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Pamela M. Brown

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# Municipally Operated Charter Schools

## A New Trend in Community Services

Pamela M. Brown

*Florida Atlantic University*

Many cities throughout the United States are experiencing rapid population growth and an increased demand for public services delivered in safe, livable neighborhoods. Some of those cities have recognized the need to offer an improved urban school system for their residents and have begun to embrace the charter school movement through the use of innovative local partnerships. There is a nexus between these educational strategies and the principles of community education. Advocates of community education emphasize the importance of community agencies and local residents becoming active partners in community concerns, including the school system. Schools are viewed as localized and community based. This study was undertaken in an attempt to identify the number and location of municipally operated charter schools in the United States, examine the potential nexus with municipal economic development strategies, and measure the schools against community education principles.

**Keywords:** *municipal; charter schools*

Many cities throughout the United States are experiencing rapid population growth and an increased demand for public services delivered in safe, livable neighborhoods. City policy makers are focusing on economic development to help sustain growth and revitalize the urban core. In some states, population increases are outstripping the availability of basic services, including education delivered in public school buildings, yet the quantity and quality of local schools are part of the potential health and prosperity of cities (Weiss, 2004). Middle-income parents are less likely to flee the city if quality education is available in neighborhood schools (Halsband, 2003). According to a survey by the National Association of Realtors in 2002, the quality of public schools was rated as one of the two most important factors when people choose where to live. Even in cities without any formal responsibility for public schools, municipal leaders are

paying attention to the importance of a functioning public education system to attract and retain families inside the city limits.

A growing number of cities are embracing the charter school movement as a means to create locally controlled schools. As early as 1992, it seemed likely that urban areas were fertile grounds for the charter movement because of the growing dissatisfaction with the public school system (Weil, 2000). Charter schools are attractive to municipal government because they can be built more quickly and allow some local control over the services offered (*Cape Coral Charter School System*, 2005). They are also proving to be a tool for economic development (Halsband, 2003). Charter school operators are purchasing or leasing old buildings and vacant properties and renovating them. Schools are often built on vacant land in the urban core thereby helping to improve the communities in which they operate. As local communities improve, it is more likely that stable, middle-income families will remain in the neighborhood (Weiss, 2004). Municipal leaders have come to believe that the performance of schools and the economic vitality of the city are closely linked. Schools educate the local workforce and provide jobs for the surrounding community (Weiss, 2004). A study by the University of Cincinnati Economic Center for Education and Research in 2003 estimated that school construction programs affect the community in three ways: the purchase of materials from local businesses, these suppliers' purchases of other goods, and the spending of incomes earned by employees.

There is a nexus between the educational strategies of municipal government and the principles of community education. Cities have traditionally relied on partnerships with neighborhood and community groups to ensure the support of residents and the best use of scant resources. Advocates of community education emphasize the importance of community agencies and local residents becoming active partners in community concerns, including the school system. Schools are viewed as localized and community based (Decker & Boo, 2001) integrating the physical, financial, and human resources of communities in the most efficient way. Community education principles include institutional responsiveness, integrated services, a decentralized administrative structure, self-help, and self-determination (Decker & Boo, 2001). Some of these same principles are to be found at work in the charter school system with its emphasis on small schools, community involvement, and local partnerships.

The current study was undertaken in an attempt to identify the number and location of municipally operated charter schools in the United States, examine the potential nexus with municipal economic development strategies, and measure the schools against community education principles.

## Definitions

Charter schools are public schools operated under a contract called a charter (Weil, 2000). They are authorized by state legislation and receive waivers from state and local regulations so that they can be free to innovate and experiment. Each charter is negotiated and signed between a charter school's founders and supporters and the authorizing body and sets forth detailed expectations for an outcome-based school. There are now more than 3,000 charter schools in existence in 40 states. Legislatively prescribed individuals in each state, collectively known as charter school authorizers, grant and oversee each charter. Some legislation permits only school districts to authorize charters, others permit additional types of charter authorizers (Vergari, 2002). The authorizer's role is to ensure that the school is accountable to the performance measures and standards laid out in the charter or contract. Authorizers' scope and resources vary from state to state.

Charter schools are designed and operated by a variety of governing bodies including educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs, and municipal government. Charter school operators are responsible and accountable for the school's performance. They decide how the work is to be performed, including controlling budgets, hiring teachers, designing curriculum, and adopting schedules and academic calendars. In almost one half of the charter school states, there are no limitations on who can operate a charter school. The other one half of the states require applicants to demonstrate school and community support for the charter school or legislate that certified teachers or administrators are included as applicants. States that allow only conversion schools (originally public schools that have become charter schools) limit the applicant pool to educators within that school (Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2004).

Education management organizations (EMOs) are for-profit companies, hired by the board of directors of the charter school through a contract, to manage a range of operational functions for the school. Some offer a full range of services, such as curriculum development, facility planning, administrative and financial functions, special education, and technological expertise. Others are more restricted in their offerings. EMOs are often compared to the health management organizations (HMOs) that affected the health industry in the 1970s. HMOs revolutionized the health insurance industry by instituting strict utilization review processes to manage patients' care.

Charter school legislation across the states varies significantly. The Center for Education Reform has monitored public charter school laws since 1993,

and has established standards for strong public charter school laws. Strong or permissive charter laws generally promote charter schools by offering the most latitude in the way they are authorized and operated. The majority of charter schools in the United States exist in states with strong charter laws. Strong legislation does not set caps on the number of charter schools allowed in the state and allows for multiple authorizers and operators. Charter legislation characterized as weak does not provide this level of latitude (Hadderman, 1998). In almost one half of the 40 charter school states, there are no limitations on what organizations or individuals can operate a charter school. Only two states, Florida and Texas, specifically mention government entities as potential operators of charter schools although Indiana and Wisconsin have passed legislation that allows cities to be charter school authorizers.

## Data Collection

The researcher theorized that municipally operated charter schools were most likely to be found in states defined as having “strong” charter legislation. Research was performed at the Department of Education Web sites for each of these states, and a search was made in statewide newspapers. This strategy was followed by a series of e-mails to charter organizations in each state and phone calls to potential sources such as the Center for School Reform. The researcher narrowed the search down to two states, Florida and Texas, because they have strong charter legislation that actually mentions government entities as charter school operators, and because at least four municipally operated charter schools were known to exist in Florida. A more detailed search was conducted throughout these two states including a thorough search of city Web sites.

Eight cities in Florida, none of which have formal authority over the public school system, were identified as operating charter schools. They are Aventura, Cape Coral, Coral Springs, Kissimmee, Miami, North Lauderdale, Oakland, and Pembroke Pines. Pembroke Pines has moved toward creating a city-wide system of schools and is currently operating seven charter schools. The City of Cape Coral is emulating Pembroke Pines with a plan for four schools to be built during the next 3 years. Four more Florida cities are either researching their potential or actively beginning the process of developing a charter school system. In Texas, Westlake was the only city identified as operating a charter school. There are no other public schools within its boundaries. To better understand why these cities developed charter schools and whether they operate in line with community education principles, the

**Table 1**  
**Population Growth, Race, and Ethnicity Characteristics**

City	Population,	Population	% Increase	White	Black	Hispanic <sup>a</sup>	Asian
	2000	Growth					
	Census	Estimate					
Aventura, FL	25,657	27,000	+5	93.8	1.7	20.7	1.2
Cape Coral, FL	102,286	137,000	+34	93	2.0	8.3	0.9
Coral Springs, FL	117,549	133,256	+13	95,860	9.2	15.5	3.5
Kissimmee, FL	47,814	48,574	+2	67.2	10.0	41.7	3.4
Miami, FL	362,470	380,540	+5	66.6	22.3	65.8	0.7
North Lauderdale, FL	32,264	40,523	+26	50	35.2	21.1	3.1
Oakland, FL	936	1,641	+75	64.7	31.3	3.5	1.1
Pembroke Pines, FL	137,427	160,484	+17	75.6	13.3	28.2	3.8
Westlake, TX	207	400	+93	95.2	2.4	1.0	0.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

a. Hispanic category (ethnicity) includes Black and White.

researcher conducted telephone interviews with principals at six of the schools.

The nine cities identified are situated in two states that are among the top 10 fastest growing states in the nation: Florida and Texas (Table 1). These cities are experiencing the effects of population and/or economic growth in terms of the increased demand for public services. They range in population from 400 to 380,000. The cities also offer different levels of diversity ranging from the small and almost exclusively White city of Westlake, Texas, to the large and diverse Pembroke Pines in South Florida. The City of Aventura's charter school principal describes her school as a "mini United Nations" where 33 different languages are spoken. Median income for families in each of the cities ranges from a high of US\$65,000 (above the national average of \$50,046) to a low of \$27,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Eight of the nine cities either give preference to, or restrict entrance to the school, to city residents.

## Links to Economic Development

There is some anecdotal evidence; however, little hard data exists on the relationship between public schools and the economic development and

health of cities (Weiss, 2004). The city administrators in the nine cities studied saw an unmet need in the local community and found a solution. Reasons given by the principals interviewed as to why the city chose to operate a charter school included: school overcrowding, rapid growth, and the need for a neighborhood school. The charter schools developed in the nine cities in the current study have added a basic service to the communities in which they operate, and it can be assumed that they are helping to keep families in city neighborhoods (Halsband, 2003), although there is no statistical evidence to make that claim as of yet. However, in the City of Miami, the Downtown Development Authority saw the establishment of a charter school as a way to serve downtown employees, keep them downtown, and attract more residents to the area. At least 65% of the students have a parent that works downtown. The City of Coral Springs built their school on the site of a disused shopping mall, which helped revitalize a decaying area. The Town of Oakland built a brand new facility to act as a focal point for their growing town (*Oakland Avenue Charter School*, 2004). The jobs provided by the construction of the schools can be claimed to be significant for the local economy as well.

## **Financing**

Charter schools in most states do not have access to public capital funding streams that are available to public schools. Consequently charter school operators have to find methods to fund leasing, renovation, or construction of the actual school building (Ascher, Cole, Harris, & Echazareta, 2004). These start-up costs often prohibit potential charter school operators from opening their doors. Municipalities are in a much better position to finance construction or renovation of buildings. They have taxing authority, assets and reserves, own land, and can leverage loans through floating public bonds. In addition, city building departments are responsible for the permitting of all city buildings that can help with speedier and less costly construction. Each of the nine charter school cities in the current study financed the actual building and capital costs related to the creation of the charter school. The land was either already city owned or purchased through a bond or loan. In Cape Coral, where four charter schools are planned, the buildings will be turnkey facilities, paid for by the city and leased back to the EMO, the entity that will pay the debt service for the construction. The City of Miami entered into a land swap with a developer, and the City of Westlake went into partnership with the developers of a shopping mall. In 2002, the Texas attorney general issued

an opinion prohibiting the use of city dollars for charter school funding. However, in 2003, a new attorney general and a sponsored piece of legislation cleared the way for the municipality to use bond money for charter school construction. The principal reported that the town passed a \$17.9 million bond at a time when the population was just more than 200. The school will also receive some revenue from sales tax and economic development funds. Several of the cities in the current study took advantage of their tax-exempt status to finance construction of the school and lease their buildings back to the private sector. The public-private partnership in Pembroke Pines resulted in a cost of \$8,600 per “student station,” compared with the Florida state experience of between \$11,000 and \$13,000 for public elementary schools—a savings of between 22% and 34% (Douglas & Munro, 1999).

## **Governance**

All nine cities have a city manager form of government (although the nomenclature in Westlake, Texas, refers to a town manager and elected aldermen, rather than city commissioners). In this form of government, the manager is in charge of all operational aspects of the city and reports to a board of elected officials who set policy and control budget. In seven of the nine cities, the elected body acts as the board of directors for the charter school, and the city manager takes on the role of superintendent. In Miami, the Downtown Development Authority, a not-for-profit arm of city government, acts as the board of directors, although one of the city commissioners holds a seat on the board. The City of Cape Coral still has a close relationship with the Lee County School Board, and they have created a seven-member independent board appointed by the city commission. This board also includes the city manager and one commissioner.

## **Administrative Structure**

Some of the cities have chosen to work with an EMO, although after the academy at North Lauderdale received an “F” in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the city commission ended their relationship with the EMO and took over the administration and operation of the school. Interviews with principals at six of the schools revealed further differences in the administrative structure. At Cape Coral, the principal and the staff are employed by the EMO; however, the city administers the school budget,

salaries, and invoicing. At Coral Springs, Charter Schools USA, the management company, oversees the budget, data collection, marketing, and staff development. The City of Aventura also contracts with Charter Schools USA; however, the principal of the school is hired directly by the city manager and acts like any other city department head. The school staff is still hired by the management company. In the schools where city personnel and financing departments are used, it is unclear if these administrative functions are charged back to the charter school budget or assumed by the general fund. In Coral Springs, Charter Schools USA provides professional management for all aspects of the school operation. In the City of Pembroke Pines, the city contracted with Haskell Educational, a for-profit EMO, for the design and building of its schools. Haskell also helped with the charter school proposal and curriculum. The school principals and staff report to the city manager, although for curriculum-related issues the principals rely on peer supervision. The City of Kissimmee used the Haskell Company to build the school and now uses Chancellor Academies, another EMO, to help with educational services.

## **Community Involvement Prior to School Opening**

The six principals interviewed for the current study confirmed that the local community was involved in the planning and development of the school through neighborhood and community meetings. Citizens also attended and gave input at the formal public hearings to discuss the school site, curriculum, and operations. In the cities where a bond was passed, public support among voters was high. In Coral Springs, parent support groups were formed and made recommendations to the city commission regarding the set-up and curriculum of the school. In Westlake, Texas, the charter school process was described as a “community effort” (Dennis, 2002). The project included the building of a town hall and school on the same site. The site also includes a library, ball fields, a public recreation center, and a public gymnasium. Prior to the building of the charter school, residents of the town sent their children to schools in three other counties.

## **Ongoing Community Support and/or Partnerships**

City government is the major partner for all nine of the schools in the current study. The schools can take advantage of each city’s administrative

structure, recreational facilities, and public information departments. At Westlake, the school shares the services of the new city public information officer for outreach and public relations. The principals interviewed confirmed that a very close relationship exists between the cities and their schools. School personnel and students get involved in city-sponsored events, and there are many examples of shared facilities and services. In North Lauderdale, the school auditorium is shared with the local community and is used for city-sponsored community events. In Cape Coral, the city is currently preparing some redevelopment for downtown improvement that will include an auditorium and fine arts wing for the school. In Pembroke Pines, the 10,000 weekly school meals are prepared in the kitchens of the city's senior center, and school employees are involved in city events such as toy drives and other community-driven efforts. As one principal pointed out, the partnership with the city helps the school "stay in touch" with the local community.

The schools offer a variety of learning activities and events to involve the local community during and after school hours. Community programs include literacy, computer skills for senior citizens, Spanish, and good nutrition programs. At Coral Springs, extensive continuing education courses are offered to the community by Barry University and Broward Community College. In North Lauderdale, the city and school work together to organize community activities, and school buses are used for community events. At Westlake, the school's music academy is open to the community in the evenings. All of the schools have advisory boards made up of parents, community members, and in at least two instances, students. At only two of the schools, principals reported that the focus on community involvement had lessened as the pressure to perform well on state tests increased.

All six principals emphasized the importance of partnerships with local businesses. In addition, Web sites and press releases from three other schools gave clear indication of local business support. In Cape Coral, the local Chamber of Commerce is providing mentors to the school. The principal is also planning an adopt-a-classroom/adopt-a-pupil approach. In the City of Aventura, many of the student clubs are underwritten by local businesses. At Coral Springs, the students are offered executive internships with local businesses through the Capstone program. Through partnerships with local universities, the City of Pembroke Pines has built and leases the facilities of an 80-acre Academic Village campus that contains their charter high school. The campus includes a regional library, community college, a 4-year university, a full service performing arts center, and a sports facility (Rhodes, 2003). Cape Coral is emulating this model, and groundbreaking will begin on their

Academic Village later this year. Pembroke Pines has also partnered with Florida State University to create a charter elementary professional development school to promote learning, research, and collaboration.

The principals were in agreement that parental involvement is very important to the success of the school. Partnerships with parents are made easier because eight of the nine cities have a requirement that parents volunteer their time. The hours range from 20 to 40 hrs per year, and in some schools those hours increase depending on the number of children in one family attending the school. Only one principal reported problems with parents actually performing the required volunteer hours. At Westlake, there is no mandatory requirement to volunteer; however, the principal reported tremendous parental involvement in the school. Parents volunteer in the classroom, dining area, and office. Parent volunteers also staff the school reception desk 5 days a week.

## Academic Information

Of the nine cities and 12 schools studied, only North Lauderdale and Pembroke Pines have more than 3 years of testing data available. In Florida, the FCAT is the standard barometer of school performance. There is a wide divergence in testing results with Pembroke Pines schools getting very high grades and North Lauderdale now having two consecutive F's. In Texas, each school is rated on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Campus Accountability Rating (CAR), with *Exemplary* being the high score and *Unacceptable* the low score. Westlake Academy (2004) was given an Exemplary rating in its first year of operation. The principal at Westlake was adamant in her comment that the school does not "teach to the test." She credits the International Baccalaureate curriculum for the excellent results (Table 2).

## Conclusion

Although the current study is limited to nine cities, it is clear that the municipal desire to operate a charter school is tied to an unmet need for public services, coupled with the belief that schools are an active part of the economic development and health of cities. In seven of the nine cities, the school district could not build schools quickly enough to support the population growth. In Westlake, the town was not big enough to qualify for a public school of its own. Town officials wishing to attract residents and

**Table 2**  
**Charter School Academic Grades, 2000–2004**

City/Grades	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Aventura, FL	NA	NA	NA	NA	B
Cape Coral, FL	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Coral Springs, FL	NA	NA	A	B	A
Kissimmee, FL	NA	NA	C	B	A
Miami, FL	NA	NA	NA	NA	F
North Lauderdale, FL	D	D	D	F	F
Oakland, FL	NA	NA	NA	NA	C
Pembroke Pines Elementary, FL	C	A	A	A	A
Pembroke Pines Middle, FL	NA	A	A	A	A
Pembroke Pines High, FL	NA	NA	B	B	B
Westlake, TX	NA	NA	NA	NA	Exemplary

businesses saw the selling power of an excellent city school as opposed to the disadvantages of sending the town's children to schools in three different school districts. At least two of the cities, Pembroke Pines and Coral Springs, are considered to be "boomburbs," satellite cities with more than 100,000 residents that have maintained double digit rates of growth (Lang & Simmons, 2001). The public school systems in both areas were completely overwhelmed. North Lauderdale and Miami wanted small neighborhood schools to attract workers and residents to the urban core. Although growth may have been the motivating force in most cases, municipally operated charter schools potentially offer many other benefits including the rehabilitation of old buildings, the use of vacant land, and the possible attraction of residents back to cities.

The municipalities in the current study have used the flexibility of charter school legislation to create small and local schools where family and community play an integral role. Each school principal expressed a sense of belonging to the community heightened by the ability to share facilities, resources, and staff. Parent, community, and business involvement encourage the community education principles of self-help and self-determination within the local community. Municipally operated charter schools offer local residents, agencies, and institutions the opportunity to become active partners in providing educational opportunities and addressing community concerns (Decker & Boo, 2001). This institutional responsiveness to community needs is one of the principles of community education. Each school is collaborating with organizations and agencies in the local community to offer integrated

services that include shared facilities, community programs, and services offered at the school site, and shared administrative services. The schools are local and have decentralized administrative services encouraging the greatest potential for public and parent participation. At each location, the public was involved in determining the need for a school and planning the kinds of services offered. This localized self-help and self-determination builds capacity within the community. In Westlake and North Lauderdale, city officials made the decision to operate a charter school based on the vision of a small neighborhood school integral to the public services offered to the community. All of the schools in the current study are small, and local and each one has a cap on class size that ranges from 15 to 25 pupils.

### **An Emerging Model**

The municipally operated charter school system is less than 5 years old. All nine of the cities in the current study supplied the capital costs for the school buildings and manage the ongoing maintenance. Although there are slight differences in governance, the emerging model appears to be one in which the city establishes a Department of Education in which the department head, in many cases the school principal, reports to the city manager. The administrative services of personnel, finance, and budget are provided to the school by those city departments. An EMO may or may not be involved to offer technical expertise for curriculum and other educational issues. Shared facilities and a close partnership with the city afford a more integrated and less isolated public school system. This is not a privatized model but a localized and more flexible governmental system within a system (Table 3).

The future of municipally operated charter schools is unclear; however, population growth is a given in some areas of the country. It is possible that more and more municipalities will venture into education. However, city government is supported by the taxpayer. To be responsive to the need to keep city taxes low, large and extensive city departments are contracted out to the highest bidder. The contract is monitored by city staff and usually ratified by the elected officials. City education, in this scenario, would become just another municipal service performed by the private sector, such as garbage collection and utilities. To avoid tax increases, cities look for ways to transfer general fund activities that are tax supported to enterprise fund activities that are fee supported (Hoene & Pagano, n.d.). The danger is that having removed the need for district oversight, public education would be reduced to a strictly payment-by-results service. The City of Pembroke

**Table 3**  
**Comparison of Considered Issues, by City**

Area/City	Cape		Coral		Miami		North		Pembroke		Westlake, TX
	Aventura, FL	Coral, FL	Springs, FL	Kissimmee, FL	Miami, FL	Lauderdale, FL	Oakland, FL	Pines, FL			
Economic development											
School overcrowding	X	X	X	X			X	X			
Rapid growth	X	X	X	X			X	X			
Need for a neighborhood school					X	X					X
Revitalization			X	X	X	X					
Attract new development				X	X						X
Financing											
City owned and/or bought land	X	X		X			X	X			X
City purchased building	X	X	X	X	X		X	X			X
Bond								X			X
Land swap					X						
Buildings leased back to private sector		X			X				X		
Sales tax and/or other revenue				X	X						X
Governance											
City commission as governing body	X		X	X			X	X		X	X
City manager as superintendent	X		X	X			X	X		X	X
Not-for-profit board		X			X						
Hybrid board		X			X						
Community advisory board		X	X	X			X	X		X	

(continued)

**Table 3 (continued)**

Area/City	Aventura, FL		Cape Coral, FL		Coral Springs, FL		Kissimmee, FL		Miami, FL		North Lauderdale, FL		Oakland, FL		Pembroke Pines, FL		Westlake, TX	
Administrative structure																		
Education management organizations (EMO)	X		X	X			X							X				
City performs administrative function	X		X	X					X					X				
Principal reports to city	X		X	X			X							X				X
Principal reports to EMO							X							X				X
Community involvement prior																		
Neighborhood meetings			X	X										X				X
Public input at commission	X		X	X			X		X					X				X
Other																		
Partnerships																		
Shared facilities	X		X				X							X				X
School involved in city events	X													X				X
Parent involvement	X		X	X			X		X					X				X
Community learning activities	X		X	X														X
Community activities			X	X			X											X
Business partnerships			X	X			X											X

Pines already offers a glimpse at privatized city government. All of the personnel and services are contracted through a management company, and the city manager acts as the chief executive officer of the City. Whether this privatized model will be the fate of an extended municipal charter school system remains to be seen. Nonetheless, at this early stage it appears that municipally operated charter schools are an excellent example of the economy and collaboration inherent in public-private partnerships.

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**Pamela M. Brown's** professional career in community education, local government, and social services spans 30 years. She is currently the Ernest Melby Fellow and research assistant at Florida Atlantic University. She is in the process of writing her PhD dissertation on the relationship between neighborhood organizations and public schools in the community. She is coauthor of a forthcoming textbook for school leaders examining educational partnerships in a multicultural society.