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Charter schools bring benefits to other public schools

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As a longtime charter school advocate, I try to maintain some familiarity with what's happening in Florida. I've heard recently from friends in Sarasota of the efforts to open a Project Child charter school in the Palmer Ranch community in Osprey.

This would be the second Imagine School in Sarasota County. The first is in North Port; both schools would employ a highly innovative curriculum that is used in 50 schools in six states. Project Child schools are enthusiastically endorsed by the parents of enrolled students and many authorities in education.

The Sarasota County School Board was hesitant about approving the new school, as it was with the earlier one. In a sense, that's understandable, given the budgetary problems many Florida school districts are facing.

A recent article in the Herald-Tribune left the impression that the new Imagine Charter School in North Port may be part of the School Board's problem.

What the article did not mention are the benefits that charter schools typically bring to the other public schools. In many districts, charter schools provide high-quality education at about 75 percent of the cost of the district's noncharter schools.

Since 1996, when the movement began with Florida's first charter school legislation, public charter schools have helped to improve the state's public schools. With the support of parents seeking alternatives to traditional public education and educators seeking greater flexibility and creativity, charter schools offer unique and innovative educational options that are otherwise unavailable. And the number of charter schools continues to expand at an impressive rate. In less than 12 years, Florida's charter school community has burgeoned from just five schools to over 350 schools that serve more than 100,000 students.

As a career Florida educator and a pioneer in the charter school movement, I continue to believe that charter schools are critical to the success of public education throughout the country. Charter schools offer a tuition-free alternative for parents; they encourage classroom innovation and continue to demonstrate cost-effective operations. As intended, the original legislation encourages traditional public schools and charter

schools to refine their best practices in order to compete in an open market of school choice.

Some Florida school boards are wary of what they view as competition for limited resources, and that is understandable. But on closer examination, school boards usually find charter schools to be cost-effective as they look for ways to enrich educational opportunities in their communities.

The Sarasota County School Board is to be commended for its progressive approach to charter schools. The school district is one of only a few statewide to receive exclusive chartering authority from the Florida Department of Education both last year and this, based upon its supportive policies toward charter schools.

We have seen strong parental response to the new Imagine School at North Port, which opened last month. But only about 7 percent of Sarasota County students attend charter schools and, in a progressive district, that's too few.

Charter schools are succeeding because parents want to make choices about their children's education. With charter schools, parents get to vote with their feet. This creates a healthy competition between the school district's regular schools and charter and private schools; it promotes the innovation and creativity that lead to better choices for parents and better education for our children.

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