
Case Study: KIPP Academy Nashville

Nashville, TN | 364 students, grades 5-8

60% African-American | 35% Latino | 89% low-income | 11% special education

Profile: Laura Miguez Howarth, 2016 Ryan Award Winner

Her message was as clear as the plastic page protectors she put on each classroom door at KIPP Academy Nashville: The team would stare data in the face and confront it no matter what it said. Laura Miguez Howarth's first move as principal was to have every teacher give students a weekly quiz then spotlight the results on the classroom door. With specific goals, procedures and metrics, she brought the whole team together quarterly to challenge the results.

It was difficult publicly sharing results that showed only 9 percent of students in one teacher's class passing the state test, but if teachers were to help the mostly minority and low-income students compete, honesty was critical.

"I create transparency so I can build trust. There is no façade that this is going really well when it's not," says Ms. Miguez, as she's known around the halls of KIPP Academy Nashville.

She built systems and structures and created daily, weekly and monthly trackers to force the shift to that transparency.

Despite some of the ugly early numbers, Miguez saw a path for the school, and for the teacher who had only 9 percent of students pass the test. It turned out to be a good bet, as that teacher has improved her kids' scores nine times over. *"We've made insane progress in five years in terms of individual teachers and kids,"* Miguez says.

Today, KIPP Academy Nashville is a Tennessee Reward School, a distinction given to the top 5 percent of Tennessee schools for year-over-year progress. In her first full year as principal, Miguez and her staff helped students post double-digit increases on state scores, more than doubling

math and science results. (In math, the school soared from 24 percent of students proficient and advanced to 51 percent in just one year.) They've continued to drive higher.

Miguez brought consistency to procedures, creating rubrics and a handbook while uniting people around a common mission. These days, teachers hang their results voluntarily in those clear page protectors on the door, to motivate

kids. *"I want my school to be a place where every single person who works here and attends feels the exact same ownership as I do,"* Miguez says. *"When something goes wrong, I want everybody to feel it in the same way I feel it. That's important to me, so I try to create the opportunity to do that."*



Several KIPP students joined Principal Laura Miguez Howarth as she accepted her 2016 Ryan Award for exceptional achievement from Pat Ryan, Founder of Accelerate Institute.

Her vision for the school is rooted in one sobering statistic: Research shows that 79 percent of students who come from wealthy

families in the highest earning quartile graduate from college. For those students coming from families in the lowest earning quartile, only 11 percent do. Most KIPP Academy Nashville kids fall into the category that suggests only 11 percent of them will complete four years of college. To give her students the same opportunities as their wealthier peers, Miguez set the goal of making sure 79 percent of her students graduate from college, and everything works back from that. (The student-facing goal is 100 percent. Miguez says the team will increase the bar once students hit the 79 percent, but are focused on college completion, not just admission.)

"Everything should be in service to this in our mission," Miguez says. *"Is this going to happen in a year? No. Is this going to happen in two to three*

years? Probably not. But in five years this could absolutely be a reality.”

Teachers say the high expectations and demands for transparency are balanced with supports to help them improve. *“Her goals are at the same time both audacious and big, while still being reasonable and achievable for the staff,”* says teacher Kristen Sueing. *“She really communicates to us that she believes in our potential to achieve them. She communicates the same things to the kids.”*

Math teacher Katie Draper says she values the thinking that goes into developing procedures for every step of the day. *“From the time kids come in the door, we have discussions about what does that look like? What does greeting kids at the door look like? How do we have them coming in? We’ll set them up for success before they even get to homeroom,”* says Draper. *“Every little piece, a lot of other people might overlook, our leadership is just very intentional.”*

From the way staff members stand outside to shake her hand every morning to the demeanor of the student body, KIPP Academy Nashville was a shift for student Evelyn Mancilla, now in eighth grade. *“A lot of other schools, they don’t have professional students. Here there is a lot of professionalism,”* says Mancilla, who wants to be an engineer. *“They said they will push us through college, and they’ve been preparing us ever since fifth grade,”* she says. The school values also helped her to evolve. *“When I was in fifth and sixth grade, I used to not participate. I used to be really shy. My teachers have told me to go and show grit and ever since then, I really have improved,”* Mancilla says. She saw how the habits teachers emphasize helped students focus on their work. *“Ms. Sueing forces you to do the best every day,”* she says.

From day one, the conversation is focused on a student’s future self. When 10-year-olds make a mistake, teachers remind them of a future as possibly an engineer or a doctor. *“I’m speaking to you as that 21-year-old engineering student, not as the 10-year-old being defiant on purpose,”* Miguez says. *“That’s the idea behind everything. When I’m speaking to you at any point, I’m making this*

connection to you right now. If this continues or this doesn’t adjust, this is the detriment it’s going to have on your potential to be a college graduate.”

Today the KIPP Academy Nashville team continues to stare data in the face. In quarterly reflections, staff members take one step back to gauge where they are toward the larger goal, celebrate successes, reinvest in the mission, then motivate with a healthy sense of urgency. Some teachers might walk into the quarterly meeting lamenting that the whole room will know if they failed to hit their goals. *“But it’s just what it is. Let’s not dwell on it,”* Miguez says.

Most importantly, she says, the focus should be: *“Here’s what we are going to do about it. Let’s make a game plan.”*