



Daily Record (Jacksonville, FL) - "KIPP leader talks education"

By David Chapman | January 29, 2010

A national success in education for underserved communities might not debut in Jacksonville until August, but Monday the Meninak Club of Jacksonville received a peek at its blueprint for change.

Tom Madjanics, Knowledge is Power Program executive director, spoke to more than 75 members of the civic organization on the public school initiative that will aim to improve graduation rates and increase the number of college graduates in Northwest Jacksonville.

Madjanics referenced Jacksonville's 64.5 percent graduation rate - last among the top 40 metropolitan areas in the country - along with Northwest Jacksonville's rate between 40 and 45 percent, calling the collective statistics "tough numbers to swallow."

"These students are our future," said Madjanics. "We need to do better with them ... and these kids deserve better."

Madjanics and KIPP officials believe their program is part of the solution. The national network of free, open-enrollment college preparatory public schools is more than 80 strong across 19 states and touts a rate of more than 85 percent of its students going to college.

The success of higher graduation rates assists taxpayers, explained Madjanics, through fewer dropouts needing social welfare and being better prepared to enter the workforce.

"There's giant unrealized economic opportunity through unrealized human capital," said Madjanics.

How KIPP students reach success in the classroom and the structure, though, is a little different from typical public schools as Meninak members learned.

School days are longer - typical school days are from 7 a.m.-5 p.m., with half-days Saturdays - resulting in close to 65 percent more classroom time during the year. School leaders, said Madjanics, have greater authority over things such as teachers and budgets.

Teachers are paid on average 20 percent more due to increased time in the classroom. Students will have an hour a day of art and physical education classes, stay engaged through nightly homework and learn in ways that isn't always by-the-book.

"We have a focus on results and accountability," said Madjanics, adding when things do go wrong: "Make changes, not excuses."

To accomplish these goals, it takes more than just teacher and officials participation. It takes dedication and leadership in the home, he said, as KIPP officials meet with parents of interested students beforehand to explain the school's structure and process while stressing the need for parental involvement and encouragement.

Going into homes of interested families and selling the school, responded Madjanics to an audience question often varies in reaction. Some parents are enthused by the approach, while others are surprised by the commitment, he said.

The involvement and commitment is vital, though, as Madjanics explained how many students that come from underserved areas almost have to play "catch up" due to being as many as two grade levels behind in reading and math skills. The additional classroom time builds those skills, adds positive character ("Character is woven into the fabric of school," he said) and helps students go from an "if" to a "when" attitude when it comes to their educational future.

A total of five KIPP schools will be in the area (the first such in Florida) at the closed Jacksonville Kennel Club facilities on McDuff Avenue donated by Howard Korman last year. The first school will be a middle school, with a combination of two middle or elementary schools to follow within the next few years. Between 2014 and 2017 the final two schools, with a possible high school in the mix, will be established.

Madjanics' presentation received a plethora of nodding heads and questions, with many Meninak members like Gil Wright and Claude Molton interested in the concept - especially with devoted attention to classes involving art and physical education.

"I think it will help a lot with the students," said Wright.

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