



HIGHLAND PARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BOARD OF EDUCATION

435 Mansfield St, Highland Park NJ, 08904

BOARD PRESIDENT DARCIE CIMARUSTI

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Dear Highland Park Residents,

Once again the Highland Park School District is in the position to write to the community regarding the Hatikvah International Academy Charter School (Hatikvah). This is the third consecutive year that Hatikvah has filed an expansion request with the New Jersey Department of Education. In March 2015 they gained approval to add grades 6-8 to their original K-5 charter.

The Highland Park Board of Education has appealed the Commissioner's approval of that expansion, in *Highland Park Board of Education v. Hesper*, Docket No. A-3890-14. The Edison Board of Education has joined Highland Park's appeal, and other districts, including North Brunswick and South River, have adopted resolutions in support. In addition, East Brunswick has entered the matter as a party to the case.

Despite this widespread opposition, in November of 2015 Hatikvah filed yet another expansion request to add an additional class of 25 students per grade in grades K-8. This will add 225 seats to their current charter of 450, for a total of 675 seats. If the request is approved Hatikvah will add 375 seats in total, essentially doubling their enrollment over the next eight to nine years.

Hatikvah is a Hebrew-language immersion charter school located in East Brunswick, and East Brunswick is Hatikvah's only "district of residence." Charters can have a "region of residence" consisting of several contiguous districts, but Hatikvah has never applied for such status. Hatikvah is therefore considered a "single residence" charter school.

Hatikvah was approved in 2009 to serve 240 students from East Brunswick, and their original application stated that they did not anticipate any out of district enrollment. Since opening their doors however, Hatikvah has been unable to attract sufficient interest in their district of residence, and each year they have drawn more out of district students. In 2010, Hatikvah's first year of operation, 85% of Hatikvah's students resided in East Brunswick. The other 15% of students were from 7 other districts in Middlesex County. ***Fast-forward to 2016 and only 50% of their students are from East Brunswick, with the other 50% coming from 27 districts in seven counties. Hatikvah has in essence become a statewide charter school, despite the fact that there are no provisions under state law to allow a statewide charter to operate in New Jersey.***

When Hatikvah submits an expansion request to the Commissioner of Education, they are only required to notify East Brunswick, their district of residence. The 27 other districts impacted by their expansion are given no notice of the request, and are afforded no formal opportunity to respond on behalf of the families and taxpayers in their districts. Nonetheless, the Highland Park and Edison Boards of Education have submitted a joint legal response opposing the expansion application to Commissioner Hesper, which you can read [here](#).

Hatikvah's current expansion request claims that there is sufficient "community demand" to warrant further expansion, while at the same time stating that "the majority of the waitlisted students for Kindergarten and 1st grade, originate from a district other than East Brunswick, so their enrollment at Hatikvah will have very limited financial impact on taxpayers in East Brunswick." This statement demonstrates that Hatikvah is keenly aware that there is virtually no interest in the only district they are approved to serve, and that taxpayers in the other 27 districts will bear the financial burden of the expansion.

In their 2014 request to add grades 6-8, Hatikvah assured the Commissioner of Education that there was sufficient demand to justify the expansion. After the request was approved Hatikvah launched an aggressive direct marketing campaign, sending full color, glossy postcards throughout Highland Park and other communities. Despite those efforts, when Hatikvah opened their doors to their first class of 6th graders in September 2015, only 35 of the available 50 seats were filled. This clearly demonstrates that Hatikvah's claims of sufficient community demand, even when drawing students from 28 districts, are greatly exaggerated, and there is no true need or demand for the expansion they currently seek.



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There are 21 Highland Park students currently enrolled in Hatikvah, which diverted \$318,201 of Highland Park taxpayer funds to Hatikvah in the 2015-16 school year. Since 2010 school districts have been held to a 2% budget cap each year, making it increasingly difficult to meet rising costs. It is important to note that for the 2015-16 budget year the 2% cap figure was \$ 464,179. ***The total tuition for Hatikvah represents 69% of our budget cap.***

Further expansion will have an increasing impact on the taxpayers of Highland Park, threatening both the financial strength of the district and the competitiveness of the district's educational offerings. Therefore, as part of Highland Park's appeal, our attorneys expect to argue that the Charter School Act of 1995 does not give the State the authority to charge tuition to Highland Park or any other district that is not Hatikvah's district of residence. They also expect to argue that the law does not prohibit the enrollment of 'non-resident' students to charters such as Hatikvah, it simply shifts the burden of paying the tuition for those students to their parents rather than their neighbors and fellow taxpayers.

In addition to the district's appeal of the previous expansion and the legal response to the current request, on January 11th Board President Darcie Cimarusti testified before the State Board of Education regarding the impact of the expansion. Representatives from East Brunswick and Piscataway also testified on the matter. You can read Ms. Cimarusti's testimony [here](#).

As a result of that testimony, Ms. Cimarusti, Highland Park Superintendent Dr. Taylor and East Brunswick Superintendent Dr. Valeski and Business Administrator Mr. Giuliana have been invited to meet with State Board President Mark Biedron and New Jersey Department of Education Assistant Commissioner Evo Popoff to discuss the pending expansion requests, and our objections to it. Mr. Popoff is responsible for oversight of the Office of Charter Schools. We hope that this opportunity to present our concerns directly to officials in Trenton will increase the chances of a favorable outcome in this matter.

But to truly be heard in Trenton we need your help as well. A petition has been started to urge Commissioner Hespe to deny the expansion, and we hope that you will consider adding your voice. You can find the petition [here](#).

Thank you for all you do to support the Highland Park Public School District.

Sincerely,

Darcie Cimarusti

Board President

Dr. Scott Taylor

Superintendent