



Florida Judge Orders Equal Funding for Charter Schools

A Florida judge ruled a group of charter schools must receive the same percentage of funding from property taxes as traditional public schools.

Michael McGrady

July 28, 2017

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately run schools that comply with stricter accountability rules in exchange for freedom from some government restrictions. Indian River County voters approved a special property tax in 2010 to fund public schools' operational costs, including teachers' salaries and books. At the time, a group of five charter schools in Indian River County received 5 percent of the funding, because they enrolled 5 percent of the county's students.

By 2012, the charter schools were enrolling about 13 percent of the county's students but were still receiving 5 percent of the funding generated by the voter-approved property taxes. Between 2015 and 2016, the state Department of Education and Department of Administrative Hearings failed to reconcile the funding dispute.

In June 2017, Circuit Judge Paul Kanarek sided with the charter schools, ruling they are entitled to the percentage of the property tax levy that corresponds to their enrollment. At press time, the School District of Indian River County was considering whether to appeal the judge's ruling.

Broadening the Market

Corey DeAngelis, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and a distinguished doctoral fellow at the University of Arkansas, says the judge made the right call.

"Children ought to have access to all of their public educational funding, no matter which public school works best for them," DeAngelis said. "The low funding amount also disincentives high-quality, innovative public charter schools from opening at all. If charters provide more services that cost the same amount as a neighboring traditional public school, they will not even be able to exist with the current funding structure. In fact, it would be economically irrational to try to provide educational services above the state funding level.

"In addition, from an economic standpoint, improving charter funding equity would entice new high-quality charter schools to enter the market for education, providing children in need with even more opportunities for lifelong success," DeAngelis said.

‘Another Positive Step’

William Mattox, director of the J. Stanley Marshall Center for Educational Options at the James Madison Institute in Florida, says equitable funding puts students first.

“The court decision is yet again another positive step in the direction of recognizing that education is first and foremost about students and not about schools,” Mattox said. “What the court said is we believe that the funding ought to follow the student to the school or educational program that his or her parents choose. If that happens to be a district school, fine, funding will then go to the district school. If that happens to be a charter school, fine, funding will go there.

“Our hope, of course, is that in time that principle will be extended to all students making a wide array of choices, whether that choice is to go to a district school, a charter school, a private school, parochial school, home school, whatever it might be,” Mattox said.