

## **Building Home for Charter Schools**

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Amid concerns about classroom crowding and academic performance at conventional public schools, charter-school enrollment nationally has grown from 100,000 in 1997 to more than 1 million today. During that period, campuses have nearly quintupled to 3,600.

Florida, with 330 charters, is following that expansive curve, with some of the highest growth occurring among low-income, special-needs and minority populations.

But, increasingly, charter schools are going suburban, thanks to an evolving partnership between the community-based public campuses and developers. It's proving to be a win-win-win-win situation.

- Charters win because builders defray start-up costs through donated land and even building construction — the biggest single hurdle to launching a new school.
- Developers win because schools in their communities build value and salability.
- Participating families win because they don't have to subject their children to lengthy bus trips while waiting for the bureaucratic wheels to grind out a neighborhood campus.
- Overloaded Florida school districts win because each new charter seat means one less they'll have to service.

Unfortunately, the last "winner" doesn't always see it that way. Most districts would rather have complete ownership of every student. While Indian River County has four charter schools, only one charter is operating in Martin County, and St. Lucie — the Treasure Coast's largest district — has none.

But in South Florida, developers are partnering with charters to bring school choice home. Miami-based developer Fernando Zulueta placed a charter campus in one of his communities in 1997 and became so enamored of the concept that he started a firm, *Academica*, to provide non-curricular services to 30 charters around the country.

"It's a great tool for concurrency," says Zulueta, noting that big national builders such as Lennar Homes have launched school projects from New Jersey to California. In light of Florida's relatively charter-friendly laws, Zulueta expects more to follow here.

Meantime, charters have been earning solid marks academically. A 2005 study by the Dallas-based National Center for Policy Analysis, an organization that promotes private solutions to public problems, found that charter students, when held to the same statewide accountability standards, "are more likely to be proficient in reading and math than students in neighboring conventional schools."

A citywide charter district was explored briefly by Port St. Lucie last year and,

considering the academic woes of St. Lucie schools and PSL's distinction as the nation's fastest-growing city, the idea seemed like a good fit. But it was shelved when the school district pledged to fix its busing mess.

The ball is now in the district's court, and here's hoping for success.

Meantime, a new charter is on the drawing boards at Tradition, where Core Communities is donating up to 47 acres to house a "laboratory" charter, a joint venture between Florida Atlantic University and St. Lucie schools. Due to open in fall 2008, the campus will serve 1,600 students in grades K-8.

Though technically classified as a charter school, it will not be truly autonomous because the campus will likely operate under the school district's collective-bargaining agreements. This constricts fiscal flexibility and could put a damper on innovation.

On the other hand, FAU officials say the yet-to-be-named charter will enjoy the funding formula of a "typical district" — which is more than the typical charter receives.

As a state-sponsored laboratory school, enrollment at Tradition's charter is designed to be representative of Florida school population at large; its students will be selected by lottery and sorted by demographics. Performance will be tracked by education researchers.

However things work out, give credit to Core Communities for giving this project a home.

#### WHAT IS A CHARTER?

- Independent public schools that are exempt from many of the rules and regulations that impede innovation, flexibility and economy in regular public schools.
- Unlike private schools, charters do not charge tuition, cannot pick and choose their students and must administer the FCAT.
- Charters receive slightly less per-pupil funding than their conventional counterparts, and have not had access to state capital-construction funding.
- Charters traditionally are sponsored by churches, community centers and nonprofit organizations.
- The Center for Education Reform ranked Florida's charter-school law ninth best in the nation.