

FLORIDA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS: An Overview

Charter schools in Florida are tuition-free public schools, governed by volunteer, non-profit boards of directors, that operate under a contract or “charter” entered into between the school and a school district. They are nonsectarian public schools that operate free of many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The expanded flexibility given charter schools permits them to innovate in how they deliver education services to students. Charter schools provide much-needed public school choice to Florida families.

Since 1996, when the first public charter school opened in Florida, charter schools have been providing a public school option to Florida families and educational innovations to better meet the individual needs of students in those families.

- 282,924 students were enrolled in Florida charter schools in 2017-18, the third largest charter school student population in the nation.
- 654 charter schools operated in 46 of Florida’s 67 counties the 2017-18 school year.
- More than 10 percent of Florida’s public school students are enrolled in charter schools.

Enrollment in charter schools is entirely voluntary and driven by parental choice. Charter schools are required to use a lottery system to ensure a fair selection process. Many charter schools have long waiting lists of students wishing to transfer from their traditional public schools.

The most recent (March 2017) Florida Department of Education report comparing student achievement in charter schools compared with traditional public schools reported that charter school students outperformed their peers in traditional public schools in almost all achievement areas.

- Charter schools did a better job in reducing the achievement gap between white and African-American students, and white and Hispanic students in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies among most grade levels and subgroups
- A higher percentage of charter school students scored a level three or above on the statewide assessment
- A higher percentage of charter school students made learning gains.

Charter schools are required by law to abide by state law and regulations on services to students with disabilities, civil rights, health, safety and welfare of students and staff. They are required to keep public records, hold public meetings, have public inspections, and are evaluated and assigned a school grade using the same standards and criteria as traditional public schools.

Unlike low performing traditional public schools that remain open in near perpetuity, whether they perform for students or not, public charter schools must close if their students do not perform well.