

## Sometimes the data deceives; [All Edition]

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

Normally, "scripted programs" - a.k.a., teacher-proof curricula - - are not my idea of heaven. But [Daniel Parker] argues that programs such as Direct Instruction are as creative as a teacher makes them. Most importantly, according to him, "they work." The early grades focus on phonics and decoding. In time, fluency with both reading and math facts becomes the issue. But by the time most children are in the third grade, the scripted program becomes more of a guide, a reference to make sure the kids are where they need to be. Most older, more-advanced groups are reading and discussing books or working out complex math problems.

"When a child gets an IEP, it's not a school decision, but a team decision, with the parents. Some parents want the legality of an IEP; some look me in the face and say: 'My kid doesn't need special services.' When children come in from another school with an IEP, we generally keep it for at least a year, to monitor that they are making progress in our environment."

The lesson is that the very nature of charter schools -- small classes, strong schoolwide academic strategies, the flexibility to be responsive, and calm atmospheres -- tends to eliminate the need for certain kinds of IEPs. Those typically written by the regular districts for many behavior problems, for certain reading issues and for mild learning disabilities are often rendered unnecessary. To ensure calm respect and a polite atmosphere, charters commonly teach a social curriculum, something also much rarer at regular district schools.

### Full Text (1210 words)

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Critics of charter schools have long complained that charters cherry-pick the easy kids and turn away those who need special education and special services.

And indeed, if you compare the percentage of special education students in any state's charter schools with that in the regular districts, the data say the critics are right on the money.

Nationally, special ed students are estimated to be about 11 percent of the overall public school population, but only 8 percent at the charters. Any child with an Individualized Education Plan, or IEP, is counted as a special

education student, or, as the new buzz would have it, a student with disabilities.

Digging into Rhode Island's data, in *Information Works! 2005*, you find a pattern similar to the nation's. Every R.I. charter school has a significantly smaller percentage of children in special education than its host district. Seemingly, charters plain have an easier job.

But the real story is just the opposite.

Indeed, special education is one area where the much-ballyhooed promise of charter-school innovation is actually yielding some solid, illustrative, replicable results. If anything, proportionally more parents with atypical kids are turning to charters for help.

Take Kingston Hill, in North Kingstown, for example. Principal Daniel Parker is himself a special educator with very strong feelings about what works best with all kids, of all kinds. Growing by a grade a year, this charter school's population is now K-4.

He says, "We have small-group instruction for reading and math, based on ability, every morning from Monday to Thursday, across the school. We use the Direct Instruction program, which is a tightly scripted program that teaching assistants can implement. The P.E. teacher has a group; I have a group; everyone takes a group. That's how we get the numbers so small. The hard part, actually, is the constant re-grouping."

The school assesses the students and responds quickly whenever they complain they want more or less challenge. As such, the groups are frequently being reconfigured, without regard to age or grade level, so that each child gets precisely what he or she needs to keep advancing.

During the rest of the school day and Friday, the kids are grouped heterogeneously by grade, or by their own choice of project-based learning. Together they have field trips, activities, speakers, and a menu of mini-courses.

Normally, "scripted programs" - a.k.a., teacher-proof curricula - - are not my idea of heaven. But Parker argues that programs such as Direct Instruction are as creative as a teacher makes them. Most importantly, according to him, "they work." The early grades focus on phonics and decoding. In time, fluency with both reading and math facts becomes the issue. But by the time most children are in the third grade, the scripted program becomes more of a guide, a reference to make sure the kids are

where they need to be. Most older, more-advanced groups are reading and discussing books or working out complex math problems.

Parker says, "This strategy completely eliminates the need for resource [special education] services, because general education is all done in small groups. Everyone from the challenged kids to the advanced ones are working at their own pace. If they are working below standard, regardless of IEP, they have a program tailored to them.

"This also reduces the number of kids with behavior issues. Our high structure works very well with attention deficit and hyperactive behaviors.

"When a child gets an IEP, it's not a school decision, but a team decision, with the parents. Some parents want the legality of an IEP; some look me in the face and say: 'My kid doesn't need special services.' When children come in from another school with an IEP, we generally keep it for at least a year, to monitor that they are making progress in our environment."

Interestingly, Principal David Bournes tells a somewhat different story about the Paul Cuffee Charter School in Providence. He can't believe the number of kids who come into his building who don't have IEPs from their home school.

Parents seek out Cuffee because their child was obviously not thriving where he was. Cuffee groups its classes heterogeneously at all times. So it depends heavily on resource teachers and extra help to make sure that every kid along a wide spectrum of abilities and disabilities is getting the right challenge and support.

District schools sometimes sequester special needs students -- especially those with behavior problems -- into self-contained classrooms, apart from the general population. The parents of certain students in the CVS Highlander classroom I visited in Providence for last week's column objected to what they felt was segregation and moved their children to Highlander's entirely inclusive model.

From my observation, those ex-self-contained students were far from cherry-picked, easy kids. Charters don't generally have self-contained classrooms for students with special needs; Rhode Island's charters have none.

R.I. law forbids charters from asking applicants if the child has an IEP.

The lesson is that the very nature of charter schools -- small classes, strong schoolwide academic strategies, the flexibility to be responsive, and calm

atmospheres -- tends to eliminate the need for certain kinds of IEPs. Those typically written by the regular districts for many behavior problems, for certain reading issues and for mild learning disabilities are often rendered unnecessary. To ensure calm respect and a polite atmosphere, charters commonly teach a social curriculum, something also much rarer at regular district schools.

To be fair, no charter can handle what we on the Providence School Board used to call the \$100,000 kid: the ones who need some combination of motorized transport equipment, computerized everything, a one-on-one aide, daily medical assistance and a specially configured classroom.

This coming fall, a small Rhode Island district will have \$120,000 more to spend because one medically complicated child will turn 21, and thus age out of the school district's responsibility. (That the state should be picking up the full tab for these kids is a subject for another day.)

Rhode Island has the highest percentage of special ed students in the country -- currently 19 percent. The inflexible environment of district schools, as compared with charters, allows problems to fester far too often. District-school parents have been known to fight like tigers to get their kids into special education, sometimes just to get them a little extra help.

Rhode Island charters put more of their resources into prevention than into remediation and cure, though that too is necessary sometimes. No R.I. charter schools are deemed "low-performing," whereas 42 district schools are.

Most importantly, charters by nature have more freedom to deploy their staff where staff is needed and to prioritize what they spend their money on. This flexibility makes credible their promise to address each child's individual needs. The lesson, then, is that all schools should have similar freedoms to improve results for the kids and to make the parents happier.

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