

Miami-Dade Catholic schools may get new life as charters

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BY JAWEED KALEEM | jkaleem@MiamiHerald.com

The Archdiocese of Miami is working with Academica, South Florida's largest charter school management company, to convert six Catholic schools it plans to close in June into nonreligious charter schools by the fall.

The shift, which would allow the six to stay open with their current teachers and make them tuition-free, requires approval from the parish that runs each school and the county school district in which it is located."

It's a better alternative than no school," archdiocese spokeswoman Mary Ross Agosta said. Archbishop John C. Favalora has signed off on Allapattah's Corpus Christi elementary becoming part of Little Havana's Mater Academy International and is considering a request from the St. Stephen parish in Miramar to merge its elementary with that city's Somerset Neighborhood School, Agosta said Thursday.

Academica, which manages Mater, Somerset and 32 other Miami-Dade and Broward schools, also is in talks to take over St. Clement in Wilton Manors, Our Lady of Divine Providence in Sweetwater, Sacred Heart in Homestead and St. Francis Xavier in Overtown. Agosta said the archdiocese is considering additional charter operators but declined to name them. Corpus Christi parent Marlene Blanco said she hasn't decided whether her two children will continue there."

Religion isn't my main concern, but my experience hasn't always been the best with charter schools," Blanco said.

At Sacred Heart, where principal August Silva said a decision about the school's future will likely be announced next week, Isabel Rodriguez said she will enroll her niece elsewhere next year. "I put my child in here for the religious instruction," Rodriguez said. "I have been looking at other Christian schools instead."

Citing investment losses, declining enrollment and rising expenses, the archdiocese announced the closings in January, prompting parent protests and save-our-school fundraisers. Charter conversion would not only eliminate costs but generate revenue in the form of rent for the school facilities."

Because it's a lease, that means money will go to the parishes to help them in these tough economic times," Agosta said.

Academica, which is based in South Miami, referred a request for comment to Lynn Norman-Teck, spokeswoman for the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools."

It makes financial sense for the archdiocese," she said. ``Otherwise, it's just an empty building."

Because charters receive public funding, the schools would be stripped of crucifixes, Bibles and other religious trappings. But the archdiocese is asking that parishes be allowed to use the buildings for after-school religious instruction, Agosta said.

As Catholic schools across the country struggle to stay open, converting to charters is an increasingly popular option. Seven Catholic schools in Washington, D.C., opened last fall as secular charters, and four Catholic schools in New York said last month they will convert by fall.

Academica, which also manages schools in Utah and Texas, has courted Catholic schools in San Antonio, as well.

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