

JANUARY 2017

POLICY BRIEF:

FLORIDA CHARTERS FALL SHORT ON STATE ASSESSMENTS

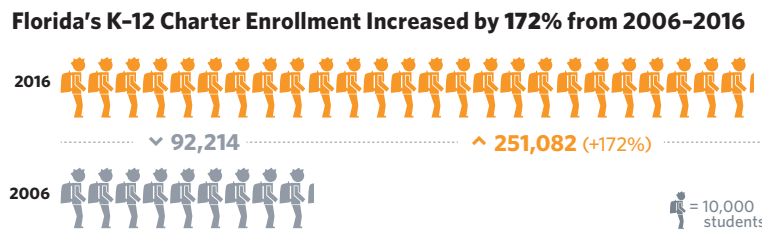


Florida Charters Fall Short on State Assessments

Charter Schools' Poor Performance

Over the last 10 years, Florida's K-12 charter enrollment has increased 172 percent from 92,214 to 251,082 students.¹ With that increase came tens of millions of state tax dollars for charters,² yet despite this substantial investment, charters have failed to live up to the state's mandate for "high standards of student achievement."³ This should come as no surprise given the lack of oversight. As part of its investigation into waste and abuse in Florida charters the *Sun Sentinel* observed "The statutes don't address background checks on charter applicants. Because of the lack of guidelines, school officials in South Florida say, they do not conduct criminal screenings or examine candidates' financial or educational pasts. That means individuals with a history of failed schools, shaky personal finances or no experience running schools can open or operate charters."⁴ In June of 2016, Florida lawmakers improved disclosure requirements, yet there is still no restriction that would automatically disqualify a charter applicant based

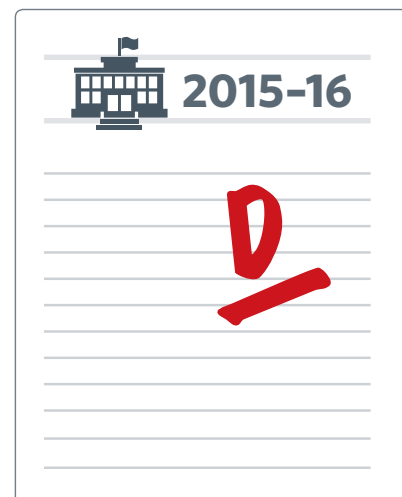
on problematic disclosure findings.⁵ In addition, according to an analysis conducted by the *Miami Herald*, \$70 million in taxpayer funds have gone to charters that closed not long after.⁶



Many of those charters that do remain open fail to perform well, with 21% receiving a grade of D or below for the 2015-16 school year. That includes the 5% of charter schools receiving an incomplete because they failed to have enough of their students sit for standardized testing, nearly twice the rate of traditional public schools receiving an incomplete.⁷

Where charters have done well on state assessments, they have done so, in many cases, with a student population that excludes economically disadvantaged students. Statewide, charters have an average economically disadvantaged enrollment of 51% compared with 70% for traditional public schools. The difference is particularly pronounced in school districts where the average overall score of charters was significantly (at least 5 percentage points) higher than that of traditional public schools. In all but one of these districts, the charters had a much lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students than the district average. In some districts, the difference was over 30 percentage points.⁸

21% of Florida Charters received a failing grade



Statewide, charters have an average economically disadvantaged enrollment of 51% compared with 70% for traditional public schools.



Moving Beyond Standardized Testing

The Florida Department of Education provides a broad range of information at the school and district levels, including teacher education levels, certification status and student to staff ratios.⁹ However the accountability system used to trigger state action for failing schools (and that parents are most likely to refer to) is the grading system focused almost exclusively on standardized testing. The information available should play a larger role in the state's assessment of school performance and distribution of resources.

Transparency

In 2015 the National Association of Charter School Authorizers released a beta version of its Charter Operator Tracker, a database offering information on charter management organizations and their schools. Citing Florida's high school closure rate in the previous school year, NACSA's database focused on Florida operators. This database will no doubt be an invaluable tool for Florida's charter school authorizers, but it is not available to parents seeking information about their children's schools.

Recommendations

We recommend that Florida focus on providing stronger oversight of existing charter school performance and require a district needs analysis before supporting any more charter schools. Essential to this goal is an accountability system for all schools that focuses on more than standardized testing and provides parents with as much information as possible.

In order to effectively identify those areas where Florida charters are most in need of help, we recommend:

- A moratorium on the authorization of new charter schools until existing charters can show improvements based on the analysis described above.
- An accountability system that takes into account a broad range of information to help identify struggling charter schools and which can be used to help in the development of school improvement plans.

- Charters and districts should collaborate and exchange detailed data and promote transparent policies on the selection, discipline, and retention of students.
- Require charter schools to have a local school advisory council made up of local parents, community members and staff. Currently, charters are exempt from the local school advisory council requirement that all traditional schools must have.

Notes

- 1 Florida's Charter Schools Fact Sheet, Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice
- 2 March, William. Most State Building Money Now Goes to Charter Schools. Tampa Tribune. April 14, 2014
- 3 Fl. Statutes, Title XLVIII Ch. 1002.33 (2) (a)
- 4 Shipley, Amy; Yi, Karen. Unsupervised: Taxpayers, students lose when school operators exploit weak laws. June 18, 2014.
- 5 Fl. Statutes, 1002.33, 1013.62, 1008.34.
- 6 Veiga, Christina; Spencer Terry; Fineout Gary. Florida gave about \$70 million to charter schools that later closed; state recouped little." December 13, 2015.
- 7 2015-2016 School Accountability Reports.
- 8 2015-2016 School Accountability Reports.
- 9 Florida Department of Education Website, PK-20 Education Data Warehouse

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



The Center for Popular Democracy works to create equity, opportunity and a dynamic democracy in partnership with high-impact base-building organizations, organizing alliances, and progressive unions. CPD strengthens our collective capacity to envision and win an innovative pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda.



The **League of Women Voters of Florida**, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.



The **League Latin American Citizens (LULAC)** is the nation's largest and oldest civil rights volunteer-based organization that empowers Hispanic Americans and builds strong Latino Communities. Florida LULAC's programs, services, and advocacy address the most important issues for Latinos, meeting critical needs of today and the future.