



Education



Julia Steiny: A system that's tailored to each student's ability to learn

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By Julia Steiny

One image of a school that works well is a place where students spend the morning training vigorously in the basics — mainly reading and math. Then in the afternoon teachers invite the kids to enjoy learning by exploring well-designed projects and pursuits, in a creative, supportive, intriguing environment.

While it's not there yet, Kingston Hill Academy Charter School (KHA) is becoming just such a school. The staff is well on its way to developing a program designed to ensure that every one of the KHA students learns to read proficiently. Every child. No excuses. It's simple, really. On a regular basis, staff members take stock of what each child needs to learn next, and place the child where she or he will get that instruction.

First thing in the morning, the 180 children in kindergarten through fifth grade assemble for "home room," which is their home base for the year. These classes have a morning meeting and then instruction in Spanish or Health.

At 9:30 everyone skedaddles off to their mathematics group for an hour. All the children have been assessed, in both math and reading, and are grouped according to what they need. In both math and reading the composition of the groups changes at least several times a year, and some are quite fluid. KHA scrupulously tracks where a child is along a continuum of reading and math skills. Frequent regrouping allows the quick ones to advance quickly, and those who need intensive support to get it. Everyone in between moves at a pace tailored to him or her.

At 10:30 the children — as well as the adults — do the relaxation exercises developed by the Groden Center, which I discussed in last week's column. (The Groden Center partners closely with KHA.) In brief, everyone in the school community learns relaxation exercises to control agitation and stress. In these days of ever-increasing pressure to compete and succeed, what could be more important to teach children? The exercises take a mere five minutes.

So at 10:35 or so, the students go to their reading groups for an hour. Since all teachers are reading teachers, including the gym and art teachers, the groups can be tiny when necessary. A teacher's

homeroom has the same children all year, but his reading group may have 3 students now and 20 in a couple of months. Three special-education teachers work with the students who are struggling. One teacher serves as an on-site trainer for the others in the use of Reading Mastery — a scripted, phonics-based program that builds skills systematically.

The KHA principal, Dr. Daniel Parker, who has a master's degree in special education and a doctorate in psychology, says “Our general education program mimics the special-education program in most districts. Students start in kindergarten wherever they are at. They need to be in the right class, or they won't be learning. We want them reading by third grade, but 95 percent of our kids are reading by second grade. If they are not reading, they're in a small group of 3, or even 1. The goal is not to have to do any remediation.”

On average, the state puts 19 percent of its children into special education. KHA has only 9 percent with special-education status.

Reading Mastery, good though it is, required a lot of adjusting to match up with Rhode Island's Grade-Level Expectations, which are benchmarks for what a child should know and be able to do, as evidenced by state tests. The KHA staff has been working to align the curriculum so the right skills are taught before the test. They're by no means done with the work. Even so, this year KHA improved its reading score on the state tests by a fat 19 points, from 55 percent proficient last year to 74.

The KHA math program, in the interests of full disclosure, has not yet been adjusted to state expectations, and the school's percent proficient rose by only two points this year, to a tepid 56.

Once students have mastered the basic reading program they move on to Horizons, a “reading to learn” program. In these more conventional language-arts classes, they read texts and learn nuances of grammar, spelling, plot and theme. Again, regular assessments assure the school and families that the child's skills are growing appropriately. No child graduates from Reading Mastery until the staff is sure his or her foundation is solid.

Personally, I'm not fond of scripted programs like Reading Mastery. They are dull to teach year after year — though Parker insists that the teacher can make it as creative as he likes. Still, I usually see scripted programs used in a drill-and-kill teaching style instead of immersing the kids in rich literature as well. At KHA, when the foundational math and reading classes are over, everyone returns to heterogeneously mixed classes to explore the wider world of learning together — stories, history, projects and art. Classes ponder the mysteries of water or electricity using science kits from the East Bay Collaborative.

Then on Wednesday afternoons, KHA children choose their own “Individual Learning Plan” (ILP) courses. In six-week sessions, groups study drama, art, construction, creative writing, chess or whatever appeals. Recently a teacher wrote Parker requesting that chemistry be an upcoming ILP course, to satisfy two budding chemists in her class.

So every KHA child gets the necessary set of tools to keep growing as a learner, and also the opportunity to choose subjects to investigate and to have fun mastering useful skills.

Kingston Hill is unusual because of the number of psychologists involved, between the Groden Center's staff and the principal himself. But nothing in the program outlined above requires a staff beyond what regular schools usually have.

In fact, the model seems especially ideal for low-achieving urban schools. Spend half of the day being scrupulous about getting solid skills to those kids whose parents might not have strong literacy or numeracy skills. Then spend the rest of the day intriguing kids into the rich possibilities inherent in learning and mastery. Oh, and teach them how to calm their agitation. How could that not work better than what we're doing now?

Charter foes complain that charters haven't lived up to their promise to incubate innovation. The foes just haven't been willing to go out and take a look.

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