

## Revolutionary Educators

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12.21.09



"I'm proud to report the achievement gap between white kids and minority students is closing, for the good of the United States," the president told a beaming group of young minority children and photographers.

The year was 2002, and President George W. Bush had just pledged a revolution in education, encapsulated in the motto "No Child Left Behind." By 2014, he promised, black, Hispanic and poor children would catch up to their white peers.

Eight years later, it hasn't happened. Today the average 12th-grade black or Hispanic student still has the reading, writing and math skills of a white eighth-grader. The achievement gap is even more pronounced in the nation's so-called "dropout factories," the 12% or 2,400 of all American high schools that produce more than half the country's dropouts. In high-poverty cities, like Detroit, only 34% of black males earn their high school diplomas.

Obviously, the usual medicine--cutting class sizes, raising teacher pay, revamping curriculum--isn't working. Educational reforms typically have incremental gains at best; tiny upticks of one-quarter to one-third of a standard deviation in standardized test scores. Throwing dollars at the problem doesn't work either. In Washington, D.C., one of the worst public school systems in

America, only 43% of students graduate high school--yet the district spends 50% more per pupil than the national average.

What is needed is a revolutionary approach. The 14 educators on our list are taking radical tacks, and in many cases, they are accomplishing the seemingly impossible.

Take Geoffrey Canada. He believes that just providing a decent classroom experience is not enough, so he starts in the womb. His organization begins by offering free prenatal care to pregnant women and follows the kids all the way through their college graduations. Canada's approach is intensely local--he covers just 97 inner city blocks in central Harlem--a focus that allows his team to literally go door to door and check on their 8,000 kids.

A smaller fraction of these students--roughly 1,200 of them--attend Canada's charter school, the Promise Academy. The school spends \$19,200 per pupil, \$4,000 more than New York's state average but \$4,000 shy of average spending in upscale neighboring Westchester County. The extra cash covers a raft of after-school programs, free medical and dental care and tutoring.

It works. The typical 6th-grader entering Canada's charter school scored in the 39th percentile among New York City students in math. By the 8th grade, just two years into the program, that same student scored in the 79th percentile, matching or outscoring his white peers in New York City public schools. The school produced statistical gains of 1.3 and 1.4 standard deviations--unprecedented when you consider that typical reforms produces gains equal to small fractions of one deviation. Canada's \$75 million annual budget is mostly covered by private giving, but there is significant government interest. President Barack Obama has recently announced plans to expand the model into 20 cities.

Other visionaries on our list include Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, whose Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) is now the nation's largest network of charter schools. The two started KIPP in Houston in 1994 around a simple philosophy: "Work hard. Be nice."

Incoming students sign a contract committing to do whatever it takes to go to college. Their school day begins at 8 a.m. and ends at 4 p.m. They have class on alternate Saturdays and their summer vacation is shorter. On average, they spend 60% more time in class than their peers. Teachers give out their cellphone numbers so students can call for help with homework. More than 80% of KIPP students are from low-income families, and would typically have an 8% chance of graduating from college. To date, a staggering 85% of KIPP students have gone on to college.

Deborah Bial is exploiting peer pressure at her New York-based Posse Foundation. She got the idea for her program when a student told her, "I would have never dropped out of college if I had my posse with me." So now she helps disadvantaged youth take their "posses" to college with them, in the form of nine peers the foundation selects, using its own unique set of predictors for success. Scholarships provided by the program send groups of friends to the same college. Her students have won over \$220 million in scholarships and 90% have graduated. From good schools, too: Bowdoin, Pomona, Middlebury and Rice University all partake.

Three of the revolutionaries on our list--Mike Feinberg, Dave Levin and Michelle Rhee--are Teach for America alums. Teach for America was founded by Princeton grad Wendy Kopp in 1990 to entice top college students to pass up lucrative careers to teach in the nation's poorest schools. In 2007, before the recession unfolded, 18,000 college seniors were applying to teach in the nation's highest-poverty neighborhoods, nearly a 40% increase from four years earlier. Last year, a record 35,000 applied. Among those, were 11% of Ivy League college seniors turning down consulting and investment banking gigs to teach. The latest study (2009) by the Urban Institute found that TFA teachers have at least twice the impact on student performance as teachers with three or more years' experience.

**[In Pictures: Revolutionary Educators](#)**