

Testimony of Matthew Blair
Before the State Board of Education
July 15, 2014

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

I am here today not because I oppose charter schools. I am here because I oppose ineffective schools. I remain concerned that Gulen-affiliated charter schools are hurting thousands of Ohio students each year and wasting taxpayer money.

I hope the testimony you are about to hear will convince you to find a way to properly investigate these schools and help Ohio craft a system of making ALL public schools accountable so Ohio can give ALL students access to a quality education.

This is my third attempt to get officials to examine the apparent cheating, health and safety violations and other irregularities I personally witnessed while teaching at the Dayton Horizon Science Academy from 2004-2005.

My 2013 blog post on the matter made its way to Ohio Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Richard Ross in January. I learned the important issues I raised were not properly investigated. They were covered up. Officials in state government launched an “investigation” that was nothing more than forwarding softball questions to the schools’ sponsors, even telling sponsors to "feel welcome to keep [their] responses brief and 'positive'" (January 15 e-mail, Office of Community Schools, ODE, Re: HSA Article). No one contacted me for further details, clarification, or questions. This is not the way to investigate such transgressions.

On June 23, I sent a letter to members of this board asking, again, for these allegations to be investigated. A spokesman for the board said they would be examined – but described my information as “vague and several years old.” The information was not vague and when it was originally reported to the Ohio Department of Education and the school’s sponsoring agencies, it was not “several years old.”

Since I spoke out, I have heard from many other past Gulen teachers, parents and students. Some are here with me today.

Kellie Kochensparger will testify that surveillance cameras caught students having oral sex at a school function but the sexual activity was kept from their parents. The kids involved were in grades 6, 7 and 8.

Richard Storrick who taught mathematics at a Horizon Science Academy as recently as last year, will tell you of testing irregularities, unsafe building conditions and administrators who took no action when a Turkish teacher called an African-American student a “monkey.” He also will tell you about another Turkish teacher who allowed an in-class “game” in which male students groped female students. His information is neither vague nor old.

Stephen Rudnicki will testify how chronic mismanagement left a Horizon school with four English teachers in six months, six math teachers in one year and opened its doors with no food service, no cafeteria tables or chairs and no working computers for months.

You will hear from Tim Neary, who insists that the school padded its attendance.

Allysson Vallieu, who taught at the Horizon Science Academy as recently as 2013, submitted written testimony. It includes information on a physics teacher whose classroom instruction consisted of little more than showing Man v. Wild videos all week long – a practice sanctioned by the school’s director.

In her written testimony, Melissa Randolph recalls witnessing apparent cheating nearly identical to what I saw: School officials filling in bubbles on standardized tests. When she asked what they were doing, she received the same explanation: They were simply going over them in pencil to make sure they were dark enough. Had the school’s testing protocols been followed, the tests would have been locked up and the officials would not have been able to touch them.

And you will hear from Nathaniel Cutts, a former student who complained to the school’s director about the classroom groping and about an ineffective science teacher. His concerns were ignored.

We have the responsibility to give students in Ohio the best education they deserve. The testimony you will hear and read about today will show the need to take concrete and decisive action that will lead to better schools for all children.

Thank you for your time. I will turn this over to Kellie.