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Testimony before the State Board of Education
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Good afternoon members of the State Board. My name is Darcie Cimarusti, and I am the President of the Highland Park Board of Education. I am here today on behalf of my Board to speak with you about the Hatikvah International Academy Charter School, and the expansion request sitting on Commissioner Hesper's desk awaiting his decision.

My board would like to inform you that Hatikvah has essentially morphed into a statewide charter school, pulling students from 28 districts in 7 counties to fill their seats. Hatikvah was approved to serve East Brunswick, and East Brunswick alone. In fact, in their 2009 application to the state they stated that they didn't anticipate any out of district enrollment. Now five years into their charter, 50% of their enrollment comes from districts other than East Brunswick, demonstrating a clear lack of interest in their district of residence.

There are no provisions in the state's charter school law that allow a statewide charter to even exist. This Department has written no regulations, and this Board has approved no regulations to oversee the operation of a statewide charter. If Hatikvah were restricted to accepting students only from their district of residence, not only would they be unable to expand, they would be forced to close. Even if they were restricted to their district of residence and a handful of contiguous districts they would be unable to exist.

In order to keep their doors open they continue to draw more students from more districts, and as each year passes, more funds are lost. When Hatikvah opened in 2010 we lost \$61,847. This year Highland Park lost \$318,201. In 5 years time, Highland Park's costs have increased fivefold.

But Highland Park is not part of Hatikvah's district of residence, so Hatikvah is not required by law to notify our district of their plans for expansion, and our district is not given an opportunity to respond to the proposed expansion.

We are essentially left in the dark and rendered voiceless.

Some of you may be thinking that our district should do more improve our own offerings to "compete" with the charter, and then perhaps students wouldn't leave and the proposed expansion would therefore have minimal impact.

Hatikvah is a Hebrew Language Immersion charter, and is a part of the Hebrew Charter School Center, which was created and funded by hedge fund billionaire Michael Steinhardt, and his foundation, the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

Between 2010 and 2013 the Steinhardt funded Hebrew Charter School Center gave over one million dollars to Hatikvah, and they also gave another half million to create a religious after school program that *exclusively* serves students from Hatikvah. Students are bussed directly from Hatikvah to the religious after school program, and the program follows the schedule of Hatikvah and advertises on their website that they “complement the curriculum” of the charter school. With the cost of the religious after school program a mere \$2,800, Hatikvah seems to have become a low cost alternative to a private religious education for many Jewish families.

This should come as little surprise, as the stated mission of the Steinhardt Foundation is to “revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that reach out to all Jews.”

It is also unsurprising that with the combination of a Hebrew language charter and a religious after school program, the charter is having a segregative effect on the sending districts. I have provided you each with a graph, prepared for my district by Mark Weber, a Ph.D. student at Rutgers Graduate School of Education, under the advisement of Dr. Bruce Baker. At your request, I would be happy to provide the Board with his full report.

The graph makes it plainly clear that Hatikvah serves more white students than any of their top 7 sending districts, while at the same time the white population is decreasing in the sending districts. Subsequent graphs show that Hatikvah serves less minority students, less children receiving free and reduced lunch, and less children with special needs. Weber also demonstrates that the special needs students that Hatikvah does serve have lower-cost needs than the students in the district of residence. It is also important to note that according to Hatikvah’s Performance Report, the two most commonly spoken languages in the homes of students, other than English, are Russian and Hebrew. It almost goes without saying that these are not the most common languages in any of the sending districts.

There is no question that Hatikvah is having a segregative effect on the sending districts, and that traditional public school districts, which must serve all children, can’t compete with a niche offering such as a Hebrew immersion charter with an exclusive religious after school program.

While the Highland Park Board of Education understands that this decision rests with the Commissioner alone, we wanted the Board to be aware of this egregious situation.

Remember when I told you at the beginning of my testimony that Highland Park’s expenses have increased fivefold in five years? Just last February Commissioner Hespe announced he would put a cap on the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program, which is paid for by the state.

Why?

The Commissioner was quoted as saying, "It's fiscally unsustainable. The program has increased fivefold. The cost has increased fivefold."

Members of the Board – I'm here to inform you that Hatikvah has become fiscally unsustainable for our district. Please help us impress upon the Commissioner that Hatikvah should not be allowed to expand when they are operating as a statewide charter and they are segregating the districts from which they draw their students. It is time for the Commissioner to put a cap on Hatikvah as well and deny their expansion request.