

# Leland charter school focuses on old instructional technique

By [Ana Ribeiro](#) [Ana.Ribeiro@StarNewsOnline.com](mailto:Ana.Ribeiro@StarNewsOnline.com)

Published: Saturday, June 6, 2009 at 5:32 p.m. Last Modified: Saturday, June 6, 2009 at 5:32 p.m.

Students at Charter Day School in Leland hardly look up from their work when a camera-toting reporter tours their classrooms.

Almost by reflex, they repeat vocabulary words after their teacher snaps her fingers. They move their index fingers as they read, tracing the words so the teacher can tell if they're having trouble following along.

It's Direct Instruction, the very structured method that dominates this charter school. Everything in it is planned, from delivery of lessons to how students interact with their teachers and move around the classroom.

Charter Day School founder Baker Mitchell says he has heard some people find this a bit mechanical, but he disagrees.

"The kids are not robots," Mitchell said. "You should see them at recess. It's bedlam."

But in the classroom, they keep themselves on task. One of the keys is that teachers ignore small slips of behavior, which are often students' attempts at getting attention. Instead of punishing, the teachers praise positive behavior, Mitchell said.

All this structure gives teachers time to focus on individual students' needs, he said. A student is not allowed to move on from one skill to the next before he or she masters it.

The decades-old Direct Instruction method works on the premise that every student can learn, and if a student is not learning, the

problem is with the teacher, Mitchell added. He credits the method with his school's good track record in standardized state tests, which charter schools must also comply with although they can choose their curricula.

In 2005-06, when it ranked among the state's top kindergarten-through-eighth grade schools in academic growth, 90.8 percent of the charter school's students were proficient in the state's reading test, and 71.5 percent in math. The school is still among the highest-scoring in Brunswick County.

But whether Charter Day School has provided a model for improving public schools remains murky.

Brunswick County Schools Superintendent Katie McGee said the district and Charter Day School have shared ideas. But the public schools were using elements of Direct Instruction long before the charter school opened in 2000, she said.

"I was impressed they were using Direct Instruction. ...I thoroughly enjoyed visiting there," said McGee, whose school system has expanded the method to all its elementary and middle schools over the past few years. "In a number of school districts where there's a charter school, it's very competitive and the public schools don't have the good relationship we have with our charter school."

Ana Ribeiro: 343-2327