

# Legislature may pay for charters to compete with failing schools

[Dan Sweeney](#)

The Florida House has a plan to deal with failing elementary and middle schools: Pay a reputable charter to compete.

There are 115 persistently failing schools in Florida, according to a list provided by House [Republicans](#). They include 18 of Broward's 174 elementary and middle schools and 10 of Miami-Dade's 221 schools. There are none in Palm Beach County.

The Schools of Hope bill would offer \$200 million to charter school operators to come into areas where elementary and middle schools have been rated "D" or "F" for at least three years straight. Charter schools are public schools owned and operated by private entities. They are funded by taxpayer money but do not have to abide by the same rules and regulations as traditional public schools.

Supporters say the bill would help children and their parents escape failing schools that have proven incapable of turning around.

"This bill is about the children who are sitting in failing schools," said state Rep. [Manny Diaz](#), R-Hialeah. "We should not care who is providing the service, but what service is being provided to our kids."

Added the bill's sponsor, state Rep. Chris Latvala, R-Clearwater: "It's time to give these school districts some help."

But the Broward County School District doesn't want it.

School officials and Democratic lawmakers say the \$200 million should instead be used to shore up funding for failing schools and allow them to try new, creative solutions to their problems.

"We think its great that the House is recognizing the challenges we face in our struggling schools. We disagree with their position," said [John Sullivan](#), the district's director of legislative affairs. "The silver lining is that they agree it takes money to turn around these schools."

Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools can market themselves, and Democratic lawmakers fear they will do that to recruit the best students from failing schools. That would leave the failing public school in even worse shape.

State Rep. Shevrin Jones, D-West Park, and other black Democrats have said the bill represents a back door return to segregation.

"Are we returning to the days of separate but unequal?" asked state Rep. Patrick Henry, D-Daytona Beach. "Overfunding charter schools and underfunding public schools is the same thing."

House Speaker Richard Corcoran, R-Land O'Lakes, has specifically mentioned successful charter school companies operating in Boston, New York and Phoenix as being potential operators of the Schools of Hope.

But a report by Politico Florida found that none of these companies is interested in coming to communities where they may not be wanted to turn around failing schools.

"We want to stay out of the politics of district versus charter," Peter Bezanson, CEO of Arizona-based BASIS.ed, told Politico.

Broward school officials say they have made great strides toward turning around their failing schools.

According to the school district's chief school performance and accountability officer, Valerie Wanza, Broward had 19 schools with an "F" rating 18 months ago and now has five, although many of those schools have risen only to a "D" rating. That is why there are 18 schools on the list of persistently failing schools.

"We do acknowledge that while we do have work to do in our schools, we are proud of the work we are doing and the growth that's taken place," Wanza said.

Republicans say that public schools have had their chance and that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is foolish.

"We're spending more than we ever have and we continue to get a bad result," said state Rep. Chris Sprowls, R-Palm Harbor. "That's madness."

The Schools of Hope bill cleared the House on Thursday on a party line vote, 77-40. Similar legislation has not yet been heard in a committee in the Senate.

But since Schools of Hope is all about funding, language could simply be inserted into the budget to fund the program.

"Anything we can do to have intensive programs for students who face obstacles in their educational experience, I'm generally supportive of those things," said Senate President [Joe Negron](#), R-Stuart.

## **Persistently Failing Schools**

To get on the list of schools that could face charter school competition, a traditional public school has to have a "D" or "F" rating for three years in a row. That includes, in Broward:

[Colbert Elementary](#), Hollywood

[Walker Elementary](#), Fort Lauderdale

**Broward Estates Elementary**, Fort Lauderdale

[Watkins Elementary](#) Pembroke Park

[Tedder Elementary](#), Pompano Beach

[Westwood Heights Elementary](#), Fort Lauderdale

[Pompano Beach Elementary](#), Pompano Beach

[Lake Forest Elementary](#), Pembroke Park

**Lauderhill 6-12**, Lauderhill

**Dr. Martin Luther King Montessori Academy**, Lauderhill

[Lauderdale Lakes Middle](#), Lauderdale Lakes

[Oriole Elementary](#), Fort Lauderdale

[Royal Palm Elementary](#), Lauderhill

[Park Ridge Elementary](#), Pompano Beach

[Pinewood Elementary](#), North Lauderdale

[Thurgood Marshall Elementary](#), Fort Lauderdale

[Rock Island Elementary](#), Fort Lauderdale

The schools in Miami-Dade are:

**Mandarin Lakes K-8 Academy**, Homestead

**Earlington Heights Elementary**, Miami

**Golden Glades Elementary**, Opa-Locka

**Liberty City Elementary**, Miami

**Dr. Robert B. Ingram/Opa-Locka Elementary**, Opa-Locka

**Poinciana Park Elementary**, Miami

**Brownsville Middle**, Miami

**Carol City Middle**, Miami Gardens

**Jose De Diego Middle**, Miami

Palm Beach County has no schools on the list.

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