



FLORIDA CHARTER SCHOOLS 2002-2003 ANNUAL ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

Executive Summary

Charter schools are independent public schools of choice, governed by an independent board. In Florida, most charter schools are sponsored by a school board. These schools place an emphasis on providing expanded learning experiences to meet the individual educational needs of each student by using innovative learning methods. Charter schools provide parents with additional choices for selecting the most effective educational programs for their children.

Charter schools have experienced dramatic growth since their inception in Florida in 1996. Six charter schools operated during the 1996-1997 school year; by the 2002-2003 school year, there were 222 operating charter schools. The charter school student population has grown from 574 students in 1996-1997 to 53,016 students in the 2002-2003 school year.

Charter schools are held strictly accountable for academic and financial results, embodied in three guiding principals:

- Meeting high standards of student achievement, while providing parents flexibility to choose among diverse educational opportunities within the state's public school system.
- Promoting enhanced academic success and financial efficiency by aligning responsibility with accountability.
- Providing parents with sufficient information on whether or not their child is reading at grade level and whether or not the child gains at least a year's worth of learning for every year spent in the charter school.

Florida's charter schools have proven to be a solid educational option with a strong performance track record. In 2002-2003, 31% of Florida's charter schools made Adequate Yearly Progress, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act. Only 16% of Florida's traditional public schools made Adequate Yearly Progress the same year. Charter schools also performed well in the A+ School Grading System; 73% of all charter schools received a C or higher.

Students entering a charter school often perform below their traditional public schools counterparts. These struggling students pose serious instructional challenges. As a result, the average scores for charter school students often lag behind the average scores of traditional public school students. Research shows that these differences in performance close over time, suggesting that charter schools may provide an additional value for the students they educate.

In order to continue to thrive, however, charter schools and the Florida legislature will have to address several challenges:

- The difficulty attaining and comparing charter school data and student performance data;
- The need for expanded charter school research;
- Fostering financial viability of start-up charter schools;
- The need for a recurring source of capital outlay; and
- The need for increased technical assistance to charter schools and their sponsors.

The 2002-2003 report marks the inauguration of the first charter school accountability report of its kind. While the challenge of consistent and reliable data remains, the findings of the report will serve as baseline information for future reports on charter school performance measures.