

# Why Miami-Dade Superintendent Is Embracing School Choice



By **DOUG TUTHILL**

Teacher tenure, performance pay and standardized tests often drive the Florida public education debate, but the quietest revolution may well be the growing legion of parents who now choose their children's schools.

The learning menu in Florida keeps expanding, and nowhere is that trend more compelling than in Miami-Dade, the nation's fourth-largest school district. For superintendent Alberto Carvalho, parental choice has become an operational credo.

"We are now working in an educational environment that is driven by choice," Carvalho recently told a television reporter. "I believe that is a good thing. We need to actually be engaged in that choice movement. So if you do not ride that wave, you will succumb to it. I choose not to."

Dade is setting a blistering pace. The number of students it accepted into magnet and choice programs last year – 39,369 – was larger than the total enrollment in each of 46 other school districts. But that only scratches the surface. An even larger number – 42,367 students – attended charter schools that were approved by the district, and another 22,000 were allowed to choose other public schools through "open enrollment" options. Nearly 15,000 students with meager incomes or learning disabilities chose scholarships to private schools.

This is not just for show. Dade is a five-time finalist for the prestigious national Broad Prize in part because it has found a way, with 72 percent of its student enrollment qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, to lead the state's urban districts in growth of reading and math test scores and graduation rates.

Parental choice is no silver bullet, of course, and can only begin to account for the impressive academic gains made in Dade. But across the Sunshine State, parents are

being treated to a growing array of learning alternatives, most of which did not exist as little as a generation ago. These options speak to a basic truth that many superintendents such as Carvalho are embracing – that different children learn in different ways and parents often know the key that unlocks their potential.

As these choices expand, the traditional tension between public and private is becoming increasingly irrelevant. For example, charter schools are run by private boards, staffed by private employees, and typically housed in private buildings. But they are tuition-free and financed by taxpayers through contracts with local school boards. So are they public or private? With one of every 15 Florida public education students now attending a charter school, does that distinction even matter?

I work at a nonprofit that will provide state tax credit scholarships this fall to nearly 50,000 students whose incomes are barely above the poverty level. These are precisely the students who suffer the greatest odds in public education, and we know from state research that they were struggling in the schools they left behind. So what we see is the same thing Supt. Carvalho sees. We see parents who are simply looking for a different option, and children who often succeed when they get it.

*Doug Tuthill, a lifelong public educator and former president of two teacher unions, is president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that oversees scholarships for low-income K-12 students.*



Alberto Carvalho