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Ohio Department of Education
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Dr. Ross and Members of the Board:

My name is Denis Smith and I worked for the Ohio Department of Education's Office of Community Schools from 2007 to 2011. At ODE, my duties centered on assisting charter sponsors with their oversight responsibilities. Much of my time was spent providing training on laws and regulations as well as providing technical assistance to school developers and parents with their questions and concerns.

In performing our charter school oversight responsibilities, we were understaffed back then and the problem has worsened. In 2005, before my tenure with ODE, the agency had twice as many on staff to work with half as many charter schools as there are today. In looking at that disturbing trend, there seems to have been a conscious decision to cut oversight and do so as the number of charters has exploded. It is no surprise that so many teachers and parents are speaking out to demand real reform.

For the past month, we have heard parents and teachers tell new examples of how Gulen-run charter schools short change students and taxpayers. We also have learned that perhaps due to a smaller and overwhelmed staff and other reasons, some of the state's top education officials have ignored such evidence and, in at least one instance, not acted on the information provided by the public. This unfortunate state of affairs will continue to happen until Ohio makes dramatic changes to the way it authorizes and oversees charter schools.

Today, under the laws and regulations that direct the formation and operation of these schools

- -Charter school administrators are not required to hold any professional licenses or meet even minimal educational requirements.

- -Charter school board members aren't elected by and responsible to the voters but are hand-picked mostly by the for-profit management companies who run them.
- -Charter school board members have no citizenship requirements, allowing most Gulen-affiliated schools to be run by Turkish citizens tied to the Gulen Islamic movement.
- -With hand-picked, unelected boards, charter school administrators can often pay themselves exorbitant salaries that in some cases match those of local school district superintendents responsible for the education of thousands of students in multiple locations.
- -Many charter schools are run as profit-centered enterprises employing highly paid administrators but teachers compensated well below colleagues in school districts, causing constant turnover among the teaching staff.
- -The for-profit management companies that operate many charter schools think that their mission and vision (read: profit) supersede the legitimate interests and aspirations of the public.
- -Charter schools are exempt from more than 150 provisions of state law that otherwise are applicable to school districts, including a requirement to annually report the names, salaries, and credentials of licensed employees to the State Board.
- - There are no restriction on the payment of public funds for recruitment of students, advertising, or payment for celebrity endorsements; there is no ban on using public funds earmarked for charter schools for political campaign donations.

The issue confronting this state and this board is not about any individual charter school chain. The real issue is the legislature has created an unregulated, incoherent nightmare that is allowing for-profit management companies, entrepreneurs, national charter school chains and ill-prepared developers to operate in a murky industry that ill-serves young people.

If we are to have charter schools in Ohio, their legal basis must be that they exist in similar fashion with public schools, be subject to the same requirements, and not be favored by so many questionable exemptions. Chapter 3314 of the Ohio Revised Code must be scrapped in its entirety.

I address you today to respond to the words on the State Board of Education's website: 19-member board that creates policy and makes recommendations for K-12 education in Ohio. It is time to ask that you be proactive and indeed create policy and recommendations to reform the K-12 charter school environment in Ohio so that the thousands of students enrolled in these schools receive a free and appropriate public education, an education they deserve and we the taxpayers require to justify this one billion dollar per year annual investment. After all, it's about our future.

If we truly want schools of choice, we must first choose to build the legal structure and accompanying regulatory system that guarantees that excellence -not profit- will be the result. The State Board and the legislature must act, now.

There is no other choice.