

EDUCATION

Roger Bacon Academy Eschews Fads, Leads Way With Basics

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Contributor

RALEIGH

A rural school named for a 13th-century cleric is one of the largest charter schools in North Carolina.

Despite low funding and an economically disadvantaged demographic, the school's test scores run above state and local averages, drawing interest from education leaders in other states.

The founder, though, says the school's success is simply a matter of observing what works and scrupulously pursuing it.

Charter Day School in Leland teaches grades K-8; a sister campus, Columbus Day School in Whiteville, offers K-4. The two enroll more than 1,000 students under the aegis of The Roger Bacon Academy, which was founded by Baker Mitchell in 2000.

Mitchell is a retired engineer who began teaching when he sold the company he founded. Astonished to find his children had written off science in the fourth grade as insufferably dull, he began watching what made the difference between effective and ineffective teaching. What he learned, he said, was that successful teachers and schools systematically observed the effects of their teaching and adapted their methods to how their students really learned.

"Others were adopting fads willy-nilly, whatever the latest idea was, and they were invariably not successful. It occurred to me that education is no different than medicine or engineering — we need to pay attention to data," Mitchell said.

The school was named in honor of the Franciscan monk who pioneered the modern scientific method, for that reason. "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," Mitchell said.

The Roger Bacon Academy uses the Direct Instruction method, a systematic presentation of "rules, tools, and techniques" rather than the facilitated discovery model popular in the state's teacher colleges.

"You can take any content, the classical trivium or something nouveau, as long as it's nested in a behaviorally sound approach to instructional design," Mitchell said. "Look at the end goal task, break it up into

components, teach each subskill to mastery." Military and industrial training follows this design, "but here, no, no, we take a kindergartner, immerse him in books and expect him to learn how to read."

Mitchell said his schools typically hire teachers straight out of college, "before they form bad habits," and put them through extensive training before they start teaching. At one time, RBA's faculty averaged less than three years experience in the classroom.

Megan Britt, a kindergarten teacher at Charter Day School, was hired a month after she graduated from UNC-Wilmington.

She said the intensive phonics program at CDS is more effective than what she learned in college and student teaching, which emphasized "whole language" theory.

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

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," he 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."

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. The technique, while demanding of the teacher, is "effective — absolutely," she said.

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

RBA's philosophy is that every child can learn if properly taught. State records say it's working. Compared to other Brunswick County elementary and middle schools, Charter Day School had 17 percent more students on or above grade level for reading, 29 percent more in math, and 23 percent more succeeding in both subjects. Many RBA students are going into Early College programs next. This occurred while receiving 30 percent less in funding than surrounding schools, Mitchell said. *CJ*

