Education Next

Feature

Inside Florida's Charter Schools for Exceptional Students

How parental choice is reshaping special education in the Sunshine State

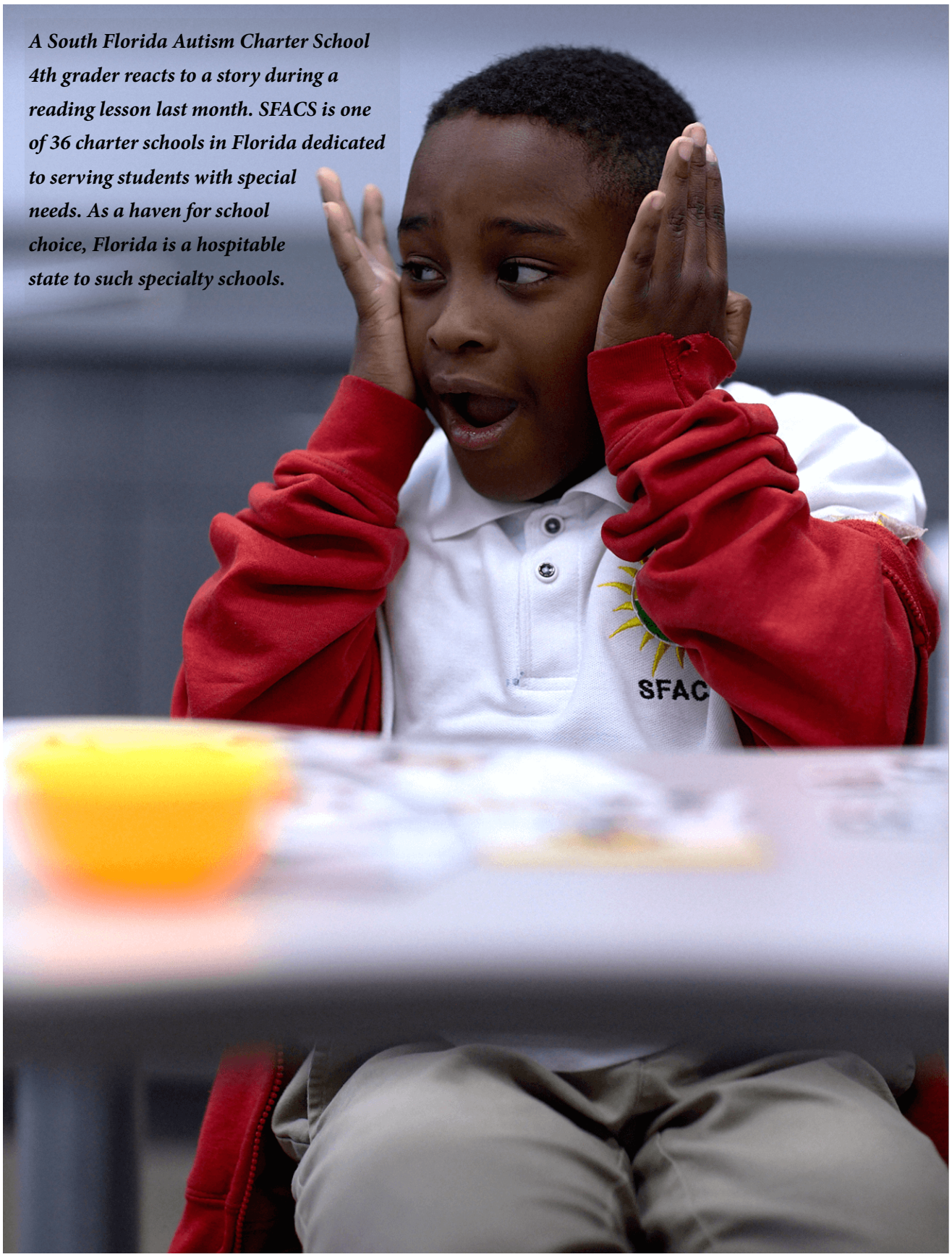
By Thibaut Delloue

As soon as I step onto South Florida Autism Charter School's (SFACS) sprawling campus, nestled in the outskirts of Miami, I'm greeted by the school's principal, Tamara Moodie. She's overseeing one of the school's three different arrival schedules, split between its elementary, middle, and high school grades. Moodie exerts a calm yet commanding presence in the hallways of SFACS. She asks a high schooler named Chase, along with a staff member, to guide me on a short tour of the school.

Chase, wearing the school's red uniform hoodie, sports a paper crown adorned with the words "King Chase." As he leads us up the staircase, he tells us about a ring he won at a Chuck E. Cheese restaurant the previous weekend. We make our way through the hallway, and I notice I can see inside of each classroom through large clear windows—transparency is a hallmark here. Another student, emerging from an elementary class with his teacher, tells us he won the recent school spelling bee with the word "giggle," which he then proudly spells.

SFACS's facilities include a large therapy area filled with play equipment, a dance room, and, so that students can practice life skills, a model studio apartment complete with a fully equipped kitchen, bed, TV, and closet.

Later I visit a 12th-grade classroom, where the students have recently returned to their desks after leading the annual senior parade. SFACS adheres to a three-to-one student-to-staff ratio; its classrooms are permanently staffed by three instructors—one primary teacher and two paraprofessionals—overseeing nine students.



A South Florida Autism Charter School 4th grader reacts to a story during a reading lesson last month. SFACS is one of 36 charter schools in Florida dedicated to serving students with special needs. As a haven for school choice, Florida is a hospitable state to such specialty schools.

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Today, they're learning about the difference between "wants" and "needs." Their teacher reads short stories with examples such as "Ryan needs a coat" and "Ryan wants to play video games." The young people assigned to this classroom, like all the students at SFACS, occupy the severe end of the autism spectrum. Their IQ scores are below 68 and they live with various cognitive, speech, or mobility impairments. Many have difficulty sitting at a desk for extended periods of time. From my vantage point in the back of the classroom, the instructors' unwavering dedication to their students, who require nearly constant one-on-one attention, is on full display. As the lesson progresses, the assistant teachers shift from desk to desk, eliciting example sentences and providing encouragement to each student. When one nonverbal student grows restless, one of the teachers guides him to a chart on the wall where he uses pictures to convey various emotional and physical needs.

Moodie, along with a group of community leaders, founded the school in 2009 to provide families in South Florida with the region's first public school for students with autism. First housed in a library and enrolling 81 students, the charter school moved into its current two-story facility in 2021 and now serves nearly 300 students. With the help of a fundraising arm and multiple related nonprofits, including an adult center housed within the school building, SFACS also provides resources and services, from housing to employment, for people with severe autism. Students can remain at the school through age 22, after which they have the opportunity to transition to the adult center.

"We treat the whole family," Moodie likes to say. She even hosts and often personally leads family learning sessions on Saturday mornings on topics affecting the autism community. The school's cafeteria, meanwhile, is partly staffed by parent volunteers. Because of its tight-knit community and wraparound model—they now serve individuals as old as 40—enrollment at the school is especially limited.

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Principal Tamara Moodie founded SFACS with other leaders in 2009 as a public school serving South Florida's students with autism.

SFACS is one of at least 36 charter schools in Florida dedicated to serving students with special needs, the highest number in any state. While some schools only require students to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to enroll, others, like SFACS, further limit eligibility to students who are taught through a modified curriculum, have a specific diagnosis such as autism, or have additional cognitive or behavioral differences.

Florida, long a self-professed haven for education choice, specifically allows charter schools to focus on special needs students, or "exceptional students," in their enrollment process (across the country, states vary widely on the permissibility of enrollment preferences for charter schools). Some of Florida's earliest charter schools, like Princeton House Charter School in Orlando, were private

schools for students with disabilities that took advantage of the law and converted to charter status in the late 1990s. For decades, families of students with special needs in Florida have also benefited from a specialized education savings account for exceptional students, which can be used to cover private school tuition or services such as therapy.

Meeting a Critical Need

Florida's culture of school choice has seeped into its greater education community. SFACS's autonomy, Moodie recounts, was supported from the start by Miami-Dade County's public school district. The school has also benefited from the state's funding formula, which significantly multiplies base funding for students who require the most intensive and personalized learning services. While there may be a financial incentive for charter schools to enroll students with special needs, the greatest benefit has been to the students themselves. In traditional public schools—and especially in charter schools that lack the same level of financial support—the amount of physical resources and services available at SFACS would be out of reach.

In the U.S., students receiving special education services now make up at least 15 percent of the public school population, a figure that has doubled over the last four decades. Diagnoses of specific learning differences, such as autism, dyslexia, and ADHD, are on the rise. Yet special education students continue to struggle academically and behaviorally compared to their peers—they are more frequently disciplined and

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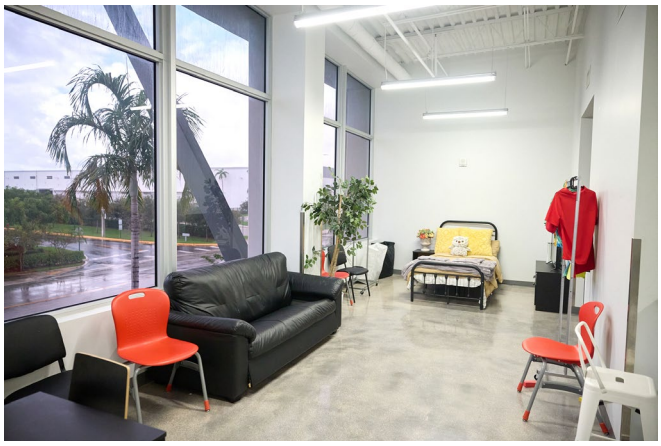
An SFACS teacher helps a student identify America's founding fathers during a whole-group history lesson.

referred to law enforcement, and they report being harassed or bullied at rates that exceed their share of enrollment.

Across the country, teacher shortages are most pronounced in special education, driven by the increasing number of students receiving services and by the adoption of more labor-intensive service models. Teachers report being underprepared to meet these students' unique needs. In Florida, during the 2021–22 school year, exceptional student education as a subject represented 16 percent of all courses taught by teachers not certified in the relevant field. Out of more than 60,000 total ESE courses, nearly 9,000 were taught by teachers not certified in special education.

Before founding SFACS, Moodie served as education director of a $45,000-a-year private school for students with disabilities. At that time, few public school options existed for parents of children with special needs, and she saw many students leave the school when tuition became unsustainable for their parents. Today, the SFACS community is made up of families seeking an alternative to their traditional school districts, which many parents felt were unprepared to teach their children. Some have moved near the campus, even from other states, to take advantage of the school's extensive wraparound services. Moodie says that as many as 30 prospective families tour the school each month, hopeful for a spot.



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At its suburban Miami campus, SFACS has a model studio apartment for adult learners to practice the routines of daily living. As seen in the 2nd-grade classroom at right, the school keeps a three-to-one student-to-staff ratio.

A recent Florida policy, however, has limited parents' ability to enroll their students at the school. As required of all states by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, Florida offers an alternate assessment for students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the regular state assessment; however, the state restricts eligibility for this option to students with an IQ score below 68. This constraint is designed to comply with federal law, which caps such assessments at 1 percent of a state's student population. Since SFACS is built specifically around Florida's alternate curriculum and assessment for students with significant cognitive needs, those who could benefit from its services but don't meet the IQ threshold for an alternate assessment are no longer eligible for enrollment. The use of IQ tests to determine school eligibility, particularly for students with significant cognitive disabilities, has sparked controversy and widespread criticism among the charter leaders I spoke with in Florida.

Sandra Figueredo beams when she talks about her son Joaquin's experience at SFACS. Now 14, he began

at the school in kindergarten and has been with the same group of students ever since. He loves music class, playing basketball, and the school's life skills program—his mother says he now wants to make his bed and put on cologne every morning. He's also a member of the Key Club, which organizes community service projects such as beach cleanups. While Figueredo describes Joaquin as "not completely verbal," the school has enabled him to forge longstanding friendships.

Joaquin was diagnosed with autism when he was two and, before coming to SFACS, was placed in an autism cluster at his first public school. His mother says she was concerned by the level of "babysitting" and stigmatization he experienced in those early years, something made more difficult for a parent just learning to navigate public schools' complex language around special education. After connecting with a parent advocate at her school district, Figueredo recounts, an IEP meeting that would normally last 20 minutes turned into two hours—she had finally found someone to help her ask the "right questions" about her son's education. Not long after, another parent at her school told her about SFACS. Figueredo applied immediately, and Joaquin was accepted for the last seat in his grade that year.

Now, Figueredo is fully involved in Joaquin's IEP development, just as the staff is thoroughly invested in his overall growth. "Dr. Moodie is very engaged with the staff and with everything that goes on at the school," she tells me, "you know everybody's responsible for their part because they're held accountable." Both she and Joaquin, who wants to pursue a career in music, are excited for the future, and SFACS's continuing adult services give Figueredo peace of mind. "Here, they keep learning," she tells me.

When asked if she has advice for parents of neurodivergent students in the public school system, Figueredo responds: "If you think something doesn't sound right, don't accept it just because it's coming from a place of authority. *You* are your child's first advocate."

Jeff Skowronek, who leads a network of three specialized charter campuses in the Tampa area known as Pepin Academies, is passionate about the role of these schools in the education landscape. Pepin Academies exclusively serve students who require more complex or frequent accommodations, but whose needs are not as severe as those of students at SFACS. Skowronek calls it a "middle ground" for local families seeking better options for their kids.

Pepin Academies is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year and, like SFACS, its schools have thrived when partnerships with local school districts have been strong. "To me it's what charters are supposed to be," Skowronek continues. "What is a gap in traditional schools that funding and time don't allow them to close? Let's create an innovative way to tackle it and work with the district to be successful."

Separate Settings vs. Inclusion

Specialized charter schools do have their critics—starting with the issue of inclusion. Special education in American schools is governed by the principle of "least restrictive environment," a component of IDEA, which requires schools to educate children with disabilities alongside children who are nondisabled "to the maximum extent appropriate" unless "the nature or severity" of the disability makes it impossible.

IDEA, however, leaves the exact circumstances of the least restrictive environment undefined, creating

a gray area that continues to fuel debate among educators and researchers. For some advocates, "full inclusion" of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, no matter their specific disability, is a civil rights imperative akin to racial integration. They point to research showing students with disabilities do better academically when placed in general education settings.

Other researchers, like the Vanderbilt University psychologist Douglas Fuchs, have long countered this claim. In his most recent paper, Fuchs shows that studies promoting inclusion overlook both the differences in the nature of disabilities between students placed in separate versus generalized settings and their prior academic abilities. Some students with disabilities do thrive in general education classrooms, he allows—but that doesn't mean *all* students, especially those needing intensive services, will achieve more in a general education classroom. Further research has corroborated Fuchs's findings that the benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities are, at best, inconclusive.

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Group therapy sessions may include games like hide-and-seek.

Moodie agrees that the debate over inclusion overlooks the profound differences that exist between the individuals we label as students with disabilities. Even at her own school, she points out, "no two kids with autism are the same." Instead, it's more helpful to consider the individual supports and goals spelled out in those students' IEPs, which should be collaboratively developed by parents, teachers, and specialists. These, rather than more traditional academic metrics like test scores, are a more accurate measure of success for students with more severe needs.

At the start of the school year, for example, 51 students at SFACS and its associated adult center, ages 5 to 28, were unable to use the toilet independently. "I made it a mission," Moodie explains, "to get every kid and adult toilet trained." In March, the school was over halfway to achieving that goal. "To me, that's how you measure success," Moodie continues, "being able to be independent—that's what 'successful' looks like."

In fact, Florida's specialized charter schools generally opt out of the state's traditional school grading system and instead choose to receive its School Improvement Rating, which is designed for alternative schools and those that exclusively serve students with special needs. Instead of a school grade—which

would be based primarily on student test scores and ill-suited to an environment in which most or all students receive an alternate curriculum—schools receive ratings of "unsatisfactory," "maintaining," or "commendable." For the 2024–25 school year, Florida's specialized charter schools overwhelmingly received a rating of "maintaining."

Although Florida charter schools overall have demonstrated positive results, assessing the performance of specialized charter schools poses a challenge due to the less stringent standards of the state's School Improvement Rating. That system, however, provides an alternative model of accountability, which has long been the north star of the charter movement, by emphasizing students' specific needs rather than top-down standards.

Nevertheless, concerns about exclusion and a lack of accountability have prompted education experts to raise questions about the separate settings offered by specialized charter schools. The Center for Learner Equity, a research and advocacy organization for students with disabilities, has suggested such schools "may run counter to longstanding goals to provide students access to inclusive learning environments." Their latest report on specialized charter schools nationwide, however, reveals no evidence that these schools violate federal laws or subvert the doctrine of least restrictive environment.

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A student takes a sensory break from a lesson in her classroom.

Skowronek, formerly an associate professor of psychology at the University of Tampa, responds to this criticism by pointing to the array of tailored academic opportunities and extracurricular activities available to students at Pepin Academies. "We're trying to meet the elements of a traditional environment," he explains, "but in an environment that's set up to maximize their success. If we determine that success isn't being met in other environments, and I try something different and I'm met with success, haven't I fulfilled the goal of providing the least restrictive environment?"

It's difficult for outside observers to generalize about specialized charter schools given the range of special needs they serve and the variety of education models and settings they offer. Nonetheless, The Center for Learner Equity has urged charter authorizers and state policymakers to hold such schools accountable to equally high standards as other public schools and to ensure they provide access to inclusive settings

when appropriate.

Specialized charter schools for students with special needs remain rare: Ohio, Texas, and Florida collectively account for around 40 percent of total nationwide enrollment in such schools. Ultimately, school districts are responsible for ensuring students with special needs receive a free, appropriate public education, as guaranteed by federal law. Across the country, specialized non-charter public schools, managed either by individual districts or states, are not uncommon. In some cases, districts may even pay for external providers, such as private and out-of-district schools, when a student's needs can't be met in district.

While the government plays a significant role in safeguarding the rights of students with special needs, Floridians have long affirmed their faith in parental choice. It's the primary reason why, in a state that claims to be first in the nation in education freedom, specialized charter schools have proliferated. This growth reflects parental demand for education options as much as the education needs of students. Furthermore, the limited progress of the decades-long school accountability movement has only added to parents' hunger for alternative educational experiences for their children. And behind that hunger lies a compelling question: Aren't schools ultimately accountable to *parents*?

Viewed through this lens, specialized charter schools have been remarkably successful.

Moodie and the rest of SFACS's leadership have bold plans for the future. They've recently opened a new campus for grades K–5 in South Miami and have started construction on an additional building next to their main facility. The new space, which Moodie affectionately calls her "YMCA for autism," will include expanded therapy rooms, a fitness center, and a pool designed to teach water safety to their students. They're also opening small businesses to create employment opportunities for their adult learners.

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Moodie hopes these expanded services will continue to ease the burden on families. "Our parents are our biggest advocates," she says. It's not hard to see why.

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This article appeared at EducationNext.org on October 14, 2025.