

Students thinking more for themselves; [South County Edition]

KATIE MULVANEY *Journal Staff Writer*. *The Providence Journal*. Providence, R.I.: Mar 22, 2005. pg. C.01

Abstract (Document Summary)

The Groden Center, a Providence-based nonprofit agency that specializes in treating autistic children, sponsored Kingston Hill four years ago. The school began at the Lily Pads Professional Center in Peace Dale. As enrollment grew, classes were split between the center and Camp Hoffman. Ultimately, according to its charter, 180 students in kindergarten through eighth grade will attend the academy on Stony Fort Road.

Kingston Hill is led by 33-year-old Daniel Parker and employs six full-time teachers at salaries the director says are competitive with public schools. The student-to-teacher ratio is about 10:1, with five full-time teacher's aides, Parker says.

About 75 percent of the students come from South Kingstown, with the rest drawing from the Chariho area, Narragansett and Exeter, Parker says. About 200 children are on the waiting list to attend the school, though it cannot exceed its 180-student cap, Parker says. Admission is determined by lottery.

Full Text (943 words)

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To promote independence, the charter school dedicates an afternoon a week to students' special interests, such as cooking, drama, or even rock music.

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN - Sean Fay-Wolfe can chronicle each step he has made as a Kingston Hill Academy student. Since September, the second grader has taken classes at Camp Hoffman, then briefly at Camp Canonicus in Exeter and, finally, in the new Kingston Hill Academy on Stony Fort Road.

Today, he has his own locker and studies in the blue room, one of a half-dozen color-coded classrooms. He can't decide what he likes best about his new quarters. "The whole school's awesome," he says.

Sean transferred to Kingston Hill from a public elementary school in South Kingstown. So far, he is happy with the charter school, particularly his math classes.

"It's a lot more difficult," says the intense boy. He is studying division.

The \$2-million Kingston Hill Academy opened to students and faculty about five weeks ago. The cinder-block building sits on about 30 acres surrounded by woods. Natural light floods the classrooms, which have a warm color scheme. A playground will soon be constructed near the tree line and a snow-covered athletic court awaits use in the spring.

The Groden Center, a Providence-based nonprofit agency that specializes in treating autistic children, sponsored Kingston Hill four years ago. The school began at the Lily Pads Professional Center in Peace Dale. As enrollment grew, classes were split between the center and Camp Hoffman. Ultimately, according to its charter, 180 students in kindergarten through eighth grade will attend the academy on Stony Fort Road.

Today, 120 students in grades kindergarten through four are enrolled, 40 in the kindergarten class.

Kingston Hill is led by 33-year-old Daniel Parker and employs six full-time teachers at salaries the director says are competitive with public schools. The student-to-teacher ratio is about 10:1, with five full-time teacher's aides, Parker says.

The school is about to hire a full-time Spanish teacher and another in the coming year to incorporate language into the curriculum.

"From day one, it's always been foreign languages, foreign languages, foreign languages from the parents," Parker said.

At a glance, Kingston Hill Academy is unusual. Students mill independently in the hallways, walking freely to their lockers and the bathroom. They read in the hall, by themselves and with classmates. And they read under tables in the multipurpose room -- wherever they choose.

It's that independence that the school hopes to cultivate, Parker says. Students govern their own skill level to a large degree. A second grader skilled in math or reading can advance at his or her own pace. Children from as many as three grades share reading and math classes.

If a student feels the class is too difficult, he or she can pull the reins as third grader Ben Rollo did this year. Ben asked to be moved down a math level and was shifted back when he gained the necessary ground.

"It's just really what's developmentally appropriate for a child," Parker says.

Parker would like to do away with the concept of grade levels altogether.

Kindergartners attend a full day of classes; their curriculum includes math and phonics-based reading, he says.

The students who transfer into Kingston Hill Academy are typically high achievers who were not being challenged in a traditional setting or students performing under the grade level, says Parker, who has led the school for three years. About 10 percent are special needs students, who are incorporated into classrooms and receive one-to-one assistance as well.

About 75 percent of the students come from South Kingstown, with the rest drawing from the Chariho area, Narragansett and Exeter, Parker says. About 200 children are on the waiting list to attend the school, though it cannot exceed its 180-student cap, Parker says. Admission is determined by lottery.

Students, in collaboration with their parents and teachers, also set individual learning plans. The children select a subject area of interest, be it cooking, knitting, drama or woodworking. One afternoon a week is dedicated to that pursuit.

Third grader Rachel Gruner can't wait to begin her specialty: being in a rock band.

Special interest classes are often taught by teachers who have a talent in the given area. Sometimes consultants are brought in, Parker says.

Kingston Hill relies on the Groden Center for resources such as technology support and psychological services. The center assists the school with curriculum and staff development, said June Groden, founder of the center.

Kingston Hill was rated high performing by the state last year.

Parker hopes to develop a relationship with the surrounding school district and regrets that charter schools have been pegged as a threat to public schools.

Charter schools are publicly financed schools designed to give parents and students educational choice. Kingston Hill is one of two with charters in South Kingstown; the other is The Compass School.

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Cameron DeMuro, left, and Colin Krogg answer math questions in their workbooks during Kim Charest's kindergarten class at Kingston Hill. About one-third of the school's students are kindergartners.

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Kingston Hill Academy students gather at their lockers before going out for recess earlier this month. Second graders Victoria Rainey, third from left, Taylor Lynch, second from left, and Ali Gretchner, fourth from left, enjoy the interlude.

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At right, fourth grader Hannah Hopkins, 10, left, and third grader Mary Rose Eden, 8, read in the hallway of Kingston Hill's new school building. Bridging the grades and getting out of the classroom are encouraged at the charter school.

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