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President, Highland Park 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, yet again, to express our opposition to the proposed expansion of the Hatikvah International Academy Charter School.

Hatikvah is approved to serve East Brunswick, but this year they are drawing students from 26 districts in 7 counties, including Highland Park.

I was here before you on January 11, 2016, speaking about the same topic. You see, this is the fourth year in a row Hatikvah has filed the same request. They've been denied 3 times, by 2 different Commissioners, but they keep on trying.

After my testimony last year Board President Mark Biedron and Board Member Edith Fulton took the time to meet with me, Highland Park Superintendent Dr. Scott Taylor, who is here with me today, and the Superintendent and Business Administrator from East Brunswick, to try to better understand the issues involved. Harold Lee, the then Director of the Office of Charter Schools, joined us as well. Mr. Biedron asked Mr. Lee a pointed question that got to the heart of the problem with Hatikvah – he asked why a charter approved to serve only 1 district was pulling students and funds from more than 20.

There really wasn't much of an answer.

As I recall there was something about not wanting students who move out of a district to have to leave their charter school, but that is simply not what is happening here. Hatikvah has been actively recruiting students in other districts, mailing glossy postcards throughout Highland Park selling parents the notion that sending their child to Hatikvah is akin to enrolling in a \$30,000 a year private school - ***for free!***

But as we all know, nothing is free. The taxpayers of Highland Park are paying the price. And while taxpayers can, and do, come to our budget meetings to challenge individual line items, the line item for tuition to Hatikvah, which this year has soared to almost \$334,000, is set in stone. This is up from approximately \$62,000 in 2010 when Hatikvah first opened. We have no say, and the costs just continue to rise.

As if to thicken the plot, this year Highland Park was billed for one student at the Thomas Edison EnergySmart Charter School, and one at Central Jersey College Prep Charter School. Both are in Franklin and neither are approved to serve Highland Park either. These additional tuitions total another \$45,137; funds that were not anticipated nor budgeted.

Like Hatikvah, Thomas Edison and Central Jersey are seeking expansions, but they are also asking for additional campuses. Thomas Edison wants two, one in Old Bridge and one in Perth Amboy, and Central Jersey wants one, right across the river from Highland Park in New Brunswick.

And as if that's not enough, before he left, Commissioner Hesse approved an application for the Ailanthus Charter School, which is scheduled to open its doors in New Brunswick in 2018.

Members of the Board, I'm here to ask for your help - Middlesex and Somerset Counties have turned into the wild west of charter schools.

This year there are five charter schools in these two counties, with 2,316 charter school seats available.

If all of these expansions and applications for new campuses are approved, very shortly there will be 9 charters and 5,283 seats available. This is a 128% increase.

I hope to quickly demonstrate for you that there is insufficient demand in **any** of these communities to support this level of expansion, and that none of the local communities should be saddled with this out of control growth.

This year only 48% of Hatikvah's students are coming from East Brunswick, which is the only district they are approved to serve. In these two counties this is by far the most extreme example, but much to my surprise, I've discovered that several other charters are operating in a similar fashion. They are unable to fill their seats with students from their sending districts, and are therefore accepting students from a wide geographic area.

According to 2016/17 enrollment data I recently received via OPRA:

Thomas Edison EnergySmart Charter School is approved to serve Franklin, North Brunswick and South Brunswick - 96% of their students come from the district of residence; the other 4% come from 7 districts in 4 counties.

Central Jersey College Prep Charter School is approved to serve Franklin, North Brunswick, and New Brunswick - only 87% of their students come from the district of residence; the other 13% come from 12 districts in 4 counties.

Greater Brunswick Charter School is approved to serve New Brunswick, Edison and Highland Park - only 83% of their students come from their district of residence; the other 17% come from 10 districts in 3 counties.

These numbers demonstrate that there is simply insufficient demand in any single district, or any group of contiguous districts, to support the charter growth this Department has championed under Governor Christie. The result are charters that have to look far outside of their district of residence for students, leaving dozens of districts with unanticipated charter expenses and little to no recourse.

This unchecked growth is just one of the reasons why the Highland Park Board of Education and other boards across Middlesex and Somerset County will call for a moratorium on new charter seats. Unless and until this DOE demonstrates that they are analyzing the financial and segregative impact continued charter expansion will have on traditional public school districts, no new charter seats should be created.