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Turkish Charter Schools Are No Delight

HARMONY SCHOOLS CAUSE DISCORD

by MerryLynn Gerstenschlager, the former vice-president and education liaison for Texas Eagle Forum, a 14-year Republican precinct chairman, and 2018 member of the Texas Republican State Platform Committee.

The Harmony Public Schools are taxpayer-funded charter schools in Texas. In 2011, a Texas legislator filed a bill that would allow charter operators to use the Permanent School Fund to guarantee school construction bonds. At the time, existing law only allowed traditional public schools to use the PSF to guarantee school construction bonds. The PSF also provides student textbooks. At the time, the PSF was worth \$25 billion. Today, it is worth \$47 billion.

Also in 2011, the Texas Senate passed a resolution honoring Fethullah Gulen, the controversial Turkish imam who founded the *Gulen Movement* and who lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania. The Gulen Movement is known as Hizmet, which means “service.” Followers are required to give forty percent of their wages to the Gulen Movement for Hizmet. Gulen fled Turkey in the late 1990s when he

was accused of trying to return Turkey to an Islamic caliphate. Several other states passed almost identical resolutions honoring Gulen.

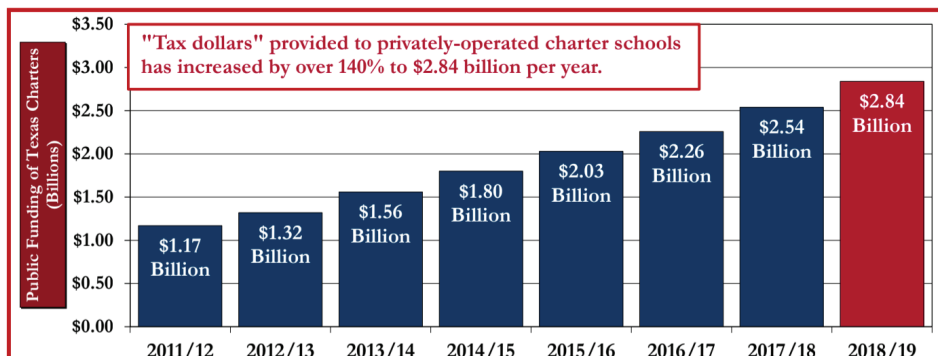
Fethullah Gulen is the same Gulen who has since been accused of instigating the failed coup in Turkey in 2016. He is the same Gulen who Turkish president Recep Erdogan has demanded the U.S. extradite to Turkey to stand trial for the coup. He is the same Gulen who Lt. General Michael Flynn has been accused of allegedly plotting to kidnap to return to Turkey to stand trial.

Back in 2011, the Harmony Public Schools, which then had 35 campuses, lobbied hard to pass the PSF construction bond guarantee bill. Another Turkish man, Dr. Soner Tarim founded the HPS in 2000.

Peyton Wolcott joined me in creating an awareness of HPS. Our main concern was that Texas law does not

require charter operators to be American citizens, which is required of our local elected school board trustees. Also, since charter school operators are appointed, rather than elected like local school board trustees, there is NO accountability to the taxpayers. Our attempts to pass a law requiring charter operators to be American citizens failed, as well as our attempts to pass a law requiring ALL school check registers be placed online.

There are 26 other states with taxpayer-paid and Turkish-run charter schools. In 2014, the FBI raided 19 Turkish-run charter schools in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Turkish-run American charter schools are known to use the H1-B Visa program for importing Turkish teachers to work in these schools. Today, there are about 160 Turkish-run charter schools in America. Operators deny that they are affiliated. These Gulen-style schools exist in many other countries. Russia has outlawed them. Of course, Gulen always denies that the schools are affiliated with him. Gulen is reported to be worth \$25 billion; yet how can that be possible when all he does is broadcast sermons and write books? Could it have anything to do with Hizmet?



(Continued on page 2)

Four common threads tie the schools together. Gulen schools stress Turkish culture, teach Turkish song and dance, offer Turkish cooking classes, and offer Turkish language courses. I have always wondered if these schools also teach their students about the abuse of rights, particularly women's rights, in Turkey?

Where will an impressionable child's loyalty lie after being immersed in Turkish culture for his years spent at a Turkish-run charter school? Fethullah Gulen has a great deal of influence among his millions of followers throughout the world. How much influence does he have over thousands of American school children right here in his own backyard?

Mark Hall, an Austin, Texas attorney and filmmaker, investigated the Harmony Schools for five years. He interviewed former Harmony teachers, former Harmony students, Harmony school construction contractors, and Turkish journalists who had been persecuted for exposing the Gulen movement. He documented how the FBI had raided one of these schools in Louisiana.

More information about Mark Hall's film, *Killing Ed*, can be found at www.killinged.com.

Peyton Wolcott and I pored over campaign finance reports and publicized that several legislators had taken free trips to Turkey. The *Austin American Statesman* ran a front-page article about the free trips. The *New York Times* wrote a June 6, 2011 article about Gulen's ties to HPS. CBS "60 Minutes" featured a program on Gulen; CBS reporter Leslie Stahl was granted entry to Gulen's home, but he refused to speak with her.

In 2011, Peyton Wolcott discovered a video at a Houston-area HPS website. The film was titled *A Changed Muslim*. Some Harmony Students who were members of the

school's Muslim Students Association had made the film and entered it in a contest held by the Muslim Interscholastic Tournament. After Wolcott posted the film at her website, along with some storyboards she had created from screenshots from the film, it was immediately removed from YouTube. MSA was founded by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1963 at the University of Illinois at Urbana. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) has introduced legislation to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, but the bill has yet to pass. The MSA has over 700 chapters in American universities and high schools.

Various news articles report that Soner Tarim denies that the HPS are related to Fethullah Gulen. Dr. Tarim is on record saying that he has only been "inspired" by Gulen. Dr. Tarim, who came to America as a graduate student and later became an American citizen, recently told the Texas Education Agency while applying for a brand new charter school chain, the Royal Charter Schools, that he "cannot go back to Turkey." Can he not go back to Turkey because of his close ties to Gulen?

The charter school PSF construction bond guarantee passed the Texas legislature in 2011 and charter schools rapidly began to construct new school buildings. Today, the Harmony Public Schools boast 57 campuses with an enrollment of over 35,000 students.

Dr. Tarim left HPS in 2017 and since then, he has worked to establish charter schools in other states. His Lead Academy charter school in Alabama has met great public pushback. He also encountered public pushback in Washington County, Alabama where he recently opened another charter school called Woodland Prep. Dr. Tarim also has charters in Nevada called Nevada Strong. You can learn more about what's happening in Alabama from Larry Lee's newsletter

available at larryeducation.com.

In June 2019, Soner Tarim appeared before the Texas State Board of Education to apply to open his new Royal Charter School chain in Texas.

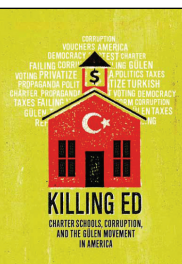
Two Alabama teachers traveled to Texas to testify against the Royal Charter Schools. Mark Hall provided facts he learned while filming *Killing Ed*. My testimony referenced a recent HPS graduation in Sugar Land, Texas where a HPS graduate held up a large Palestinian flag while seated on the stage. No American flags or Texas flags were displayed. Peyton Wolcott cautioned about financial transparency. SBOE member Pat Hardy commented to Soner Tarim that schools that were awarded federal Race To The Top-D Funds required implementation of the Common Core Standards. Miss Hardy also mentioned that the HPS had been awarded RTTT-D funds. Dr. Tarim's response failed to address Miss Hardy's comments. Note that Common Core has been outlawed in Texas.

John Guandolo of Understanding the Threat, a national security consulting company with an expertise in the Islamic movement in the United States, sent a letter to the SBOE regarding the Royal Charter application. Guandolo advised the SBOE about investigations surrounding the Gulen network and the 2012 misuse of funds by the Harmony Public Schools. Learn more at understandingthethreat.com

Ultimately, the Texas SBOE vetoed Soner Tarim's Royal Charter School application.

But, like whack-a-mole, Gulen-style schools will be back — either in Texas or your state.

Only American citizens should be allowed to open charter schools. We must also require financial transparency of our taxpayer money by requiring that school check registers be placed online. 



WE ARE PAYING FOR CHARTER SCHOOL INVASION

by Peyton Wolcott, founder of a successful grassroots public school check register transparency project.

Twenty years ago, about the same time our Turkish friends suddenly came to the U.S. en masse for graduate school and then decided that even though Turkish schools were only in the 30s to 70s in world rankings, and ours in the top 20, they would help us anyway — the federal government simultaneously began flooding states with easy charter school money and undersupervised funds for underserved students. The subsequent decision of our new Turkish friends to open charter schools for underserved students might seem to the casual observer to be a genius move. Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu said to aim for what is weakest.

Texas boasts the largest Turkish-run charter operation in the U.S.: 57 schools and 35,000 students, 100 percent college acceptance rate, and academics they tell us are excellent. Harmony Public Schools' approaching 20th anniversary makes this a great time to take a closer look at their promises made — and promises kept.

What Harmony said in 2000

Harmony's "CEO [and principal] will possess ... Texas supervisor certification," they said. But Soner Tarim, Harmony's first principal then later its first superintendent then CEO, has never held any State Board for Educator Certification credentials; in fact, when Tarim was questioned by elected State Board of Education member Georgina Perez on June 14, 2019, she had to correct him when he referred to SBEC certification as "ABC."

Although our Turkish friends told the Texas Education Agency in 2000 they were going to include parents and citizens, every board

since for Harmony and its three successive charter management organizations (Cosmos Foundation, Charter School Solutions and Harmony Education Foundation) — has shared one common trait: the voting majority is Turkish men.

Masters of self-promotion?

Harmony told us from the beginning they had an inside track on teaching and word of mouth would bring students in. Another peg in their PR package was their near-mythic stack of 38,000-plus applications. If true, why did Harmony just spend \$2 million taxpayer dollars for newspaper ads and flyers and promotional items? And why did taxpayers spend \$926,781.75 for Harmony to have the same helpful trainings at Texas' regional Education Service Centers as our neighborhood schools? Plus millions more that taxpayers spent on student test prep to boost those unverified scores?

Is Harmony really excellent?

Pressed for proof that anyone at TEA had ever in-person monitored Harmony's accountability tests, the source for their excellence claims, TEA supplied no names.

Re Harmony's 100 percent college acceptance rate: It's only at North American University, which automatically accepts Harmony graduates. NAU's seven Turkish male trustees include former Cosmos Trading president Abdullah Marulcu, former Harmony chief of academics Kadir Almus and NAU's president Serif Ali Tekalan who hails from Istanbul's short-lived (est. 1996) private Fatih Üniversitesi-

si, which was shut down in 2016 by the Turkish government.

In 2000, Harmony told TEA their goal was to teach three languages: Spanish, French, and German.



So why did HPS spend \$338,778.05 at Clifton, N.J.'s Antstores on Turkish textbooks last year — but nary a penny for German textbooks? Oops.

There are checks a-plenty for bouncy house rentals and custom shirts plus myriad catering and meals including a \$744.30 tab at Empire Turkish Grill whose \$11.95 lunch specials do not include *zahtar* dip, an extra \$2.50.

Charter boards appointed, not elected

In my local schools when there were serious ethics issues, a small group of us organized and found five candidates to fill each of our newly vacant trustee spots. We told the candidates we would help elect them if they would agree to sign a public pledge they would not do business with the school district during their tenure and all agreed. Voters loved the idea of voluntary accountability and all five won their spots in May 2004.

But because charter schools' boards are appointed, not elected, with Harmony and the other charter operators we have no such ballot-box recourse. In fact, Texas taxpayers are dependent on — is there

————— (Continued on page 4)

a nice way to put this — TEA’s charter division’s nine appointed bureaucrats (of approximately 1,000 TEA employees). For the record: All TEA employees I’ve met have been nice. But that does not mean they will return my phone calls and emails — or yours.

Did anyone at TEA know about Harmony’s \$2,090 bouncy house rentals? Pressed recently, TEA was unable to confirm eyeballing any actual Harmony checks. Is that any way to run a bank?

From short stick to CEO of a national empire?

So who is Soner Tarim? In his own words earlier this year to Texas’ SBOE: “When I started in, uh, 2000, my first charter, I was teaching at university, and, uh, you know, when I established Harmony Public Schools and, uh, five of us, we had five board members, and I pulled a short stick and became the principal, I had no principal experience, no principal certification in my life.”

Years ago during a lecture, architect Frank Gehry said if you think a building is well designed, imagine 100 like it. Are students amoebas on a petri dish to be prodded and pulled with every new fashion in education? Is the goal to come up with the perfect formula and make 100 — or millions?

Soner left Harmony in 2017, sights apparently set on “building a new CMO intended to be national in scope, Royal School Services,” according to one of his business partners, Nevada Strong’s Annette Dawson Owens. (Note to Annette: Soner’s new charter school business is *Royal Public Schools* and his new CMO is *Unity School Services*.)

At the beginning, Turkish charter operators across America touted their Science, Technology, Engineering and Math emphasis. But Soner

told Texans earlier this year he had found STEM lacking and started Royal so he could add Social and Emotional Learning. Other buzzwords like “incubate” and “replicate” also pepper the former Harmony CEO’s talks. Were these his own observations — or edu-fashions *du jour* picked up at Aspen Institute or Broad Foundation?

Regardless, how could SEL have been the cause for Soner’s leaving Harmony — when Harmony’s website features both SEL and STEM? In a revelatory aside, Soner told the SBOE he was starting Unity SS “to pay the bills.” According to published reports, the one charter Soner has been able to open in Alabama was paying him \$30,000 per month — for 360 students.

Hard to keep up. Where is Soner today? Nevada? Alabama? Washington, D.C.? Houston? And wearing which hat: CEO, business partner, charter enthusiast — or non-credentialed academic leading 35,000 impressionable young students?

Hearts pure as the driven snow

Washington, D.C. has been eager for the past two decades to give away our tax dollars to charters. This past spring the Network for Public Education reported “the federal government...wastes hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars on grants awarded to charter schools that never open or quickly close, [and the] grant approval process appears to be based on the application alone, with no attempt to verify the information presented.” Didn’t Reagan tell us, “Trust — but verify”?

Walk softly and carry a big — question mark

According to Soner’s application to TEA, Royal was named in honor of George III, the same despotic tyrant our forefathers cited 27 injuries and usurpations by in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Royal’s appli-

cation says George III created the “first documented charter school in history... in 1733” — except George III wasn’t born until 1738. Nobody at TEA noticed?

If he separated from Harmony in 2017, why in 2018 did Texas taxpayers give Soner \$149,877.05 for his Harmony office expenses including phone, internet and “drinking water services”? Tap water’s okay for students but not for a CEO?

Soner’s separation from Harmony meant walking away from indebtedness in the millions including “Education Facility Lease Revenue Bonds,” rated BBB out of La Paz, Arizona — leaving Texas taxpayers to forever make rent payments to CMOs. Indeed, there are \$9 million in rent payments on Harmony’s 2018-2019 check register. Who approved this?

Are BBB bonds a good investment? When asked, one investment advisor joked, “No, no, no!”

My magic wand

If I had one and could wave it: TEA, D.C. and state education departments across America would act less like cheerleaders and more like hall monitors — and the bankers they actually are. And charter school operators would be held to the same standards as other taxpayer-funded public schools: No CMOs, no empires. One top job, uh, at a time at, uh, one limited-size charter. Please pass the *zahtar*. 

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