

LBA charter school makes difference

Posted on Saturday, December 28, 2013 / By Myriam Marquez

Out past the cow pastures and the truck stops, surrounded by the warehouses of North Miami-Dade County in a rural patch of Hialeah, stands a boxy, flat-roofed building filled with curious students serious about learning.

Many of them get up at 4 a.m. to take long bus trips across town to reach their destination, the Latin Builders Association Construction & Business Management Academy Charter High School. It's a long name for a young school that's the first of its kind, a private-public partnership where students are trained on the nuts and bolts of building communities.

The students can train for construction-related jobs straight out of high school, but most will pursue college degrees that lead to high-demand careers. The LBA, now headed by a second generation of Cuban-American and other Hispanic engineers, architects, home builders, marketing executives and the like, is giving back to the community by attracting a new generation into construction fields.

Bernie Navarro, whose term as LBA president ended Nov. 23, recently gave me a tour of the charter school, which is run by Miami-Dade Public Schools. Unlike some charter schools, this is no fly-by-night enterprise meant to enrich a few slick operators while students struggle in mediocrity.

On the contrary, the LBA has built excitement around an experiment that's the first of its kind in the nation, a charter started by a business association willing to put up its members' resources and experience to help students succeed by offering mentoring programs, internships and strong academics. The academy started out modestly with 40 ninth-graders, growing to 138 ninth- and 10th-graders this year. The goal is 500 students from ninth to 12th grades by 2016 and to kick off a fundraising campaign for a new school that's more centrally located in the county.

For now, the LBA academy exceeds expectations, rated an "A" by the state with end-of-course results in algebra (91 percent of students passed) and reading (66 percent were proficient or better) leading the state average in both categories. It selects students who are committed to learning, yes, but also represent South Florida's diversity. Consider that in reading the LBA charter ranked in the top 10 percent of schools with a quarter or more English-language learners; it placed third among 1,648 Title I schools with passing math scores.

LBA Academy Principal Gyovania Marante notes that on the charter's board are educators from Florida International University, University of Miami and Miami Dade College. The school is focused on technology — each student gets a free iPad to use — and teachers are trained to be up on the latest techie concept but also to help students see their choices and seize the opportunities.

"We're like the Statue of Liberty," Marante told me, pointing to the income and racial and ethnic diversity of the school's students.

For the poor and the huddled masses yearning to live free, there is a little charter school out past the cow pastures and the truck stops in rural Hialeah, and it is making a difference.

Myriam Marquez, the Miami Herald's former editorial page editor, is executive editor of El Nuevo Herald.