

Senate Education Committee Hearing
Hearing Room E1.028
August 24 - 9am

Good morning, Chairman Patrick. Good morning, Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to provide public testimony to the Senate Education Committee.

I am John Harper, Chief Financial Officer for The Cooper Institute in Dallas. Many of you know Dr. Ken Cooper. I also am an Advisor to the Board of Trustees of Harmony Public Schools. I retired from the Texas A&M University System after 26 years of service in higher education as a vice president, vice chancellor, and a tenured professor guiding graduate students seeking the Doctor of Education.

I am here today to speak about Harmony Public Schools, which is the largest charter group in the State. I prepared a handout for you which highlights their many accomplishments and their unique contribution to the education of our children and grandchildren...our future leaders! I think you will find the handout quite interesting and informative.

In term of best practices, the Harmony Public Schools are dedicated to excellence, and to what they call the three "R's"...Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. These are science academies where students are expected to go on to higher education. They are open enrollment schools and students and parents who seek them out understand and accept the rigor and the relationships. Parents, students, and teachers commit to a supportive partnership that will motivate and encourage every student to be successful. I have spoken to many Harmony students and parents who exclaim how much and how quickly math and reading scores improve after just a short time in the Harmony environment.

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Harmony Public Schools have been in Texas for more than a decade. Recently they have enjoyed unprecedented growth in numbers. Like most organizations that grow rapidly, there are growing pains...issues with communications, policies, and procedures. The leaders of Harmony have acknowledged these growing pains and have strengthened their internal controls and redoubled their commitment to transparency and accountability. They are also expanding their Board of Trustees and making it more diverse. In just the short time I have been associated with Harmony I have seen more and better policies and procedures put in place.

What Harmony has excelled at from the beginning - another best practice - is the relationship between the school, the parents, and the student. They developed tools and technology to assure the three-way partnership is kept well-informed. The system includes early warning so that required tutoring is provided before it is too late. The Harmony program for character education is another best practice which also controls the "bullying" seen so often at other schools. This best practice and many other policies and practices, both administrative and academic, are worth replicating throughout Texas schools. While Harmony plans to limit its growth in the future, its successful best practices should continue to grow in use. Just look at their results! They are an asset to the State of Texas!

Harmony Public Schools have been called "Miracle Schools" by Newsweek Magazine because they do so much and with so much less funding from the State of Texas.

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Earlier you heard testimony that raises questions about the Harmony Public School's stewardship of public funds. Specifically, the auditors of the Texas Education Agency reviewed Harmony's use of federal Title I funds and found several issues and cited a need to return more than \$180,000 that was not used for an approved purpose.

I saw many such audit reports during my time as a university vice president. In fact, I still teach governmental accounting to graduate students at A&M. This was a fairly typical audit outcome.

The audit findings in the TEA report were very common for an institution managing federal funds for the first time. I doubt Harmony knew exactly how strict the federal rules and regulations are. In any event, most of the findings had to do with a lack of written policy that was required by the federal government. Those policies have since been written and now are in place.

Another issue was that Harmony Public Schools used the federal funds on programs in Harmony schools that were not certified to be Title I eligible. The money was spent on needy students but again the documentation was not in place. My advice was to strengthen the internal controls, refund the money, and learn the lesson that with grant funds, federal or otherwise, comes a very stringent requirement for transparency and accountability. Harmony has done that.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to speak. I will be happy to respond to any questions.



Harmony Public Schools are high performing K-12 college preparatory public charter schools, operating in Texas only, that focus on science, technology, engineering, and math - the STEM courses - to provide opportunities for underserved communities. Harmony Public Schools have been part of the T-STEM program since the beginning of the Texas High School Project. There are 59 T-STEM academies, 23 are charter schools and 16 of those are Harmony schools.

<u>Houston South</u>	<u>Houston North</u>	<u>Houston West</u>	<u>Austin</u>	<u>Dallas</u>	<u>Fort Worth</u>
HS Ingenuity	HSE Endeavor	HSS Houston	HSA Austin	HSA Waco	HSA Fort Worth
HSA Beaumont	HSA Bryan	HSS High	HSA N Austin	HSA Garland	HSA Grand Prairie
HSA Houston	HSA Northwest	HSA W Houston	HSE Austin	HSA Elem. Dallas	HSA Euless
HSA Houston High	HS Excellence		HSS Austin	HSA Mid. Dallas	HS Nature & Athletics
HS Innovation	HS Advancement		HS Political S&C	HSA Dallas	
HS Art	HS Discovery			HSI Dallas	
<u>Brownsville</u>	<u>El Paso</u>	<u>Laredo</u>	<u>Lubbock</u>	<u>San Antonio</u>	
HSA Brownsville	HSA El Paso	HSA Laredo	HSA Lubbock	HSA San Antonio	
	HSI El Paso		HSA Odessa	HSI San Antonio	

- While serving as Mayor of Rowlett, I was asked to look into the Dallas Harmony Public Schools. My personal research into Harmony, including school visits and meetings with administrators and staff, leads me to believe that many of the "concerns" about Harmony Schools fall into two categories - simple cultural differences, and undue reliance on rumor and speculation.
- Anyone who visits a Harmony Public School, as I have, will find a very culturally diverse mix of students and staff, a rigorous science, technology and math-based curriculum that follows Texas Education Agency guidelines, and a rich, nurturing learning environment for students who are often underserved. **I encourage everyone to visit a Harmony School!**



- In addition to wanting to serve my constituents, I have a personal interest in addressing issues that have arisen in the news media and social media forums about Harmony Public Schools, which were founded by Turkish-Americans ten years ago. While serving in the US Air Force Intelligence Command, I lived and traveled extensively in Turkey for almost four years. My family was there with me and I became quite familiar with Turkish culture and customs. I had a positive experience then, both personally and professionally, and those experiences have been reinforced by my more recent involvement in meeting the Harmony Public Schools leadership team and learning more about their schools.
- There are more than 20,000 students enrolled in Harmony Public Schools today. There are more than 40,000 additional students on a waiting list to enroll as soon as space is available! Enrollment is open to all and chosen by lottery!
- The cost of tuition to the Texas taxpayer for a Harmony Public Schools student is more than \$1,200 less than what is funded at an independent school district. Harmony schools do more with less tax-funded resources!
- Just recently, Newsweek Magazine recognized two of the Harmony High Schools...one in Dallas and one in Austin...as among the very best top 200 high schools in the entire USA! They were designated as "Miracle" schools!
- The Washington Post also recognized those two high schools and another in Houston among the top schools in the nation!
- The US Department of Education just awarded the Harmony Public Schools \$5 million to assist with opening an additional seven new campuses and sharing their best practices...at least one will be in the Dallas area!
- And, 21 out of 33 Harmony schools received either an "Exemplary" or "Recognized" State Accountability Rating in 2011. The remaining 12 schools received an "Acceptable" rating. None were unacceptable!
- What a great asset the Harmony Public Schools are to the entire State of Texas!