

A new normal:

Maintaining high expectations and flexibility for high school students

CASE STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN

Abstract

KIPP Academy Lynn Collegiate (KALC), a high school in the KIPP Massachusetts public charter network, is well known for offering academically rigorous curriculum and sending a high proportion of its students on to higher education. This school has come a long way from its roots as a “no excuses” charter school by introducing more flexibility, relationship-rich support services, and opportunities for students to influence decisions at school and define postsecondary success for themselves. These shifts toward a more affirming and supportive learning environment for students resulted in part from a deliberate increase in racial diversity among leadership and staff, and have improved school culture in tangible, demonstrable ways without compromising the school’s mission and standards for student achievement. However, the pandemic and related challenges of recent years have caused KALC leadership to re-examine the optimal balance between holding students accountable to high expectations and allowing them flexibility in when and how to meet those expectations. Students want more say in the academic and cultural norms they’re held accountable to, and more flexibility and leniency when their individual circumstances make it hard to meet the standards. Meanwhile, staff understand the need for flexibility, but worry about the risk of lower or inconsistent academic expectations for students. Administrators are also working with staff to strengthen their skills for holding students accountable in consistent and equitable ways. This teaching case concludes with generative questions for school leaders who are working to create a flexible and supportive school culture, while staying committed to high expectations for student behavior and outcomes.

Teaching note

Leaders and design teams engaged in high school redesign are hungry for relevant learning materials that build our collective capacity for innovation. This document is part of a [series of teaching cases](#) featuring real-life scenarios from high schools grappling with design dilemmas. The cases were researched and developed by the the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at Arizona State University’s Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College and the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to generate a grounded, in-depth discussion of key issues related to innovation and equity in high school education. Common approaches to using teaching cases include:

- Asking participants to read the teaching case in advance.
- Using group time for discussion or presentations that focus on the questions at the end of the document. One set of questions invites participants to advise the school featured in the case, and a second set broadens the discussion to high school education.
- Concluding by asking participants to align themes in the discussion to the broader learning objectives they have as a group.

KEYWORDS

high expectations, student support, warm demander pedagogy, academic performance

Introduction

At KIPP Academy Lynn Collegiate (KALC), a public charter high school in Lynn, MA, 87.9% of the 2021-22 [graduating class](#) went on to higher education, outpacing the state average by 16.2 percentage points. This is especially noteworthy because the school primarily serves students from historically marginalized groups: 95% of KALC's [student population](#) are students of color, 67% are categorized as low-income, and 81% are students whose first language is not English (14% are categorized as English language learners).

The school's college success rate can be attributed to KIPP's commitment to hold every student accountable to high expectations for academic achievement. The network believes those uncompromising high expectations are possible because of the high degree of support that schools provide students. Indeed, parents and students seek out KALC in part because of its reputation for academic achievement.

KALC's journey over the last six years also reveals some additional unique factors that have amplified its ability to support students from its historically underserved community. In recent years, KALC has evolved from its roots as a [“no excuses” model](#)—a charter-school movement known for upholding strict behavioral expectations and often hailed for producing strong test score achievements. The school's former predominantly white leadership team has transitioned to a majority-BIPOC leadership team, which has shifted the school culture from a top-down approach to include student voice in a way the school hadn't before. Students, who have individualized expectations and dreams for their futures after high school, partner with counselors to discern the best route for them, such as college, a trade, entrepreneurship, or the military.

At the same time, especially since the pandemic, KALC has wrestled with just how much flexibility to offer students when they're struggling to achieve the expectations set for them. Sometimes, students' circumstances—such as needing to provide financial or caregiving support to their families—make meeting certain expectations at least temporarily unreasonable. The pandemic and its aftermath underscored that students need something more from their schools.

KALC's evolution raises the question: How can high schools hold students accountable to universally high expectations, while also allowing them flexibility and voice in setting and meeting those expectations?

Given the severe toll that COVID-19 had on students in high schools around the country, KALC's story is worth learning from. Nationally, schools are still dealing with the aftermath from pandemic schooling: test scores were [severely impacted](#), youth mental health challenges [increased at alarming rates](#), and teachers experienced [burnout like never before](#). Many recent graduates are already seeing [the repercussions of lost learning](#) as they begin college.

KALC's successes and challenges in facing these issues can help school leaders nationwide design learning environments that maintain high expectations, along with flexibility in how and when those expectations are met.

The context: KIPP Academy Lynn Collegiate

The KIPP Massachusetts charter network is well known for offering academically rigorous curriculum and sending a high proportion of its students on to higher education. KIPP Massachusetts is [founded on six differentiators](#): high expectations; strength of character; highly skilled teachers and leaders; positive, structured and nurturing environments; family and community learning; and a focus on postsecondary success through college or career.

The last several years of [state data](#) show that virtually all KALC students graduate high school within four or five years. According to the [network's own data](#), 86% of the class of 2023 will matriculate into 2- or 4-year degree programs. A larger national [study](#) of KIPP schools shows that 77% of KIPP graduates enroll in a four-year college, and 39% graduate within five years. According to [KALC's published information](#), KALC graduates are “projected to graduate college at more than five times the graduation rate of educationally underserved students across the country” (the positive outcomes cited here may be attributable to KALC’s approach and KIPP’s overall model, but it’s important to note that other factors like selection bias—the fact that families enrolling in KIPP schools must seek them out and choose to attend—may also play a role).

But KALC is also notable for evolving from its roots as a “no excuses” charter by introducing more flexibility, relationship-rich support services, and opportunities for students to define a more personal vision of postsecondary success. This shift had begun to take root during the 2019-20 school year, before the pandemic struck.

“Thankfully, we were on such a trajectory of starting to feel [almost collegiate] where students had more freedom, but not too much. It was starting to feel a lot more student-centered in a way that honored the simple things that happened several times per day. For example, at a staff huddle, we explicitly modeled and practiced how we wanted to show up when monitoring transitions from class to class - how to keep the silly, silly. We practiced talking to kids and staff who needed to talk to us without taking our eyes off the crowd.” - *Central office administrator*

These shifts toward a more “student-centered” learning environment for students resulted in part from a deliberate increase in racial diversity among leadership and staff. In 2017, when racial reckonings were at the forefront of society, KALC leadership began to shift from a top-down, more rigid leadership style to a female-led, majority-BIPOC leadership team that set out to ensure KALC was a joyful, culturally affirming place to learn.

“Our entire leadership team shifted over the course of one year, which started to open things up. It allowed us to actually work in a more progressive way.” - *Teacher*

The shift in leadership and priorities was accompanied by a strong focus on racial equity, including dedicating staff time to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Staff were expected to both develop their own cultural competence, as well as build more culturally responsive instructional skills and curriculum. Although some staff embraced the shift, not all did. One school leader compared this transitional phase to a Jenga game, where the tower of blocks must stay balanced even as components are being moved in and out.

“When [leaders of color] were moved to the right seats, I think it was a relief for staff of color for many different reasons. It was, however, uncomfortable for staff who weren’t committed to doing the internal work required to mitigate biases that were detrimental to our school community.”
- *Principal*

Creating a more student-centered KALC culture meant relaxing certain rules and expectations. For instance, the school modified its dress code to allow for more student self-expression. The school also lengthened the time between classes to 10 minutes, giving students more time to socialize and reconnect—a change that has been transformative for school culture compared to the previous, highly regimented transitions between classes. KALC has also invited more direct student input and feedback, such as involving students in selecting a new caterer for school lunches. While previously many students avoided school lunch or threw out uneaten food, students helped choose a local Dominican catering company that is much more popular.

Additionally, while KIPP schools have always been anchored in robust support for students, such as counseling and college advising, KALC is especially notable for its focus on individual, positive relationships between students and adults. A veteran staff member noted that the school has deliberately focused on making relationships the foundation of school culture and student success.

"We completely replaced our philosophy toward education into being one of supporting young people, of focusing on high expectations with high support, and really relying on relationships as the centerpiece of a broader system [rather than the relationships being adjacent to the system]."
- *Teacher*

A social-emotional learning (SEL) counselor is assigned to each grade level to support students, and each student also has a faculty advisor with whom they build a relationship over their four years in school. Additionally, KALC's team of "match" counselors are paired with students starting in junior year to provide individualized coaching and guidance as students develop a postsecondary plan.

"We have a support system. Our Match counselors are able to help us through all of the college stuff, and [navigate] our postsecondary options. [We even have] SEL counselors available to talk. Sometimes, the counselors just literally just come up to you and be like, 'How are you doing today?' Those little things matter." - *Student*

Once students graduate, their Match counselors maintain periodic contact for up to four years, and students can also access support from alumni counselors.

"Having someone to check in that's not part of the college campus shows someone cares [about me]. I [met with my counselor] a few times and talked about study habits, financial aid. Having someone to reassure me that it's not all on me—I needed to hear that." - *KALC graduate attending a public college in Massachusetts*

KALC has also increased opportunities for students to influence decisions on their postsecondary plan, whether career or college. The [KIPP Forward program](#), formerly KIPP Through College, helps students choose and prepare for the educational or career path that fits their goals. The school no longer automatically assumes college is the best pathway for all students.

"I think KALC was a little ahead ... in terms of saying we actually want to be KIPP Forward and not just KIPP Through College. And so, what does it mean to have a path forward postsecondary? I just think that [KIPP leadership] weren't totally sold on that concept given that's written in our charter that we are KIPP Through College. And so I think we had to prove that we could do it before we could change our narrative." - *Principal*

Finally, the school has deliberately moved away from mostly punitive disciplinary measures like detentions and suspensions. A teacher reported that the school has "completely change[d] our discipline system to be restorative rather than punitive." A counselor noted that now, if a teacher sends a student out of the room, there's an expectation that the teacher and student will meet soon after the incident for a "restorative circle" to share each of their perspectives, reaffirm the relationship between them, and make a plan moving forward.

All these changes have positively impacted school culture in tangible, demonstrable ways that don't compromise the school's high academic standards—and in fact make it easier for those standards to be met. One student, who had attended a KIPP Massachusetts middle school before coming to KALC, said school used to feel "like a jail, if I'm being honest." Now, she said,

“the system has changed a lot.” All the students we interviewed for this case study described feeling supported by the adults in their school.

“Coming to school and not being in the best mood because you’re not where you want to be in one of your classes or you’re behind in a few of them and you don’t really have time to catch up, the adults here and the staff here are very, very supportive. Even if they don’t teach you at all, they’ve never taught you before, or they don’t teach you anymore, they’re always willing to help.” - *Student*

Critically, the relationships students develop with adults during high school also seem to pay off on KALC’s core mission of academic success. One student directly attributed a positive turn in her academic trajectory to a teacher’s personal attention.

“U.S. history ... was the class that I most struggled with when I first came to high school. It was a class that I had [an F in], but one of the teachers ... took the time to make me understand what history is really about. ... I understood that history plays a big role in today’s society, and he showed me what history really was. So from there, I started liking history a lot.” - *Student*

The challenge: Building a school culture of both flexibility and high expectations in a post-pandemic “new normal”

Pandemic learning disruptions, social isolation, and economic, political, and racial stresses of the last several years have shifted the ground under KALC—just as in other schools nationwide. In some ways, the pandemic changed what students need and expect from their school.

Both students and staff have noted that students’ personal habits and interpersonal dynamics have changed. For instance, KALC’s principal noted, “I cannot get a kid to stay off their phone. They just need to have it on their person. Even if they’re not using it, it needs to be in their hand, which almost always leads to interruptions to the learning environment.” Students also noticed changes in the peer relationships and social dynamics at school:

“I feel like because of quarantine, everybody became very distant, very much on social media, whereas instead of meeting up with people, or just basic communication skills, a lot of people suffered from that, their social skills a lot. People have social anxiety. Everybody’s a little more distant.” - *Student*

The pandemic also caused some students’ academic skills to suffer. One student shared, “[Quarantine] just broke up all the skills I’ve had. My time management skills really suffered a lot.” Another student echoed this sentiment:

“I’m able to learn better than I did during quarantine, but it’s not as good as the way I was learning in ninth grade [before quarantine]. I was very quick with understanding material. Like I said, I lost all those skills, and it’s hard to rebuild the skills that you had prior.” - *Student*

Staff also have noticed that students have a harder time paying attention during long class periods.

“I’m learning [that] even students who are considered high-performing, they too are in need of more brain breaks than ever. We had a model where we have 85-minute classes—and it’s exhausting for them. ... I’ve seen more kids on breaks in the hallways than ever before. And that’s because they could [take breaks] in their homes.” - *Principal*

Finally, some KALC students—particularly after the pandemic—are experiencing serious mental health issues. The school’s counselors can help, but some cases require intensive time or special training. And while the school can refer students to state-funded programs, they have long waitlists and stringent requirements for what counts as a “red flag” for referral. As a result, KALC staff have needed to take into account more widespread—and sometimes more serious—mental health issues, most of which don’t have immediate solutions.

In light of these changes since the pandemic, students want more say in academic and cultural norms they’re held accountable to, and more flexibility and leniency when their individual circumstances make it hard to meet expectations. It has been challenging for KALC staff and leaders to find the optimal balance between holding students accountable to high expectations—which is key to the school’s mission—and allowing them flexibility in when and how to meet those expectations.

For instance, students advocated for a smoother transition back to the full intensity of KALC’s academic program. During the height of the pandemic and school closures in the 2021-22 school year, several students used the word “easy” to describe their academic experience:

“We noticed that 11th grade [last year] was a little easier ‘cause we just got off the pandemic so they made academics easy. But then this year they just dropped a bomb on us and made everything hard and it was very hard for us to get back into the system. They didn’t ease it in slowly, they just dropped it [on us].” – *Student*

Administrators said the reduced intensity was at least partially deliberate, given everything teachers and students were facing. But KALC is not an “easy” school, and staff upped the ante upon students’ return to school in fall 2022. Some students, caught by surprise, didn’t appreciate the dramatic change.

“I told [an administrator] I didn’t like how they made it really drastically hard instead of just making it a smooth transition to the next year. Not much has been done, because the year already started and they can’t really change the curriculum.” - *Student*

Students also advocated for more understanding and support from teachers when a new online course didn’t go as hoped. When a teacher left unexpectedly, an AP calculus course was left without an instructor. The school was able to find an online platform offering the course—one that had a demanding workload. One student said that the class didn’t all “take it seriously ... at first,” but the workload ultimately “caught up with me.” The student continued:

“A lot of the students were upset because we also have other classes. A lot of the students here have responsibilities outside of school. Not all of us can dedicate so much time to work outside of school. And it just felt like the workload and the caseload was very demanding.” - *Student*

Administrators and students told us how in the end, the issues with the calculus course were mitigated by hiring a teacher to oversee the online program and support students’ progress with classroom material. The course shows how KALC staff responded to students’ feedback, while not lowering the standards.

Some students think the school does a good job encouraging student advocacy and taking their feedback into account:

“Especially during quarantine, they really pushed a whole thing of what we want in our school coming back. They still continue it till this day, because we have a monthly meeting where a bunch of student leaders come together and we talk about things that need to change around here, and they actually take it [the advice].” - *Student*

Other students are more critical. One senior said that the rapid return to academic intensity after the pandemic was especially hard for students who were nearing graduation, and was frustrated that the school didn't offer more second chances to students at risk of failing required courses. Another student said the school's focus on self-advocacy wasn't always honored in practice:

"Well, our school from the very beginning has always taught us to advocate for ourselves and advocate for others who can't advocate for themselves. But when we speak out against our leadership ... or we don't agree with something, we feel that they shut us down very quickly, and they don't listen." - *Student*

Meanwhile, staff understand students' need for flexibility, but worry about lower or inconsistent academic standards. KIPP schools share a philosophy that both instructional quality and instructional time are game-changers for students from underserved communities. Staff know there could be unintended consequences if KALC were to substantially reduce instructional time to lessen the intensity for students.

"They need more breaks and we're meeting the moment by giving them more breaks. And we must hold the tension with one of our grounding principles: every minute counts." - *Principal*

Other unintended consequences could come from loosening college-preparation requirements. For example, many schools adopted test-optional policies during the pandemic, but by fall 2022 a number of competitive colleges had reinstated their requirements for applicants to take the SAT or ACT. KALC students who thought those colleges would be test-optional suddenly learned that they should have been preparing for these tests. For KALC, it was a reminder about why the school should require test prep for every student—in order to preserve all possible postsecondary options.

"The demand outside didn't change. And so we don't want to stray too far from what's going to be expected of them. Because then that wouldn't be right either." - *Principal*

At KALC, there is a saying: "We hold the line together, we examine the line together, we move the line together." Staff need to be clear about which lines to hold—around cell phones, dress code, academic expectations, and more. But staff also know they need students' input and buy-in about the lines that matter most, so that students can also hold themselves and their peers accountable. It seems clear to KALC staff that students' perspectives are different from what they used to be.

"Some of this is just who [this] generation is. It's like when women stopped wearing skirts and someone wanted to wear pants, right? Like, it's gonna stay. And so how do we actually make this work for us? So, how do we [find ways that] you having access to your cell phone more frequently actually makes the classroom environment richer and more rigorous. I think that's the learning that is kind of next for us." - *Central office leader*

As the school works toward this new normal, administrators are also helping staff strengthen their skills in holding students accountable consistently and equitably. This is particularly important given that many KALC staff members are new since the pandemic, and need to strengthen their shared foundation of how to "hold the line together." Another factor driving the need for skill-building is that many staff also are exhausted, which in some cases can cause them to be more lenient with students because they themselves need a break. As one administrator noted, "I don't think it's intentional, but I'm noticing that the teachers who are constantly presenting exhaustion, it's impacting the kids ... I think they're cosigning lots of things that they shouldn't be, even if they aren't necessarily aware of it."

Given KALC's commitment to racial equity, intentional increase in BIPOC leadership, and predominantly BIPOC student population, staff and leadership are also having discussions about how identity intersects with how and when staff "hold the line." Racial and gender identity in particular can impact teachers' choices about which lines to hold, whether to hold the line, and what kind of response they get from students. [Research has found](#) that using "warm demander" pedagogy—where teachers convey warmth toward students while also demanding they work toward high expectations—with students of color may require different approaches from Black educators compared to white educators. White educators, the authors found, may need to work on specific mindsets and skills to develop appropriate, not oppressive, cross-racial authority with Black students. Staff we spoke with at KALC also observed how people with identities that have historically held more positions of power and privilege, like males and white individuals, may feel like they have an easier time upholding certain expectations because society has taught students to obey white and male authority figures as a self-protection mechanism. An administrator said the school is prioritizing time to reflect on the complexities of how one's identity markers can impact the way students perceive adult authority figures in their life, and explained:

"Some folks are saying, well, it's a lot easier for you as a white man to hold this line with students because students are more conditioned to listen to you than me, a Black man. And then a Black woman's like: mm-hmm, not in my classroom. It's a rich conversation, and one that's ... going to illuminate who perceives themselves as a really powerful presence in the community."
- *Central office leader*

In schools committed to educational equity and justice, like KALC, it's a truism that for students to have equal opportunities for success, the school must simultaneously uphold high expectations and provide robust support for students to meet those expectations. Both are required. But KALC's journey in the past several years illustrates how sometimes a "both/and" approach is a difficult balancing act.

"I think it's a challenge to find what that balance is—how do you give that grace, but also hold people accountable? ... It definitely is finding a balance and I think this year has been tough. It's been hard to be in a school; everyone wants to give that grace." – *SEL counselor*

Discussion

On KIPP Academy Lynn Collegiate

1. What key elements does KALC have in place to support students to achieve their dreams and meet high expectations?
2. Racial equity is an important and visible priority at KALC. How are race and identity connected to the challenge of holding students accountable to high expectations while still allowing flexibility in how they meet them?
3. KALC's principal observed that certain patterns in student needs and behavior may stem from generational shifts that adults need to recognize and adapt to. Do you agree? What do you perceive as the important needs of the current generation of young people, and how can educators and schools respond to these needs while remaining committed to academic rigor and high expectations?

On high schools in general

4. What kinds of expectations should be maintained for students no matter their circumstances?
5. What kinds of flexible policies would most benefit students at your school?
6. What are some examples in your school of “holding the line together, examining the line together, moving the line together?”
7. What are both the positive and negative results that can come from creating more flexible policies, especially for students from historically marginalized communities?
8. What would a “warm demanding” teaching approach look like at your school? What factors need to be in place for it to be effective?

Further reading

- On the concept of [warm-demander](#) pedagogy and [warm-demander practice](#)
- Understanding [culturally responsive teaching](#) and [five strategies to be implemented in the classroom](#)