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Princeton Class of 2011
Class of 1995 Summer Service Fund Report
for the summer of 2010

This past summer, I worked as an intern and teaching assistant at a Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) school in Washington, D.C. KIPP is a nation-wide organization that has set up free, open-enrollment public schools for low-income and underserved children, with the professed goal of closing the achievement gap. Although every KIPP school differs slightly from the other schools in the network, on the whole, KIPP is producing a remarkable record. The KIPP school I worked for – the AIM Academy, serving grades five through eight – is located in Anacostia, one of the poorest neighborhoods in D.C. HIV/AIDS is the third-highest cause of mortality in Anacostia, and violence is the fourth. Most of the children entering the fifth grade at AIM Academy this year are unable to read or write on grade level, but judging from the statistics from previous years, a majority of the ones that make it through the eighth grade at AIM will go on to college.

How does AIM – and how do the other KIPP schools – achieve these kinds of results? In a nutshell, KIPP's philosophy is that demographics do not (or at least should not) define destiny. Poverty is a barrier to high achievement not because poorer children are incapable of high achievement, but because they are not given the same opportunities or the same preparation to become high achievers. KIPP believes that hard work, better teachers, and more hours spent studying both in and outside the classroom will put a child on the path to high achievement.

I wanted to work at KIPP this summer because I'm interested in pursuing a career in education, but also because I was very curious to see what KIPP's philosophies looked like in practice. I was curious to see in person what made KIPP's education system work. In many ways, what I found at AIM confirmed what I already knew about the program, but the experience of living and working side by side with KIPP teachers was so much richer, fuller, and more eye-opening than I could have anticipated.

At AIM, I was paired with an experienced fifth grade teacher who taught reading and writing. During the week before summer school began, I attended teaching workshops and professional development with the other teachers, and I organized and set up a library for the fifth grade. During the first week of summer school, I spent several hours each day observing my mentor's class and other fifth grade classes. In addition, I assisted with managing and disciplining students, supervising them during lunch, in between classes, and after school. During the second week of school, I continued these responsibilities but also taught a few lessons in the fifth grade nonfiction class, designed and implemented a reading assessment for all the incoming fifth graders, and started giving violin lessons to beginner students in the orchestra.

While I was in DC, I kept a journal of my experiences. I think the following entry provides a good snapshot of what it felt like to work at AIM, and also sums up what I was able to learn and take away from the experience:

There is an incredible sense of teamwork, joy, and urgency among the teachers at this school. Many of them are only a few years older than me, but they are all so driven! The daily routine should, by all accounts, be pretty exhausting – we often work twelve hours a day – but in spite of everything, no one seems to have any trouble finding the energy to make it through the day. I have honestly never seen a group of teachers who work so tirelessly, care so much, try so hard and brainstorm together so constantly about ways to improve their own teaching or help specific students. I have also rarely seen a group of people work so well and so conscientiously as a team. For these and other reasons, I've begun to realize over the course of the last week that I am in the middle of something extraordinary. This school is *actually* closing the achievement gap – I can *actually* see it happening every day that I spend in the classroom. After only five days of school, most of the fifth graders (who have never attended a KIPP school before) are working hard, taking notes, and attempting to show respect and follow instructions. They are exhibiting the traits of excellent students, not because they were necessarily excellent students before, but because these teachers are working so relentlessly to mold them into excellent students. I have a newfound appreciation for teaching as a work in progress: it is something that these teachers are continually learning, training for, practicing, and improving. It's a discipline in its own right. And at least within the walls of this school, it's a tool being used deliberately to make real, meaningful, tangible change in the lives of these children.

Working at AIM was a wonderful, moving, and truly life-changing experience, and it would not have been possible for me without the generosity of the Class of 1995. I owe my sincere thanks to the Class of 1995 Summer of Service Fund for funding my internship at AIM, and for enabling me to spend a part of my summer teaching and learning, helping a community and making a difference.

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