Concept Schools:  
Poor Results, Worse Oversight

On July 15, a panel of teachers who formerly worked for the Horizon Science Academy of Dayton told the State Board of Education that they personally witnessed testing irregularities, teachers using racial slurs, an in-class groping game and an administrator who failed to tell parents that their 6th and 8th grade students engaged in oral sex at a school function. Two days later, legal counsel for the Ohio Department of Education sent letters asking Dayton Police and Montgomery County Children’s Services to investigate allegations that fell under their jurisdictions. The referrals not only identified the wrong, they also did not provide the names of school employees who the teachers identified as complicit in the sex scandals.

On Aug. 7, 2014, a Columbus-based public relations firm hired by the Horizon schools characterized the teacher testimony as a “mountain of deliberately distributed misinformation,” and accused teacher unions and their allies of launching a “smear campaign” to undermine “the positive influence of Horizon Schools in Ohio.”

The Ohio Department of Education’s continued failure to properly address this scandal, the ridiculous charges of a “smear campaign” and the serious nature of some of our findings compel ProgressOhio to issue this preliminary report. ProgressOhio analyzed 19 Ohio charter schools managed by Concept Schools.

**Brian Rothenberg**  
Executive Director  
ProgressOhio
SUMMARY

The rise of Concept schools in Ohio has been aided by lax charter regulations, its aggressive marketing efforts and a political climate that favors continued expansion of charter schools. Concept Schools manages 19 publicly funded charter schools in Ohio that operate under the names of Horizon Science Academy and Noble Academy. In exchange for management services, Concept is paid 12 percent of each school’s state funding, state audit records show. Concept – a non-profit that was founded in Cleveland but is now based in Chicago – is affiliated with the charismatic Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, who is living in exile in Pennsylvania. Most top administrators in the Ohio schools are Turkish immigrants with ties to the Gulen movement.

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) tracks background checks and lists credentials for school teachers, administrators and staff, but dozens of employees have no background checks listed with ODE. Moreover, the schools have hired questionable teachers and administrators such as a middle school principal who was denied a teaching license for leaving his infant in a car while he went shopping, a convicted felon who oversees student discipline and a Dean of Students who a federal judge said has “no educational certifications or experience.”

Concept Schools are also the subject of an on-going Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) inquiry. Agents have raided Concept’s headquarters and 19 schools, including four in Ohio. The FBI has not disclosed the nature of the investigation, but search warrants and a subpoena obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times show federal officials are interested in the flow of public money from the schools to businesses run or owned by Gulen followers. Agents sought a wide range of documents pertaining to Concept President Sedat Duman and to founder Taner Ertekin, who brought the charter chain to Ohio in the late 1990s. Also named in a search warrant is Ozgur Balsoy, former administrator of a Concept-run charter in Columbus and founder of Advanced Solutions in Education, a company that provides services to Horizon schools and is among the businesses the FBI has targeted.

The Concept chain places a strong emphasis on aggressive public relations. It trains school officials how to court politicians and community leaders and how to trumpet the school’s achievements.

In Ohio, Concept often boasts that high schools in Columbus and Cleveland have been designated Blue Ribbon Schools, an honor the US Department of Education gives to schools with stellar academic achievement. Despite those honors, the schools have inconsistent academic records, receiving high marks one year then failing grades the next. All of Concept’s Ohio high schools have a poor record of graduating their students.
FINDINGS

Poor Academic Results

Although Concept touts its emphasis on college preparation, just 2 of the 19 schools – high schools in Cleveland and Columbus – received an A rating for meeting 9 of 10 performance standards, according to the latest state report cards released last week. Both schools received an F the previous year. Three other Concept schools received a D in performance standards: The Horizon middle school in Cleveland and Noble Academies in Cleveland and Columbus. The remaining 14 schools received an F.

Both the Cleveland and Columbus Horizon Science Academies have been designated in the past as Blue Ribbon Schools by the US Department of Education. They score higher than their sister schools on the science portion of state-mandated tests, but their scores are trending lower.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
<th>2012-2013</th>
<th>2013-2014</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland Horizon</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>67.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Columbus Horizon</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>72.6</td>
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The Dayton and Toledo high schools have among the lowest Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) Science scores. Dayton scored 50 percent proficient in the 2012-2013 school year and 36.5 percent proficient the following year. Toledo scored 48.8 percent proficient in science in the 2011-2012 year.

Teachers, parents and former students have described these “science academies” as having either no or poorly functioning laboratory facilities. During testimony before the Ohio Board of Education, teacher from the Dayton school identified inferior labs among their criticisms of the school.

Another key measurement of a high school’s success is whether it graduates students within four years. All five of Horizon’s high schools received a D or F grade for four-year graduation rates,
new state report cards show. Horizon schools in Cleveland and Cincinnati scored a D, while counterparts in Columbus, Dayton and Cincinnati received an F, the report cards show. The previous year, both of the Blue Ribbon schools received an F for their four-year graduation rates.

The schools also have low student retention rates. For instance, in the fall of 2010, the five Horizon schools enrolled a total of 462 freshmen. Four years later, the Class of 2014 cohort had dwindled down to only 250 students.

The following is the Grade 9 to Grade 12 enrollment change with the percentage of students who stayed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horizon Cincinnati</td>
<td>44 to 25</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horizon Cleveland High</td>
<td>167 to 88</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horizon Columbus High</td>
<td>136 to 80</td>
<td>59%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horizon Dayton High</td>
<td>41 to 32</td>
<td>76%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horizon Toledo High</td>
<td>74 to 25</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
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There also is growing evidence that Horizon schools have tampered with standardized testing or used other nefarious means to try and improve their academic standings. Some examples:

- In an interview with ProgressOhio, Amy Britton-Laidman, a former administrative assistant from Cleveland’s Noble Academy said the school routinely found reasons to expel some of the worst-performing students before standardized tests were to take place. She also said that although Nobel is supposed to take all students, it used entrance exams to cherry pick higher-achieving students, then lied to parents of low-achieving students by saying the school had a waiting list. She has been interviewed by the FBI but agents asked her not to provide details of their conversations.

- Scott Courtney, a former teacher from Horizon’s Cleveland high school, also said he was pressured to expel poor performing students but refused to do so. Courtney, who spent seven years at the school, was generally positive about his experience but said he became disillusioned when the focus moved from educating kids to promoting the school. He was among the teachers tapped to undergo PR training at Concept’s headquarters but said his marketing duties interfered with his teaching. His comments echoed those of Kellie Kochensparger, one of the teachers who appeared before the state school board. She also went through Concept’s PR training and said the school emphasizes image over academics.
Three former teachers from the Dayton school told the state school board that they witnessed school administrators darkening in circles on student tests. State law prohibits test tampering, and strict protocols dictate how standardized tests must immediately be collected and locked to prevent cheating.

The Horizon Science Academy of Dayton offered students $20 and pizza to answer unanswered questions on standardized tests, according to a July 27 report by the Dayton Daily News I-Team. Former student Hakkimte Sun told the newspaper that the school’s assistant director, Ergun Sevilmis, recruited students for the task. Sevilmis escorted them to a small office where hundreds of filled-out test sheets were in boxes. The administrator instructed the students to darken bubbles on the test sheets that had marks through them and urged them to fill in questions that weren’t answered, Sun said.

A study by Innovation Ohio suggests cheating on standardized tests at the Horizon high school in Columbus. IO discovered a large discrepancy between scores students received on the state Performance Index with the scores those same students received on the ACT college entrance exam. Performance Index tests are administered by the schools themselves, while ACT tests are administered by an independent testing company. Columbus students scored 98.6 on the state Performance Index, slightly below the state public school district average of 98.9. But on the ACT test, Horizon Columbus students had an average score of just 17, which put them in the 28th percentile of all students taking the ACT. In other words, 72% of all ACT test-takers scored higher than Horizon Columbus students — and just 16 of Ohio’s 612 school districts had ACT scores that were the same or worse. Yet Horizon Columbus students somehow managed to achieve a higher Performance Index score than 269 Ohio school districts.

Similar discrepancies have been documented at Concept schools in other states.

Former students and teachers recounted instances where students who had been absent for months mysteriously passed standardized tests or graduated on time. Jasmine Jones, past president of her senior class at the Horizon Science Academy of Dayton, said it happened routinely. “There was one girl who didn’t pass one part of the OGT,” she said. “She knew nothing, and there she was, walking across the stage to get her diploma.”
WEAK OVERSIGHT

Despite Horizon’s assertion that it only hired high-quality staff, that is not always the case. Some examples:

- In 2002, the Ohio Department of Education declined to give a teaching license to Muhammet “Matt” Yildiz, after learning that he left his 1-year-old in a car while he went shopping, ODE records show. Still, in 2010 he obtained a principal’s license. Until recently, he had been director of Concept’s middle school in Columbus. Concept’s website now lists him as principal of a Chicago middle school.

- During the 2006-2007 school year, the Horizon Science Academy of Dayton placed convicted felon Robert Merkle in charge of student discipline. Merkle, a lay minister, was hired after receiving an 18-month jail sentence for stealing from a financially troubled cemetery he was entrusted to oversee. Merkle stacked the cemetery board with family members and stole $93,000, nearly the entire endowment fund. In addition to using the money for things such as toys and satellite TV, he also paid for his grandchildren’s private school tuition, the Cincinnati Enquirer reported.

- US District Court judge said it was not in dispute that Horizon Science Academy Denison Middle School hired a dean of students with “no educational certifications or experience – [and] indeed, had been accused of sexual misconduct while in a university setting in another state.”

- Horizon promoted Ali Kucuker to principal (replacing Muhammet Yildiz), despite serving as director of the embattled Horizon Science Academy of Dayton. As the school attempted the counter the teachers’ testimony, a 2014 memo from the school’s own Dean of Students told of a school so out of control that it had “condoms in the hall” and students having sex in the in-school suspension room. The memo warned, “We are possibly facing four different lawsuits.” Kucuker is now director of the Noble Academy of Columbus, according to his LinkedIn profile.

- Hasan Kose, a former director at the Noble Academy in Cleveland, conceded that a Turkish teacher who witnessed a female student getting beat up lacked the training to properly intervene, Carmen Thompson, the mother of the student, said in an interview. “We put her in that school because they said they had a zero-tolerance policy for fights, and when my child said she was bullied, I went to talk with the school.’’ The bullying continued, she said, despite assurances that the problem would be solved. Frustrated by the inaction, her husband went to the school and witnessed their daughter getting assaulted by other students – while a teacher stood by and did nothing. “The head of the school told me the teacher didn’t know what to do when this kind of thing happens but he had to know that doing nothing at all was
‘‘Thompson transferred her daughter to a new school where she had no similar problems.

**Missing Background Checks**

The Ohio Department of Education tracks background checks and lists credentials for school teachers, administrators and staff, but dozens of employees have no background checks listed with ODE.

For example, at the Horizon Science Academy of Cleveland, nine individuals who have been paid by the school between 2010 and 2013 either have no background listed with ODE or cannot be found in ODE’s system at all. School officials did not return calls seeking an explanation.

Responsibility for insuring compliance with required background checks and other matters rests with the Educational Service Center (ESC) of Lake Erie West Community Schools Center. The center “requires affidavits signed by the school board president and the school leader (that certify completion of background checks for all school staff),’’ the center’s interim director, Apryl Morin, said in an email. She provided copies of affidavits asserting that the background checks were conducted but no explanation for why ODE has no record of them. Her colleague, Emily Vassar, said the ESC does site visits to the schools but only spot checks files for background checks, estimating that about 25 percent of the required documents are physically examined.

The Cleveland high school had the largest number of missing background checks. Only the Columbus high school had documented checks on all its employees. The comparisons were made by searching the teacher salary database at the Buckeye Institute for all school employees, then crosschecking each school’s list with the ODE website to tell when – and whether – each had a background check from the FBI or the Ohio Attorney General’s Bureau of Criminal Investigation.

In 11 instances, ODE had no record at all of the employees, even though they clearly had been paid by one or more Concept schools. Other individuals who initially appeared to have no background checks or could not be found in the system were eventually located. Their names were either misspelled, their first and last names reversed or they were listed under nicknames.

**Unqualified teachers**

One common theme raised before the state school board centered on the large number of unqualified Turkish teachers. They told of one teacher who only showed videos during class, another who periodically slept in class and others who could not properly teach due to poor language skills.
A pattern of Horizon hiring teachers with poor language skills is documented in news reports, teacher testimony, state audit findings and even recently unclassified cables from the US State Department that question the qualifications of Turkish citizens seeking H1-B visas to teach in American schools. In one case, a Turkish teachers’ language skills were so poor that the school decided he could not do his job. From 2006-2012, Celep Ramazan, a Turkish immigrant, worked at Horizon schools in Springfield, Cleveland and Toledo. “Mr. Ramazan’s English is not good enough to do his job,” according to a 2006 email from Hakan Bagciolgu, a math teacher at the Horizon Denison school. “I had to help him several times. Anyway, he cannot come to our school for two days. When guests come to our region, they find him. I think our school needs a full-time man. He will make pizza sales. He will care about our school.”

In 2002, state audits found thousands of public dollars “illegally expended” to help finance the US citizenship process for Turkish employees of a Gulen-affiliated school. Auditors noted that some had no classroom experience and spoke broken English. The trend continued, according to State Department cables that note the large number of Turkish residents seeking visas to teach in American charter schools affiliated with the Gulen movement. “Their qualifications were uneven at best,” according to one 2008 cable. Some applications were denied “based on lack of qualifications, such as their inability to speak English.” A 2009 cable recommended “these H1B candidates received a high degree of scrutiny before any visas are approved” and suggests that the school be examined “for compliance with US immigration laws.”

The US Department of Labor has an ongoing investigation into a Cleveland school’s use of H1-B visas. Investigators asked Horizon Science Academy Denison, in Cleveland, for all its H1-B visa documentation. At the same time, state auditors were poring over the school’s books. Auditors found immigration fees and legal fees for school officials' families and others living in Turkey. In some cases, auditors found payments were made to individuals who were never employed by any of the schools.

Auditors found 19 Turkish immigrants were paid nearly $13,000 for what they called "illegal immigration fees." The money has since been re-paid.

**FBI Raids Concept Headquarters and Schools**

The FBI has an on-going investigation into Concept Schools that dates back several years. In June, the agents executed search warrant at Concept’s headquarters and at 19 schools, including four in Ohio. The US Department of Education and Federal Communications Commission were also involved in the raids. Officials would not disclose details of the investigation but an FBI spokeswoman called it an “ongoing white-collar crime matter.”
Search warrants and a subpoena obtained by the Chicago Sun Times show federal officials have a particular interest in the flow of public money to businesses run or owned by Gulen followers. The businesses provide goods and services to Concept schools. Agents sought a wide range of documents pertaining to Concept President Sedat Duman and to founder Taner Ertekin, who brought the charter chain to Ohio in the late 1990s.

Contractors mentioned in the warrant include:

- Advanced Solutions for Education of Schaumburg and company founder Ozgur Balsoy, who used to be administrator of a Concept-run school in Columbus. The company has provided consulting services to Concept. Two other ASE executives — Huseyin Alper Akyurek — also previously worked for Concept as administrators at Ohio schools.

- Cambridge Technologies of Chesterland, Ohio and owner Stephen Draviam.

- Illinois-based Core Group Inc. and its president Ertugrul Gurbuz. Core is described in federal records as performing much of the work for Concept under the E-Rate program. A Core subsidiary was cited in a 2012 audit in Georgia that questioned why a Gulen-affiliated charter school in that state bought polo shirts from Core Design & Production when “there were cheaper prices to be obtained.” The principal of the Georgia school told auditors he looked online for a polo shirt vendor and found Core; auditors said they found no mention of polo shirts on the company’s website.

Investigators also sought documents from companies hired to assist Concept with the E-Rate program which helps pay for high-tech upgrades. The federal E-Rate program requires competitive bidding when hiring contractors in an effort to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent wisely. In Ohio, charter schools are exempt from competitive bid requirements on building projects and school bus purchases but traditional public schools are not exempt. All told, charters are exempt from more than 150 requirements that public schools must follow, according to a 2012 analysis by the Legislative Service Commission, Ohio’s non-partisan bill drafting agency.