

St. Petersburg Times

Florida's Best Newspaper

tampabay.com

Sunday, April 10, 2011

PRIVATE PATH TO SUCCESS IN SCHOOL



CHERIE DIEZ | Times

Southside Christian Academy kindergarteners, from left, D'Jia Lumpkin, 6, Yazmyn Mitchem, 6, and Amariah McDonald, 6, pray aloud together before lunch.

Black leaders tout the role of charter schools and vouchers for children.

BY RON MATUS
Times Staff Writer

Frustrated by poor test scores and dismal graduation rates, black residents in Pinellas County are increasingly exploring alternatives to traditional public schools.

Among the latest signs: a serious move-

ment to start charter schools to serve black students; and plans to expand a well-regarded private school that relies heavily on kids with state-sponsored vouchers.

"The fact is, you have an unacceptable percentage of children from our community that are not graduating," said the Rev. Louis Murphy, pastor of Mount Zion Progressive

Missionary Baptist Church in St. Petersburg. "I'm not trying to bad-mouth anyone. I'm just saying it's not working."

Some charter school and voucher supporters say they want to complement traditional public schools, not undermine them. But some of them also say the statistics in

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PRIVATE SCHOOL PATH EMBRACED

Pinellas are beyond troubling.

In every grade that took the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in reading, math and science last year, black students in Pinellas scored lower — and often far lower — than black students in the 11 other biggest districts in Florida. Meanwhile, jaws dropped last summer when a national report concluded the graduation rate for black males in Pinellas was 21 percent — the lowest of any big school district in the country.

The report was knocked as wildly misleading (a truer rate is about 50 percent, and rising). But it put a harsh, new spotlight on black students in Pinellas and, rightly or wrongly, fueled pessimism about the district's ability to turn things around.

"I wouldn't be honest if I told you that the people in the community here feel just great about the school system," said School Board member Lew Williams, who represents the predominantly black Midtown area in St. Petersburg.

Williams said there is still skepticism in the black community about vouchers, which many believe siphon money from public schools. But charters are getting more attention and, in his view, deserve more discussion.

"I've always advocated for the struggling kids," he said. "I would look at any alternative that we think could help them."

Dissatisfaction with public schools is not new in some black neighborhoods. But now, thanks to state and local efforts, there is more access than ever to alternatives.

Four of Stacey Owens' five sons have used a type of voucher called a tax-credit scholarship to attend private schools in St. Petersburg — three at Southside Christian Academy and one at Academy Prep. She said those private schools were more structured, more caring and more rigorous than the public schools her sons attended.

"I don't think he's being challenged," she said of her sixth-grader, now at Azalea Middle.

In the past five years, the number of Pinellas students receiving tax-credit vouchers has more than doubled, from 443 in 2006 to 1,020 this year. About 375 Pinellas parents tried to apply after the application period closed in September, including 150 from St. Petersburg, according to Step Up for Students, the Tampa-based outfit that oversees the program.

Tax-credit vouchers are available only to low-income students. Statewide, 70 percent of recipients are minorities.

This year, the Yvonne C. Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg has 65 of its 95 students on tax-credit scholarships, up from 42 last year. The school's founder, former public school teacher Yvonne Reed-Clayton, is working with Murphy to relocate the K-5 school to the Mount Zion church this fall.

Murphy wants to tie the school to the church's day care program and, eventually, to expand it through high school.

"It's my desire that we serve hundreds of kids, if not a few thousand," he said. "We're serious."

Vouchers are key to that vision. And they should be available as demand continues to spike. Legislative changes passed with bipartisan support last year ensure there will be enough corporate money to provide thousands of additional vouchers every year.

More charter seats for black students are on tap, too.

Charter schools, funded with public money but run by independent entities, are given more flexibility than other public schools in return for greater accountability. Some have floundered with low-income, minority kids, including the Imagine charter school in St. Petersburg, which has earned two F grades in a row.

But others are credited with huge successes, such as the KIPP schools that set up their first Florida campus in Jacksonville last year.

Last summer, in settling a decade-old lawsuit alleging discrimination against black students, the Pinellas School Board promised to give "full and prompt consideration" to charter school applications that are "located in and designed to serve student needs in the black community." It also agreed to an aspirational goal of at least 500 new charter seats for black students in the next five years.

"I think the feeling is, the more local control a group can have over the students and the institution, the better," said attorney Guy Burns, who represented the plaintiffs in

Where the voucher students are

Here are the Pinellas County private schools with the most black students using tax-credit vouchers.

SCHOOL	CITY	NO. OF BLACK STUDENTS WITH VOUCHERS
Yvonne C. Reed Christian School	St. Petersburg	63
Academy Prep Center of St. Petersburg	St. Petersburg	61
Southside Christian Academy	St. Petersburg	41
Lakeside Christian School	Clearwater	26
Classical Christian School for the Arts	Pinellas Park	17
Cornerstone Christian School	Dunedin	16
St. Petersburg Christian School	St. Petersburg	13
Esther's School	Pinellas Park	12
Elim Junior Academy	St. Petersburg	10

Source: Step Up for Students

the suit. "If you're on the board of a charter school, you have the ability to set the agenda, you have more authority and power."

Burns represented the International People's Democratic Uhuru Movement when it applied to start an all-black charter school in St. Petersburg in 2000. The School Board said no because it would have violated the court-ordered race ratios that were in place at the time.

With race ratios gone, the Uhurus are again talking about a charter school. But they're not the only ones.

In the wake of the settlement, Burns and others have formed a group called the Learning Village to ease the startup of new charters.

Among those involved: Goliath Davis, the former St. Petersburg city administrator who was recently fired by Mayor Bill Foster; former state Rep. Bill Heller; Doug Tuthill, a former Pinellas teachers union president who is now president of Step Up For Students; and Linda Benware, a former Pinellas school administrator who was the first principal at St. Petersburg Collegiate High School, a highly successful charter school.

"Everybody's looking at alternative efforts ... to deal with kids who are struggling," said Davis, the group's president. "Heretofore, those alternatives didn't exist. Now that they do, we want to look at the full menu of options."

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