

Good news: more schools in works for downtown Miami

Written by [Catherine Lackner](#)



Advocates for more schools in downtown Miami – which has seen its population double over the past several years – might be encouraged by new ideas currently being circulated, and improvements that are already underway at one school.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools has allocated \$43 million in its budget to expand educational options downtown north of the Miami River.

At the same time, it is “pursuing monetization opportunities” for the School Board Administration Complex, a 10-acre parcel near the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.

A request for proposals for uses of a one-acre lot at Northeast Second Avenue and Northeast 14th Street is under the cone of silence now, but the county and school board signed a memorandum of understanding last summer to consider a joint venture. The county would acquire the property for arts center patron parking, and give the school board “the use of downtown property for expansion of school facilities,” a school board memo said.

Another part of the school board office complex, a half-acre off-street parking lot at Northeast First Avenue and Northeast 16th Street, would be made available to the Omni Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), which

would make an unspecified amount of funding available “to serve the downtown Miami residential areas,” said a Jan. 11 school board memo. “The Omni CRA has also expressed a willingness to provide tax incentives and credits to developers that may be interested in board-owned properties within the CRA boundaries.”

“The Omni CRA is very much interested in investing in educational options for their area,” said Lisa M. Martinez, chief strategy officer in the office of Superintendent Alberto Carvalho. “We want to be a good partner with them in finding a short-term solution to their need for parking.”

The school board has earmarked \$51 million to add or enlarge facilities south of the Miami River, she said. “Downtown Miami is experiencing double-digit population growth, and as with any growing community, there is a need to expand education options and amplify school facility capacity for students and families,” said Mr. Carvalho. “As the greater downtown area continues to flourish, Miami-Dade County Public Schools is determined to meet the education needs of children by continuing our tradition of delivering innovative technology and high-quality classroom instruction. Establishing new school, business and municipal partnerships while strengthening existing ones will be critical to the development of effective funding strategies that support both education programming and increased facility utilization in the area.”

At Southside Elementary, 45 SE 13th St., building No. 1, which dates to 1914, is being remodeled from within to preserve its historic façade, Ms. Martinez said. “We are doing all necessary repairs and renovations while adhering to its historic status.”

Two circa-1920s buildings on campus are also included in the \$21 million project. Once updated, they will add classroom space, she said.

Meanwhile, the district will also negotiate with The Related Urban Development Group “to develop a future educational facility at the site of the affordable and workforce housing project The Gallery at West Brickell, located at the northwest corner of Southwest Second Avenue and Southwest 10th Street,” a school board memo said. The district has set aside \$36 million for that endeavor.

If the project does materialize, Miami would make Southside Park available to the school for outdoor recreation during specified hours, the memo said.

“The City of Miami has been a great partner, both south and north of the river,” Ms. Martinez said.

The district is in conversations with the Southside Elementary PTA, the Brickell Homeowners Association and other stakeholders “to gauge their interest in the Related Urban Development Group project and bring it back to the school board,” she said. “Then we can begin to work out the details.”

The downtown authority is conducting its own survey of downtown residents and other stakeholders to see what school options they want for the area, said Christina Crespi, authority deputy director. Survey respondents are being asked about all educational options, including private and charter schools, she added. “In two to three months, we should have good numbers.”

Last October, authority directors questioned whether impact fees collected downtown from developers are being

spent downtown, especially on the creation and expansion of schools.

“We want to be a stop on the spending train,” said authority chair Ken Russell, who is a Miami commissioner, in October. The school board is “not unaware” of downtown’s needs, he said.

But it must balance the education requirements of the entire county – including neighborhoods that have failing schools with low enrollments – when allocating funds. “They have to improve the schools on the perimeter before injecting money into downtown. The market is going to decide. If we don’t have adequate schools, people are not going to live here.”