

# FLORIDA

## Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

### OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Florida's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that school performance is remarkably stubborn in both of Florida's public-school sectors. The vast majority of the state's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements over five years. Florida's charter sector has, however, been more successful at *closing* persistently low-performing schools—one positive indication of the charter sector's more stringent accountability policies at work. Six charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were closed by 2008-09, representing 23 percent of all charters, compared with 7 percent in the district sector. Florida's charter closure rate was above the 10-state average; only Ohio, Wisconsin, and Arizona closed larger proportions of low-performing charters. Still, 73 percent of the charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were still operating, and still low-performing, in 2008-09.

### Characteristics of Florida's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary

### BACKGROUND ON FLORIDA'S CHARTER SECTOR

Florida enacted charter legislation in 1996. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 413 charter schools operated in Florida during 2009-10,<sup>1</sup> serving over 137,000 students, or 5 percent of all Florida public-school pupils.<sup>2</sup> Ninety-two Florida charter schools have closed since 1996, representing 18 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 81 percent of Florida's charter schools are independently operated, while 1 percent partner with a nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 18 percent partner with a for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Florida's charter law was ranked eleventh (among forty states) by NAPCS.<sup>3</sup> State law permits local school boards to authorize charters. (The legislature created an independent statewide authorizer, but in 2008 it was ruled unconstitutional by the state Court of Appeals and subsequently dissolved.) There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.<sup>4</sup>

or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 123 Florida charter schools and 2,183 district schools were included in the dataset.<sup>5</sup>

Table 1 shows that twenty-six of the 123 charter schools (21 percent) met the criteria for low performance, compared with 206 of the 2,183 district schools (9 percent). The fact that Florida's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Florida's Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	21% (n=26)	9% (n=206)	10% (n=232)
Others	79% (n=97)	91% (n=1,977)	90% (n=2,074)
Total Schools	123	2,183	2,306

*Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.*

*Source: Author's calculations. Florida Department of Education (2010).*

Table 2 (see page 58) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their respective sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 545, compared with 821 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 164, compared with 342 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Florida's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
<b>Location (%)</b>						
Urban	35.9	15.0	16.9	26.9	14.4	17.1
Rural	5.8	15.6	14.7	0.0	25.8	20.3
Other	58.3	69.4	68.3	73.1	59.8	62.6
<b>Student Population (%)</b>						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	81.0	52.4	55.1	64.7	37.2	43.0
Special Education	14.8	15.8	15.7	15.7	15.6	15.6
Limited English Proficiency	10.0	7.0	7.2	8.5	7.4	7.6
Hispanic	18.2	19.4	19.3	14.5	16.5	16.0
Black	65.6	22.5	26.6	56.9	21.7	29.1
<b># Schools</b>	206	1,977	2,183	26	97	123
<b>Avg. Enrollment</b>	545	821	795	164	342	305

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

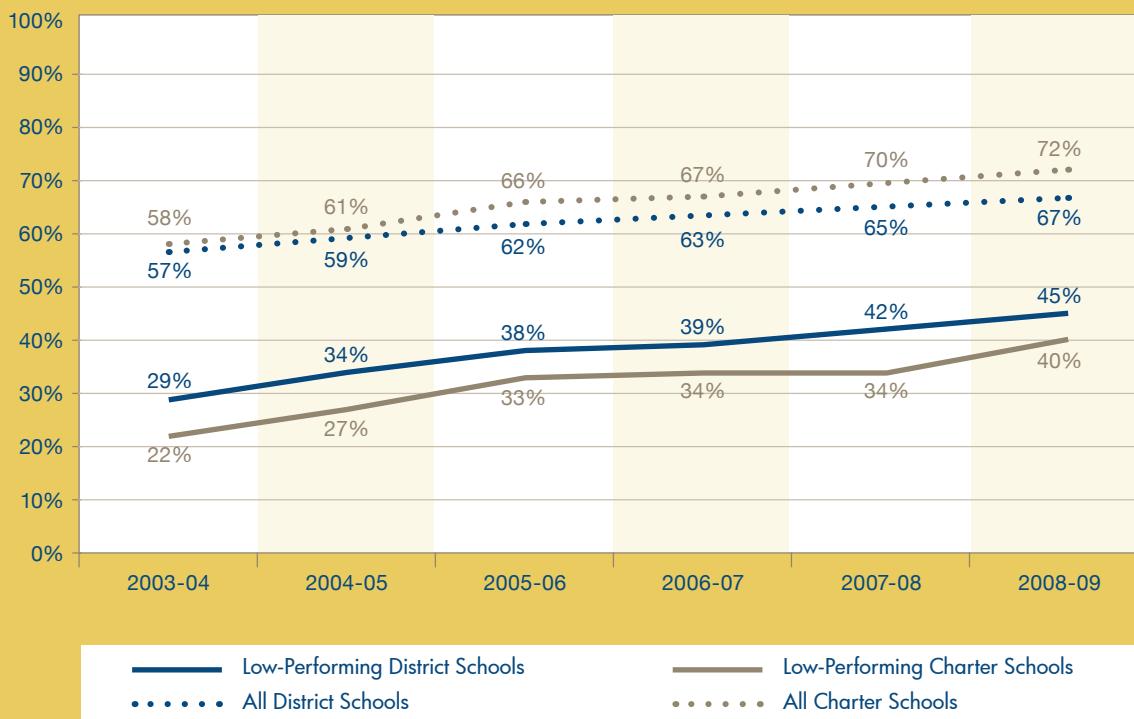
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

## READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 59) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Florida schools improved steadily during that five-year period. Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also suggest that the state's reading and math performance increased from 2003-04 to 2008-09.<sup>6</sup>

Average school proficiency rates for all schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were slightly higher in the charter sector than in the district sector. Still, a comparison of the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other.<sup>7</sup> As for low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in their proficiency trends.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1. Florida’s Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on 206 low-performing district schools, 2,183 total district schools, twenty-six low-performing charter schools, and 123 total charter schools.

Source: Author’s calculations. Florida Department of Education.

### PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., “turn around”); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Florida from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 60) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools

Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

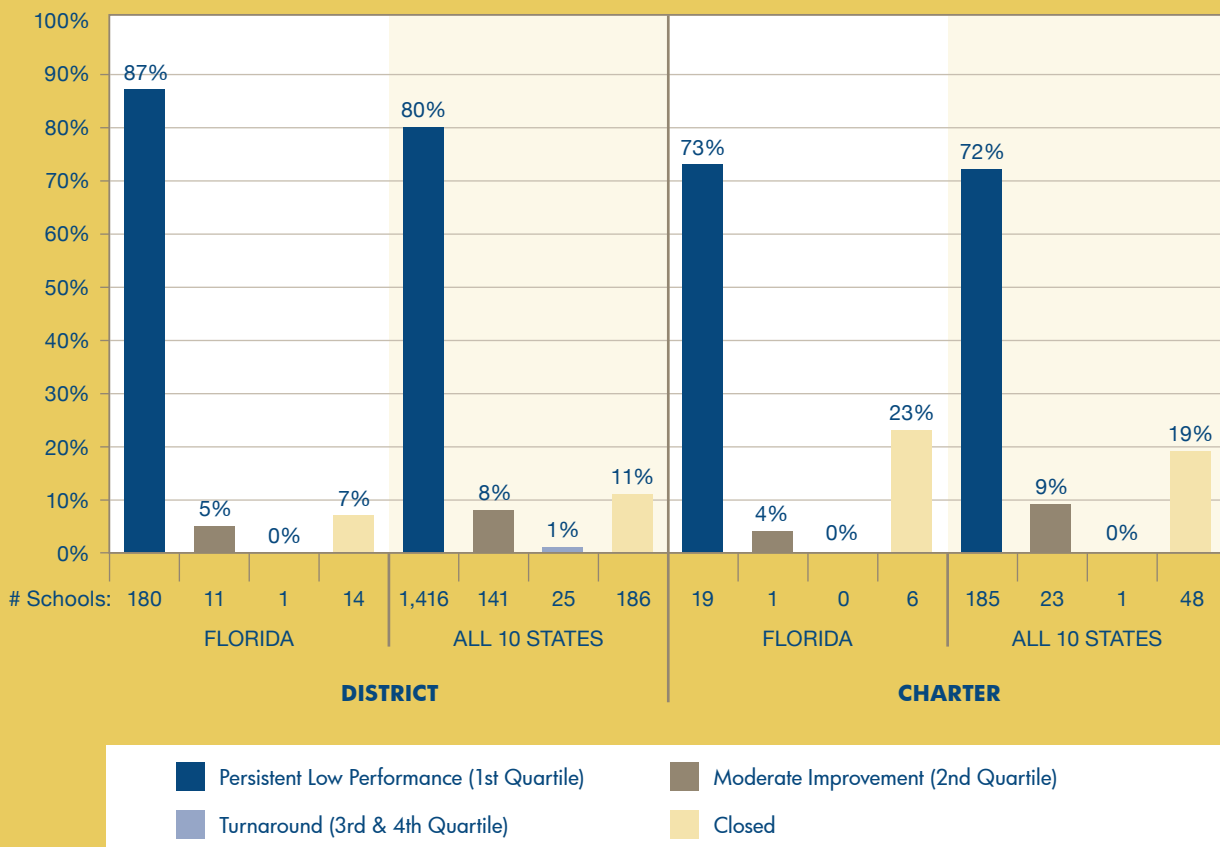
Figure 3 (see page 61) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Florida's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Four notable findings emerge:

- The vast majority of schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later.
- Florida's charter sector did better by its low performers than did the district sector. Seventy-three percent (n=19) of the low-performing charters in 2003-04 remained in the lowest quartile, compared with 87 percent (n=180) of the low-performing district schools. Florida's district sector had the third-highest rate of persistent low performance of the ten states in the study.
- As was the case in all ten states, Florida's low-performing charters were likelier to be closed than similarly weak district schools. Six of the former were shut down from 2003-04 to 2008-09, representing 23 percent of all charter schools, compared with 7 percent in the district sector. Florida's charter closure rate was above the 10-state average; only Ohio, Wisconsin, and Arizona closed larger proportions of low-performing charters.
- None of Florida's low-performing charter schools in 2003-04 qualified as a "turnaround" by 2008-09, and just one district school met the criteria. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better—only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools met the criteria—indicating the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

In sum, neither Florida's charter sector nor its district sector is skilled at dramatically improving low-performing schools. Negligible fractions of low-performing schools in both sectors turned around over a five-year period; rather, the overwhelming majority of low performers in both sectors remained that way over time.

Still, Florida's charter sector shut proportionally more of its low performers than the state's district sector: A low-performing charter school in Florida had roughly a one-in-four chance of being closed, versus a one-in-fourteen chance in the district sector. Florida's charter sector was also more successful at shutting down low-performing schools than six of the nine other state charter sectors in this analysis.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating “persistent low performance” if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making “moderate improvement” if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as “turnaround” if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as “closed” if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author’s calculations. Florida Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data.

Florida’s charter and district sectors could improve the quality of the state’s public education system by strengthening their efforts to shut down low performers. Even with more autonomy, charter schools rarely make dramatic turnarounds in performance. For those authorizers who defer closure options in hopes that weak schools will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

## ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Florida schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of the state’s low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

Florida’s charter sector closed a larger proportion of its low performers than the state’s district sector; the following two case studies profile a low-performing charter school that closed and a similarly low-performing district school that remains open.

### Origins Montessori Charter

Six of the twenty-six Florida charter schools that were designated as low-performing in 2003-04 were closed before the start of the 2009-10 school year. Only one, however, had its charter revoked due to low academic performance; the other five lost their charters due to financial mismanagement or insolvency. This reinforces a message heard repeatedly from charter authorizers: Financial problems and academic problems tend to go hand-in-hand.

Origins Montessori was an elementary charter school in Orlando that served an economically and ethnically diverse population. The school’s reading and math proficiency rates consistently ranked in the bottom 10 percent statewide: In 2003-04, it had an overall proficiency rate of 23 percent, which barely inched to 26 percent by 2006-07. The state gave the school an “F” in 2004-05 and a C in 2005-06. In 2007, Origins Montessori was closed by its authorizer, the Orange County School District, after district officials discovered evidence that the school had accepted funds for students who were not enrolled and had assigned students to teachers who were not on official employment rolls.<sup>10</sup> These discoveries served as an immediate impetus to close the school—and its poor academic performance served as weak counterargument.

### Sunland Park Elementary School

An alarming 87 percent of Florida’s low-performing district schools failed to exit the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency after five years. One such school is Sunland Park Elementary in Broward County. Located in a low-income Fort Lauderdale neighborhood, it enrolls about 400 students in grades K-5, over 90 percent of whom are poor and nearly all of whom are African American. Many of the families served by the school live in subsidized housing. Sunland Park faces high student mobility with an annual turnover rate of over 45 percent.

The school’s academic performance is stubbornly low. From 2003-04 to 2008-09, its overall reading and math proficiency rate moved only from 34 percent to 35 percent. Based on its performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the school received three consecutive “F” grades by the Florida Department of Education between 2006-07 and 2008-09. Though it underwent NCLB-mandated reconstitution in 2006 and replaced its principal, those changes have yet to pay off—and leadership has since remained unstable.<sup>11</sup> Principals left abruptly after 2006-07 and 2007-08, and in 2008-09, retired principals were used to fill the position until district officials could locate a permanent hire. The teaching force has also proved unstable. Thirty-six percent of the instructional staff was new to the school in 2008-09 and three teachers were removed during the school year on recommendations from the Florida Department of Education’s regional director. Sunland Park was listed as a “persistently lowest achieving” school in the state’s application for federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds.<sup>12</sup>

## REFERENCES

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2. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Public Charter School Dashboard, <http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/home>.
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4. Center for Education Reform, "Race to the Top' for Charter Schools; Which States Have What It Takes to Win: Charter School Law Ranking and Scorecard 2010—Florida," <http://www.charterschoolresearch.com/laws/Florida.htm>.
5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports there were a total of 3,529 public schools in Florida in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 2,306 schools after excluding 117 schools designated by NCES as special education schools, 448 schools designated by NCES as high schools, eighty-six schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 572 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Florida Department of Education.
6. National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.
7. A 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found the average growth of Florida's charter school students was around 0.03 standard deviations lower than similar district school students (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, [http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf)).
8. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sector could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Florida, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
9. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure the measure accurately represented the performance of the school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
10. Erika Hobbs, "District Probe Closes Orange Charter School," *Orlando Sentinel*, July 4, 2007, [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2007-07-04/news/NOCHARTER04\\_1\\_charter-schools-school-board-school-year](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2007-07-04/news/NOCHARTER04_1_charter-schools-school-board-school-year).
11. Broward County Public Schools, "Florida Differentiated Accountability Program 2009-2010 School Improvement Plan: Sunland Park Elementary School," <http://www.browardschools.com/schoolsplash1/schoolimprovement/0611.pdf>.
12. Florida Department of Education, "Lowest 5% of Title I Schools (52)," <http://www.fldoe.org/bsa/title1/pdf/lplps.pdf>.