Ms. Georgia M. Bowen
Leon County School Board
2505 Fritz Lane
Tallahassee, Florida 32304

October 20, 2013

Dear Ms. Bowen:

I write to urge you to deny Stars Middle School’s request to expand into the elementary grades.

I am concerned about Stars’ contracting practices.

Stars contracts to a corporation called Charter Educational Services and Resources, which was known until recently as the Grace Institute For Educational Research And Resources Inc. This corporation is located in Alpharetta, Georgia, and has ties to charter schools in several cities in Florida, as well as Fulton Science Academy High School and Fulton Sunshine Academy in the greater Atlanta, Georgia, area.

A New York Times article of June 5, 2012 noted that an audit by Fulton County Schools uncovered related-party deals between Fulton Science Academy Middle School and the Grace Institute, amounting at that time to $500,000. Fulton County superintendent Robert Avossa expressed concern that the contracts with the school’s vendors, including the Grace Institute, represented a conflict of interest. Fulton Science Academy Middle School had its charter terminated, partly because of these concerns. The group of 3 schools, Fulton Science Academy Middle and High Schools, and Fulton Sunshine Academy, were all tied to a $19 million bond deal that resulted in default.

(Link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/us/audits-for-3-georgia-charter-schools-tied-to-gulen-movement.html?_r=0>)

The Times article noted that the three above-mentioned Fulton schools are part of a nationwide network of schools run by followers of Fethullah Gulen. There is ample evidence that Stars Middle School is also part of this network, as it shares many similar characteristics with the Fulton Schools, and teachers and administrators have circulated between these schools.

My concern is that Stars Middle School’s contracts with Charter Educational Services and Resources may not be the result of an open and fair bidding process, but rather may arise from the fact that the school is part of this tightly-knit nationwide network of charter school operators that appears to favor its own contractors even when lower-priced alternatives are available. This issue was covered by a front-page New York Times article on June 6, 2011, which focused on the network’s chain of charter schools in Texas:

Link: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/education/07charter.html/pagewanted=all

I urge you to not allow Stars Middle School to expand until its contracting practices have been thoroughly investigated. This school receives both local and federal funds for its operation. A 2012-13 Title 1 school list from the Florida Department of Education lists Stars Middle School, indicating that it is receiving federal Title 1 funds. Stars’ parent company is 501c3 and therefore exempt from federal taxes. All taxpayers in the US therefore have an interest in ascertaining that the public funds (and tax breaks) this school receives are being used wisely to improve our children’s education rather than to enrich special-interest groups.

Sincerely,

John/Jane Doe