

Quick Overview of School Privatization in Florida

In both the US and Florida, there are two main prongs of school privatization: charter schools and voucher-funded schools.

Charter schools are privately managed but publicly funded from the district of residence. This is true in Florida and throughout the US. All charter schools are set up as nonprofit schools but many are managed by for-profit management corporations. In Florida, close to 50% of charter schools are managed by for-profit companies—companies that charge significant fees and often bring in big bucks through real estate schemes or curriculum sales. In the real estate schemes, a separate for-profit land company, usually owned by the management company, build or purchase property (there are financing companies with all sort of federal support just to fund charter schools) and rent it back to the charter school they manage, often at an inflated price. Some of the big chains like Academica, exert pretty much total control over the school to the point that the nonprofit applications for the “nonprofit” schools they manage were taken out by officers of the corporate management company.

Sarasota is fortunate to have no for-profit managed charter schools. Two are managed by a national chain, The Imagine Schools, which had been a for-profit but after various scandals, the company became nonprofit. The rest of the 9 charter schools here are homegrown “mom and pop” ventures. The Sarasota School District stays on top of the charters as they want them to keep their grade high as the charter grades are factored into the District grade. Many charter schools face money issues and fold within the first couple of years. This has happened in Sarasota, although in the past five years the schools have been quite stable and in the past two years, no new applications have been made.

General criticism of charter schools is that they frequently cherry-pick their students, even though that is supposed to be illegal. There are a bunch of loopholes and that fact that most do not provide transportation that makes this rather easy. They also have gimmicks to inflate their student population which increases the amount of money they receive from the local district. The schools are also criticized for not living up to their original intent of providing innovative program for populations within schools that are traditionally not served well. However, the reality is that very few are innovative.

In Sarasota about 16% of students attend charter schools. This will go up to about 18% when the Dreamers Academy gets going.

The other major thread in privatization are the voucher programs which are growing at an even faster rate than charter schools but starting from a lower base. With voucher programs, the local school district has no say over the voucher-funded schools and, in fact, districts are totally cut out of the loop. The schools are either existing private schools that agree to take vouchers (often catholic schools—in fact vouchers have saved some of these schools from going under) or schools that have been set up explicitly to take vouchers (usually especially shoddy schools. The vouchers are either funded by the state treasury or from diverted treasury money through largely corporations “donating” part or all of corporate taxes owed to a nonprofit like Step Up for Students (established by John Kirtley, a wealthy venture capitalist and direct associate of Betsy DeVos who was the architect of most of Florida’s school voucher programs) who then doles out so-called scholarships to families. A separate report on voucher schools in Sarasota has been prepared.