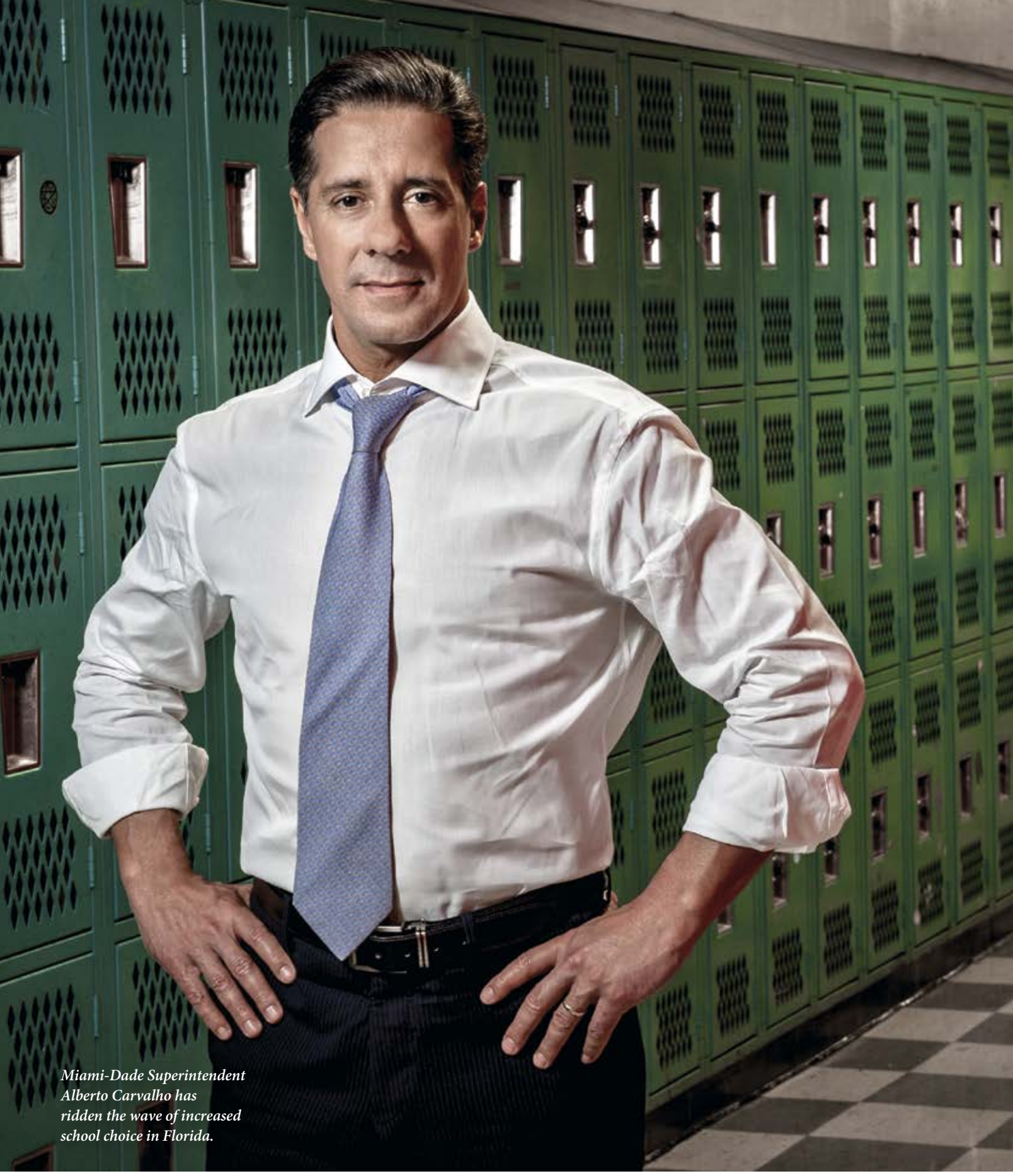


Miami-Dade Superintendent Alberto Carvalho has ridden the wave of increased school choice in Florida.

DONNA VICTOR

MIAMI'S CHOICE TSUNAMI

CARVALHO, COMPETITION, AND TRANSFORMATION IN MIAMI-DADE

ONE OF THE BEST EDUCATION STORIES in years played out on live TV. As cameras rolled, Miami-Dade Superintendent Alberto Carvalho weighed, in public, whether to leave his 10-year, district-transforming job in Miami to become the chancellor in New York City. The drama that ensued captivated Miami.

Kids cried. Parents gasped. The school board called an emergency meeting. When Carvalho arrived, as always in the crispest of dark suits, a packed chamber gave him a standing ovation. Over the course of four hours, the crowd begged and begged and begged some more. A student asked for a hug. Business leaders said please don't go. Some sang, "Please Don't Go," by Miami disco kings KC & The Sunshine Band. One school board member said she hoped the superintendent "will continue to love us enough to stay with us." Another said bus drivers, custodians and cafeteria workers all "told me to tell you to stay."

Even Luther Campbell, aka Uncle Luke of local rap legends 2 Live Crew, made a stirring pitch: "This man

by RON MATUS

here brought dignity back to that seat. So whatever is going on in this system that is pushing this man out, y'all need to straighten it out." For good measure, Campbell channeled the Category 5 hurricane of community pride that Carvalho has unleashed across one of America's most distinctive melting pots: "Mr. Carvalho, if you do decide to leave here, you got all our blessing. But ain't no place like Miami," he said, as Carvalho cracked a smile. "New York ain't got nothin' on us."

In the end, Carvalho said the "emotional tug" was too great. He would stay.

In New York, the mayor fumed. In Miami, the people cheered.

For anybody keeping tabs on public education in America, #TheCarvalhoShow of 2018, as it became known on Twitter, was surreal. A whole city just went all out to persuade its superintendent to stay? How could any urban superintendent, forever navigating the tangles of factions and fiefdoms, have this much support? From the car line and the classroom? From the "establishment" and "reformers"? From the luxury suites and the street?

Call it Carvalho's choice. Instead of resisting the inevitable forces of choice and customization that are re-shaping public education, Carvalho and Miami-Dade chose to harness them. As the superintendent said to choice advocates this year, he and his district saw the "tsunami of choice" coming. They realized it was too powerful to avoid—and too brimming with opportunity not to embrace.

THE *MIAMI HERALD*

When Alberto Carvalho announced his decision in March 2018 to stay in Florida rather than leave for a job running New York City schools, Miami-Dade school board members cheered.

Today, nearly three quarters of Miami-Dade students are enrolled in choice programs. That makes Miami-Dade the most choice-rich district in arguably the most choice-rich state. Parents and teachers who live in Miami-Dade now access more than 500 non-district schools that didn't exist or weren't accessible 20 years ago, and everybody knows even more options are on the way. In Florida, innovation and disruption now bubble up from every direction. In Miami-Dade, it's surging from a particularly aggressive charter school company, from proud little private schools, and from off-the-grid homeschooling moms.

It's also surging from the district itself. "Bring it," Carvalho said at iPrep Academy, a school of choice he designed. This year, 3,355 students applied for 112 open seats at iPrep. "We're unapologetic," he said, "about our desire to dominate choice." Under Carvalho's leadership, Miami-Dade has created an expanding portfolio of district choice—magnet schools, career academies, international programs—that is unrivaled in Florida and perhaps anywhere else in the country.

This plan wasn't imposed from afar. It was hatched at home. And the district has methodically, if not gleefully, executed it. Carvalho's popularity stems from his district's ability to direct its own vision for change, and to document sustained progress. Its programming is dynamic. Its achievement is rising. Its stakeholders are remarkably unified. Success has led to more buy-in and more resources, which in turn has ramped up potential for more success.

Will it last? Ever more parents are demanding public education be ever more tailored to their kids' needs, with ever more providers to choose from. Carvalho may be one of the best superintendents in America. But can anybody really surf a tsunami?

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY IS BIG. It's the size of Delaware. Take away the swampy parts teeming with alligators and pythons, and it's still a palmy, concretized, iguana-ridden expanse as big as Rhode Island. The nation's fifth-biggest school district encompasses all of that. It has 476 schools. It has 37,830 employees. In 2018-19, it had 350,456 students, with 80 percent in district-run schools and 20 percent in charter schools.

Miami-Dade is the most choice-rich district in arguably the most choice-rich state.

For perspective, consider that 350,456 students is more than the district enrollments of Denver, Washington, D.C., Detroit, New Orleans, Boston, and San Antonio combined.

But big isn't bumbling. Miami-Dade County Public Schools is racking up academic accolades the way the Miami Hurricanes used to rack up Division I football championships. It's doing this in a state with some of the lowest per-pupil spending in America, in a state that is itself an academic standout.

To be sure, no big district in America is near the promised land. Every rising trend line has caveats and complications, and surficial analyses may obscure the stubborn gaps and trade-offs and unconscionable numbers of still-struggling kids. As Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute wrote last year: "time and again, sensible people embrace nifty reforms, hot new superintendents, and 'miracle' school systems. However, they later "realize that the packaging was a whole lot better than the product. Even two decades into the 'accountability era,' it's far too easy for snake-oil peddlers to trumpet a few numbers and insist that a given school, district, or supe has 'cracked the code.' "

Miami-Dade needs the kind of hard audit that only multiple auditors, from multiple vantage points, can deliver.

In the meantime, this is fair: Over the past decade, Miami-Dade County Public Schools has moved the needle on a range of academic indicators. It's that relative success that brought President Barack Obama and Governor Jeb Bush to Miami in 2011, in those halcyon days when "education reform" flirted with bipartisanship. It's those relative gains that led to the district winning the Broad Prize in 2012, and the College Board Advanced Placement District of the Year in 2014. It's that relative progress that led to Carvalho being named Florida Superintendent of the Year in 2013, National Superintendent of the Year in 2014, a McGraw Prize winner in 2016, and National Urban Superintendent of the Year in 2018.

The numbers suggest Miami-Dade is punching above its weight.

In 2018, the state awarded the district an "A" grade for the first time. School grades are primarily based on proficiency and progress on state tests, with extra weight given to progress of the lowest-performing students. Of the state's 14 biggest districts (those with 60,000-plus students), only three joined Miami-Dade as "A" districts that year. Miami-Dade also ranks No. 1 among Florida's biggest districts in enrollment of students of color (93 percent, with 71 percent Hispanic and 20 percent black); No. 4 in percentage eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch (66 percent); and No. 1 in English language learners (20 percent).

The last stat should be underlined. Standardized tests in Florida are administered in English only, and the state has, so far, successfully resisted every effort to change that.

The district is outpacing its Florida peers in progress, too. In 2008, Miami-Dade students were below the state average in performance on annual statewide reading tests in all eight tested grades; among the 14 biggest districts, students' scores were near the bottom in seven of the eight. This year, average scores for Miami-Dade students ranked in the top three of Florida's biggest districts in six out of eight tested grades.

The data looks even better disaggregated. In math and reading, black and Hispanic students in Miami-Dade score above the state averages for black and Hispanic students in nearly every tested grade. Scores for Miami's black students are in the top five among big districts in most categories. Hispanic students rank in the top two in most categories. Low-income students from Miami, meanwhile, are No. 1 in three of six tested grades in math, and seven of eight in reading.

This looks good. This also needs context. In 2019, only 46 percent of low-income 10th graders in Miami-Dade passed a statewide test in reading. But looking across Florida, that low-sounding pass rate is still six percentage points above the state average, and best in class among the 14 biggest districts.

Miami-Dade's outcomes on the National Assessment for Educational Progress are more mixed. In 2016, the Urban Institute demographically recalibrated the 2015 scores for the 23 districts then participating in the Trial Urban District Assessment, a testing program for a group of city districts, all of which have large shares of students who are black or Hispanic or from low-income families. Miami-Dade came in at No. 5. It outperformed its demographics, but not as much as Boston, Dallas, and many other districts.

The Urban Institute has not yet updated its analysis to include the 2017 exam. Fourth graders in Miami-Dade continued to make strong gains between 2015 and 2017, and now rank No. 1 among their urban peers in reading, with 42 percent scoring proficient or above, and No. 2 in math, with 45 percent scoring proficient or above. Over the past decade, they've shown some of the biggest gains in both subjects.

The opposite is true for Miami-Dade eighth graders. Their scores were flat between 2009 and 2017, and among urban districts, they've shown some of the least progress.

Clearly, work remains.

CLEARLY, THOUGH, Carvalho has earned wide latitude to keep at it.

Eight months after his decision to stay, 71 percent of Miami-Dade voters approved a four-year property tax increase that will reward district teachers with more than $200 million a year in additional pay—meaning annual supplements of $7,000 to $8,000 for teachers with median salaries of $46,000. This was a vote of confidence in the district by voters who had

been burned by past tax referenda. It was a second thumbs-up for Carvalho. In 2012, he successfully led a $1.2 billion bond referendum to upgrade district facilities and technology.

The district's latest tax-hike pitch quickly followed news of its "A" grade. The campaign strategy was simple: Leverage the credibility earned from a decade's worth of progress. Our teachers are delivering, the superintendent told voters. They deserve to be rewarded.

An incredible personal story is part of Carvalho's appeal. He grew up in Portugal, the son of a custodian and seamstress. Six kids in a one-room apartment with no running water and no electricity. Carvalho, 54, was the first in his family to graduate from high school, and he left for America as an "unaccompanied minor" who spoke no English. He washed dishes. Worked construction. Lived in a U-haul that reeked of paint. As a waiter, he met former U.S. Rep. E. Clay Shaw, who encouraged him to go to college. He did, earning a bachelor's degree in biology in 1990. Today, he speaks Portuguese, English, Spanish and French—and is one of America's most decorated superintendents. There's no mistaking how deeply this resonates in a community where half of all residents are foreign born, and more than 70 percent speak a language other than English at home.

In Miami-Dade, Carvalho began his career teaching physics, and, at one point, served as the district's chief communications officer. He's keen on momentum and narrative. He often lists his district's challenges in bullet points, then punctuates them with a variation on these words:

That sounds like mission impossible. But we turned it into mission inevitable.

Nobody thought that when the school board hired Carvalho in 2008.

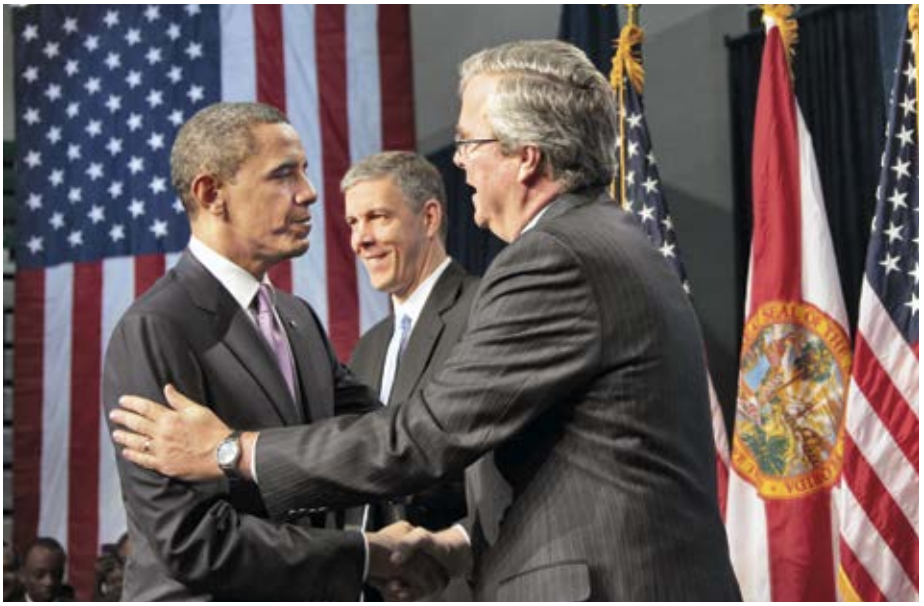
The Great Recession was in full effect. State funding was shrinking. Board members were bickering, even as the state was threatening to take over nine low-performing schools. Earlier in the year, the district had cut more than $200 million, but still did not have a balanced budget.

Relations were rocky with the local branch of the American Federation of Teachers, the United Teachers of Dade. Just before Carvalho's appointment, the district reneged on promised raises. A ticked-off union distributed fliers showing school board members flushing cash down the toilet. The union had hundreds of teachers protest in front of the administration building (at one point forming a conga line), and it brought bars of soap to a board meeting to encourage administrators to "come clean" about mismanagement.

As 2009 dawned, news got worse: Miami-Dade was now among eight districts being monitored by the state because its financial reserves had shrunk to dangerously low levels. It was the only one that wasn't tiny and rural. In desperation, the administration told schools it wanted a 20 percent cut of fundraisers, which would bring in $5 million to ease the crunch. Fundraisers—as in bake sales and car washes and kids selling candy bars. The *Miami Herald* called it a "plan to raid schools' piggy banks." Parents rebelled, and in response, Carvalho did something he's rarely had to do since: retreat.

In summer 2009, Carvalho presented, and the board approved, a balanced $4.8 billion budget that was $700 million smaller than the prior year's. With help from federal stimulus funds, it raised reserves to $56.5 million, avoided layoffs and secured a small raise for teachers. The 2010 budget was slimmer still—and sent 200 district administrators back to classrooms. The superintendent also began replacing hundreds of principals, and re-assigning hundreds of low-performing teachers.

By fall 2010, the clouds had parted. The superintendent could focus on the real challenge.



PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS/AP PHOTO

President Obama is introduced by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, right, before speaking at Miami Central Senior High School in 2011. Education Secretary Arne Duncan is at center.

IN THE SPAN OF A GENERATION, school choice became the new normal in Florida.

Thirty years ago, about 10 percent of K-12 students in Florida attended private schools. A handful attended magnet schools. The rest attended assigned district schools—either neighborhood schools assigned by zip code, or far-flung schools

Today, 45 percent of Florida students in K-12 attend something other than their assigned schools. Charter schools, private schools, and an ever-growing array of district options are all part of the mix.

assigned for compliance with court-ordered de-segregation.

Today, 45 percent of Florida students in K-12 attend something other than their assigned schools. Charter schools are part of the mix. So are private schools that can be accessed with choice scholarships. So is an ever-growing array of district options.

This wave didn't just happen.

In 1996, the Florida Legislature passed a law allowing creation of charter schools. The first opened that fall in Miami's Liberty City community. Two decades later, Florida had 295,814 students in 655 charter schools—and one of the largest charter sectors in America.

In 1997, the Legislature created the Florida Virtual School to ramp up online learning. It started with 77 students and five courses. Today, it serves more than 200,000 students a year.

In 1999, the Legislature created the McKay Scholarship, a state-funded private school voucher for students with disabilities. In 2018-19, it served 30,695 students in 1,525 private schools.

In 2001, the Legislature created the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students. As of June 2019, it was serving 104,091 students in 1,825 private schools. In students and funding, it is the largest private school choice program in the U.S.

By the time Carvalho became superintendent in 2008, these ripples were fast merging into something bigger. As fate would have it, the waves rolling into Miami-Dade were that much stronger.

THE HEADQUARTERS for Fernando Zulueta's company is a nondescript, two-story house in South Miami with terra cotta shingles and sprinkler stains. No signs bear the company name.

Academica, a privately-held for-profit company, manages 165 schools in five states and the District of Columbia, including 122 in Florida. According to Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes, whose research on charter school performance is widely respected, the company's core networks consistently make solid gains over district schools. Yet the company is remarkably off the radar. So is Zulueta. He hasn't done many newspaper interviews in recent years. There aren't many photos of him floating around. One of the few, which ran with a critical *Miami Herald* series in 2011 (and was taken paparazzi style), shows him in the Bahamas, wearing shades and holding a glass of champagne.

Forget first impressions. Zulueta, 60, is cerebral and methodical. He, like the superintendent, has a classic South Florida immigrant story. And if Academica is less than fully focused on improving student outcomes—an impression the *Herald* series and other reports may have left on some—Zulueta has a funny way of showing it. He has a stack of charts at his fingertips, comparing Academica schools with district schools and other charters. At a national charter schools conference, he noted how few high-poverty schools are academically top tier and deemed it "disgusting."

Like Carvalho, Zulueta had a relatively modest start in Florida. His father was a banker in Cuba. When Castro came to power, Zulueta's father fled with his family to Florida and eventually took a job as a truck driver, delivering art supplies before becoming a bookkeeper. Zulueta trained as an accountant and lawyer at the University of Miami and then became a developer, building starter homes on what undeveloped land was left in South Florida.

In the mid-1990s, his company was building a community just north of the Miami-Dade County line that didn't have a nearby public school to serve it. The new charter school law offered an opportunity to create one. The company won approval in 1996. Somerset Academy opened in 1997. But before it opened, parents far from the school began applying in droves. "I was taken aback by this," Zulueta said. "Why would you want to go to a school that hasn't even opened?"

The light bulb flickered on. In 1999, Academica was born.

"WE ARE NOW WORKING in an educational environment that is driven by choice. I believe that is a good thing. We need to actually be engaged in that choice movement. So if you do not ride that wave, you will succumb to it. I choose not to."

Carvalho made those comments in 2012, in response to a reporter's question. A year later, a gaggle of TV news crews followed him on the first day of school, as he talked up scores of new district choice programs. A year after that, with another 50-plus choice programs on the district menu, Carvalho added some wow to his metaphor:

"Rather than complain about the incoming tsunami of choice, we're going to ride it."

In 2010, as the district was emerging from its economic malaise, 35 percent of its students were enrolled in district-run choice programs. By 2018-19, it was 61 percent. This percentage does not include charter and private schools. Add in those sectors, and the percentage of Miami-Dade students enrolled in choice programs rises to 69 percent and 74 percent, respectively.

"ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE!" reads the banner on the Facebook page of Miami-Dade County Public Schools. "ONE SIZE FITS NONE!"

The district has embraced what many public education traditionalists won't. The Florida School Boards Association, for

example, was a lead plaintiff in a 2014 lawsuit that ultimately failed to have the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship declared unconstitutional. Superintendents in some Florida districts continue to persuade their boards to deny charter applications on shaky ground, knowing the denials will be overturned. Under a charter law that has no cap on new schools and allows schools to appeal application rejections to the state Board of Education, the continued growth of charters in Florida seems secure.

"I was not going to do what a lot of my colleagues did" about the fast-growing school choice movement, "which is, 'Let's hope and pray it doesn't hit us,'" Cavalho said in an interview in April. The expansion of choice "materialized exactly as we predicted. But rather than being a spectator, or a victim of it, we were an active participant in it."

"We" includes the Miami-Dade school board. It bought into this acceleration of district choice quietly but fully, and, despite changing membership over the years, consistently. Even before Carvalho's arrival, some board members had been pushing for expansion of choice into far-flung corners of Miami-Dade. But as parental demand for non-district options intensified, so did the district's desire not to be outdone. This response has generated little push back. The issue of choice—be it charters, vouchers or district options—has rarely surfaced in school board elections over the past decade. Throughout the district, choice has become accepted as the way it is.

"With or without competition, people are driven to be the best," Martin Karp, a Miami-Dade school board member since 2004, said in an interview. "But you can't discount the competition and what it brings. It's wise to learn from others, and for others to learn from us."

Miami-Dade didn't merely adapt. The changes under Carvalho say so much more about him, the district, the possibilities for public education. They suggest school districts can rise to the occasion in the era of choice and customization,

"Rather than complain about the incoming tsunami of choice, we're going to ride it."

and, perhaps not only evolve, but lead. Even the best districts can never be all things to all students, but, perhaps, they can be more things to more students.

Perhaps they can also be more efficient. Miami-Dade operates in a state that ranks No. 44 in per-pupil spending. It has supplemented state-set funding by tapping local sources. But even then, its success would seem to suggest that sustained academic progress is possible even in a relatively low-spending state, even with declining enrollment. Over the past decade, enrollment in Miami-Dade district schools has dropped to 281,969 from 321,279 as tens of thousands have enrolled in charter and private schools. Yet Miami-Dade keeps notching superlatives and expanding its programming.

Traditionalists aren't the only ones who think something special is happening. "If you do not evolve, if you do not produce, you get left behind," said former state Rep. Ralph Arza, a former teacher and football coach in the Miami-Dade district who now directs governmental relations at the Florida Charter School Alliance. Carvalho "has sold his district on that."

"He's not complaining about Uber," Arza said. "He became Uber."

A HALF CENTURY AGO, Fernando Zulueta's mom helped found a small Catholic pre-school in Little Havana that grew into a little network called Centro Mater. Thirty years later, the director of an offshoot in Hialeah Gardens ran into Zulueta and said, "Your mom told me you started a charter school."

The director was worried. Some Centro Mater students went on to excel in district schools, but many did not. Could Zulueta help him start a charter? Zulueta was hesitant. He had a business to run. But in 1998, he established Mater Academy, Academica's first charter in Miami-Dade.

Today, there are about 60 charters affiliated with Academica in Miami-Dade, serving 35,000 students. That's half the sector. Academica is the biggest reason charters now enroll 68,452 students in the county, and 20 percent of all public school students, up from 23,871 students and 7 percent in 2008-09.

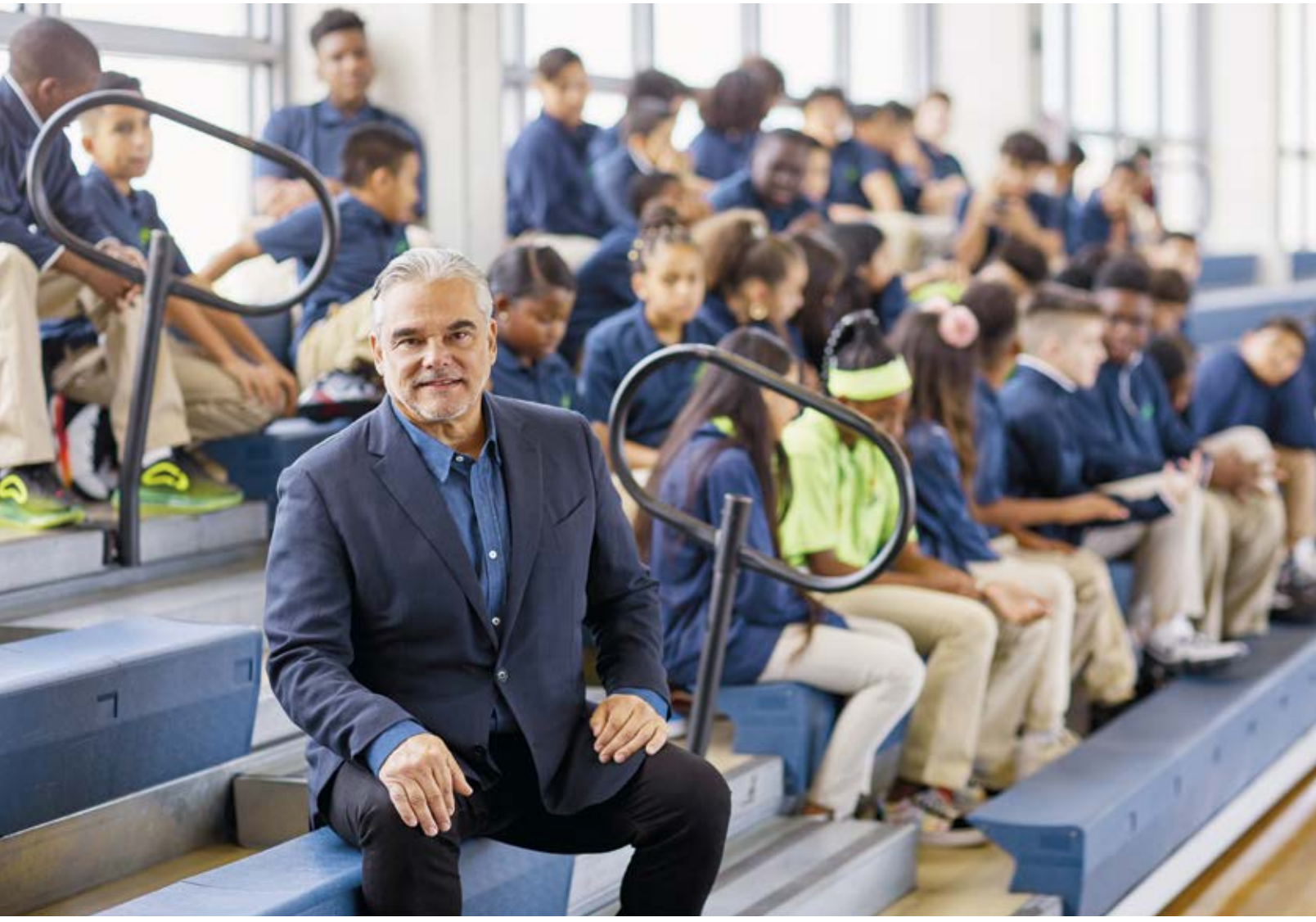
Academica's core networks are Somerset, Mater, Doral and Pinecrest. Its affiliates tend to have a few things in common: student uniforms, parent contracts committing to 30 volunteer hours a year, and atypical grade configurations like K-8. By design, Zulueta said, they look and feel like private schools, and accountability for results is a given. "We wake up scared every day," said Zulueta, who has three children in Academica schools, "that if we don't do a great job, the parents will turn around and leave."

Academica is a full-service manager: accounting, compliance, human resources, strategic planning, accreditation support, legal affairs. The company does it all.

The analysis from Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes suggests it does it well. The 2017 report found students in all four major Academica networks were making modest to large gains over similar students in district schools. The Doral network, which includes schools in Florida and Nevada, showed the biggest gains—the equivalent of 142 additional days of learning in math each year, and 57 in reading. Those outcomes are better than more celebrated charter networks of comparable size, like Achievement First and Democracy Prep.

It's not clear how much of Miami-Dade's academic progress is due to its charter sector, and how much the charter sector's success is due to Academica.

JEFFERY A. SALTER



Fernando Zulueta, president of Academica schools, at Slam Miami School in August 2019. "We wake up scared every day that if we don't do a great job, parents will turn around and leave."

As a whole, charter students in Miami-Dade perform better than district students on state tests in math and reading, and on three of four core tests by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. However, student populations differ at different school types, and a serious analysis, controlling for demographics, is overdue.

In the meantime, Academica continues to expand.

It secured a license to operate a private post-secondary program in 2011 and today, Doral College serves students attending Academica charters who want a head start on higher education. Most classes are online, and tuition is free for families, with costs covered by the state funding Academica receives for its high-school programs. In 2018-19, according to company figures, Doral College enrolled 1,711 students.

AS OPTIONS GREW, KIDS MOVED.

Rated as a "C" by the state for most of the past decade, Richmond Heights Middle School, 14 miles southwest of downtown Miami, served fewer and fewer students until it was less than half full. In many districts, this would be a problem. In Miami-Dade, this was an opportunity. The district drilled into surveys asking what students and parents wanted; looked at districtwide application numbers to see what programs were in demand; considered what potential partnerships and resources were available.

In 2014, it opened BioTECH High, co-located inside the middle school.

To do it, the district secured a $10.1 million federal magnet

schools grant. It strengthened an existing partnership with Zoo Miami. It forged new partnerships with Everglades National Park and Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. The response? BioTECH High began with 110 students. Last year it had 400. Now it's drawing 600 applications a year for 200 slots, including the occasional applicant from out of state. One student gets up at 4 a.m. to catch three buses and a train to make it to school by 7:20 a.m.

Meanwhile, Richmond Heights Middle has improved its state grade to a B.

From the district side, nothing better tells the story of Miami-Dade's transformation than magnet mania.

In 2010, the district had 41,251 students in magnet schools, 11.9 percent of total enrollment. In 2018-19, it had 72,194 students in 114 magnets, fully 1 in 5. These aren't the magnets of old, created to spur integration. These are theme-based vehicles for relevance, engagement, ownership, achievement. Dozens of them have earned national honors, including designations as National Blue Ribbon Schools, merit awards from Magnet Schools of America, and high rankings on the annual list of best high schools from *U.S. News & World Report.*

STEM? How quaint. Miami-Dade's science magnets include BEAT (Bio-Medical Environmental Agricultural Technology), BEAM (Biomedical Environmental and Medical), STIR (Science Technology and Investigative Research) and COAST (Ocean Academy of Science & Technology). Its arts magnets include schools focused on film, interior design, and fashion design. Its health magnets include programs in veterinary science, pre-medicine, and sports medicine. Business magnets? Take your pick: Banking, financial technology, digital marketing, international business, or global trade and logistics.

There's a magnet for aviation, for architecture, for construction design. For legal studies, multimedia entertainment technology, homeland security. There's iPrep, iCode, iMed. There's a single-gender 6-12 school for young women, and another for young men. There are separate international studies magnets with immersion in Spanish, French, Italian, Haitian-Creole, German. The list goes on.

In 2018-19, Miami-Dade had fully 1 in 5 students in a district-run magnet program—theme-based vehicles for relevance, engagement, ownership, and achievement.

The district's embrace of choice has allowed it to do more than expand programming. It's also mitigated the wrenching community pain that often comes when districts close schools. One former neighborhood school, Mays Community Middle School, is now the Arthur & Polly Mays 6-12 Conservatory of the Arts. Another, Miami Edison Middle School, became iTech@Thomas A. Edison Education Center. "Bittersweet" is how the *Miami Times,* Miami's century-old black newspaper, called the conversion of the latter in 2014. But "bittersweet" is better than "slash and burn."

Some Miami-Dade magnets have entrance requirements. Many don't provide transportation. Students and parents are flocking to them anyways.

BioTECH does not have entrance requirements, and its share of low-income students at 62.7 percent is on par with the district average. Its students are expected to publish a scientific paper by the time they graduate. More than half of their teachers are working scientists. Their lab equipment is college caliber. Some are studying the intestinal flora of spider monkeys to develop diets that make captive monkeys less prone to stomach problems. Some are evaluating the potential of plants, like bok choy, to be sustainable sources of vitamins on space voyages.

"Rigorous but relevant hands-on research," said Principal Daniel Mateo, 37, a chemist turned educator. "That's the name of the game here."

Mateo himself was a school choice pioneer. He initially attended high school a block from his house, but then enrolled in a dual enrollment school the district developed with Miami-Dade College. It was newer, and smaller, and the students had to start their own traditions, from yearbook to prom. They did. And loved it.

"Give people what they want," Mateo said. "That's the secret sauce."

DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS. Room 916. 8:30 a.m. Last February, dozens of principals and top district administrators packed into this conference room for a quarterly ritual called DATA/COM. They small talked until 8:49 a.m., when Carvalho made his entrance and bee-lined to the head of the table. The quiet was immediate. After a joke about how happy hour would start early today—as soon as DATA/COM was over—Carvalho called the first principal to a seat at the other end of the table—directly in front of him.

It's obvious from outside the Miami-Dade district that choice is a defining feature.

It's obvious from the inside that so is data-driven urgency.

The next four hours were intense. Each principal got two minutes to note which trend lines are headed in the right direction, which are not, and what interventions and supports were being deployed to change that. Behind the superintendent, a digital timer ticked down next to a screen that displayed a dashboard of data for each school.

Carvalho cheered on progress and clearly relayed expectations. "You have a lofty goal of a B this year," he said to one principal. "Are you going to meet it?" "Yes sir," the principal said. "The data shows we will."

ARTHUR & POLLY MAYS 6-12 CONSERVATORY OF THE ARTS

Art teacher Gerald Obregon and students from Arthur & Polly Mays Conservatory of the Arts, a public school, in front of a mural they painted on a wall at Kendall Regional Medical Center.

If hype about Miami-Dade has fogged its challenges, that dissipates at DATA/COM. One principal noted his school already had 477 students who'd missed 11 or more days. Yet it was also clear in Room 916 that the district is in a rush to meet those challenges. Boasted one top administrator, "We're not an aircraft carrier … we're a jet ski."

At DATA/COM, issues are identified, quickly. Remedies are proposed, quickly. If need be, direction is given, quickly, for processes and protocols to be short circuited, quickly.

One principal told the superintendent she had a cosmetology and hair styling teacher who was stalling on certification. "This is a really hairy issue," Carvalho joked. The room erupted. A half second for levity. Then, dead serious, "If she's not certified or certifiable, she needs to go." But, the principal continued, finding a replacement is difficult given district policy that requires multiple years of field experience, no matter how talented the applicant. Carvalho ordered a policy tweak. Another principal noted little progress with reading proficiency rates at his school, with 52 days left in the school year. The group agreed in this case, it's time, not talent. On the spot, Carvalho ordered the school day extended for the rest of the year.

DATA/COM is aimed at the most "fragile" schools, and goes hand-in-hand with the work of the district's Education Transformation Office.

The 65-person office provides intensive instructional support to scores of schools—86 in 2018-19. Many are subject to state requirements for low-performing schools. But the office identifies a broader range in need, gives them help beyond what the state requires, and takes pride in rapid response.

Does it work? The district's graduation rate has risen sharply to 85.4 percent, but a decade after Carvalho's appointment remains below the state average of 86.1 percent. An impressive rise in elementary school scores isn't getting the same traction in middle school. Seventeen Miami-Dade schools,

16 of them predominantly black, sit on the state's list of 300 lowest performing elementary schools. Another remains on the shorter, more troubling list of persistently low-performing schools. It, too, is predominantly black.

At the same time, Miami-Dade has not had an "F" school in three years. Twenty years ago, it had 26.

Back at the meeting, a principal told Carvalho one especially effective teacher in a key subject area was on maternity leave, and another was on long-term medical leave. Carvalho began his response with a riff on context: The district has 140 openings out of 20,000 teaching positions. That's down from 300 to 350 in past years. That compares favorably to other big districts in Florida. Still …

"Let's build a reserve army," he said. Let's employ talented teachers, perhaps recent retirees, who'd be willing to work short term. Let's figure out how to find them. How to best structure the contracts. How to square it with the union. "Let's see it Monday morning," he said to his Cabinet.

It was Friday.

No, he continued, before the awkward pause could root. End of next week will work.

The district's graduation rate has risen sharply to 85.4 percent, but a decade after Carvalho's appointment remains below the state average of 86.1 percent.

LONG BEFORE DAWN bathes the palms in soft light, thousands of workers stream from neighborhoods in Little Havana where modest homes are tucked in tight as pastelitos in a Cuban bakery. In the thick of this working-class hum is a private school with Cuban roots that was once harassed by Fidel Castro. He couldn't kill La Progresiva Presybterian. Now it's thriving more than ever.

The Miami-Dade district has hundreds of reasons beyond most districts to try and move like a jet ski. La Progresiva and 400 other private schools are among them.

Miami-Dade County had 75,994 students attending 612 private schools in 2017-18, a rate of 17.6 percent. That was the fourth-highest rate among Florida's 67 districts, and No. 1 among the big districts. At least 41 percent of those students used state scholarship programs to help pay tuition, with some 26,272 using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, five times as many as when Carvalho became superintendent. They attended 441 private schools, up from 156 a decade ago.

La Progresiva is led by a former district teacher. Melissa Rego grew up four blocks away, the child of Cuban immigrants, a bank teller and a car mechanic. When she became principal a decade ago, the school had 162 students in grades K-12. Last year it had 672, all using tax credit scholarships.

The director who hired Rego told her to do whatever it takes to propel the school to its potential. So the woman with 1,000 facial gestures behind horn-rimmed glasses became Inspirer-in-Chief. Over and over, she reminds the children of cooks and waitresses and gas station attendants: "You have the ability to do this. We're going to equip you. You have a future. But you have to grind."

In many states, it's big news when lawmakers consider a single school choice bill. In Florida, lawmakers consider a dozen or more every year. In 2014, they created the Gardiner Scholarship for students with special needs. In 2018, they created the Hope Scholarship for bullying victims. This year, they created a voucher that expands income eligibility into the middle class.

Clearly, parents are hungry for options. Increasingly, teachers are too.

Rego, 42, graduated from public school in Miami, got a full ride to Miami-Dade College, and earned a bachelor's from the University of Miami. Her teaching career began 18 years ago. She started as a sub, working with emotionally disturbed students, then taught four years at a career academy high school. At the invitation of a friend who had become a principal, she headed to an Academica-affiliated charter.

The charter was serving 600 students in a movie theater. The intended building wasn't completed on time, so teachers and school leaders had to wing it. That they did, successfully, helped Rego understand the power of choice. Students, parents and teachers all chose to be there. All worked harder to make their choice work. They were, Rego said, "invested."

Rego raised expectations at La Progresiva, making college a fundamental goal. The students looking sharp in green, white, and khaki are descendants of Cubans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, Dominicans. Many didn't fare well in district schools. But at La Progresiva, something allows them to gain momentum. Maybe it's more nurturing. Maybe it's more flexibility. Maybe it's the reminders, from the placards in the front office to weekly chapel, that there's a shared moral code.

Whatever it is draws teachers, too. Forty percent of La Progresiva's teachers worked in district schools. Many, like Rego, would make more money there. "But you know what?" she said. "I'm happier here."

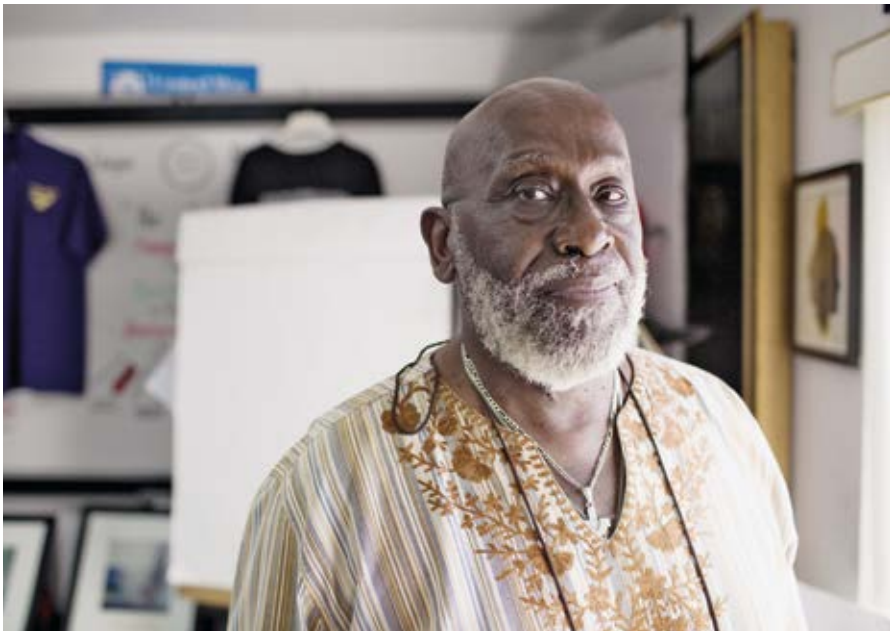
AS PRESIDENT of the Urban League of Greater Miami for 55 years, T. Willard Fair has worked with 10 Miami-Dade superintendents. As former chair of the Florida Board of Education, he's worked with scores more. Carvalho, Fair said, is "the best I've seen anywhere." Fair said many in Miami-Dade's black communities feel the same. When he and Carvalho walk down the street in Liberty City, people stop their cars so they can run up and shake Carvalho's

hand. "Not my hand," Fair said for emphasis. "His hand."

Fair's endorsement is telling. Carvalho has bridged "establishment" and "reform" tribes in Miami like no one else. Fair and Bush co-founded that first charter school in Liberty City. Yet it's easy to find choice-and-accountability stalwarts like Fair who are Carvalho fans. When it appeared Carvalho was headed to New York, Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers praised him. But so did John Kirtley, a longtime leader at the American Federation for Children, a prominent school-choice advocacy group.

The district's relationship with the teachers union is also telling. As Carvalho repaired the fiscal mess he inherited, he eased tensions with United Teachers of Dade. He avoided laying off teachers, found a way to secure a small raise in 2009, and put annual raises back on track by 2012. At the same time, his administration used a clause in the collective bargaining agreement to re-assign 400 low-performing teachers and, with union cooperation, become the first district in Florida to tap federal Race to the Top funds for merit pay. The union president at the time said Carvalho "might be the best superintendent in the nation."

Fast forward to 2018, when voters agreed to convert a modest property tax hike into a major teacher pay hike. If Carvalho didn't get a honeymoon at the beginning of his tenure, he's getting one now.



RYAN STONE/THE *NEW YORK TIMES*/REDUX

T. Willard Fair worked with Jeb Bush to found the Liberty City Charter School in 1995. The Liberty City Charter School was a pioneer in what became a national movement.

In relations with Tallahassee, Carvalho has walked a tight rope. On one hand, he has not hesitated to be critical about the state's reliance on standardized testing, about state education funding, and about its dictates on teacher evaluations.

On the other hand, he never attacks the operating system as a whole.

Carvalho has not fought the state's expansion of choice. In fact, he helped persuade the school board to approve a KIPP charter in Liberty City. Among charter advocates, Miami-Dade has a reputation for fairness with authorization and oversight.

Carvalho has not opposed the state's basic approach to regulatory accountability, either. Instead of resisting, he has focused on meeting the state's definition of success. In 2017, when Miami-Dade recorded no "F" schools for the first time, Carvalho called a press conference. "Second only to the day I became superintendent, this is my proudest moment," he said. "Nothing beats being able to say that failure has been eliminated in Miami-Dade."

THIRTEEN OF THE TOP 20 high schools in Florida, according to *U.S. News & World Report,* are in Miami-Dade.

All 13 are schools of choice.

Ten are magnets. Three are charters. Two of the charters are affiliated with Academica.

Education rankings must be taken with many grains of salt. But the U.S. News list synchs with other evidence that's hard to ignore—about the degree to which choice is mainstream in Miami-Dade, about the high caliber of many choice schools, about the tsunami that is looking an awful lot like a rising tide.

To be sure, the evolving landscape isn't entirely peaceful. A feud over the tax hike continues to simmer. The district maintained the money was for the district only. But the charters fought that, given the massive disadvantage it imposes on recruiting and retaining teachers. During the legislative session that ended in May, charter-friendly lawmakers passed a measure that requires districts to share proceeds proportionally from future referenda, and Governor Ron DeSantis signed it into law. But the new law isn't retroactive.

Rising tensions between the district and charters would be unfortunate, and distracting.

In 2016, Education Cities and GreatSchools released their Education Equality Index, which sought to spotlight cities where low-income students are most likely to attend schools with small achievement gaps, or none at all. Two big cities in Miami-Dade—Hialeah and Miami—finished No. 1 and No. 3. Given the research on the competitive effects of choice, this shouldn't be a surprise. Studies have found positive impacts on district achievement from charter schools, from private school

Instead of resisting, Carvalho has focused on meeting the state's definition of success.

scholarships, from other district options.

The Education Equality Index identified 10 Hialeah schools and 10 Miami schools with the smallest gaps. In Miami, six were charters, including four managed by Academica; and two were magnets, including iPrep, the school designed by Carvalho. In Hialeah, one was a traditional public school, one was a magnet, and the other eight were charters, including seven run by Academica.

All seven were Mater schools, that little network that sprouted in Little Havana.

CARVALHO ISN'T ALONE on the big wave.

The superintendent once called iPrep, now 10 years old, "my signature school." It has bean bags, treadmills, Macs, and funky colors. Some rooms have comfy sofas. There's a room with high tables and a ping pong table. All of it feels, as intended, more like a college than a preK-12 public school with 860 students. "I wanted to build something totally against the grain of public education at the time," Carvalho said.

Twenty miles away, Ana Garcia is building something totally against the grain now.

"Guys! Choo-choo formation!" At Garcia's command, a loose knot of people near the turnstiles at Zoo Miami—three adults, five students—put their hands on the back shoulders of the person in front of them and merged into something less locomotive than caterpillar. Sixteen feet proceeded on a motley ramble. Over the next few hours, Garcia, another former teacher from the Miami-Dade district, subtly steered her students toward the goals in their personalized education plans.

Garcia put special focus on three students with autism, including her 9-year-old, Kevin. It's education savings accounts that make Garcia's home education cluster—and perhaps, someday, a never-ending array of other clusters—possible. Without them, the parents who've entrusted Garcia with their kids would be limited to schools that, despite the best intentions, didn't work for them.

In the shadow of America's fifth-biggest district, new forms of educational life are emerging. Florida now boasts the largest education savings account program in the nation, with 11,276 students using them, including 1,469 in Miami-Dade. That doesn't sound like many. But 20 years ago, there weren't many students in Miami-Dade charter schools, either.

With iPrep, Carvalho surfed to the edge. He created a boundary-busting school where students learn in their space, at their pace. iPrep students supplement traditional courses with Khan Academy, Florida Virtual School, dual enrollment. For many students, it rocks. iPrep is perpetually A-rated. And Carvalho has sought ways to expand it, by "franchising" it into other district schools. This was, and is, ahead of its time. But given the pace of technological change, Carvalho knows it won't be much longer.

"Ten to 20 years from now, how will we be teaching kids in America? In Miami-Dade? I think the most honest answer to that question is, we don't know," he said. "You have to anticipate a dramatic shift, perhaps the most powerful shift we've seen in education in the history of mankind. … Where, when, how, and by whom kids will be taught, will be very different than the reality today."

Garcia loved teaching in the district. But over a decade, the passion ebbed. For her and for Kevin, it didn't work. In 2014, after 12 years as a middle school English teacher and curriculum specialist, she called it quits.

Without fanfare, she surfed to the edge, too. She envisions a micro-school, flexible enough to serve home education students, including Kevin and others with special needs. She hasn't figured out all the details yet. But she's sure that if she doesn't, somebody else will.

IN MIAMI-DADE, nobody corners the market on good ideas in public education.

Superintendent Carvalho deserves credit for boldly transforming his district. Florida's redefined public education system gives more entities more power to create more options, and more parents more power to choose them or not. Miami-Dade did not run from this new system. It embraced it, dug deeper, delivered more, even as the education landscape around it became one of the most dynamic and diverse in America. The result is a far different district than existed a decade ago. There is a buzz about Miami-Dade. There is pride in its accomplishments, unity across potential divides, optimism about what's ahead.

At the same time, the district's rise didn't just happen. A long list of providers brought their models and approaches and enthusiasm into a system that gave them the freedom to take a shot. Going forward, more providers will emerge, and more parents will become more demanding. In many cities, this level of competition and customization in public education is still abstract. In Miami, it's real. The next great innovations are on their way, but who can say from where? Maybe it'll be the resourceful home-school mom or the talented district teacher. Maybe it'll be the feisty private school principal, or the hard-charging charter network. Maybe it'll be the superintendent who shocks everybody, again, by paddling out to the next big wave instead of waiting for it to crash.

Chances are, it'll be all of the above. And others we can't yet imagine.

Ron Matus is director of policy and public affairs at Step Up For Students and a former state education reporter for the Tampa Bay Times.