. When he was trying to restart KIPP Central City, he made home visits to each family himself.

Over time, teachers have earned this responsibility, as it's considered key to setting the right foundation. The visits are 45 minutes to an hour and involve a veteran teacher and a newer staff member clearly laying out the expectations. Parents haven't always been welcoming. *"The framing of the home visit is huge,"* Purvis says. *"Where parents haven't been welcoming, generally it's been a misunderstanding around the purpose of the home visit. It's 'this is not a screening.'"*

Instead, staff must explain that the student is more successful when the school, student and parents are all working according to the same set of expectations. *"The real purpose is to build a positive relationship with the kid and build a belief that with hard work, you're going to be successful at our school,"* Purvis says.

When students show up on the first day excited, they have a different mentality about things than when they show up to a place they don't want to be. And the first time the student doesn't do his homework, and the teacher has to call the parent, *"the first touch point is not a negative phone call,"* he says.

The staff can refer back to those initial home visits and say: *"We spent a half hour in your house talking about what habits lead to success for your kid and how these habits are going to take your kid from middle school to high school to college, and so homework is an opportunity to show independence and responsibility,"* Purvis says. *"That's why it's so important right now. What can we do together to make sure your kid is doing the homework?"*

For most teachers, the parents they are closest with are the ones they met through a home visit.

To this day, Purvis says for most teachers, the parents they are closest with are the ones they met through a home visit. As for the leadership's relationship with parents, the school welcomes parents who want to volunteer. But for those working multiple jobs who can't come in to the school to organize the library, that's fine also. The most critical thing is to have parent engagement and support around the mission, Purvis says.

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Data as Motivator

Todd Purvis sees data as a tool to motivate his team to one barrier, get them to break it, then move onto the next. *"We want to keep people in the cognitive phase of growth where they're constantly being challenged to get better,"* says Purvis, former principal of KIPP Central City and KIPP New Orleans chief academic officer. KIPP New Orleans gives interim assessments every 6 weeks. *"Everyone knows this is what my performance looks like. They know what the bar is. They know what they're working toward,"* he says.

Purvis led a shift at the network away from interim assessments aligned to state testing, and toward those aligned to the ACT, says KIPP New Orleans Executive Director Rhonda Kalifey-Aluisse. Then, he pushed to publish the results network-wide to foster collaboration and competition. While some teachers may bristle at their results being thrown up on the wall for

everyone to see, KIPP had been seeking out teachers who were comfortable with this growth mentality and with scrutinizing their own performance. *"A lot of times, schools operate on what feels good in terms of school culture,"* Kalifey-Aluisse says.

Staring the data in the face helped the staff course correct. Those who were finding success could

share practices with colleagues. *"(Purvis) had a way of pushing his colleagues to participate in a way that wasn't threatening,"* she says. It was all done *"under the big vision and theme of 'we can get better by doing this.'"* Again, his theory of continually breaking new barriers came into play. *"You get people performing, then other people see what it looks like, and it will drive them,"* Kalifey-Aluisse says. She credits the shift toward more transparent data with

accelerating performance. *"His theory was—and I saw this play out—provide people with the information, don't prescribe to them how they are to do this. Put all the info out there... Let's see who else can get there,"* she says. *"It started this incredible competition and collaboration." People in the region were able to say, 'if the 8th grade math teacher at KIPP Central City can do this with the same kids I have, I can do this.'"*

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At Central City, Purvis also did this with his best teachers. *"He would go to his best people early on and say, 'here's info on every kid in your class, here's how one cohort is growing in reading, here are the 10 lowest kids—you've not moved them at all.' He'd go so granular,"* Kalifey-Aluisse recalls. *"He made teachers the owners."*

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Gut Check

The staff was turned over at the struggling KIPP Central City not once, but twice, in one year.

The original principal brought in a new staff in December. At the end of the first year, the new principal brought in, Todd Purvis, retained just two staffers for the following year and started fresh.

"We identified people with the right mindset, and prioritized the team we were going to build," Purvis says. His process was generic—phone interview, sample lesson, instructional interview and a visit to New Orleans. But then there was the gut check. "I would take every candidate to the building we were going into...Central City has historically been one of the more violent and impoverished areas of the city," Purvis says. "The defining moment for me was walking into the courtyard of the new building and seeing their eyes light up at the opportunity we had. That's when I knew this person was right for the team. They had to pass the informal 'You're invested in this.'"

Over the years, he's fine-tuned the factors that make for the right "fit" for his team. Flexibility and teamwork, along with a record of achievement, are crucial. *"You've got to understand and have experienced what it looks like to be successful in the past. People who have experience with success are going to want to experience that again,"* he says. Having the ability to reflect, then improve, is also important. *"Of course, I was going to provide as much possible feedback to people, but we were going to grow as fast as we could grow if people were self-directed in their learning and able to reflect on what they were doing and work on their own*

practice as much as they were getting that from me," he says.

The second try at putting together a school team turned out better. That team came together tightly and remained bonded for years to come, while KIPP Central City experienced solid growth.

In that early phase, KIPP New Orleans Executive Director Rhonda Kalifey-Aluise says Purvis was transparent about expectations so it was clear to everyone who wasn't meeting them. *"Where some would say 'Oh, give them another year,' he has such a high bar,"* she says. *"He made tough calls in keeping people or letting them go."*

You've got to understand and have experienced what it looks like to be successful in the past.

Being clear about the expectations helped the rest of the staff navigate a rough time. *"Every staff member, even those who struggled with some of their friends not returning, could not deny this was about performance for kids,"* Kalifey-Aluise says.

Kalifey-Aluise credits the approach with helping KIPP Central City accelerate its performance faster than other schools. *"I think early on he knew what excellent performance looks like earlier than what I've seen in other principals. Sometimes it takes several years to figure that out and say 'Here's what excellent performance in 7th grade math really needs to be,'"* she says. *"I have another principal who kept the staff of the previous principal for a couple years, and I saw that person get to the point in three to four years that Todd got to in the first or second year."*

Purvis stuck with people who maybe didn't get immediate results but were improving. Most

importantly, they were totally on board with the mission and vision. He now has three top-performing teachers in the city. *"We laugh now that if we did video analysis of their classrooms (back then), they were just a mess,"* Purvis says. *"The right mindset people we stuck with. We can't coach on mindset as much as we can on skill."* But if a teacher wasn't a fit with the culture, *"you (get rid of them) as quickly as possible, because the culture of the school is more important than one person,"* he says.

And sometimes the people who don't fit with the culture may be hitting the mark in other ways. *"We had a couple instances last year where we had data-wise, some high-performing teachers we might have tried to talk into staying if we felt like that was the best fit for our school,"* says assistant principal Lowrey Crews. Some of their interactions with kids weren't necessarily positive. *"They did the data piece; the culture piece wasn't always there,"* he says.

But if teachers see a colleague leave who came on at the same time as them, it can cause an identity crisis for the teachers who stay.

Teachers may think: *"Oh they're leaving to do something else, should I be doing something else?"* Crews says. *"That's the rift that it creates when you lose some of your veteran teachers. It makes other people think about why they're there,"* Crews says. To protect the team, the leadership actively seeks out the friends of the departing teachers to make sure they can separate out their own situation.

Follow the Leader: Decision-Making

Through the tough decisions of those first couple years, Purvis says he learned to do the work of trust-building ahead of time so announcements weren't interpreted as Mr. Purvis coming down with a decision. *"I think the way we built our bonding and our relationships as a staff, people were confident I had weighed all the variables,"* he says. *"That meant 'people were bought into knowing this is the best of a worst-case scenario.'"*

Building on the idea that everyone is in it together as a team also helped staff members digest hard

decisions. Some of the more difficult decisions came at the end of the year when teams had to be split up to prepare for adding a grade the following year. Purvis had to figure out how to take an incredibly bonded group and split it apart in a way that played off the strengths of people and kept the school moving forward. People were emotionally attached to each other, and Purvis believed a lot of the success of the school relied on the staff bonds. He learned the key was to make sure people understood why it was happening. *"Focus on the why, keep it in the context of how it's going to help schools and the students,"* he says. *"As long as things are told through a lens of 'this is why this is happening,' adults have been positive about changes we've made."*

Relationships Reflect Trust, Candor and Respect

A common complaint of teachers everywhere is that the administration does not respect their judgment or professionalism, instead over prescribing what must be done when in the classroom. While KIPP Central City administrators lay out expectations for teachers, school leaders try to leave room for teachers to do their own thing, so the environment feels creative instead of oppressive. *"For instance, in science we want to make sure students are involved in critical thinking and there's literacy incorporated into it and a vision for each content area,"* says assistant principal Lowrey Crews. *"But then everything else depends on the teacher's style and personality. We want kids to love science and we want you to be the teacher you want to be and can be. As long as we're clear about these things needing to be in the classroom, the rest is up to you."*

Purvis also tries to take advantage of stellar teachers' skills, developing internal experts in certain subjects. *"I'll say, 'You're a rockstar science teacher, you dig deep on science. You develop a science vision and I'll help you run with it,'"* Purvis says. The science teacher is leading the professional learning community for the science department and holding informal planning sessions with teachers. Giving capable teachers more responsibility shows the respect a leader has for their professional skills. It

also accelerates the pace of growth of the entire staff as everything is not dependent on the school leader trying to implement it all. *"If I'm saying I'm going to be the one who teaches mission and vision, the culture stuff, English, math, reading, social studies, science, electives, band—that's just not going to work,"* he says. *"The key to that has been to empower teachers who can focus in on one area to really take it and run with it, and let me help facilitate it and make sure it's running in the same direction."* But at the same time, it has to be delegated to someone who has demonstrated they are worthy of the trust of taking on such a task. *"I would much rather control something and work with people on it until we had people who were ready to work on it at a level that was higher than me,"* he says.

Team Power

The smaller teams within the team are important as well. The administration points to one new teacher who spent a lot of time over the summer thinking about what she wanted to change. She worked hard with the math team, which was one of the stronger teams at the school. Working collaboratively and being open to their suggestions helped her reach "rock star status" (as the school leaders describe it) earlier than usual. *"Building the right teams, whether it's grade-level teams or content teams, that's something we've been very intentional about in the last couple years as we try to get teachers from being good to being excellent,"* Crews says.

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Culture First

Todd Purvis had worked in emergency situations before, helping rebuild schools and recruit students after Hurricane Katrina hit. He took over as principal at KIPP Central City mid-year, with someone else's disenchanted team in place. *"The first day, I told every teacher, 'if a kid is being disrespectful send them to me,'" he recalls. "I had like 50 kids sent to me on the first day."* He gave up the principal's office and moved from classroom to classroom with his work. *"I would work in the front office, the cafeteria," he says. It gave teachers a chance to ask questions and made him feel more connected to the classroom. "A huge piece of how I manage and how I operate is to have those little times to interact, understand the pulse of the kids, the pulse of teachers," he says.*

KIPP New Orleans Executive Director Rhonda Kalifey-Aluise says the turnaround with kids started taking place in major ways after Purvis took over—even though the team of adults would continue to change for the next year.

Purvis took a lot of the kids on himself and did big room classes, focusing not as much on academics as culture. Parents pushed back, as the previous incarnation of the school had been more free-flowing, not as tight, not as strict.

There had been a set of rules on the wall, but none of them had been followed particularly well. Purvis spent much time with teachers and parents himself that first semester, setting the bar by modeling to the other adults "this is how you do this." *"There are teachers who develop a relationship and they make this exception. You correct a kid, or you tell a kid something, and then they're doing it in the classroom, and you just let them do it and don't call them out,"* Kalifey-Aluise says. *"He calls it every time."*

Kids pushed back too, says teacher Tania Roubion. *"It was challenging to shift from a traditional public*

school to KIPP. It's very structured," she says. But as the teachers began to solidify as a team, they were able to give each other support in following through to make sure students adjusted to the new culture. "Say if I had an issue with a kid, I had to give detention, and this child would not accept detention very well, I'd have three other teammates in detention with me working with me, alongside, knowing that I had a team of people to support and coach this kid through the situation," she says.

By May, when KIPP Central City closed out the first school year with principal No. 2, the foundational culture pieces were in place, Kalifey-Aluise says.

The Debate over Pencil Sharpening: Adults Define the Environment

The school leader has to have complete control over the vision and the expectations for the school, Purvis says. *"And you cannot let those go. Once those start to diminish, you've actually lost control of the school,"* he says. *"Prior to me starting, I think there was some confusion about what the expectations were, and so there weren't common expectations across the school."* To invest the staff in the mission and vision, hours and hours were devoted during those first weeks of professional development to making sure everyone was on the same page when it came to expectations for kids. The question was: *"How do we define excellence so we can constantly go back to that and measure against that?"* Purvis says. He wanted the staff to be able to articulate what high expectations physically looked like in the classroom. That led to some very detailed discussions. *"One time, we had a two-hour conversation about how to sharpen pencils in the classroom,"* he remembers. *"While the topic of pencil-sharpening is not a topic that I would normally spend two hours on, the way we were engaging around expectations brought a lot out of what was expected in a way that only that*

kind of depth of conversation could. We spent a ton of time at the beginning norming out our vision and expectations."

Teacher Courtney Meyers says Purvis gave teachers a voice. As the staff discussed appropriate ways for kids to sharpen pencils, *"Todd could have easily said, 'this is the way it's going to be' and just move on. But he gave us a voice and an investment in the school,"* she says.

Kalify-Aluise says that because Purvis hired people who were so like-minded and was able to create alignment around a vision, staff members had a great sense of the "why" behind what they were doing pretty early on into their second year. *"You had all these people who were about a vision, about a vision, about a vision,"* she says.

Norming: This Is What Your Classroom Should Look Like

When Purvis first took over at KIPP Central City midyear and he'd walk into classrooms, kids might be taking laps around the room or sleeping. So the focus at the beginning was on getting positive classrooms set up. To get everyone on the same page, school leaders started norming performance so every member of the staff knew what a team member's classroom should look like. *"There's different levels of support that goes with what's normal,"* Purvis says. *"When something's not normal, we need to constantly put it in front of people, this is what we expect—give them tons of feedback around where do they stand in performance against what's expected and work with them on strategies to get there."* The more classrooms reach that level of what's expected, the more clear the expectations. *"It's just wrapped around them. Everyone they talk to says this is how classes run,"* Purvis says. *"That speeds up the acceleration"* of developing new teachers into great ones.

Crushing Expectations

In Jamie Irish's 8th grade honors math class, the top students are getting a stern talking to. Irish, who won TNTP's Fishman Prize for Superlative Teaching

Practice in 2012, is pacing in front of a burnt orange wall at the front of the class, his voice raised as he tells the students to stop whining and complaining. *"This is the expectation,"* he says, his tone no-nonsense as he glares at the class. *"I don't care what you did last year. Are you a student who gets mastery or advanced or are you not?"* he asks. The students' task for this day, spelled out on the board, was to solve equations with variables on each side. Students are solemn, some hanging their heads. Irish doesn't let up. *"Why is this the only class of people off task?"* he says pointing to numbers showing each of his classes' performance. Afterward, Purvis explains: *"They're the honors math class, the top class, but they're not outperforming everyone else."*

Over the years, Irish has refined a process to get the best out of his students. It involves lots of inspirational talk, high expectations and Orange Crush. The Orange Crush is representative of the class goal to crush the low expectations assigned to them. In his TNTP essay for the Fishman Prize, Irish lays out how he rallies his class each year. They start on the first day by reading a newspaper article that correlates a basic score on the state standardized test to an 18 or 19 on the ACT later in their high school career. If students here hope for a scholarship—and many do—they need at least a 20 on the ACT. Just basic is not going to cut it. Everyone needs to hit the mastery or advanced bar. He sets the class goal to crush a top-performing, selective-enrollment school nearby called Lusher Charter School. The mantra becomes Crush Lusher. Irish describes the attributes he assigns to "Crushers." They have grit, strive for excellence, and work in teams. He builds lessons teaching these values. Lusher's scores are posted at the front of the room, and students set individual goals based on their own progress toward crushing Lusher. Irish quotes one student: *"I got a Basic, but I need to get a Mastery next time. I need to ask more questions in class."*

In his essay, Irish writes that he tells his students: *"I pull all my questions from the most rigorous materials available to any teacher across the country, so if you score 100 percent on one of my assessments, you are one of the most accomplished students in the*

nation.” They’ve not yet beaten Lusher, but they are making serious progress toward closing the gap.

Never Any Down Time

Meg Everett is a new KIPP teacher, charged with a 5th grade writing class. Inside, all of the students’ hands are waving in the air, shaking with enthusiasm to show they know THE ANSWER for this lesson on proper punctuation. As a small girl with a white bow in her hair struggles to answer Everett’s questions, the other students are “showing her some love” with another waving hand signal.

“Do you want to phone a friend?” Everett asks the girl. There are routines for everything. *“A couple of years ago, this wouldn’t be a first-year classroom,”* Purvis says. Whenever she wants the class to turn their attention to a student, herself, or a question, Everett orders *“Tracking (student name/me/No. 5/the board).”* Everett asks students to repeat chants after her, all designed to keep them engaged and eyes from wandering. When the girl with the white bow finally finds the answer, students snap in agreement to show they like it.

Outside the class, Purvis gives his assessment: *“Kids sitting up, kids paying attention, kids completing their*

work, if we work with teachers on getting those three things in place...Without those, you can’t actually work on quality instruction or kids mastering it,” he says. *“Foundationally, those just have to be in place.”*

In Hilah Barbot’s 6th grade science class, her blue-and-white room explodes with science terms and displays. Hanging atoms dangle from the ceiling while chemical symbols paper the windows. She is a fourth-year teacher who has been a top-performing science teacher in the city for the past few years. Purvis has had her take the lead in implementing the vision for the science curriculum. As she transitions the class from standing to sitting down with their papers, she goes through the process step by step until she gets them to the page where they need to be. She has them snap to agree with a statement of a student she questions in class.

On the white board, the aim of the day, and the SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To) is listed as *“calculate net force.”* *“Who dat on track?”* is the heading on a board that tracks every student’s performance. Another sign outlines the class goals: *“Our big goal— all of us will become inventors.”* They will also do two research papers, and be in the science fair.

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School Leader

Todd Purvis, former principal, KIPP Central City Chief Academic Officer, KIPP New Orleans

Todd Purvis had the plans for opening his new school ready to go. As a KIPP Fisher Fellow, he had thought out how he would do it and what his priorities would be. And then, midway through the year, the head of KIPP New Orleans called him and made a not-so-appealing proposition: Drop his plans for a smooth start to a new KIPP school and take over a struggling New Orleans school that at just a few months old, had already lost staff and students, lacked a cohesive culture and was...well, a bit of a mess. *"There were people at the time who said, 'I would never take that school,'"* remembers Rhonda Kalifey-Aluise, Executive Director of KIPP New Orleans. *"It was not atrocious by any means, certainly better than anything happening in New Orleans schools before, but it did not look like KIPP. It did not look like this. There were fights, we were losing kids, there were discipline issues, our attrition that year was 30 percent of our students."*

KIPP Central City opened in 2007, at a time when every area of the city was in desperate need. *"So much of the city had flooded, so many of the citizens were still coming back and so many failed schools had closed,"* Kalifey-Aluise says. Located in the heart of New Orleans, Central City was among the most crime-ridden areas in the entire city.

The KIPP New Orleans board considered forgetting Central City altogether and starting over with new schools. They eventually decided to give a chance to Purvis, who was just 26 at the time. Kalifey-Aluise pinpoints the phone call when she offered Purvis the job as the start of his becoming a transformational leader. *"There's a lot of risk there. I could start my own school and start from scratch and build it and hire who I want. Or, I could come in and do what it takes and try to figure this out,"* she says. Purvis took the job, and actually accepted with enthusiasm. *"It was, 'If we're going to do it, I want to do it now. I don't want to wait until the fall because I want to get in there now. The longer we let it go, the harder it's going to be to do,'"* Kalifey-Aluise recalls.

Student progress over time on Louisiana's annual assessment (LEAP)

KIPP Central City	2007-08 Grade 4	2011-12 Grade 8
ELA	47	75
Math	56	91