

Palm Bay picks Miami-based company to run Patriot school

Academica known for sterling schools

BY MICHELLE SPITZER • FLORIDA TODAY • July 2, 2009

A Miami-based management company with a record of helping schools in low-income areas earn top grades was hired by the city of Palm Bay to oversee Patriot Charter.

The city council voted Tuesday night to have Academica take over for Charter Schools USA effective immediately.

Academica, which has been around since 1999, has schools in South Florida, Texas, California and Utah. This past school year, all but one of the company's 31 schools in Florida received an A or B under the state's school grading system.

The schools, many in low-income areas, average an 88 percent minority rate.

"It shows in difficult environments they do extremely well," Deputy Mayor Milo Zonka said. "Going into the fall, this gives me great confidence."

Palm Bay and Charter Schools USA agreed last week to sever their partnership. They had been operating Patriot jointly since 2005.

Palm Bay will pay Academica \$450 per student. The school serves about 700 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade and is starting a ninth grade this fall, making it the first charter high school in Brevard. More than 60 percent of Patriot students are minorities.

Palm Bay had been set to pay Charter Schools USA \$903,000 for the 2009-10 school year, but began negotiations in December to lower the fee to about \$400,000.

"I don't want people to think we're sacrificing affordability for quality because we're not," said City Manager Lee Feldman about the new deal with Academica.

"Academica is a quality charter management company with a reputation of excellent high schools," he said. "I think they have a model that will fit us well and take us to the next level in charter school excellence."

Two of Academica's high schools in South Florida were among the "Best 400 High Schools in the Nation," according to U.S. News and World Report. Both also made Newsweek's list of the nation's best.

Faculty members have already met with Academica representatives and an informational meeting was conducted Wednesday night for parents.

Parent Jennifer Shearer said she's done a little research on Academica and has been impressed so far.

"It looks good according to their Web site, but until we get in there and actually start working with them we won't know," said Shearer, who has a son entering second grade at Patriot.

Patriot has had its share of troubles. In November, the school officially ran out of money and began to use reserves for expenses. To save the school, Palm Bay agreed to refinance the school's \$21 million bond, but only if the school received a B grade or better.

For years, the school hovered at a C grade, but this year, it moved up to a B.

"You get over the hump of the school maybe closing and it's something else," Shearer said. "I'm hoping for the best, that's all I can do. Sometimes change can be good."

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