

By Jason Garcia

Outside the Box

Specialty schools are often a better fit for students from challenging economic backgrounds.

SOME OF THE high schools doing the best work with students from challenging economic backgrounds are non-traditional: Trade schools, themed schools and research academies.

In fact, according to Florida Department of Education data for the 2015-16 school year, four of the five top-performing non-charter high schools in the state were either trade or theme schools.

The list included Lorenzo Walker Technical High School in Naples, Law Enforcement Officers' Memorial High School in Miami, Tampa Bay Technical High School and Miami Lakes Educational Center.

Such schools have some inherent advantages over conventional public schools when it comes to rankings. The state, for instance, awards points for students who achieve industry certifications, which are a point of particular emphasis at trade or theme schools. While public, the schools are also typically admissions-based, which means they tend to attract more motivated students and parents.

But supporters say specialty schools are also sometimes a better fit for economically disadvantaged stu-

dents, by emphasizing subjects they are particularly interested in or by more directly connecting their high school educations to good-paying jobs — whether the ultimate goal is to build a career from there or to earn enough money to pay for college later.

Students “view our school as a door that can open other opportunities to them,” says Jeff Rexford, principal at Lorenzo Walker.

The Collier County school, which is affiliated with Lorenzo Walker Technical College, was the top-performing overall Title I high school in Florida last year. It rated 40th among all high schools.

About three-quarters of the school's students receive free or reduced-price lunches. About two-thirds are Hispanic, with white students about 19% and black students about 12%. It's a small school: Admission is capped at about 150 students per grade level.

Among the advantages Lorenzo Walker offers is the ability for students to dual enroll in both the high school and the technical college — and, in some cases, even triple enroll, by simultaneously earning a diploma from the high school, an industry certification from the technical col-

lege and college credits from Florida SouthWestern State College.

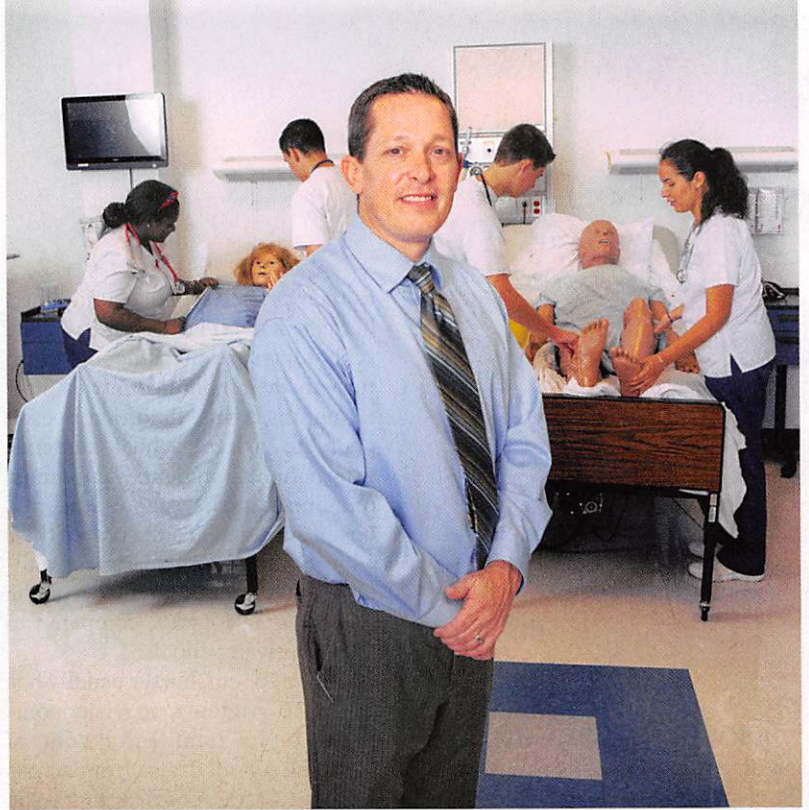
Three of Lorenzo Walker's students earned associate's degrees last year before they had even walked across the podium at their high school graduation.

Specialty schools are becoming more popular with more affluent families as well, in part because they tend to be so highly rated. Miami-Dade's Design and Architecture Senior High School, ranked as the second-best high school in the state by *U.S. News and World Report*, is one perennially well-regarded example.

“Parents of students can vote with their feet. So many families today are picking specialized education choices,” says Bill Sublette, school board chairman in Orange County, who has advocated for more themed magnet programs.

Central Florida's largest school district doesn't have any themed schools yet, though it has plans to build a foreign-language-themed elementary school and two gifted-themed K-8 schools.

“I think you have to trust parents to know what in their minds is best for their children,” Sublette says. ■



Principal Jeff Rexford's Lorenzo Walker Technical High School is among the best non-charter high schools in the state.

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