

Miami Herald

April 27, 2017

Circulation: 86,941 / UMV: 8,942,930



A rendering of Brickell Preparatory Academy, a new Mater Academy planned for the Brickell area. **Courtesy of CIVICA**

Brickell area in line for two new schools — but are they really needed?

After a lobbying campaign by parents and powerful business interests, the upscale Brickell area will likely get not one but two new schools.

The first is a traditional public school for middle and possibly high school students on SW 10th Street at the [site of an affordable housing project](#). The second is a Mater Academy K-12 charter school on SW 17th Road and SW 2nd Court alongside Interstate 95.

That was welcome news to a group of real estate agents and bankers who met at the Four Seasons Hotel on Tuesday to discuss education options in Miami's urban core, a topic their clients often ask about when considering whether to buy a condo in one of Brickell's gleaming highrises.

“Gratefully we went vertical, revitalized our downtown and created fantastic neighborhoods in the urban core that provide a fantastic, wonderful lifestyle,” said Alicia Cervera, a Miami Downtown Development Authority board member. “But in the middle of that we have a gaping hole and that is with the education.”

Brickell's population has grown over the past few years, from approximately 26,000 residents in 2010 to close to 35,000 in 2016, according to a 2016 demographic [report from the Miami DDA](#). The greater downtown area as a whole has also seen substantial growth, with its population projected to grow from 88,000 to more than 106,000 residents by 2021.

But there are questions about whether new downtown schools are really needed now when there is plenty of room at existing ones nearby, which could later simply be expanded.

The issue is not just the number of seats available, however, said Samuel Joseph, the Director of Advocacy at the Brickell Homeowners Association. The problem is finding spaces at schools that are desirable to Brickell residents.

"Families now are making the decision to leave, which for us, and I know for you, is a problem," Joseph told the real estate agents and bankers at the Four Seasons event, which was hosted by CREW-Miami, a commercial real estate group. He said parents in Brickell "want seats at high-quality schools for our children."

Many of the nearby schools don't rank among the county's highest performers. But there are other issues, left unstated at the meeting, that likely [influence decisions about where parents send their kids](#). Many of the nearby schools largely serve low-income minority students and are located in neighborhoods with higher crime rates.

Plans for two new Brickell schools

- 1 Charter school network Mater Academy plans to build a new K-12 school for 3,000 students in Brickell.
- 2 The Miami-Dade school district is negotiating with Related Urban Development Group, Miami-Dade County and the City of Miami to build a school at The Gallery at West Brickell site.



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The downtown area's growth has been driven mainly by young professionals, many of them single, while the percentage of households with families is decreasing, according to the Miami DDA's report. And while there are close to 14,000 children and teens living downtown, with as many as 7,500 more poised to move into the area once new residential towers are completed, nearby public schools have plenty of room for additional students.

Booker T. Washington High in Overtown, which serves part of Little Havana and the largely black Overtown neighborhood, sits half-empty with more than a thousand slots available for Brickell residents. Nearby Dunbar K-8 Center and Phillis Wheatley Elementary each have roughly 400 empty spots, and hundreds more children could be accommodated at Frederick Douglass Elementary, Jose De Diego Middle School and Southside Elementary. Seven charter schools are also located within a four-mile radius of Brickell.

Some of the schools perform better than others. Jose De Diego Middle School has a D according to the most recent state grades, which are based on standardized test results, graduation rates and other factors, while Dunbar, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. have Cs and Southside has an A.



School Board member Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall said Miami-Dade might eventually need to build more schools, but for the time being she believes Brickell's affluent residents could be accommodated nearby. "We have wonderful academic programs that are second to none that would benefit all students," she said.

The new public school in the works for Brickell would sit on top of a parking garage at The Gallery at West Brickell, two residential towers that will go up at 201 SW 10th Street. The project, which has yet to be finalized, is a collaboration between the Miami-Dade school district, Related Urban Development Group and the county and city governments. It might also incorporate [affordable housing options for teachers](#).

The Mater Academy charter school, to be named [Brickell Preparatory Academy](#), would start off with younger grades and build up through 12th grade to accommodate a total of 3,000 students. Mater plans to build a seven-story building that includes an indoor gym.



A rendering of The Gallery at West Brickell, the site planned for a new school in Miami's Brickell neighborhood.

Courtesy of Related Urban Development Group

The Mater charter school network, which runs more than a dozen schools in Florida, first tried to build a Brickell campus in 2011, but ran into opposition over traffic concerns. Mater Academy has purchased land next to the original site and is now hopeful that the extra space will alleviate the concerns, said Mater Academy President Antonio Roca. If the city OKs the plans, the school could open 18 months after approval is granted.

The Miami-Dade school district has also allocated \$21 million to expand Southside Elementary School in Brickell and \$43 million to create more space for students at existing downtown schools north of the Miami River. The district is also considering expanding iPrep Academy, a popular downtown magnet school that is

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currently open to anyone in Miami-Dade. The extra spaces would likely be earmarked for downtown residents.

In the meantime, Bendross-Mindingall hopes Brickell parents will turn their attention to other downtown schools that could use extra resources.

“We need that type of passion from our Brickell parents in schools that already exist in our system,” she said. “In doing so, a collective force can be created in raising the level and standards of all our schools. We need all our parents, businesses, and community stakeholders to invest resources into our existing schools.”
