

# Harmony Advocates

- Parents
- Teachers
- Students
- Alumni &
- All Supporters

## Responses to Recent Allegations



[www.harmonyschoolsadvocates.org](http://www.harmonyschoolsadvocates.org)

*This document comprises a response constructed by the Harmony advocates as a way to clarify misconceptions created by various media organizations.*

*We encourage you to share this information with interested parties as a way to clarify any misconceptions.*

# Table of Contents

- Responses to Recent Allegations ..... 1
- Introduction ..... 1
- Do Harmony Schools include Islamic teachings in their curriculum? ..... 1
- Do Harmony Schools have a relationship with Turkish Scholar Fethullah Gulen? ..... 2
- Does Harmony favor Turkish contractors & discriminate against non-Turkish companies? ..... 3
- Were any of the contracting companies established in Turkey or another country? ..... 3
- Are contracts for construction always granted to the lowest bidder? ..... 5
- Can you explain Harmony’s rationale behind selecting Atlas Texas for projects as opposed to Daj Construction which was mentioned in New York Times Article? ..... 6
- How does Harmony Schools decide to rent or purchase a building? ..... 6
- How did you acquire the building for your first campus, HSA-Houston? ..... 7
- How has HSA – Houston performed as a campus during its ten years of operation? ..... 7
- Explain the history of the challenges with acquiring a building for HSA-Austin ..... 7
- How has HSA – Austin performed as a campus? ..... 7
- Tell us about your experience in 2006 with finding a location for the HSA-El Paso campus. .... 8
- How did Harmony come to acquire such land and buildings to house Harmony Houston High, Harmony School of Innovation, and the Central office building? ..... 8
- Did the decision to purchase buildings in lieu of renting save the organization & taxpayers’ money? ... 8
- What has enabled Harmony to purchase buildings and complete large construction projects? ..... 9
- Can you name companies with Non-Turkish owners which Harmony has awarded major contracts? ... 9
- Will Harmony hire additional teaching staff for the 2011-2012 school year? ..... 10
- Does Harmony favor & recruit Turkish teachers to fill teacher and administrator position as alleged? 10
- Can you explain the rationale behind hiring foreign teacher? ..... 11
- Does Harmony favor male versus female teachers and administrators? ..... 11
- In the recent nationwide newspaper article, issues surround the issuance of H1B Visa’s were mentioned. How do you respond to these allegations? ..... 12
- How does someone become a principal at a Harmony School? ..... 12
- Note: Journalist Reveals Bias through Questions and Comments ..... 13

## Introduction

We, Harmony advocates, would like to share with our parents, teachers, and supporters information in response to published misinformation. Recently some biased, unfounded stories, carrying the potential of raising doubt surrounding Harmony Schools, were published by various news media outlets, including, newspapers, webpages and blogs.

Prior to the baseless allegations by the West Texas Patriots in 2010, Harmony schools operated peacefully, maintaining educational activities. A sudden emergence occurred yielding webpages and blogs administered by marginal hate groups, launching a smear campaign utilizing fabricated, supposed research and data. One group created multiple websites and blogs, each citing the other as proof of "valid data." Each site appeared unique and authentic, yet this circular relationship created a web of misleading, slanderous, prejudiced information, ready to capture the reader into their web. As these web pages and blogs did not produce the desired effects, the campaign was carried to the printed media. On several occasions, journalists have requested interviews, ultimately producing published stories where important data and provided responses were omitted.

**Next Section provides the frequently asked questions and allegations and the answers the Harmony advocates derived using online data, interviews of administrators, our experiences with Harmony and simple common sense!**

### **Do Harmony Schools include Islamic teachings in their curriculum?**

**Answer:** Harmony Schools do not teach Islam or any other religion in any aspects of their curriculum. To our knowledge, a couple of bloggers and some members of West Texas Patriots have been claiming that Islam has been indoctrinated at Harmony Schools. One even claimed that Texas Education Agency used our institution to spread Islam in Texas, a peculiar one that does not deserve any response.

Harmony Public Schools are not affiliated with any religious group, nor do our schools teach any sort of religious curriculum. As publicly-funded charter school, Harmony is required to abide by the same state curriculum as any traditional public school, and religion is not part of that curriculum. We adhere strictly to the guidelines of the Texas Education Agency, and our focus is on delivering a rigorous math and science curriculum, and providing excellent educational opportunities for children in Texas.

Harmony has been in operation for over a decade. As of the 2010-2011 school year we had around 16,000 students and 1,500 teachers. During the ten years of operation, Harmony Schools have educated more than 20,000 students. Teachers have visited the homes of students' families, through which they have increased the size and cohesiveness of the Harmony family. Moreover, Harmony schools have worked with hundreds of teachers, many of which remain, while others accepted positions with other organizations. It is a well-known fact in the US that most of the parents are very involved in their children's education. If religion has been taught at any of the Harmony schools, one would expect that one of these individuals (students, parents, and teachers) would have reported this to the authorities. The allegation of teaching of religion in the schools begs the question: How can one believe such a practice would go unreported? With more than 99% of the Harmony student body and their parents

being non-Muslim, non-Turkish Americans, would such a practice truly remain unrecognized and unreported? Allegations of teaching Islam are rooted in fear mongering, with the intention of perpetuating religious and racial prejudice.

### **Do Harmony Schools have a relationship with Turkish Scholar Fethullah Gulen?**

**Answer:** Superintendent Dr. Tarim is quoted as saying:

*As an answer to this question, whether it is asked by a journalist, academician, or an official, I always respond as follows: Our institution has neither an organic relationship with Mr. Gulen nor any sort of financial relationship. He is not a member of our board, nor is he the side of any of our affiliation agreements. If there were such a relationship, we would openly declare it, as we would see no problem with having such a relationship. Arguing that there was such a relationship when there is none would be a lie. However, this is not to be construed that there cannot be any personal relationships between our employees and Mr. Gulen. Some of our employees may naturally have social, cultural, or religious relationship with their respective communities. This is a matter of personal choice, as well as a matter of cultural and religious diversity, and has nothing to do with the institution. This should be subject to respect, not allegation. Personally, I am from the same city in Turkey as Mr. Gulen. Just as many in my home country may enjoy the ideas and opinions of Mr. Gulen, I have read his writings and I respect him. This is not an institutional relationship. Although I always clearly state this, some still write that I 'absolutely denied' any kind of relationship with Mr. Gulen. This logic produces a situation such as: Because Muhtar Kent, the CEO of the Coca-Cola Company, is of Turkish origin, Coca-Cola is now a Turkish company! Or just because a director at Boeing is a member of Methodist Church, Boeing is a Methodist company! The fact is that my personal knowledge of Mr. Gulen does not make the Harmony Schools a Gulen-affiliated institution.*

*I first came to the United States in 1991 to accompany my brother to MD Anderson for cancer treatment. I fell in love with Texas and applied for entry to Texas A&M University. I received my my PhD. in Aquatics Ecology in 2002. By now I am a proud American citizen who is helping Texas children improve their math and science skills, along with their other education subjects. Most of these children have no idea how lucky they are to live in the land of the free and the home of the brave, but we are teaching them appreciation of their heritage. Every day begins with the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States of America. Harmony Schools were established according to the Texas laws and they are subject to the rigorous state inspection and audits. It is irresponsible to claim that such institutions are affiliated with some religious or ethnic groups.*

The issue is depicting charter schools established by Turkish scholars in different states as if they were connected with each other as well as with Mr. Gulen, and then publishing lists of those schools. Can one argue the impartiality, objectivity, honesty and ethicality of an article that puts in the same bowl schools which were founded in different states, are bound to different state laws, have different boards, and have no affiliation in between to make one schools' financial or administrative issues the issue of all others, and bother the rest with similar accusations? What if such an article is affecting tens of thousands of students, parents and teachers? Shouldn't the author have published responsibly?

### **Does Harmony favor Turkish contractors & discriminate against non-Turkish companies?**

**Answer:** No. Harmony schools grant contracts to the companies that will most adequately fulfill requirements while meeting regulations. The national origin of the company owners or their employees is not a factor in awarding bids, contracts, or service providers. The criteria for awarding a contract or bid is the lowest bidder capable of providing the best quality product, delivered in a timely manner. Any educational organization that has a construction job to be done would naturally make sure that the building is cost-effective and safe, and completed in a timely manner. Prompt completion is necessary to avoid the loss of money.

### **Are contracts for construction always granted to the lowest bidder?**

**Answer:** One of the essential differences between charter schools and traditional public schools is that charter schools provide the land and buildings to house their students. Public schools use taxpayer dollars for their land and buildings. Harmony awards a contract to the lowest bidder capable of providing the best quality product, delivered in a timely manner. This is legally called “the most responsive and responsible bid.” We make sure that the building is cost-effective, safe, and completed in a timely manner. The national origin of the company owners or their employees is not a factor in awarding bids, to contractors or service providers. The organization has consistently exercised fiscal responsibility in all matters.

Harmony schools have granted hundreds of construction and renovation contracts in ten years. It is expected that choosing the lowest bid is not always the responsible choice. Although saving money is our goal, we do not wish to sacrifice quality for cost.

### **Were any of the contracting companies established in Turkey or another country?**

**Answer:** Harmony has not awarded contracts to any companies based in or that have originated outside of the state of Texas. All of the contractors and sub-contractors have been American firms established in Texas. The issue for some accusers here is the Turkish origins of the owners or shareholders of some of these American born companies. We consider the issue of national origin of company owners is both racist and discriminatory, an unfortunate act. For comparison below are some tangible examples to contracts Harmony Schools have granted.

#### **Dallas School of Nature:**

- Cost per square feet: \$120.
- Average Cost per square feet according to local pricing: \$148
- High-bid for construction: \$13,052,260
- Low-bid for construction: \$10,587,600\*
- Savings to tax payers: \$2,464,660\*

#### **Harmony School of Innovation – San Antonio**

- Cost per sq. ft. : \$132
- Comparative cost per sq. ft. for SA school construction: \$224
- H.S.I.-SA construction cost: \$8,220,809\*
- Neighboring ISD school construction cost: \$13,985,656
- Comparable savings to tax payers: \$5,764,847\*

**Harmony School of Fine Arts and Technology- Houston (pictured below)**

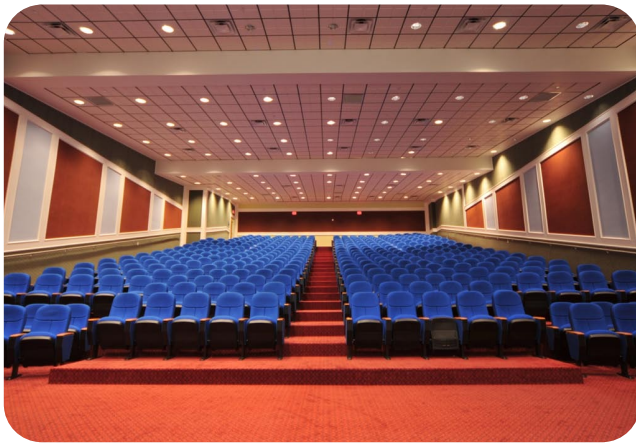
- Cost per sq. ft. : \$111
- Comparative cost per sq. ft. for HISD school construction: \$165
- High-bid for construction: \$12,131,305
- Low-bid for construction cost: \$8,179,112\*
- Savings to tax payers: \$3,952,193\*

**Harmony School of Science High School- Sugarland**

- Cost per sq. ft. : \$123
- Comparative cost per sq. ft. for FBIS school construction: \$151
- High-bid for construction: \$11,596,498
- Low-bid for construction cost: \$9,482,000\*
- Savings to tax payers: \$2,114,498\*

\*The bids for the listed schools were awarded to companies founded in Texas, and owned by Turkish-Americans. In every case, significant savings were realized in overall costs, and each building was constructed use high-quality material. The campuses were constructed following a tight time schedule, six months or less. Prompt completion allowed each campus to open for the planned school year, thus providing a desired space to educate thousands of students. Did the Harmony schools act in good faith, exercising fiscal responsibility? You decide.

Compared to conventional school buildings, Harmony schools aim to present warm, lively, well-equipped, good quality finished environments for their students. In this respect, we use particular multi-color designs with top quality paints such as Benjamin Moore or Sherwin Williams on wall finishes. Although VCT tiles and low quality commercial carpets are widely used in conventional school buildings; Harmony schools use high quality modern style carpets, stylish marble or ceramic tile flooring according to the space’s purpose of use. All fixtures are selected from highly reviewed manufacturers to better serve the students’ needs. Despite the high quality standards in school facilities, Harmony schools manage construction budgets successfully to remain below the market average cost wise.



Harmony Science Academy – High, Houston



Harmony Science Academy – Austin



Harmony Science Academy – Houston



Harmony School of Advancement – Houston



Harmony School of Nature – Dallas



Harmony School of Ingenuity - Houston

**Can you explain Harmony’s rationale behind selecting Atlas Texas for projects as opposed to Daj Construction which was mentioned in New York Times Article?**

**Answer:** Atlas Texas has an impressive portfolio of projects, including ten educational facilities, structures close to one million sq. ft., and ground-up construction projects. Atlas is licensed as general contractor in seven states including: New Mexico, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. Additionally, their client list includes several districts including a national charter school management group. Since 2006, the well-known construction industry news source, Engineering News Record, has included Atlas Group as one of the top international contractors. Finally, Atlas’ BBB rating at the Better Business Bureau records lends credence to their reputation. On the other hand, as a company, Daj Construction is more like an interior firm, with specialization in retail and strip center renovations. Their available portfolio does not seem to include educational institutions. Rating information was not available for Daj Construction. Based on financial credentials, relationship to the district, experience on similar projects, and the knowledge of the project management team, Atlas Texas was determined to be superior to Daj and other participants for the specific bidding process.

**Are there other reasons to your decision to select Atlas Texas?**

As previously explained, Harmony always selects the lowest and the most responsible bidder on projects. Harmony makes sure that the lowest bidder is responsible and provides adequate information in the proposal. If satisfactory information is not included in the proposal, an analysis is requested from an expert to determine if the bidder is eligible. In the report composed by Heights Venture Architects, LLP analyzing four likely to be chosen bids (including three lowest ones) given for the construction of Harmony Pflugerville school project, chief architect David Roselius recommends Atlas for four reasons:

- 1- Atlas’ bid was closest to the average budget of the group.
- 2- Atlas provided a completed schedule of values as requested.
- 3- Atlas’ bid was the most complete of the bidders.
- 4- Only Atlas had committed to a delivery date that provided Cosmos the most preparation time before the school year begins

**How does Harmony Schools decide to rent or purchase a building?**

According to the study conducted by the Texas Charter Schools Association charter schools in Texas receive \$1200 less per pupil per year than their counterparts in traditional public school districts and do not have access to facility funding. This lack of funding to facilities forced all charter schools in Texas including Harmony to come up with creative facility solutions. Harmony’s business model is unique and has worked well since the inception of schools. The lack of credit history to acquire facilities at the beginning did not stop Harmony to secure nice facilities for Texas children it is serving. One solution Harmony found at the beginning was to approach investors and buy facilities and rent them back to Harmony. This was a win-win situation for investors and Harmony. This way we were able to secure facilities without being a burden to tax payers. Of course Harmony was able to execute this business plan only with investors who had believed in its mission because of the organizations’ early age at its



outset. This has been the challenge up until 2004. Beginning 2004 Harmony was able to increase its portfolio of investors due to its successful academic and financial track records. Harmony performed outstandingly well in its financial operations and was able to secure its first bond sale in 2007. This enabled Harmony build state of the art school facilities for a price below the industry average.

***Below, we are giving some examples to elaborate on these different phases Harmony went through.***

#### **Example#1: Acquiring the building for first Harmony campus, HSA-Houston?**

When looking for a location for the first campus, a building, formerly used by the Jewish community as a school, was vacant and available. Unfortunately, being a brand new organization, H.S.A.-Houston lacked a credit history, thus the owner of the building was unwilling to lease the space. Thankfully a Turkish businessman, was able to purchase the structure, and then leased the space to H.S.A.-Houston. Thus the school opened its doors to begin this journey. Eventually H.S.A.-Houston accrued the funds to purchase the building from the owner. The purchase of the building resulted in paying \$156K per year in mortgage payments versus \$240K per year in rent.

#### **HSA – Houston’s performance as a campus during its ten years of operation:**

Since the implementation of the new accountability system in 2004 in the state of Texas, HSA – Houston was rated either exemplary, which is the top category, or recognized which is the second best category. In 2004 Harmony Science Academy – Houston was one of the only 2 exemplary school districts in Houston, and one of the 15 exemplary high schools in Texas. In 2005 HSA – Houston became exemplary for 2 years in a row, and 1 of the 11 exemplary high schools in Texas in 2005.

HSA – Houston received the Title-I National Distinguished School Award from the US Department of Education in 2005. HSA-Houston was 1 of 2 schools in the state of Texas and 1 of 52 schools across the nation to be selected to receive this award. HSA – Houston was the only charter school and the only school having high school grades among all the award recipients. HAS students have won over 1000 prestigious awards in the science fair, science Olympiad, and math counts type competitions at city, state, national, and international levels. HSA – Houston has had a 100% college acceptance rate and 0% drop outs. HSA – Houston was listed as one of the best high schools by U.S. News and World Report in 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 among more than 21,000 public high schools across the country. In 2010, the school was in the silver school list of U.S. News. This school was also listed as one of the top 500 high schools of the country by Washington Post.

#### **Example#2: Acquiring the building for second Harmony campus, HSA-Austin:**

When Harmony schools decided to open a campus in Austin, the organization faced similar challenges to those in Houston. The organization attempted to purchase the structure and was denied due to a lack of established credit history. With a limited credit history, HSA-Austin turned to a member of the local Turkish community who was able to purchase the building. HSA-Austin

#### **Performance of HSA – Austin as a campus:**

HSA-Austin has earned as either exemplary or recognized by Texas Education Agency. The students have won hundreds of prestigious awards at academic competitions at both state and national levels.

HSA-Austin was selected as the best middle school in Central Texas by “Children at Risk”, a non-profit and non-partisan organization in 2009. This school also received statewide Title-I school award along with 4 other Harmony schools. HSA-Austin was also listed as one of the 10 miracle high schools in USA by Newsweek and one of the top 500 high schools of the country by Washington Post in 2011. Like HSA-Houston, this school has had a 100% college acceptance rate and 0% drop outs since its inception.

**Example#3: Finding a location for the HSA-El Paso campus:**

HSA- El Paso was opened in 2006. The school leased a section of a local church for classrooms and general operations. After seeing the positive effects the school had on the community, as well as the increased demand for student enrollment, the church offered to build a new structure for the school. The new 84,000 sq. ft. structure provided the much needed classrooms, gymnasium, cafeteria, office spaces and more. Harmony continues to lease this structure from the church for \$1M dollars per year. Harmony is grateful for the opportunity to house their school in this beautiful structure, yet fiscally they realize the benefits of owning versus leasing facilities. But still this does not make Harmony Schools a church school teaching the creed of one particular religion.

**Example#4: Acquiring land and buildings to house Harmony Houston High, Harmony School of Innovation, and the Central office building:**

When Harmony School of Innovation – Houston (HSI-Houston) opened in 2005, the school was housed in a two-story space leased from the property owner. A variety of other businesses occupied the adjacent buildings. Over the course of the next few years, the enrollment at HSI-Houston grew, thus more space was needed. Harmony Schools leased the adjacent property in order to house the Central office staff. Eventually, the organization negotiated with the property owner and purchased the entire complex, which included an area 93,118 sq. ft. and three buildings, for \$6M. The original owner in turn purchased the adjacent property, owned it for two months, then sold the property to Harmony, and made a sizeable profit. In light of the allegations of Harmony’s favoritism towards particular religious groups, it is important to note the original owner of the land belonged to an entirely different religious community. This particular purchasing does not mean Harmony favored either previous owner or his religious community. Harmony makes no decisions based on a person’s religious affiliation.

**Did the decision to purchase buildings in lieu of renting save the organization & taxpayers’ money?**

**Answer:** As depicted in Table 1 rows 3 and 4 Harmony have saved taxpayers’ money by simply purchasing buildings that were previously rented. Harmony saved more than \$15K per month by purchasing the HSA Houston building. Purchasing HSA- Austin campus saved more than \$10K per month.

School Name	Sale Price	Previous Owner	Lease Before purchasing	Lease After purchasing	Financing Agency/Bank
HSA-Garland	\$6.0 M	Reinhardt Bible Church	N/A	\$34,833/mo	TPFA Edu. Rev. Bond
HSA-Discovery	\$4.3 M	PTTH Properties, Inc.	N/A	\$32,385/mo	MetroBank
HSA-Houston	\$2.3 M	Dr. F. Engin Kalkan	\$28,000/mo	\$13,353/mo	TPFA Edu. Rev. Bond
HSA-Austin	\$1.7 M	Dr. Y. Alp Aslandogan	\$20,000/mo	\$9,869/mo	TPFA Edu Rev Bond

Table 1. Purchase price vs. rent comparisons

Table 2 below, illustrated the comparisons between sqft. cost of Harmony School buildings and other traditional public school buildings in Texas built in recent years. The table clearly reveals how much Harmony Schools saved tax payer money.

LOCATION	Unit cost (\$/sqft.)		% Difference
	Avg. cost of projects in other ISDs (2010-2011)	Avg. cost of Harmony school projects (2010-2011)	
Dallas-Fort Worth Area	\$148	\$120	19%
Greater Houston Area	\$165	\$133	19%
San Antonio Area	\$174	\$132	24%

Table 2. Average cost comparison of projects completed by Harmony vs other ISDs

References used in developing Table 2.

- 1- <http://www.dallasisd.org/bond/schools.html>
- 2- <http://www.hisdprojects.com/projectProjectType>
- 3- [http://garzapm.com/p\\_11K-12\\_Education.html](http://garzapm.com/p_11K-12_Education.html)
- 4- <http://www.satpon.com/dfwprojects.html>
- 5- [http://dallasisd2008bond.org/index.php/schools/type/new\\_school/](http://dallasisd2008bond.org/index.php/schools/type/new_school/)
- 6- <http://www.gammaconst.com/portfolio.asp?category=current>

**What has enabled Harmony to purchase buildings and complete large construction projects?**

**Answer:** After 6 years’ of operation, Harmony schools have an established credit history and thus became eligible for selling bonds to finance its construction projects and building purchases. This marked a huge success for Harmony. Harmony schools’ credit score was initially BBB, and this year the rating was successfully increased to BBB+. This is no small feat for a non-profit organization!

Some have accused Harmony of showing favoritism to the Turkish community in relation to business, construction and financial matters. While accusers focus on these two transactions they ignore the fact that Harmony schools purchased other campuses with higher figures from people of non-Turkish origin. The journalist mentions only two of 24 buildings that Harmony schools have purchased. Since the article never mentioned ethnic backgrounds of the owners of other buildings, which cost around \$60M, it is misleading. Approximately 80 percent of the buildings were purchased from people with non-Muslim background whereas only 10 percent was purchased from Muslims. This means only a fraction of \$60M purchase was made between Harmony Schools and people of Turkish origin.

Some people became uncomfortable with this success and opportunities, and they prompted these allegations. Below is the information that we have provided to the journalist; however she used the ones that fits to her stories best.

***Before going into detail we would like to mention the fact construction activities of Harmony schools have created around 3,000 jobs in Texas.***

**Can you name companies with Non-Turkish owners which Harmony has awarded major contracts?**

**Answer:** See the table below. \*Note this exact information was provided to the NYT journalist, however she opted not to include any of this data.\*

School Projects	Construction Company
HSA-Fort Worth	Fast-Track Construction LP
HSA-Dallas	Fast-Track Construction L P
Harmony School of Excellence Phase-1	PFG Construction LLC
Harmony School of Excellence Phase-2	Parallax Builders, Inc.
HSA-El Paso Phase-1	R&J's Construction, LLC
HSA-El Paso Phase-2	El Pueblito Estates, Inc.
Harmony Elementary Austin	John Construction, Inc.
HSA (HOUSTON NW)	Dang La Architecture
HSE (AUSTIN)	IE2 Construction
HSS (HOUSTON)	North American Construction
HSI-El Paso	Canales General Contracting ,LLC
HSA- Euless Phase-1	Sid Whitener (dba Classique Custom Homes)
HSA-Euless Phase-2	Sid Whitener (dba Classique Custom Homes)

Harmony also has contracts with other non-Turkish service providers, including:

- Bond Counsel: Andrews Kurth, LLP
- Underwriters: Morgan Keegan & Co; Jeffries, Inc.
- General Counsel: Rodgers, Morris & Grover LLP
- Media Consultant: Kaplan & Associates
- Public Relations: InsightConsultingGroup

**Will Harmony hire additional teaching staff for the 2011-2012 school year?**

**Answer:** Yes, we are currently interviewing and hiring teachers to fill the class expansion at many of our campuses. We will also hire numerous teachers for the three new campuses scheduled to open in August. Harmony conducted its own teacher job fair(s) in order to draw the best possible candidates. This speaks to the commitment of Harmony to serve its students with the highest level of fidelity.

**Does Harmony favor & recruit Turkish teachers to fill teacher and administrator position as alleged?**

**Answer:** Harmony Schools were established by a group of Turkish-American graduate students at Texas and mainly from Texas A&M University, University of Texas, and University of Houston, and Rice University. And, as a result of this foundation, the involvement of Turkish-Americans in the development and growth of Harmony Schools has been natural and consistent; early supporters and employees of Harmony Schools recruited other graduate students, acquaintances and professionals, in particular those with strong backgrounds in science, math, engineering and computers. Some of those early recruits were international students because as it is a known fact many international students complete graduate studies at American Universities.

There's another cultural and legal fact with which people from Texas and the United States may not be familiar. In 1919, the "George Washington" of Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, established Turkey as a secular state. This law actually means that Turkey is more stringent than the United States about separation of church and state. For example, in the United States you may have private or parochial schools that teach religion as part of their curriculum. Those parochial schools are not allowed to exist in Turkey. All Turkish teachers who teach at Harmony went to secular schools. In those schools, the law does not

allow Muslim girls and women to wear headscarves, even if their religion requires it or even if they attend private schools or teach in private schools. It is easy to keep clear borders between faith and school because the small part of Harmony faculty members who grew up in Turkey have always kept clear boundaries—just like in the United States, only stricter.

#### **Can you explain the rationale behind hiring foreign teacher?**

**Answer:** Please find Harmony Superintendent Dr. Soner Tarim’s response to a similar question below:

*According to a study funded by Texas Instruments and the Texas Business and Education Coalition and conducted by Dr. Ed Fuller of the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin, there is a longtime shortage of math and science teachers in Texas and this shortage is getting worse just as higher state graduation standards that require the completion of four years of math and four years of science are being phased in. The gap between the number of new math and science teachers that public schools need and the number coming into Texas schools has widened dramatically since 2004. The state is currently able to recruit only half as many math teachers as it needs. Things are even worse for schools in need of science teachers, especially high school science, where schools are only able to fill 20 percent of their teaching vacancies with fully qualified teachers. Thirty to 35 percent of teachers assigned to math and science classes are already teaching outside their field and Fuller’s supply and demand projections suggest that the shortage will continue to increase for the next five years. The study shows that by 2012, the gap between the Supply and Demand for Secondary (grades 7 through 12) Science Teachers will be 6,100 and 5,200 for the Secondary (grades 7 through 12) Mathematics Teachers*

*Harmony Schools prepare its students for college in a safe, caring, and collaborative atmosphere through a quality learner-centered educational program with a strong emphasis on math, science, engineering, and technology. To accomplish this goal, to the extent possible, we hire math, science and technology teachers who hold at least a baccalaureate degree in math, science or technology.*

*We first recruit US workers for these positions by placing job announcements in major newspapers, radio channels, and internet websites in each city we serve. For positions we are unable to locate US workers, we then recruit international teachers.*

#### **Does Harmony favor male versus female teachers and administrators?**

**Answer:** Harmony was established by academicians in the fields of Science, Math and Engineering in order to address the needs for rigorous education in Math, Science and Technology (STEM) education. It is a well-known fact that more male math and science graduate students exist as opposed to females, especially in STEM fields and courses. As such, it is not surprising more males than female teachers at a school system that focuses on STEM. As the time passes, the teachers of early years were naturally promoted to fulfill the role(s) of principals and assistant principals of the newly opening Harmony campuses. Harmony school focus for leaders is based on qualifications and ability to successfully implement STEM focused programs, and not on the gender of the individual. As Harmony Schools expand, more female teachers are promoted to administration, and as of 2011-2012 school year 26% of

principals and 48% of assistant principals will consist of females across the Harmony School system. We are proud of and stand behind our method of employee selection and promotion standards.

**In the recent nationwide newspaper article, issues surround the issuance of H1B Visa's were mentioned. How do you respond to these allegations?**

**Answer:** Dr. Tarim responded to the published information with the following statement.

*Your article contains some information about the H1B process and the number of foreign workers we employ. The article mentioned that Cosmos Foundation had 505 H-1B visas certified in 2010. Cosmos Foundation had 505 certified Labor Condition Applications (LCA) (not H-1B applications). Because the immigration laws are complicated, many people confuse the Labor Condition Application (LCA) process with H-1B visa petition. I would like to take this opportunity to provide some background on H-1B petitions and Labor Condition Application (LCA) processes.*

*The Labor Condition Application or LCA is a pre-requisite step to an H-1B petition. The LCA, Form-9035, which can be filed electronically with free of charge, contains basic information about the proposed H-1B employment such as rate of pay, period of employment, and work location. LCA is filed with the Department of Labor whereas H-1B petitions are filed to and adjudicated by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) centers under the Department of Homeland Security. Each time an H-1B petition is filed with USCIS, it must be accompanied by a certified LCA. However, filing an LCA does not always result in an H-1B application. A new LCA should be filed each time an employee is transferred from one location to another (no H1B filing required), the position is amended, or H-1B is renewed. It is very likely for a company to file multiple LCAs for one single employee (due to, for example, promotion, change in job duties, change in location, renewal, etc.).*

*Each year, Department of Labor Foreign Labor Certification Data Center discloses LCA data. In Fiscal Year 2010, Cosmos Foundation had 505 LCAs certified. This number, by any means, does not represent the number of H-1B workers Cosmos hired in 2010. During Fiscal Year 2010, we recruited 112 foreign workers. We currently employ over 1550 individuals and the number of all H-1B workers –not just those hired in 2010– is less than 20%. All of these workers possess a degree in mathematics, science, technology, or a related field. There are public schools in the nation employing more H1B workers than Cosmos. For example, Prince George's County Public Schools in Upper Marlboro, MD who filed only 237 LCAs in Fiscal Year 2010 has more than 1,000 H1B workers.*

*Unlike traditional public schools, we have campuses located in 16 different cities. Each time an employee is transferred from one Campus to another, a new LCA should be filed (no H1B petition is required). On the other hand, Dallas Independent School District campuses, for example, are all in one geographic region and there is no need to file a separate LCA for such situations. This results in relatively low number of LCA filings.*

**How does someone become a principal at a Harmony School?**

**Answer:** The principals of Harmony Schools begin as teachers in the Harmony system, and receive promotions through the ranks to their current positions. Prior work or involvement in the Harmony Schools is viewed as a positive attribute in candidates, and positions are typically filled by current

Harmony employees who meet the necessary qualifications. One of the benefits of working in a charter school is the endless opportunities for growth and advancement for dedicated, enthusiastic educators.

**Note: Journalist Reveals Bias through Questions and Comments**

By considering the manner in which questions are framed and constructed, some journalists carry their personal bias to an interview, rather than listening and observing openly. Consider the following example: During her visit to the central office of Harmony Schools, the journalist inquired about some framed portraits stacked in a room. Dr. Tarim responded by stating “these are our Presidents!” She asked, “Presidents of Turkey?” Then she was shown that they were the founding fathers and key figures of the United States, as they currently decorate the walls of Harmony central office. We feel the nature of her question underscores her personal presumptions and prejudices in her mind. Below is a picture from Harmony central office walls displaying the aforementioned U.S. founding fathers and key figures:



*Wall of Founding Fathers – Harmony School of Innovation*

Finally, the above mentioned nationwide newspaper article has another interesting side, the act of writing a journal article on a school system without seeking the perspective of students and parents.

**Final Note from Harmony Advocates:**

***Our goal of publishing this document is to provide a place and an opportunity to share the facts from the source, and to clarify any misconceptions created by various media sources. We look forward to periodic updates. More importantly, we look forward to sharing the successes of our students, campuses, and teachers. Our number one goal is to remain a student focused organization, where we continually strive to facilitate high achievement and standards of excellence.***



Harmony School of Advancements - Houston



Harmony Science Academy – El Paso



Harmony School of Advancement– Houston



Harmony Science Academy – San Antonio



## Excerpts from Comments of Parents and teachers to NYT Article

*I teach at a Harmony school in Dallas, and I am an avid New York Times reader. I agree with many other comments on the xenophobic tone of the article. It may surprise the author of this article, but it is common for businesspeople to do business with contacts they already have and whom they are comfortable with. Is it so crazy that Turkish speaking Texans would prefer to sign contracts with other Turks? If an article insinuates Harmony is showing favoritism awarding contracts to Turkish businesses (illegally at that), then why no article about Texas ISDs contracting with people who only live in Texas? Why did they enter into no Turkish businesses?*

*The same goes for the discussion about visas. Is it so crazy educated Turks want to come to America and teach, like any other group from any other country in the world? If Harmony is doing something improper, why didn't the author of the article find any wrongdoing? It is extremely irresponsible to put out an article that insinuates wrongdoing to millions of people, and then finds no wrongdoing.*

**Scott Coleman, Dallas, TX**

---

*I have two children who attend the new Harmony school in San Antonio. My 2nd grader's teacher, PE coach, and music teacher were not Turkish and my 4th grader's English, Math, Science, PE, Music, Spanish, and social studies teachers were not Turkish. My children received a much better education this past year than they would have received going to the public school they are zoned for. My children have not been subjected to any type of Turkish religion of any kind in their school. They celebrated Veteran's Day by talking to and asking questions over Skype with a military soldier in Iraq. They say the pledge of allegiance and sing the national anthem every morning.*

**SA Mom, San Antonio, TX**

---

*Several points come to mind:*

- Charter schools wouldn't exist if regular public schools had done an adequate job.
- States wouldn't need to import science and math teachers (as many states do) if we had enough US teachers who could do an adequate job.
- I am interested in kids getting a good education; I don't care who is providing it as long as the teaching methods are kid-friendly and successful. Nothing in the article showed me that the curriculum or the teaching materials or the teachers in Harmony Schools are tilted toward Muslim or Turkish values that undercut American values.
- If a religious movement is indeed dedicated to peace and harmony and the importance of education, I don't care whether it originates in Turkey or Thailand or Texas -- I'm for it.

**Angelika Pohl, Atlanta, GA**

---

*My daughter has attended a Harmony school in San Antonio for the last three years and I have nothing but praise for them. She has completed a science project every year -- a real science project, where you actually design an experiment to test a hypothesis, not a glorified science report ("How does a pendulum work?") like I did in high school -- and even won a college scholarship at a regional science fair in 6th grade. She has studied the Turkish language and, at age 12, spent a month living and traveling in Turkey on one of their subsidized trips. She can't wait to return! I could not have asked for a better education for her, not only academically, but also opening her mind to the world and encouraging her to become a confident and capable young woman.*

**Stacy, San Antonio, TX**

---

*My son attends one of the Harmony Schools in Houston. I am neither a Turkish nor a Muslim yet I like the school because it actually "teaches" children to read and write and do Math and introduce them to the wonderful world of Science. If Harmony Schools were religious based, there wouldn't be hundreds of children in the waiting list every year. The school does not have all the facilities or resources like the public schools e.g gym, swimming etc., they don't even have a decent playground yet parents are keen on sending their children here, why? because they focus on academics. In a nation where many children are losing interest in Math and Science, this school puts a lot of emphasis on teaching just that. As a parent, why wouldn't I want my son to get a good education? why would I bother about the religious affiliation of the school officials as long as they don't bring that into the classrooms? I was raised Hindu, went to a Catholic school and practice Buddhism, what does that make me? I value my Christian education and I respect my parents' religion.*

**Concerned parent, Houston, Texas**

Substitute the word "Canadian" for "Turkish" wherever it appears and "Christian" for Islam and read it again. Meanwhile, you have to get to the second half of the article to discover that 16 of its 19 schools carry the state's highest rating and you only get a few lines on academic achievement in an otherwise incredibly long article. And there is no mention of the school's long waiting lists. The New York Times can do better than this; Once again, education article focused on adults for jobs and not educational outcomes for kids, with a little anti-immigration seasoning thrown in.

**tw78, Los Angeles**

---

I have heard nothing but good things about Harmony. Clearly the contractors who are part of the good ol'boy club are upset because there is a new kid on the block. As for the teachers coming from Turkey - one only needs to look at our school system to see where qualified instructors of math and science are not, and that is in the public school system. Individuals who are teaching our children received degrees with C averages. We are lacking excellence and it is shockingly obvious when watching our young beautifully bright children enter school only to exit either without graduating or going on to university. Xenophobia indeed!!

**Bertha, Dallas, TX**

---

I just recently graduated from Harmony Science Academy. I have been a student at Harmony since 7th grade and after reading this article, I am very very offended. Harmony Science Academy does not in any way endorse Islamic religion nor any religion. The purpose of Harmony is to get kids to succeed in many of the areas of education that the US is lacking currently. As an individual who has been to a public school as well, I have to say that there is a big difference. It is today that I realize how unappreciative I was in everything HSA has done. Thank you Harmony!

**Kumail, Austin, TX**

---

I am very saddened by this article and some of these comments. I have worked at Harmony for 4 years and also my kids go there. I am extremely happy that I work for Harmony. I love to get up and go to work everyday. I am an AMERICAN and I am a WOMAN and the Turkish teachers and the Turkish administrators who are men treat me with respect and respect my opinion. I can also assure you that we work with American companies as well. So, I am wondering why they say we work with all Turkish companies. The accusations are completely false. If we do go with a Turkish company, it is because they have a low bid not because they are Turkish. I also can assure you that they do not teach religion at that school. They are very modest about their religion. They are, however, excellent educators. In our school, we have 15% to 20% that are Turkish teachers and some of the Turkish teachers are the best teachers around. At Harmony, your child is not a number or a face but a person. The teachers get to know the students and help the student if he or she needs help.

**Texasmom, TX**

---

My son has attended Harmony middle and high schools in Austin, TX for four years. I am a native born Texan for 9 generations, yet I have nothing but praise for the Harmony school system. We removed him from the local public school system as they spent 75% of their time drilling on the TAKS test leaving large gaps in the education of the children. The public school teachers were listless, dull, and basically ran their classes on autopilot. My son did no homework but made straight As. The harmony schools are nothing short of inspiring. They are extremely diverse, rigorous, the teachers are enthusiastic and devoted, and they don't tolerate laziness. The kids are about one year ahead of the same kids in public schools and the expectations for performance are higher. They reach out to the parents very often, even seeking home visits to discuss the student's progress. They work on science projects with UT producing results that

NY Times, it is not unseemly to investigate expenditure of funding, but to try and tie it to religious inflammatory rhetoric is unacceptable. You should be ashamed of your article, the lack of responsibility contained within, and the results that publishing it might have upon children who could benefit from a better education that our public schools can currently offer.

**Tina Rakos, Austin, TX**

---

*I am...*

- 1. A white girl from Louisiana*
- 2. A Christian*
- 3. A Teacher at a Harmony School*

*Funny, I am not Muslim or from Turkey, yet I work at a Harmony School. I teach from state approved textbooks, and I am one of those people that is into everything and I have never seen a questionable textbook. I have never been asked to teach religion; I teach Christians, Muslims, Hindu, and one or two I truly haven't heard of because they are from smaller regions of countries. Most of my students are Hispanics (which makes sense being San Antonio and all) but I loved getting to teach Indians, Africans, and other ethnicities.*

*If our school was promoting Muslim men dominated schools, then they would have kicked me out a loooooong time ago. I am one of those people (WOMEN) that speaks my mind and make sure everyone knows if I am not happy or questioning something. I have had many conversations with our Turkish male administrations and they have always listened to me rant and have calmly and respectfully talked to me about my thoughts. They believe in an open door policy as well.*

*Coming from Louisiana, I feel so blessed to work at Harmony, especially since most folks from Louisiana still have some racism that they let shine too often. I grew up with narrow minded thoughts of Muslims, Blacks, or anyone else not fitting our mold of what is deemed acceptable. I have fought to become an open minded person. I still hold my Christian values and because I am an American woman, I stand my ground when needed. Yet, I accept differences of others and try to appreciate the BEAUTY in our differences.*

*People are criticizing our Turkish teachers but those teachers are extremely hard working. Our school pushes "home visits" b/c they strongly believe in parental involvement. Something I believe many Americans have become lax on b/c we are so consumed with everything else. These teachers go in 2-3 and visit each student's house. At first this idea blew my mind. I was like I don't want someone in my home but then I talked to an American parent one day who had been visited and she told me how much she appreciated it. The dedication of the teachers to the child's education was very impressive to her. It made me decide that next year I will visit each student's home.*

*We have many afterschool events. (Science Fair, Social Studies Fair, Black History Celebration, Cinco De Mayo, Chinese New year etc...) Many of the Turkish teachers would stop by and enjoy some of the festivities.*

*My daughter loves her teachers; some of whom are from Turkey.. So what? We are Americans! Shouldn't we be proud of diversity? Yes, Turkish is offered; but along with Spanish, French, German, etc...*

*In summary, I am very glad that I heard about these schools and my daughter did not miss such a great opportunity. I wish the author of the article was more objective and reflected parents' opinions and gratitude towards the hard working educators of Harmony Schools.*

**Susan, San Antonio**

---

*As a parent with a child in a Harmony School, I am highly offended by the lack of truth within this article. As a parent whom hears every detail of my child's day right down to bathroom break and whom at what for lunch, I am quite aware of what each second of the day at school entailed. I am involved up at the school and know exactly what goes on from the pledge of allegiance to DEAR to the gifted classes. Not once have I witnessed the allegations this article states. What I have witnessed is a wonderful atmosphere of respect, tolerance, and acceptance between the melting pot of different cultures within the school.*

*While Harmony may teach about other countries, no one religion is pushed. This is a relief for this 46 year old native Texas whom is not Christian, nor Islam, nor Muslim. Harmony does teach the ideals I believe most thoroughly and do my best to pass on to my child: Respect, Love, Acceptance, and Tolerance for your fellow human being. This is refreshing to me as in this era this nation no longer seems to follow or believe in these ideals - even though these words of Jesus can be found in the New Testament of the Christian bible.*

*I am extremely grateful for the Harmony Science Academy my child attends. Without Harmony, my child would be the unhappy, bored child whom no longer wanted to learn, much less attend a school of any kind. When a public school can do that to your child by the age of 7, it is terrible. To find a school that turns all of that around in the space of two months is a miracle. For it to continue over two years is bliss.*

*I am extremely disappointed in this false and misleading article. It is a reminder of why I have given up on newspapers and television news.*

**Juli Enn, Fort Worth, TX**



Harmony School of Advancement - Houston



Harmony School of Art – Houston



Harmony Science Academy – El Paso



Harmony Public Schools Central Office - Houston