

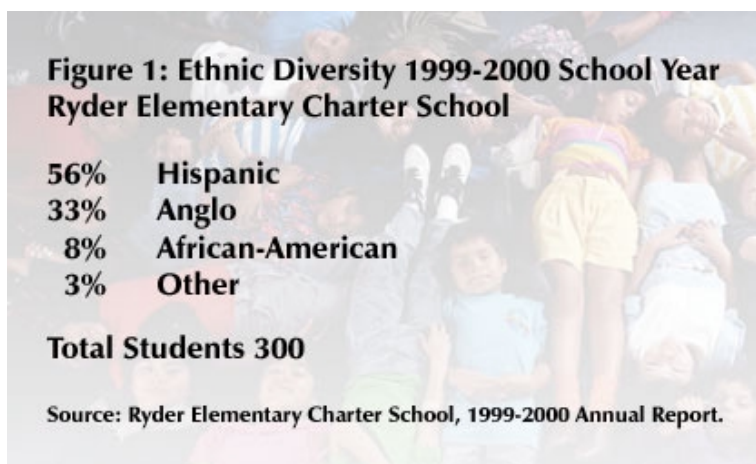
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Workplace Charter Schools: Florida Blazes the Trail

BY LISA SNELL

Ryder Elementary Charter School

Ryder System Inc., the world's largest truck-leasing and -rental company, opened the nation's first workplace charter school in August 1999. Planning, designing, and constructing a traditional elementary school is typically a five-year process; Ryder Elementary Charter School's (RECS's) facility was designed, constructed, and ready for students in less than nine months. The school is housed in a state-of-the-art 30,000-square-foot, \$3.75 million facility located adjacent to the Ryder System Headquarters building in West Dade, Florida.



Initially, RECS had a population of 300 students in kindergarten through third grade. The following year, RECS added a 4th grade class, and will expand to include the fifth grade in 2001, for a total of 500 students. The ethnic diversity of RECS's student population the first year was 56 percent Hispanic, 33 percent Caucasian, 8 percent African-American, and 3 percent other ethnicities (see figure 1).¹

¹ Ryder Elementary Charter School, *1999-2000 Annual Report*, p. 4.

Although created as a charter school serving a workplace, RECS is the school of choice for many non-Ryder families. Approximately 90 percent of the school's 1999–2000 enrollment came from non-Ryder families, many of them living in the Doral area surrounding the school.²

Students attending RECS have a longer school day and an extended school year, compared to traditional Miami-Dade County Public School (MDPS) students. Classes at RECS begin at 8:20 a.m. and end at 3:00 p.m. The school year is also five days longer, and RECS does not observe early-release days, resulting in the school gaining approximately 10 more learning days than the MDPS calendar.

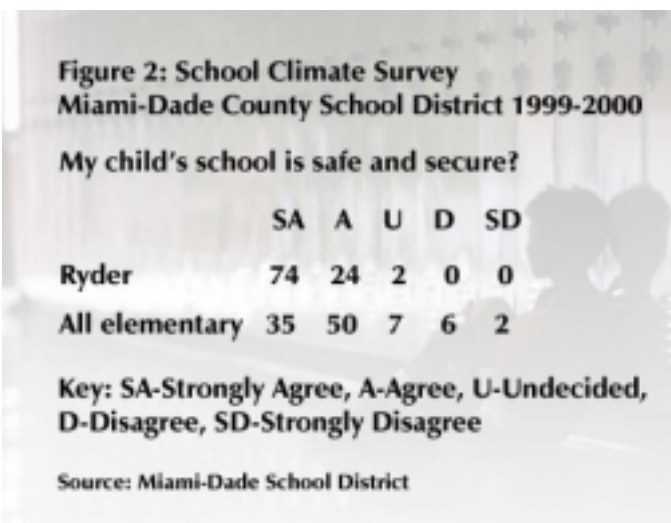
A. RECS Administration and Staff

Because Ryder's business expertise is in transportation and logistical services, it signed a performance-based contract with Charter Schools USA, Inc. Charter Schools USA, an education management organization that provides administrative and management support services, handles the day-to-day management of the school.

RECS teachers have an average of eight years teaching experience. The teaching staff is also provided with extensive professional development, and all faculty are trained for two weeks prior to the first day of school. The summer 2000 training included presentations from classroom management expert Dr. Robert Hanson and trainers from MicroSociety, a highly regarded magnet and supplementary program used in school districts across the nation. Additionally, all RECS staff are ESOL- (English for Speakers of Other Languages)-certified.

B. Parental Satisfaction and Involvement

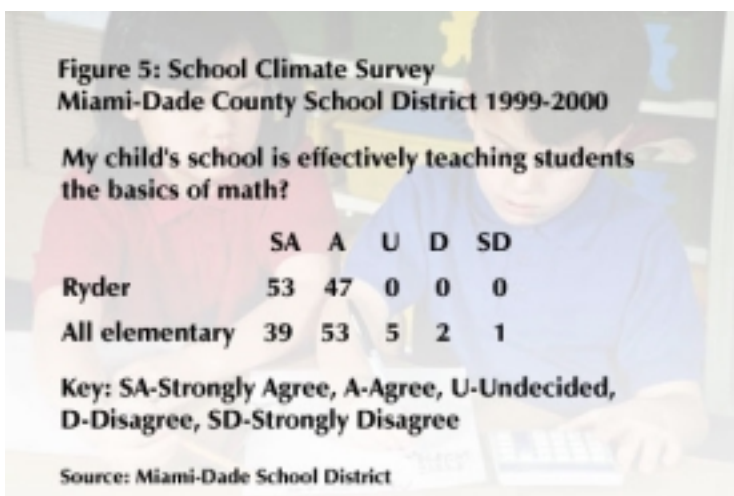
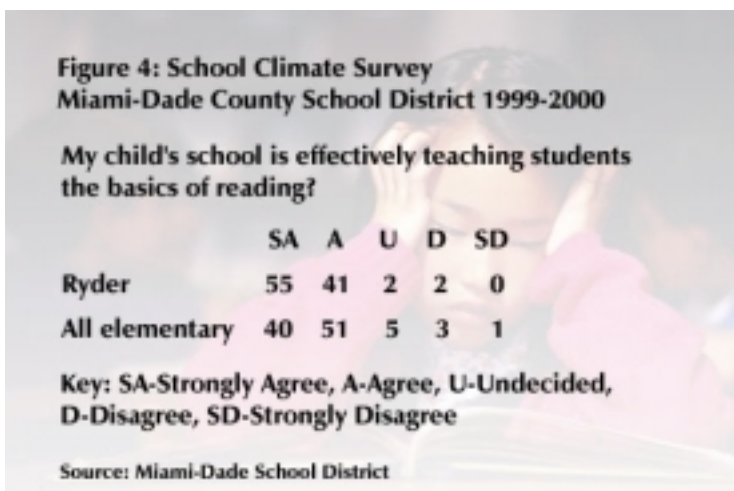
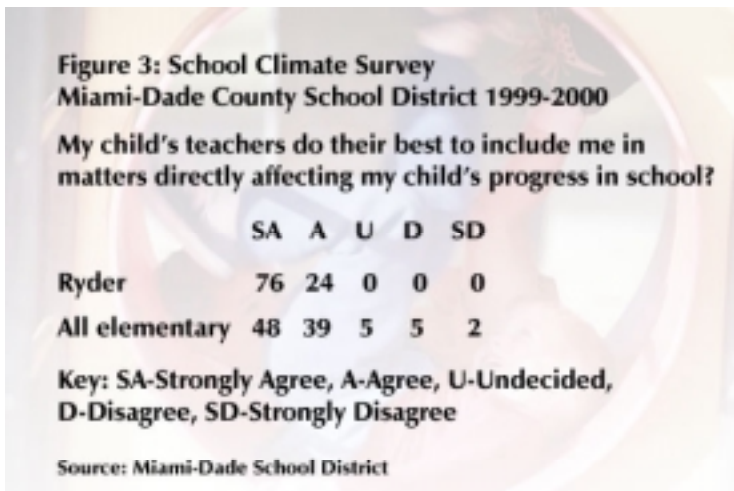
In an independent survey of RECS parents conducted by the MDPS district for the 1999–2000 school year, RECS was given a grade of A, compared with an average grade of B given to all other elementary schools in the district.³ Figures 2–6 demonstrate how RECS fared on a few specific questions compared to the average responses of all elementary schools in the district. A Charter Schools USA survey found that 100 percent of the parents reported that their child was happy at RECS, and almost 90 percent have definite plans to re-enroll their children for a second year.⁴



² Ryder Elementary Charter School, *School Improvement Plan for the 2000-2001 School Year*, Executive Summary.

³ Miami-Dade School District, *School Climate Survey*, Report for the 1999-00 Administration, O400 Ryder System Charter School.

⁴ Charter Schools USA, Ryder Elementary Charter School, June 2000 Parent Survey.



Parental involvement is highly valued at RECS; parents must contractually agree to contribute 20 volunteer hours per school year, per child in the school. In the 1999–2000 school year, 100 percent of parents fulfilled the required parent volunteer commitment, resulting in over 25,000 hours of volunteer service to the school.⁵

Sample parent volunteer opportunities included:

- Video school activities and classes;
- Attend PTO meetings;
- Help make the school scrapbook;
- Supervise recess time;
- Assist at drop off time and pick up time (take the students to their classrooms or to their cars);
- Help in the office;
- Help in the study centers;
- Assist with club assemblies;
- Monitor the lunchroom;
- Help with MicroSociety meetings on Wednesdays and Fridays; and
- Help with the school's "Art to Remember" project.

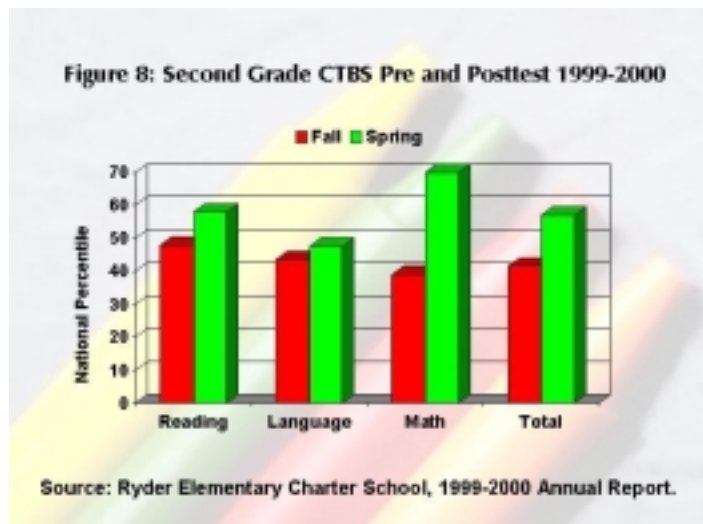
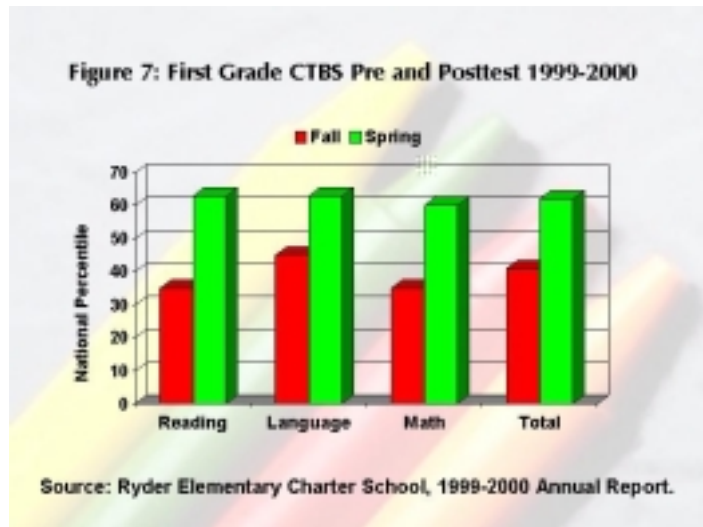
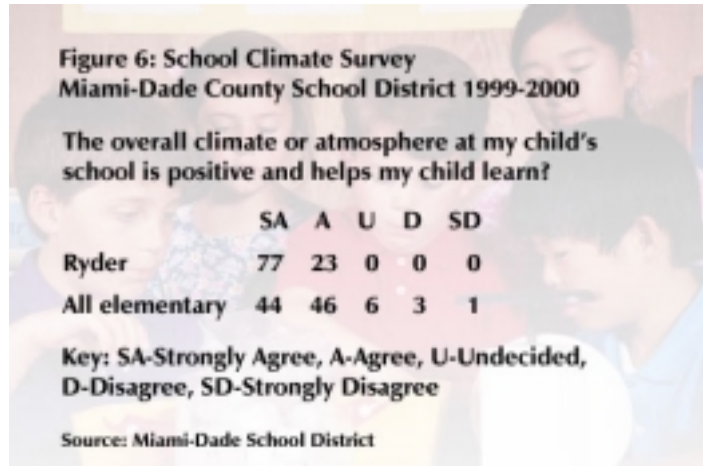
RECS also has a School Advisory Committee comprised of parents and community representatives that serves as a communication link between parents, students, teachers, and administrators. All board meetings and School Advisory Committee meetings are publicly announced and open to all.

⁵ 1999-2000 Annual Report, p. 5.

C. Student Achievement

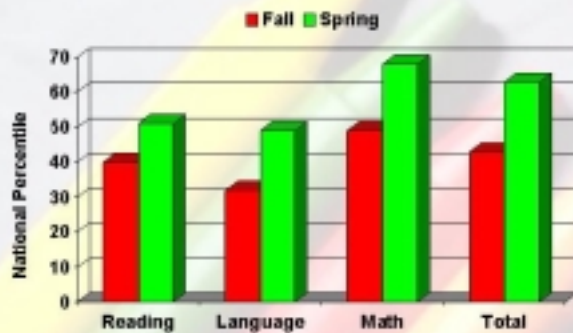
RECS administered McGraw Hill’s Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) as a baseline test in September 1999 to determine entering students’ achievement levels. The test was administered again in May 2000 to measure individual students’ rates of improvement. The total median percentile gain (using national norms) was a 54 percent gain for first grade; a 33 percent gain for second grade; and a 46 percent gain for third grade. Figures 7-9 demonstrate the gains made by Ryder students at each grade level on the CTBS test for the 1999-2000 school year.⁶

In the 2000-2001 school year, RECS’ students participated in the statewide Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT), which tests students against Florida’s standards for reading and math. Third and fourth grade students at RECS participated in the FCAT exam. On the FCAT reading exam, Ryder third graders scored 25 points above the Miami-Dade district average for all elementary schools and 6 points above the average for all elementary schools in the state of Florida. In fourth grade reading, Ryder students scored 16 points above the Miami-Dade district average and 2 points below the statewide average. On the FCAT math exam, Ryder third graders scored 38 points above the Miami-Dade district average for all elementary schools and 22 points above the state of Florida average for all elementary schools. In fourth grade math, Ryder students scored 33 points above the Miami-Dade district average for all elementary schools and 15 points above the state average for all elementary schools (see figure 10).



⁶ Ibid. p. 4.

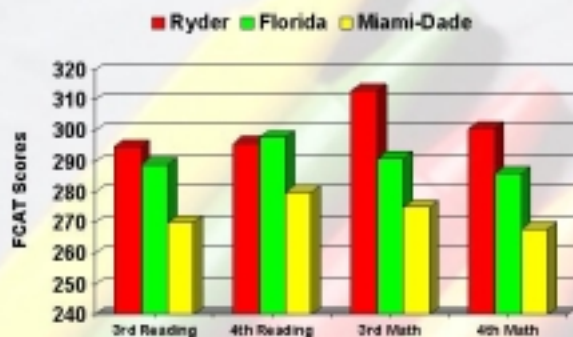
Figure 9: Third Grade CTBS Pre and Posttest 1999-2000



Source: Ryder Elementary Charter School, 1999-2000 Annual Report.

Each RECS student has a Personal Education Plan (PEP) that assesses his or her skill level upon enrolling at RECS and serves as that student’s roadmap to academic progress. Periodic assessment measures the student’s progress. A significant portion of each student’s PEP is a personal portfolio that includes sample student work, test results, and writing samples. The PEPs allow teachers, parents, and students to track individual growth and goal achievement, as well as areas that might need more attention.

**Figure 10: Ryder Elementary Charter School: 2001 FCAT Scores
A Comparison of Ryder, Florida, and Miami-Dade Average Scores**



Source: Florida Department of Education.

In order to help students achieve their goals, RECS uses the innovative “MicroSociety” program. Micro-Society allows children to put school curricula to use in real situations. There is a Market Day each month, when the students can sell products that they have made, or buy school supplies and other items at the Ryder School Store. Students are also able to visit “the Café” for refreshments or go to a play put on by the theater group. They earn “Ryder Bucks” at their “jobs,” have bank accounts, and vote and abide by the laws of the RECS constitution.

MicroSociety student ventures for the 2000-2001 school year include:

- Bank
- Café
- Cookie Factory
- Environmental Museum
- IRS/Government
- KinderMart
- Museum of Science
- Patrol
- Post Office
- Salon
- Theater Group
- Warehouse/School Store Yearbook
- Book Store
- Chocolate Factory
- Dance Group
- Friendship Shop
- Jewelry Shop
- Mediation Center
- Nursery
- Photography
- Radio
- Stationery/Gift Wrap
- TV Broadcasting
- Wellness Center

Other New Florida Charter Schools in the Workplace

The success of the Ryder Elementary Charter School has prompted two other Florida businesses to open workplace charter schools.

A. The Villages Charter Elementary School

The Villages, a sprawling 12,000-acre retirement community that covers three central Florida counties and is the largest employer in Lake County, built the Villages Charter Elementary School (VCES) in 2000.⁷ Why would a retirement community of more than 25,000 residents, most of them 55 or older, want to get into the elementary education business? “To recruit the best possible employees to work here, and to retain our employees who have children in school,” explains Jeff Miller, the VCES’s director of community education. Miller says there has been a noticeably quicker response to job offers and reduced turnover since the school opened.

VCES has 347 students enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grade, plus 40 students enrolled in a one-year pre-kindergarten program. The school’s student population is drawn from Sumter, Lake, and Marion Counties. The Spanish-style school cost \$6.8 million to build, and has a 2000-20001 operating budget of \$1.4 million. The land and building that houses VCES belong to the developer, while the school district funds the operating budget with per-pupil expenditures. The school serves employees of The Villages Retirement Community as well as those who work at the retail shops, restaurants, supermarkets, and other businesses that serve the community’s residents

The Villages Retirement Community is currently negotiating an application for a charter middle school to offer sixth through eighth grade, opening in the fall of 2001. Eventually, the developer has plans to build a high school, which will allow current elementary students to remain in the company school for their entire K–12 academic careers.

B. J.F.K. Medical Charter School

In March 2001, the Palm Beach school district approved a charter school application for operation out of the J.F.K. Medical Center (JFKMC).⁸ The school is scheduled to open in August 2001 with 374 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. In addition to the regular elementary curriculum, the school will also teach children about health care.

Phil Robinson, CEO of JFKMC, told the *Palm Beach Post* that “to recruit and retain good nurses, pharmacists, and radiology techs, you need to be ahead of the curve and make yourself more attractive as an

⁷ Bob Mervine, “It Takes a Village to Build a School,” *Orlando Business Journal*, October 27, 2000.

⁸ “Schools,” *Palm Beach Post*, March 29, 2001, p. 2B.

employer.”⁹ In the midst of a statewide shortage of nurses and technicians, hospital officials have been looking for new ways to attract and keep top-notch employees. It takes JFKMC about 13 weeks to fill vacant positions for nurses and radiology technologists, reports Beth Brill, JFKMC’s vice president for administrative services. The 369-bed hospital pays \$1,000 bonuses to employees who refer new hires. JFKMC also pays signing bonuses ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000 to the new hires. In 2000, JFKMC paid out more than \$127,000 in bonuses. The hospital also has raised the salaries of radiology technologists and pharmacists by about 20 percent, but is still relying on health-care staffing companies to fill many positions, Brill said. Clearly, JFKMC is hoping that the new school will not only help attract and retain good employees, but also interest upcoming generations in health-care careers.

C. Florida’s Legislation Will Increase Charter Schools in the Workplace

Existing charter laws in other states do not allow charter schools to limit their enrollment to the employees of a particular workplace. Charter schools are allowed to specify in their charter the academic program that they intend to offer (e.g., programs for at-risk or special-education students), but are not allowed to discriminate based on race, sex, national origin, residential, or geographic location. Florida is the first state that designed legislation to allow businesses to open charter schools that target employee’s children.

As part of the Florida SB 1996 bill, taken up in spring 1998, provisions were passed that allow the creation of charter schools in the workplace. The intent of the legislation was to increase business partnerships in education, reduce school and classroom overcrowding, and help offset the high cost for educational facility construction. The legislature encourages the formation of business-partnership schools through charter school status. Section 22 (b) of the bill states:

A charter school in the workplace may be established when a business partner provides the school facility to be used; enrolls students based upon a random lottery which involves all of the children of employees of that business or corporation who are seeking enrollment as provided for in subsection (6)); and enrolls students according to the racial/ethnic balance provisions described in subparagraph (9) (a) 8. Any portion of a facility used for a public charter school shall be exempt from ad valorem taxes, as provided for in s. 235.198 for the duration of its use as a public school.

The second part of this section puts forth incentives for businesses to participate in this program. Businesses are exempted from property taxes (for the portion of the property that is used by the school) for the formation of work-site school partnerships with regular public schools; they can enjoy this exemption as well through partnerships with charter schools. Business-charter school partnerships would also probably qualify for Florida’s new capital outlay program for charter schools, wherein charter schools can receive \$387 to \$587 in capital outlay revenue per student. (Equipment and property procured with these funds revert back to the school district if the charter closes.)

⁹ John Murawski, “JFK Hopes to Lure More Nurses with Charter School,” *Palm Beach Post*, August 11, 2000, p. 1A.

Florida, first the pioneer in satellite schools in the workplace, and now the pioneer in charter schools in the workplace, sets an example for other states to follow. Florida's workplace charter schools have not only served families well by increasing parental participation and satisfaction, and leading to high student achievement—but have also well served the companies that host the schools by enabling them to offer a unique benefit that increases employee satisfaction and decreases turnover. Providing businesses with incentives through tax exemptions and allowing them to target enrollments helps enable the concept of the workplace charter school to move forward. Given the success of Ryder Elementary Charter School and the establishment of two new Florida workplace charter schools, other states should consider following Florida's lead by developing similar legislation.

About the Author



Lisa Snell is director of the Education and Child Welfare Program at Reason Public Policy Institute, where she oversees RPPI's research on social services and education issues. Her most recent RPPI policy studies include *Remedial Education Reform: Private Alternatives to Traditional Title I*; *Child Welfare Reform and the Role of Privatization*; *Private Options to Help Students Read*; and *Innovative School Facility Partnerships: Downtown, Airport, and Retail Space*.

Other Related RPPI Studies

Innovative School Facility Partnerships: Downtown, Airport, and Retail Space, By Mathew Taylor and Lisa Snell, Policy Study No.276, December 2000.

Satellite Charter Schools: Addressing the School-Facilities Crunch through Public-Private Partnerships, by Richard C. Seder, Policy Study No. 256, April 1999.

Satellite Schools: The Private Provision of School Infrastructure, by Janet R. Beales, Policy Study No. 153, January 1993.