

Charter district gets \$2.5 million - San Antonio Express-News

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The Knowledge is Power Program San Antonio, a charter school district known for its extended school day and Saturday classes, has received a \$2.5 million grant from the George W. Brackenridge Foundation.

The five-year grant is the largest in the foundation's nearly 90-year history.

Victoria Rico, the foundation's chairwoman of the board, said KIPP San Antonio's work is in keeping with the vision of Brackenridge.

George W. Brackenridge, a philanthropist who died in 1920, is known primarily for giving to the city the park that bears his name, but he also cared deeply about education, Rico said.

He served as president of the San Antonio School Board and as a member of the University of Texas System board of regents, and he once offered to underwrite the expenses of the university for a biennium when Gov. James Ferguson vetoed the university's 1917-1919 appropriations bill.

KIPP operates three local schools — a high school and two middle schools — open to children who live within Loop 410, excluding Alamo Heights.

KIPP CEO Mark Larson said the foundation's donation will help the charter district realize its expansion plans, which include opening two elementary schools.

Charter schools receive per-student funding from the state but are not entitled to state facilities money and lack taxing authority.

San Antonio KIPP schools have more than 700 students, and Larson said he wants to eventually quadruple that number.

“Our early track record of growth proves that we are getting better as we get bigger,” Larson said.

The district, which plans to open its first elementary school in August 2012, posts reading scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills that steadily increase with each grade level

despite a student body that typically enters fifth grade significantly behind that level. Parent George Gonzalez has two children in KIPP schools, where they transferred after starting out in San Antonio Independent School District campuses.

“I always wanted to give them a better advantage, but I was unable to afford a private school,” said Gonzalez, whose wife heard about KIPP on Oprah Winfrey's television show. He said the family loves the school and that his children have adjusted well to the program's longer school hours and mandated Saturday school.

A portion of the grant money is to be spent teaching educators outside the KIPP organization but in the same enrollment area about “KIPP principles and methods,” Rico said in an e-mail.

To some extent, KIPP already does this. For example, the charter district recently hosted a professional development session for local Teach for America recruits, nearly all of whom work in the SAISD.

Larson said the session was “really about how do you set up the kind of classroom culture that will facilitate learning well.”

Gonzalez said his children had a good experience at their traditional public elementary schools. But he feels they're getting a leg up at KIPP, where, he said, future students will benefit even more from the elementary schools on the horizon.

“I did tell my friends and family that have little ones that are two or three years away from kindergarten, ‘Wait for it. It's coming.’”