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Charter schools enrolling low number of poor students

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Carl Juste / Miami Herald Staff

Charter School at Waterstone in Homestead

The Charter School at Waterstone looms behind a manned guardhouse in an exclusive community in Homestead. With a palm-lined walkway leading to its cool-blue buildings, the school stands apart from the closest alternative: Campbell Drive K-8 Center, the 35-year-old traditional public school down the road.

The students are different, too.

At Waterstone, about 32 percent of students in 2010 qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, an indicator of poverty, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. At Campbell Drive, about two miles away, 93 percent of the students qualified.

The trend is evident across Miami-Dade County, where overall, the number of poor children enrolled in charter schools is disproportionately low compared to traditional public schools — an advantage for the charter schools, given that poverty correlates with poor academic performance. Charter schools in Miami-Dade also enroll a smaller share of black students than traditional public schools, according to federal data. In traditional public schools, one-third of children are black, compared to one-fifth of children in charter schools.

The imbalances persist despite local, state and federal rules aimed at promoting open access to charter schools and preventing discrimination. The Waterstone school, for example, is open to all Miami-Dade students under its contract with the school district, while giving preference to students who live within four miles of the school — an area that includes Campbell Drive K-8.

Charter schools, which receive public tax dollars but are run by independent boards, say they do not handpick which students they enroll. Most say they rely on random admissions lotteries.

And in Broward County, the charter school demographics more closely reflect the traditional public schools.

“Charter schools serve the neighborhood kids,” said Robert Haag, president of the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools, a lobbying and support organization.

In Miami-Dade, however, the charter school industry has followed a growth strategy that has amplified the disparities. Much of the growth in charter schools has been in the county’s western and southern suburbs rather than the inner city — in part because of the housing boom of the 2000s. Moreover, some schools have adopted outreach strategies that target high-achieving students and children who live in affluent neighborhoods.

Florida school districts are not required to monitor charter schools’ admissions lotteries or marketing methods, and they seldom do — even with millions of dollars in taxpayer money on the line. But in

2009, Miami-Dade school district researchers looking at enrollment patterns found that the Mater and Doral academies, two popular charter school networks managed by the same company, had admitted a disproportionately high percentage of advanced students. The findings raised the possibility “that specific students were targeted in some way,” according to the report.

The school district never pursued the numbers further, and the two school networks denied the accusations.

As charter schools expand their reach, the issue remains a topic of national debate.

“There are questions about whether these schools truly are open to serving everyone,” said Erica Frankenberg, an assistant professor at Pennsylvania State University who studies charter schools.

Charters step in

In its early days, the charter school movement promised to empower parents in low-income communities by providing alternatives to struggling public schools. In 1996, the state’s first charter school, Liberty City Charter School, accomplished that goal.

But early critics worried charter schools would become exclusive academies accessible only to well-to-do families. In fact, many members of the Legislative Black Caucus voted against the original proposal because it did not require charter schools to provide transportation for students, to help poorer families.

There are some safeguards in place. Like traditional schools, charter schools are subject to federal anti-discrimination laws. State law also requires charter schools to reflect the “racial and ethnic balance” of their communities.

“We expect our charter schools to have open enrollment to represent the communities they serve,” said Adam Miller, who oversees charter schools for the state Department of Education. “They cannot pick and choose based on race and ethnicity.”

In Broward County, the charter schools have a slightly larger proportion of low-income and black students than the traditional public schools, federal data show. Broward school district officials say there is a growing number of small, independent charter schools in Caribbean and African-American neighborhoods.

In Miami-Dade, however, Hispanic students are overrepresented, according to the 2010 figures from the National Center for Education Statistics, the most recent available for all public schools.

In the largest charter school networks — the Mater, Doral, Somerset and Pinecrest academies — 90 percent of the students enrolled in 2010 were Hispanic, federal records show, compared to 58 percent in the public school system. These school networks are all managed by Academica, Florida’s largest charter school operator.

Miami-Dade charter schools also enrolled a smaller share of poor students: 54 percent, compared to 74 percent in traditional public schools.

“In Florida, there aren’t as many charter schools that have been really successful in going and serving high free- and reduced-price lunch populations compared to some other states,” said Kevin Hall, CEO of the Colorado-based Charter School Growth Fund, which recently committed \$10 million to help Florida charter schools expand into low-income communities.

In 2010, of the 83 charter schools open in Miami-Dade, more than two dozen had poverty rates more than 30 percentage points lower than the closest traditional public school, a Herald analysis found.

The poverty gap was particularly noticeable in South Dade, where the Charter School at Waterstone is located.

Numbers disputed

Mike Strader, president of the company that manages Waterstone, insisted that the federal poverty data were inaccurate, and said his school actually serves far more impoverished students than the numbers reflect. He said 73 percent of children at the school this year receive free or reduced-price lunches. However, Miami-Dade school district records show that 35 percent of Waterstone's students are currently receiving free or reduced-price lunch benefits. The district keeps close tabs on which charter school students are eligible, because it disburses federal funds for school lunches.

Students targeted?

In 2009, a Miami-Dade school district study of middle-schoolers found that while black students and poor students were less likely to transfer to charter schools, those who were classified as gifted or had earned high marks on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests were more likely to choose charter schools.

The report also found that advanced students were nearly twice as likely to transfer to schools in the Mater and Doral networks of schools as to continue in their home schools.

"It is unlikely that the effects seen for these particular schools can be explained by direct marketing techniques, which are typically ineffective, given that these effects are not seen in other charter schools," the report concluded. "This raises the possibility that specific students were targeted in some way."

Fernando Zulueta, the CEO of Academica — the firm that manages the two networks of schools — said neither one targets certain classes of students. "My philosophy is to let everyone in and you can do amazing work with these kids," he said.

Zulueta said more high-performing children may wind up at Mater and Doral because their parents are better informed about choice options. He criticized the findings of the district's middle-school study, saying they reflected parent dissatisfaction with the traditional public schools, not recruitment practices.

Recruitment practices can, however, help shape a population of students.

Henry Rose, who sits on the executive board of the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools, said marketing is an important part of the equation. Student recruitment is frequently discussed at charter school governing board meetings, minutes show.

"You have to figure out what your market is," Rose said. "Do you want to appeal to kids who are struggling? How far outside of the neighborhood do you want to go? How are you going to reach those parents?"

Florida charter schools are expected to "reach out to the community," said Miller, of the state education department.

Some charter operators do. Haag, the consortium president who is also superintendent of the Charter Schools of Excellence network of schools in Broward County, said he places advertisements on public buses and in neighborhood churches. "I've tried every way to reach out to African-American students," he said.

Some South Florida schools avidly court parents in affluent neighborhoods, sending recruitment fliers to homes in high-income ZIP codes. Two charter schools in Coral Gables and South Miami held an invitation-only information session at the posh Biltmore Hotel last year, parents said.

Often, a charter school's best marketing device is a good reputation and high FCAT scores, said Jonathan Hage, president of Charter Schools USA, one of the region's largest charter school management companies.

But for both charter schools and traditional public schools, poverty is linked to low test scores — creating a potential incentive for charter schools to avoid these students.

Most charter schools say they encourage all students to apply and that they admit students based on the results of a random lottery.

State law does not require any oversight of the lotteries, and the Miami-Dade school district has never sought information detailing which students apply to charter schools and which ones get in. Some charter schools contacted by The Miami Herald provided incomplete records, or said their application and lottery records for prior years had been discarded.

While no South Florida schools have been formally accused of excluding children, there have been problems elsewhere: Last July, the Academic Leadership Charter School in New York City was put on probation after hundreds of children were left out of the admissions lottery. One year earlier, an Albany, N.Y., charter school screened out children who had low test scores or learning disabilities.

In Florida, state and federal rules bar charter schools from giving preference to students except in narrow circumstances. For example, nearly all charter schools in South Florida give preference to the children of employees and the siblings of current students. Those run by municipalities can also give preference to residents.

Some schools, however, have created their own rules.

Coral Reef Montessori gives preference to children who have previous Montessori experience, principal Lucy Canzoneri-Golden said. (Many of those children graduate from the pre-kindergarten Golden operates on the same campus, she said.) But Coral Reef's charter — its contract with the school district — says nothing about any preference for prior Montessori experience.

Some schools have created "articulation agreements" with other charter schools, giving preference to students as they advance from one charter school to another. Nothing prohibits a Florida charter school from having a relationship with another school, but the process is frowned upon by federal education officials. The guidelines for receiving federal grant money say charter schools receiving federal start-up grants are not allowed to give preference to students from "affiliated" schools.

Location, location

The location of a charter school also plays an important role in dictating its racial and socioeconomic makeup.

In Miami-Dade, charter schools have proliferated primarily in the suburbs, while inner-city and black communities have remained largely neglected. Last year, one in four traditional public schools were in a neighborhood where at least one-third of the residents were black, a Herald analysis found. But only one in seven charter schools were in a neighborhood with a similar makeup.

Of the charter schools that have closed in Miami-Dade County, 20 out of 30 were in predominantly black neighborhoods.

Experts say charter schools in the inner-city face unique challenges.

Katrina Wilson-Davis, who served as founding principal of the Liberty City Charter School, said finding a building for a school in the urban core can be difficult. There's also the challenge of trying to balance a school's budget in a low-income community.

"Our parents cannot give us money to supplement our budget," Wilson-Davis said. "Our parents don't have the time to volunteer in the office every day. We have to pay for everything."

Despite solid academic performance, Liberty City Charter School closed in 2008, after falling more than \$1 million in debt.

As for transportation — a concern for black lawmakers in 1996 — records show it is provided by only 40 percent of Miami-Dade charter schools.

Haag, the consortium president, said he "strongly" encourages charter schools to provide transportation for their students. "Buses remove the barriers," he said.

State Rep. Dwight Bullard, a Miami Democrat who sits on the House Education Committee, said charter schools have a responsibility to serve all children. "From a moral standpoint, they should be investing their time, energy and efforts into communities that need the most help," he said.

To that end, the state education department and the Charter School Growth Fund recently rolled out a \$30 million fund to help high-performing schools expand into high-poverty neighborhoods.

"We've made it a priority over the last year to incentivize our highest-quality operators to go into our highest-poverty areas," said Miller, the state charter schools director.

Efforts to increase diversity have taken hold in individual schools, too. Keys Gate Charter School and Keys Gate Charter High in Homestead, for example, sent out mailers to homes within a 10-mile radius of the school in hopes of attracting students from across South Dade. The two schools also placed advertisements countywide.

The strategy is working, Keys Gate officials said. This year, 64 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, up from about 54 percent the year before.

"The diversity has increased beyond the neighborhood," said Hage, whose company manages the schools. "It is more and more reflective of the city and beyond."