



## **Report praises charter schools 10 years after movement began**

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About 92,000 students in private, taxpayer-funded schools have equal and, in some cases, more academic success than their counterparts in traditional public schools, according to a report marking the 10-year anniversary of the charter school movement.

Charter schools were created, in part, to address the needs of low-performing students. With more freedom over curriculum and smaller classes, the schools are able to reach students some say would otherwise have fallen through the cracks.

Today, for example, a larger percentage of students in elementary and middle charter schools read at grade level compared with those at traditional public schools, says the report issued Tuesday by the Florida Department of Education.

"If this is the medicine that seems to work, then we have to keep increasing the medicine," said Fernando Zulueta, head of Academica, one of South Florida's largest charter school management companies.

More than 350 charter schools have opened across the state since 1996, making Florida's charter school system the third-largest in the country. There were five schools that first year.

Broward has 48 schools that provide parents with a wide menu of options. There are schools that focus on science and language and others that target technology. That list is expected to grow, as 14 new schools are scheduled to open next year.

When charter schools first emerged, they were billed as the panacea for overcrowded classrooms and a way for private enterprise to find better ways to teach children. They were attractive because they were public schools without the stiff governance of traditional schools.

"However, a decade of progress makes it clear that charter schools are not a panacea, nor are they for everyone," the report says.

Charter schools function with independent governing boards but must be approved by and have a contract with the county school district. The district is responsible for ensuring the schools are academically successful and manage money properly.

Many charters have struggled financially, however.

During 2004-2005, 81 of 303 charter schools ended the year in the red, a state audit said. According to the audit, that's nine more schools than the previous year. Some cash-strapped schools, such as North Lauderdale Academy High, have closed.

Still, there have been successes. Pembroke Pines Charter Middle School is listed in the Department of Education report as one of the state's best charter schools.

The school has an interdisciplinary curriculum that emphasizes reading, writing, math, science, social studies and technology, the report said. It has been A-rated for the past six years.

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