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North Carolina Charter Takes 'Direct Route' to K-8 Education

Rural charter schools are finding a different path is more effective

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When a retired engineer started a rural North Carolina charter school in 2000, he named it after the thirteenth century cleric who pioneered the modern scientific method.

"He wasn't a big hero, he was not particularly brilliant, but he was excruciatingly honest in the quest for trustworthy knowledge. We always want to keep that in front of us," said Baker Mitchell, founder of the Roger Bacon Academy (RBA) in Leland, North Carolina.

Mitchell and RBA have found educational success in nothing more revolutionary than observing what works and putting it into action.

RBA is now one of the largest charter schools in North Carolina, with two campuses and more than 1,000 students in grades K-8. In spite of low funding and an economically disadvantaged student body, the school's test scores are above the state and local averages.

The school has achieved its success by intentionally bucking the "facilitated discovery" methods popular in state teachers' colleges, instead using a rigorous Direct Instruction program focusing on "rules, tools, and techniques," Mitchell said.

Military – Industrial Approach

Mitchell began teaching after 30 years with the engineering company he founded in 1968. He was astounded to find his own children had written off science in the fourth grade as insufferably dull, and he began watching what made the difference between effective and ineffective teaching.

What he learned, he says, was that successful teachers and schools had a systematic approach of adapting their teaching methods to how their students really learned. The rest, Mitchell says, "were adopting fads willy-nilly, whatever the latest idea was, and they were invariably not successful." It occurred to him that education, like medicine or engineering, had to be based on solid data to succeed.

Mitchell found the reigning teacher-education programs took an entirely different approach. The pattern for military and industrial training, he says, is to "look at the end goal task, break it up into components, [and] teach each subskill to mastery," but the model popular in teachers' colleges is to "take a kindergartner, immerse him in books, and expect him to learn how to read."

Teacher Enthusiasm

That's why RBA looks for teachers in lateral-entry programs or straight out of college, "before they form bad habits," then puts them through extensive training before they start teaching. At one time, RBA's faculty averaged less than three years' worth of classroom experience.

Megan Britt, for example, was hired a month after graduating from nearby UNC-Wilmington in 2005. The kindergarten teacher found the intensive phonics program at RBA more effective than the "whole language" theory she was taught in college.

"When I was student teaching," Britt says, "[the students] learned a lot of sight words, but no methodology like we have here. This is much more organized to me than what I saw in student teaching."

Less Funding, Better Results

The Direct Instruction program is a tightly organized methodology with frequent training, classroom observation, and feedback that some teachers find daunting.

"A lot of people have a problem with the high expectations for the teachers," Britt said. "You have to do what you're supposed to, and if you don't, you get called on it—which is good."

Mitchell says the program adapts well to different content, whether the classical trivium or "something nouveau ... as long as it's nested in a behaviorally sound approach to instructional design." Britt says she finds it "very teacher friendly."

Robert Wingett, a retired Marine who teaches second grade, said the scripted program actually demands creative teaching rather than squelching it.

"There is a misconception about Direct Instruction, that it is robotic," Wingett said. "I can assure you it is not." There are specific skills that are taught in a particular sequence, he said, but "you can add to the script all you want. You can develop your own style. The bottom line is to make the kids successful."

Proven Techniques

Nila Wojton, who teaches fifth grade, is a 32-year veteran who came to RBA from a Catholic school in Connecticut. She said the accommodation for special-needs students is "no different than what I was used to" in other school systems, and the technique, while demanding of the teacher, is "effective—absolutely."

"You are responsible for bringing them to mastery," Wojton said.

RBA's philosophy is that *every* child can learn if properly taught, Mitchell says. And according to state records, it's working. Compared to nearby elementary and middle schools, the Brunswick County campus had 17 percent more students reading at or above grade level last year, and 22 percent more in math. More than 20 percent more RBA students were succeeding in both subjects compared to other local schools, and a large number of RBA students are heading into Early College programs.

All this occurred while receiving 30 percent less funding than surrounding schools, said Mitchell.

"'No Child Left Behind' is exactly right," Mitchell said. "We should have every child learning."