



Florida Charter
Institute

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FACILITIES SHARING BEST PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

For nearly three decades, charter schools have been a successful and vibrant part of Florida’s education landscape, now making up 14% of all public school enrollment in the state. Yet a pernicious obstacle stands in their way—access to adequate facilities. New charter schools in the state spend up to a quarter of their budget on facilities, public dollars that could be spent directly on student instruction. In fact, facilities debt service is a significant and often overlooked factor in the funding disparities that exist between charter schools and traditional district schools. And while enrollment in district schools continues to decline, only 4% of charter schools share district facilities in Florida, compared to 18% nationally. Lessons from across the country suggest there is a better way. In this policy brief, we highlight ways that varying levels of leadership—from the state to school districts themselves—can incentivize and benefit from facilities-sharing arrangements in Florida. For a more in-depth analysis on enrollment trends and space availability in Florida’s district schools, see our white paper [*Space to Succeed: Possibilities & Potential for Florida’s Underutilized School Buildings*](#).

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Long-lasting facilities arrangements between school districts and charter schools depend on the right incentives and collaborative frameworks, balanced with effective enforcement mechanisms. Florida’s charter school statute, however, leaves many questions unanswered. It stipulates that district facilities that are “surplus, marked for disposal, or otherwise unused” be “provided for a charter school’s use on the same basis as it is made available to other public schools in the district.” Without a clear definition of what buildings can be considered “surplus” or a uniform process for how districts consider charters in their facilities planning process, districts have broad discretion to interpret this measure. Importantly, Florida’s charter statute offers no clear procedure for how charter schools can request space from school districts or how districts should respond. Florida’s charter authorization framework, meanwhile, provides model applications, defined timelines, and structured opportunities for appeal—state statute should provide similarly explicit guidance on the facilities request process.

Part of the roadblocks to charters accessing district space is the lack of incentives for districts. Colorado law, for example, stipulates that charter schools in district facilities still receive half of state funding normally allocated to charter schools for facilities. In Denver, school districts have charged charter schools fees for use of district facilities equivalent to the additional state funding those charters receive. In Florida, however, charter schools residing in their sponsor’s facilities are not eligible for capital outlay funding. Given the cost-effectiveness of sharing underused district facilities with charter schools, similar collaborative approaches could yield significant benefits for both districts and charter operators.

Furthermore, charter schools are only eligible for capital outlay funding—money specifically designated for facilities—if they have been in operation for at least two years. Even for eligible charters, capital outlay funds cover, on average, less than half of the total per-pupil cost charter schools pay toward their buildings.

Data collection and availability present another obstacle for charter schools. Florida law requires the Florida Department of Education to publish a list of all “underused, vacant, or surplus facilities owned or operated by each school district” every year. However, the resulting reports, known as 5 Year Educational Work Plans, are not presented in a user-friendly format and lack detail, leaving new charter operators or those seeking to open a charter school in the dark about the availability of district space in their local areas or the practical usability of these spaces. This provision should be strengthened to make public facilities data more functional for charter operators.

FOR MUNICIPALITIES

Florida’s system of county-wide school districts complicates local leaders’ ability to spur comprehensive educational reform, particularly in urban areas. However, local leadership, including mayors, can act as mediators between county-wide school districts and charter operators to facilitate students’ access to public school facilities. Cities and counties can identify non-district public buildings—such as libraries, community centers, or municipal properties—that could be rented or made available to charter schools. Other innovative approaches could include establishing third-party brokers or trusts to manage education facilities at the city or county level.

FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Despite a rising school-age population, enrollment in Florida’s school districts declined by nearly 63,000 students between 2018 and 2024. The number of district buildings across the state, however, increased during that time. In adapting to a new fiscal reality, districts should move away from this unsustainable model and seek innovative arrangements with charter schools to make better use of public space. It starts with shifting the culture within the schooling ecosystem from competition to collaboration. During long-term facilities planning, districts should consider the following:

POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

The provision in Florida’s charter school statute requiring “underused, vacant, or surplus facilities” be made available to charter schools is a variant of “right of first refusal,” the most common mandate in states’ charter school laws regarding facilities access. These direct districts to make surplus facilities available to charter schools before selling or leasing them to third parties. Like in Florida, however, they are generally ineffective without the right enforcement or incentive mechanisms—with some notable exceptions.

California Education Code requires school districts to make available to charter schools facilities “in conditions reasonably equivalent to those in which the students would be accommodated if they were attending other public schools of the district.” Most importantly, the clause does not stipulate that only “unused” or “surplus” facilities be provided to charters. In Colorado, charters operating in district facilities still receive part of the state’s facilities funding, which enables districts to charge charter schools for use of their space. In this way, state law provides districts a clear financial incentive to make space available to charters.

- How can innovative or high-performing charter schools add to education options in our communities?
- Which underused facilities have space to accommodate or incubate small, startup charter schools?
- Which vacant or unused facilities are suitable for purchase or lease to charter schools?
- Which underused facilities can accommodate colocation arrangements with established charter schools?
- What available land is usable for arrangements such as ground leases with charter schools?

Districts can develop model documents to support these efforts, including:

- Model lease agreements or standard leases with charter operators.
- Model compacts with charter operators outlining high-level responsibilities involving facilities sharing, including a dispute resolution process.
- Colocation handbooks outlining detailed arrangements with charter schools, including the use of common spaces and the management of day-to-day logistics.

As part of these arrangements, consider how both educational and operational services can be extended to charter schools. Along with facilities, transportation remains a particular challenge for charter operators and a major obstacle to families when selecting education options. Smaller and more independent charter schools also struggle to provide the full range of services for Exceptional Students and English Language Learners due to budgetary constraints. Finally, charters could greatly benefit from sharing district operational staff, including safety and security, nursing, custodial, maintenance, and food service.

Finally, districts can spur more productive conversations about facilities use by providing accessible and practical information about the state of district-owned facilities. Beyond broad usage rates provided in 5 Year Educational Workplans, districts should make available more detailed information about specific facilities and their usability.

COLOCATION IN NEW YORK CITY

Colocation, when charter schools share a single facility or campus with district schools, presents specific challenges for both districts and charters. However, experiences from across the country show it is an effective and viable model to better utilize school facilities. The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), for example, provides a detailed [Colocation Handbook](#) that addresses day-to-day concerns and highlights areas for collaboration, such as student and parent events, day-to-day logistics, and school security and emergency planning. As part of their facilities management processes, NYCDOE creates Building Utilizations Plans, or BUPs, which outline how space will be used in colocated schools. Colocated schools are required to create Building Councils, which include leaders from all schools sharing a facility and which manage shared processes and concerns. Building Councils also manage the review and implementation of their facility's BUP. In New York, where around half of charter schools are colocated in district buildings, district processes support effective communication and collaboration between district and charter schools and allow school leaders to address issues internally.



ABOUT FCI

The Florida Charter Institute was established in 2022 to further the remarkable success of charter schools and assist families in seeking quality education choices. FCI works closely with the Florida Department of Education and state and national charter and authorizing organizations to implement best practices in educational standards and offer vital resources to charter schools, and authorizers. FCI serves as Florida's premier hub for charter innovation, with a team of experts committed to elevating student success by advancing academic and operational excellence at Florida's charter schools. To learn more, visit flcharterinstitute.org.