

History of Charter Districts in Florida

Based on the level of innovation and heightened student achievement brought to public education through charter schools, Florida has opted to explore the possibilities that are opened through offering an entire district charter status. Designation as a charter district means more freedom from state control. Florida adopted a model charter district law during the 1999 session.

The Volusia County school district first proposed a charter district program in 1996, but met with little success. Florida's step onto the charter district stage evolved rapidly from a suggestion in March 1999, by Hillsborough County Superintendent Earl Lennard, during a visit by Governor Jeb Bush to Gorrie Elementary School in Tampa.

Governor Bush, who had helped found a charter school in Miami's Liberty City before he was elected governor, has described the charter district demonstration project as a way to try out new ideas.

The Florida law allows up to six pilot districts to seek exemptions from all state statutes, rules, and policies except those that deal with electing school boards, public meetings and records, financial disclosure, conflict-of-interest, and sunshine laws. Yet, the law requires the charter district to establish performance goals, measures to assess progress, and a time frame for accomplishing the goals.

Volusia County

The Volusia County School District is the first Charter District in the state of Florida and one of the largest in the country. The school district began as a charter district in 1999; the charter has been renewed through June 2008. The school district's purpose is to achieve a significant acceleration in student achievement. The school district's graduation rate is 77% and the dropout rate is 1.4%. Seventy percent of Volusia County's public schools earned an "A" or a "B" in 2002. Sixty-three percent of Volusia County's Title I schools have earned an "A" or "B," demonstrating the success of the initiative to positively impact lower socio-economic students.

Hillsborough County

The Hillsborough County School District became Florida's second Charter District in the year 2000. The school district's vision is to be in the top 1% of school districts in the nation. Two-thirds of Hillsborough County schools were graded "A" or "B," with 64 schools receiving an "A." There are 79.9 % of Hillsborough County's high school graduates that intend on continuing on to college or advanced training. The drop out rate is 2.74%.

Orange County

The Orange County Public School District was approved as the state's third charter school district in 2002. The Orange County public school system is the 14th largest district out of more than 16,000 in the nation and is the 4th largest in Florida. The school district's mission is to ensure that each student acquires the skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary to reach their full potential. Orange County has a 68.3% graduation rate and a 2.8% drop out rate. Seventy Orange County Public schools were graded an "A" or a "B."

Florida Statutes, Title 48, Chapter 1003, Section 1003.62

The State Board of Education is authorized to enter into a performance contract with up to six district school boards for the purpose of establishing them as charter school districts. The State Board of Education shall give priority to Hillsborough and Volusia Counties upon the submission of a completed pre-charter agreement or charter proposal for a charter school district. The purpose of this pilot program is to examine a new relationship between the State Board of Education and district school boards that may produce significant improvements in student achievement and school management, while complying with constitutional requirements assigned to each entity.

(1) **CHARTER DISTRICT.** A charter school district is a school district in Florida in which the district school board has submitted and the State Board of Education has approved a charter proposal that exchanges statutory and rule exemption for agreement to meet performance goals in the proposal. The charter school district shall be chartered for 3 years, at the end of which the performance shall be evaluated.

(2) **EXEMPTION FROM STATUTES AND RULES.** Charter school districts shall be exempt from state statutes and specified State Board of Education rules. The district school board of a charter school district shall not be exempt from any statute governing election of district school board members, public meetings and public records requirements, financial disclosure, conflicts of interest, operation in the sunshine, or any provisions outside the Florida K-20 Education Code.

(3) **GOVERNING BOARD.** The governing board of the charter school district shall be the duly elected district school board. The district school board shall be responsible for supervising the schools in the charter district and is authorized to charter each of its existing public schools pursuant to s. 1002.33, apply for deregulation of its public schools pursuant to s. 1003.63, or otherwise establish performance-based contractual relationships with its public schools for the purpose of giving them greater autonomy with accountability for performance.

(4) **PRECHARTER AGREEMENT.** The State Board of Education is authorized to approve a precharter agreement with a potential charter district. The agreement may grant limited flexibility and direction for developing the full charter proposal.

(5) **TIME PERIOD FOR PILOT.** The pilot program shall be authorized for a period of 3 full school years commencing with award of a charter. The charter may be renewed upon action of the State Board of Education.

(6) **REPORTS.** The State Board of Education shall annually report on the implementation of the charter school district pilot program. Upon the completion of the first 3-year term, the State Board of Education, through the Commissioner of Education, shall submit to the Legislature a full evaluation of the effectiveness of the program.

(7) **RULEMAKING.** The State Board of Education shall have the authority to enact rules to implement this section in accordance with ss. 120.536 and 120.54.