

Part 4 - Florida's failed charter schools: Amid charter school successes, missed chances for change

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Editor's note: This is the last in a four-part series on Florida's charter school system. [Part 1](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/shuttered-day-1-florida-failed-charter-schools-cracks-system) was posted on Sept. 13 (<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/shuttered-day-1-florida-failed-charter-schools-cracks-system>). [Part 2](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/day-2-florida-failed-charter-schools-few-dollars-little-sense-doom-dozens-of-charters-shuttered) was posted on Sept. 16 (<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/day-2-florida-failed-charter-schools-few-dollars-little-sense-doom-dozens-of-charters-shuttered>). [Part 3](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/day-3-florida-failed-charter-schools-at-low-performing-students-fall-behind-shuttered) was posted on Sept. 18 (<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/day-3-florida-failed-charter-schools-at-low-performing-students-fall-behind-shuttered>).

NAPLES, Fla. - In 1997, when Marco Island kids had to travel 10 miles for the nearest middle school, a group of parents made a dramatic decision.

They were going to build their own charter school.

[Watch video interviews with parents, students and officials about Florida charter schools »](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDyWYiw7Du79HbznWUy1DspDK_fozIe7t)
(https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDyWYiw7Du79HbznWUy1DspDK_fozIe7t)

Together, those parents cobbled together about 200 students, earning the faith of locals wanting to keep their kids closer to home.

Marco Island Charter Middle School CEO and Principal George Abounader directs traffic and helps students cross the parking lot after school June 3, 2014.

(Corey Perrine/Staff)

“We had no academic record at that point, and the finances were like hand-to-mouth,” said George Abounader, the school’s current and founding principal.

Today, about 450 students attend the school, one of Florida’s best. It has received an “A” grade for 13 straight years, with its finances in strong shape. And after nine years in portable trailers, students now learn in a sleek \$17 million, two-story building on the same property where the temporary classrooms once sat.

[Photo gallery: Marco Island Charter Middle School succeeds \(http://www.naplesnews.com/news/shuttered-marco-island-charter-middle-school-has-succeeded\)](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/shuttered-marco-island-charter-middle-school-has-succeeded)

Even as nearly 270 charter schools have closed in Florida, [Marco Island Charter Middle School \(http://www.micms.org\)](http://www.micms.org) has succeeded. As part of its wide-ranging investigation of Florida’s 119 charter school closures since 2008, and with the state approaching the 20-year anniversary of its charter school movement, the Daily News spoke with dozens of people familiar with the system, asking: How can Florida foster more schools like Abounader’s?

[Interactive database: Click here to get information about Florida charter schools that have closed since 2008 »](http://mediaassets.naplesnews.com/html/charterschools/database-schoolclose.html) (http://mediaassets.naplesnews.com/html/charterschools/database-schoolclose.html)

[Interactive map: Click here to get information about Florida charter schools that are still open »](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/database-map-florida-open-charter-schools-shuttered) (http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/database-map-florida-open-charter-schools-shuttered)

[Interactive map: Click here to see grades for public schools nearest to academically failed charter schools »](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/databasemap-grades-for-public-schools-nearest-to-academically-failed-charter-schools) (http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/databasemap-grades-for-public-schools-nearest-to-academically-failed-charter-schools)

Emily Boxma prepares for a seventh-grade civics test June 3, 2014 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. Students spent the day winding down the

school year before leaving for summer break. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

Many of Florida's charter schools are already performing well academically and financially, filling educational needs throughout the state. But dozens of others are failing in a system with several cracks the Legislature has yet to mend.

To fix these issues, many school district administrators, state political leaders and charter school operators agree the Florida Legislature should:

- Give county school districts clear authority to deny applications based on past failures — without preventing expansion by successful large operators whose schools occasionally close. State law doesn't explicitly allow school districts, which evaluate and approve charter applications, to hold past failures against applicants.

[Related article: Florida's failed charter schools: A 'big, big problem' with applications](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/charter-schools-big-problem-with-applications-shuttered-florida)

<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/charter-schools-big-problem-with-applications-shuttered-florida>

Martie Miller, left, a band teacher, conferences with CEO and Principal George Abounader June 3, 2014 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. Abounader says he puts the money where it needs to be -- in educating the students. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

- Promote stability on charter school governing boards. Charter governing board members responsible for managing millions in taxpayer dollars can hop on and off boards with little to no scrutiny. Legislators haven't put any mechanism in place to allow districts to deal with high-turnover governing boards, a frequent problem at failing schools.

- Establish minimum financial requirements for charter applicants — without setting the bar so high that smaller applicants can't gain access to the market. Financial troubles have caused the closure of 75 Florida charter schools since 2008. Of those 75, 39 didn't survive more than three years. Despite this, the state requires no upfront funding or line of credit before opening a new charter school.

■ Create incentives for good charter operators to go into the highest need — and highest risk — neighborhoods. As it stands, many charter operators are avoiding the lowest-performing students. Habitually bad student performance on state-mandated tests often results in the automatic closure of a school, sometimes as quickly as two years after opening.

Related article: Florida's failed charter schools - Undercurrent of money-making incentive

(<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/florida-failed-charter-schools-undercurrent-of-money-making-incentive>)

Eighth grader Brian Kocak hugs a teacher during an awards ceremony June 3, 2014 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

Legislators in recent years have instituted several changes designed to increase charter school accountability, some of which have been near-universally praised. In addition, school districts have become choosier, approving only one-quarter of applicants.

But some school district and board members say those changes haven't gone far enough, and that legislators, particularly Republicans, are shortchanging traditional public schools while enabling the too-rapid expansion of charters.

“We can continue to ensure only high-quality charters get open and operate and provide the best education for our kids. I think we're all in agreement on doing that,” said state Rep. Manny Diaz Jr., R-Hialeah, a leading charter proponent. “It's a question of how we get there.”

Students head to class after lunch June 3 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

For many county school district staff and board members, the answer is giving them more oversight power, particularly in the application phase, allowing them to weed out schools more likely to fail. Such suggestions prompt concern among supporters of the charter system, who fear too much control in the hands of county school districts and boards could stall the movement's momentum.

Ultimately, decisions about the charter school system are made in Tallahassee, where the topic has become a political football. Legislators battle over charter policy. Outside organizations and teachers unions pump millions of dollars into elections and lobbying. For-profit charter management companies flex their power. And school districts push for reforms that critics call a money-grab.

Related article: Florida's failed charter schools - Management companies vs. 'mom-and-pop'

(<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/florida-failed-charter-schools-management-companies-vs-mom-and-pop-shuttered>)

The contentiousness was seen just this year, when the Florida Legislature considered five policy changes agreed upon by a task force of charter operators and school districts. None of them became law.

Shane Totten, a science, art and guitar teacher, gives thumbs-up to students for awards June 3, 2014 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. Totten is a former Golden Apple award recipient. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

As power players in the capital squabble over the future of Florida's charter movement, the growth of and demand for charter schools continues, making repairs to the system urgent.

“I think everybody, including myself, agree that charter schools are here to stay, whether we agree or not that they're better than the traditional public school system,” said Gary Miron, a Western Michigan University professor and leading charter school researcher. “They're institutionalized, they're part of our overall public school system now and they have a strong political constituency.”

The dream scenario

By all accounts, Marco Island Charter Middle School is the poster child of school choice.

After gaining approval for the campus in 1998, parents took to a field next to the island's only elementary school, digging trenches for electrical lines and prepping the site for portable trailer classrooms.

Related article: Florida's failed charter schools: Promoting the good charter schools, not bad

(<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/florida-failed-charter-schools-promoting-the-good-charter-schools-not-bad-shuttered>)

For school leaders, there were few models to follow. Charter schools had been allowed in Florida for the first time two years before, and only 30 were in operation.

Yet year by year, test scores rose. Enrollment slowly crept up. Finances stabilized. Unlike many charter schools, administrators and governing board members stuck around, including one who remains nearly two decades later.

“Parents and local community leaders generated this school,” Abounader said. “Little by little, that passionate group of people kind of got out of the way in running the school and let the educators run the school.”

Marco Island Middle Charter School sits in a dream position. Its academics are among the best in Collier County. It has about \$2 million in assets and just about \$30,000 in liabilities, according to its most recent available audit (http://www.myflorida.com/audgen/pages/chschools_efile%20pages/marco%20island%20charter%20middle%20school.htm). Its debt-free two-story building is the envy of most charters. And its teachers average salaries of roughly \$56,000, about \$10,000 more than the state average.

What also makes the school unique, though, are some of the breaks it has gotten.

Giana Orlando, from left, Miranda Webb, Kaitlin Creedon and Sereen Itayen, all seventh-graders, chat at the end of school June 3, 2014 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

In what's believed to be a one-of-a-kind deal, the Collier County School District (<http://www.collier.k12.fl.us/>) agreed to pay for \$16 million of the \$17-million Marco Island facility. The deal's timing — in 2005, when school districts were flush with cash for building projects — proved fortuitous, though brokers of the agreement say it was primarily the result of the school's strong nine-year track record.

“They had good, solid support from a large group — not just the parents, but the community itself,” said Collier County School Board member Pat Carroll, who held the same position when the board approved construction in 2005.

The school also came under fire during its creation amid accusations of racial segregation. Marco Island is currently 91 percent white (<http://www.collier.k12.fl.us/schools/mch.asp>), while Naples Manor, a primary feeder of the closest middle school, is 8 percent white. Like some successful charter schools, its student population is majority white (about 60 percent) and from higher-income families.

Logan Smith performs "Yeah, Toast" June 3, 2014 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

“Obviously we're not targeting anybody,” Abounader said. “(Students) just come in, and if there's a seat, they take them.”

Set up for success

Across Florida, a few hundred charter schools have shown successes similar to Marco Island Middle, posting high test scores while balancing their checkbooks.

Related article: Q&A: Choosing a charter school (<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/qa-choosing-a-charter-school-shuttered-florida>)

■ At northwest Miami-Dade County's Doral Academy of Technology (<http://www.doralacademyprep.org/>), home to about 200 students, roughly 90 percent of whom are Hispanic, test scores ranked second among all middle schools in the state this year.

■ In the Panhandle’s Franklin County, the third least-populated county in the state, Apalachicola Bay Charter School (http://www.abceagles.org/ABC_Eagles/Home.html) has produced an “A” grade in five of the past six years. This despite every single one of the school’s 300-plus students in 2014 qualifying for free or reduced lunches, a marker of economic disadvantage. The county’s only other public school option, Franklin County Schools PK-12, has scored zero “A” grades and three “B” grades in the past 15 years.

■ For 14 straight years, the elementary and middle charter schools governed by the city of Pembroke Pines (<http://www.pinescharter.net/>) have received “A” grades, the longest such streak among Florida charters. (Though the results mirror those of traditional public schools in Pembroke Pines, one of Broward County’s wealthier cities.)

To produce more outcomes like these, the Republican-led Florida Legislature has implemented several charter school changes in recent years.

With a couple of exceptions, back-to-back “F” grades now lead to an automatic school closure. Financially struggling schools now must create plans to crawl out of the red. Closing schools no longer have free rein to spend extravagantly in their final weeks. And newer charters must submit monthly financial statements detailing expenditures, while more experienced charters have to turn in quarterly reports.

[Read 126 documents related to charter schools project »](#)

<http://www.documentcloud.org/public/search/projectid:%2012084-charter-project>

The changes were all made to improve accountability, Diaz said, without making access to the charter market too tough.

“I think we have to be careful not to stifle innovation at the same time that we safeguard our kids and our taxpayers from these closings,” Diaz said. “I think we’re heading in the right direction.”

Which direction Florida goes from here, however, remains caught up in a power struggle.

Justin Webb, right, vies for the ball from classmate Nick Tzonev, both sixth-graders, during gym class at Marco Island Charter Middle School. "Sometimes the smaller you are, up to a point, you can respond to the needs of your students," school principal George Abounader said. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

On one side, county school districts and boards clamor for more control, believing their oversight will prevent recurring issues. As it stands, school districts generally carry out what's prescribed by the state. In particular, there's relatively little wiggle room to insert school-specific requirements into charter contracts.

In Orange County, for example, School Board Chairman Bill Sublette routinely requested three added requirements to any charter school contract. They were: automatic closure if a school received only "D" and "F" grades during any four-year period; automatic closure if a school failed to test the required number of students for a letter grade twice in any four-year period; and an early review of a school's contract if it didn't meet at least 75 percent of its enrollment projections.

Such requirements, Sublette said, were sure to land the Orange County School Board (<https://www.ocps.net/Pages/default.aspx>) in a mediation session, which wasn't worth the hassle. The requirements weren't added to Orange County charter contracts.

Language Arts teacher Jerra Minning, center, talks with students as they clean out their lockers to prepare for summer break at Marco Island Charter Middle School. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

"What little ability we had to negotiate with a charter school applicant is now being taken away from school districts," Sublette said.

On the other side, many charter school proponents voice concern about too much power in the hands of school districts. A major fear, they say, is that heavy-handed districts, which lose funding for every student that moves to a charter school, will try to stamp out the charter competition if given more control.

[Related article: Florida's failed charter schools: 'Unfortunately, it's all political'](#)

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Many charter proponents say some school districts are already less-than-cooperative with charter applicants, dragging their feet and inserting unnecessary provisions during the contract negotiation phase. Collier, Duval and Miami-Dade are most often mentioned as more difficult than other counties.

“You have to be careful that you don’t sort of stuff the charter school contracts with too much regulation, because you want them to be innovative,” said state Rep. George Moraitis Jr., R-Fort Lauderdale. “If they’re just doing the same things as the school next door is doing, I would expect there to be a similar result.”

The closure impact

Jennifer Cowles has seen charter schools at their best and worst.

For just shy of a year, Cowles taught at Richard Milburn Academy South, an alternative school opened in Lee County in 2011. Her students were teenage parents, kids already in trouble with the law and children of poor migrant workers.

The spring of 2012, 12 students graduated and the rest were “really changing their direction,” she said.

Then, about a month into the second academic year, the entire school got its two-week notice. [Richard Milburn Academy South was closing](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1112854-richard-milburn-south-letter.html) (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1112854-richard-milburn-south-letter.html>), reporting about \$280,000 in losses.

“I think we had some great success with some of the students,” Cowles said. “The failure, of course, is the shortcoming of the business.”

Therein lies the challenge of the future of charter schools.

Josiah Hurtley, an eighth-grader, yells out for friends receiving awards during a ceremony June 3 at Marco Island Charter Middle School. "The secret to a successful school are successful teachers. You have excellent teachers, you'll have a successful program," principal George Abounader said. (Corey Perrine/Staff)

Most Florida charter schools are providing a quality education, some offering opportunities not found in the state's traditional public schools. Yet hundreds of students are failed every year by a system still finding its footing, with a legislature unable so far to stem the tide of closures.

Related article: Quotable: Leaders discuss Florida's charter school system

(<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/quotable-leaders-discuss-floridas-charter-school-system>)

Not a single educator or policymaker interviewed for this series decried charter schools as a whole. But even charter supporters concede there's little good that comes from a charter closure.

Related article: Florida's failed charter schools - Florida charter school teachers often paid less than traditional public school peers (<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/education/florida-failed-charter-schools-teachers-among-lowest-paid-in-country-shuttered>)

Adam Miller

"It's hard to envision a situation in which a school fails as being a net positive for the kids in that school," said Adam Miller, the Florida Department of Education (<http://www.fldoe.org/>)'s top charter schools director.

"The disruption of a closure affects not just your daily educational experience, but the disruption of moving to a new school mid-year, new friends, those are all things that are going to impact a student's experience.

"And they're going to impact them in a negative way."

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