



Improving student success through Voluntary Public School Choice Polk County

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Polk County has been very busy over the last several months working with nine coalition districts through the Voluntary Public School Choice grant. Polk, Hillsborough, Osceola, Lake, Indian River, Manatee, Sumter, Pasco, and Orange counties have collaborated to complete the objectives and goals of the Polk VPSC grant.

As part of the VPSC grant project for Polk County, training was offered to the nine coalition districts in February 2009 on charter school accountability by the CREDO Group and Stanford University in collaboration with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) and the Florida Association of Charter School Authorizers (FACSA). Yolanda Miranda-Hill, VPSC Grant Coordinator in the Florida Department of Education, also attended the Performance Management Institute (PMI) training. Attendees learned the importance of managing charter school “performance by maintaining focus and accountability on the underlying indicators that could impact student, employee and school performance.” The Building Charter School Quality (BCSQ) Initiative was discussed, and district charter authorizers worked together in groups to develop sample accountability indicators, measures, metrics, and targets in the areas of student achievement level, student achievement growth, post-secondary readiness, student engagement, finance and operations, and governance. Working with charter schools to develop challenging yet attainable and measurable goals and indicators in these key areas will directly and positively affect the educational achievement of the students who attend the charter school. This PMI training is the first training in a 3-part series to develop a model Renewal Document for charter authorizers to use with their charter schools statewide and also serve as a national model.

In April 2009, Polk County offered VPSC Training through three distinct strands; Model Renewal for Charter Schools, District Choice Administrators, and Pre-International Baccalaureate Model. The second part of the charter authorizer Model Renewal Document training as provided by Stanford University’s CREDO Group, who provided a basic overview of the previous February PMI training as well as built on what district authorizers have already learned about charter school accountability. NACSA worked with attendees on the development of a model renewal and accountability document that ensures the success of high performing charter schools who serve all students, including those coming from low performing schools. The Colorado League of Charter Schools provided a demonstration on growth modeling and shared their program for disaggregating student success from the district level to the school level to the teacher level to the student level. NACSA completed the training by working with district authorizers from the nine coalition districts as well as the FACSA to pinpoint key monitoring events and rank their importance in the renewal process.

The District Choice Administrators training worked with district choice contacts to address magnet and choice issues in light of budget constraints, marketing strategies, and strategies for school choice programs that serve students coming from low performing schools to high

performing programs. Discussions were focused on specific and strategic marketing, expanding offerings with resources at hand and exploring partnerships and grant funding opportunities. Prior to the VPSC Training, the coalition districts were involved in a needs assessment process with regards to choice programs. A formal evaluation of the issues surrounding choices was undertaken during the choice strand of the April 2009 training. District choice representatives used a collaborative approach in defining choice. Each district defined choice using different terms or programs specific to their districts. However, through consensus and best practice it was determined that students were exercising choice if they were not attending a zoned school or regular program in which they were zoned. Furthermore, three primary challenges to choice were identified: 1) transportation, 2) information and marketing and 3) implementation and expansion. Through each challenge, there were five primary areas of impact: 1) family, 2) community, 3) business, 4) school and 5) district.

The final strand focused on the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (MYP) which is being piloted in Polk County at Lawton Chiles Middle Academy Magnet (LCMA) and will be used as a model for other districts participating in the Coalition. The training began by bringing in consultants from a successful MYP school in Cocoa Beach. Three teachers and their director joined teachers and administrators from LCMA for two days bringing with them student samples, lesson plan ideas, rubrics and much more. They met with LCMA teachers in pairs and small groups and shared advice on many different topics: how to begin, what challenges to expect, how to infuse the MYP elements, and how the MYP curriculum and classroom look different. With their assistance, LCMA teachers gained a much clearer idea of what they needed to do to prepare for next fall.

Attendees also spent a great deal of time planning for implementation in August 2009. Teacher planning time within the school day is at a minimum, and time for planning with teachers from other subject areas is almost impossible. Through this workshop, attendees were able to do both! They began by filling poster-sized monthly calendars with the major units that each teacher covered throughout the year. Then teachers circulated the room and looked for connections between other subject area units and their own. Soon teachers were engaged in animated discussions with teachers they'd never planned with before! After the discussion of the big units each subject area addressed, attendees narrowed their focus and began planning actual units to be used next year. Each teacher created unit plans and a handout that addressed the major ways their MYP classes would be different along with the resources and materials associated with making these changes.

Teachers left this workshop feeling much more comfortable about implementing the IB Middle Years Program. On their evaluations, they all commented on the value of meeting with the experienced MYP teachers from Cocoa Beach – to quote the MasterCard commercial, learning from these experts “was priceless”. Parents and students in the community served by LCMA are very excited about this brand new educational opportunity Polk County is going to be offering them – the first of its kind in this district.

Polk County will also be hosting its Summer Summit for VPSC in June 2009, offering three strands in the areas of Charter Renewal, Magnet/Choice Principals and Career Academies. The final charter authorizer training will place district authorizers from the nine coalition districts with NACSA, FACSAs and the Department of Education together as they collaboratively complete

the three phase process for developing a model renewal and accountability document for authorizers statewide to use with charter schools as previously described.

The Magnet/Choice Principals' strand focuses on choice school issues and will include sessions featuring best practices along with planning and problem-solving sessions to strengthen choice programs now in place. Each of the nine coalition districts will participate by sending one elementary and one secondary magnet or choice school principal.

The Career Academy strand will focus on career academies and will include sessions on work-based learning, national standards of practice, business partnerships and career academy best practices. The coalition districts will send district administrators, school administrators and teachers.