



Everything New Orleans

Records show glaring faults at school with ties to Turkish charter network

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By **Andrew Vanacore, The Times-Picayune**

Inci Akpinar, the vice president of a company called Atlas Texas Construction & Trading, sat down with an official from the Louisiana Department of Education a little more than a year ago and made him an offer.

As the state official, Folwell Dunbar, recalled in a memo to department colleagues, Akpinar flattered him with "a number of compliments" before getting to the point: "I have twenty-five thousand dollars to fix this problem: twenty thousand for you and five for me."

At the time, Dunbar was investigating numerous complaints against Abramson Science & Technology Charter School in eastern New Orleans, which shares apparent ties to Akpinar's firm as well as charter schools in other states run by Turkish immigrants.



Folwell Dunbar

In fact, state auditors had already turned up startling deficiencies at Abramson.

The records they kept of unannounced visits to the campus, as well as interviews with former teachers, paint a chaotic scene: classrooms without instructors for weeks and even months at a time, students who claimed their science fair projects had been done by teachers, a single special-needs instructor for a school of nearly 600.

Dunbar -- having declined to take money from Akpinar -- recommended more than a year ago that the state board of education yank Abramson's charter.

But the board ultimately stopped short of closing down the school, giving it a year to shape up under a "corrective action plan."

Until this Friday, the school was set to open its doors for another academic year because of a tweak to board policy that pushed back all charter renewals until later in the year.

But after questioning by the The Times-Picayune, acting State Superintendent of Education Ollie Tyler late Friday wrote to the state board asking it to prevent the school from opening in the fall, citing problems

discovered during the original investigation and a new information about an incident between two young students that was possibly sexual in nature.

BESE agreed.

Tevfik Eski, the head of the nonprofit organization that runs Abramson, denied allegations about cheating in science fair competitions and outlined a number of steps the school has taken to bolster special education. He said the school has no association with Atlas Texas. Atlas officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

But records of the state's audit, obtained by The Times-Picayune through a public information request, as well as first-hand accounts from teachers, offer a view inside a school that has drawn widespread concern in education circles around the city.

That an executive from Atlas Texas, a Houston-based contractor, would speak on the school's behalf points to the somewhat opaque connections that link Abramson with other schools and businesses founded by Turkish expatriates. Atlas has won numerous contracts in the past from a Texas-based school operator called the Cosmos Foundation.

Cosmos does not run Abramson, but it has a wide-ranging support contract with the Pelican Education Foundation, the local nonprofit that operates both Abramson and Kenilworth Science & Technology Charter School in Baton Rouge.

Among teachers who have spent time in the building, Abramson has earned something of a black-sheep reputation.

Many have wondered about the foreign instructors at the school who appear to be of Turkish origin. State records and interviews show some had trouble communicating in English, which has led to speculation that the school may be taking advantage of a visa program intended to bring highly skilled workers into the country.

Similar allegations have cropped up in other states where the Cosmos Foundation operates. The group runs a charter network called the Harmony Schools in Texas, where they've encountered unfounded accusations that they somehow promote Islamic extremism, largely because of an interest by some of the group's leaders in the movement begun by a Turkish religious scholar named Fethullah Gulen.

Both Cosmos and Pelican have disavowed any official religious links, though Abramson teachers on a school-sponsored trip to Turkey received pamphlets on the Gulen movement. The literature emphasizes Gulen's peaceful message and a commitment to serve "people regardless of faith."

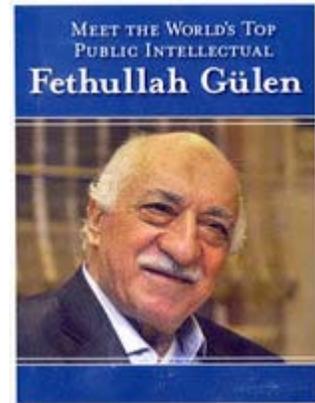
Abramson opened back in 2007 on the site of the old Marion Abramson Senior High School along Read Boulevard.

Like many high schools before Hurricane Katrina, the old Abramson had struggled academically, finishing its last year in 2005 with a school performance score from the state of 31.2 -- far below what Louisiana considers "academically unacceptable."

The new Abramson, part of a revolutionary post-storm movement toward independent charter schools, was able to produce vastly improved results. Still operating out of a set of trailers where the old Abramson school building once stood, it notched a school performance score of 78 last year.

As the school's full name suggests, Abramson focuses on a science and math-heavy curriculum, and Pelican's website trumpets the success its students have had at science fairs around the state.

Like many of the charter schools that have sprung up in New Orleans since 2005, Abramson has welcomed young recruits from Teach for America, a group whose ranks in the city have swelled.



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Abramson teachers on a school-sponsored trip to Turkey received pamphlets, like this one, on the Gulen movement.



Mary Elise DeCoursey

Mary Elise DeCoursey arrived at Abramson as a first-year TFA instructor in the fall of 2009. The school assigned her to teach 8th and 11th grade English courses along with a journalism elective.

But something odd happened around October, DeCoursey said: the teacher next door, who taught a Turkish language course, disappeared.

The instructor never came back but students continued to show up for the course, sitting unattended in the classroom day after day. Several times, DeCoursey said, she called down to the office and was told that someone would be up shortly. No one ever came, a pattern that she said persisted for months.

Meanwhile, the rumors about science projects had reached her as well. One of her students complained that she had finished her own science fair entry only to be handed a different project by school officials -- one "that could win," DeCoursey said.

Nor was there any apparent help for students with special needs, she said.

She was never unaware whether any of her students had the individualized education plans, or IEPs, that are required by federal law, and none of her students was ever pulled out of class for extra help. DeCoursey said the only time the school's special education instructor intervened in her class was after the school's

principal asked her which students might be in danger of failing the state's LEAP test. Standardized test results are a major component of school performance scores, which ultimately determine whether a school is allowed to continue taking in students.

Growing alarmed, DeCoursey and three other teachers who shared her concerns began keeping written records of what they saw, asking students to document similar instances of unethical behavior.

Finally, during a birthday get-together at the wine bar Delachaise, one of the teachers, Charm Baker, broke down in tears over conditions at the school, DeCoursey said. They decided that night to get in touch with the state.

In an email dated Feb. 2, 2010, and signed by DeCoursey, Baker and two others, they wrote to Kenneth Campell, then head of the state's charter office: "Though we are fully aware of the significant amount of autonomy given to charter schools, we are now concerned that this autonomy is being abused to the point that students are being forced to engage in unethical acts."

They also reported a "general feeling of fear" among the school's staff because of what appeared to be retaliation against teachers, parents and students who had spoken up about the school's practices in the past.

Seeming to confirm those fears, the school fired Baker as the state's audit got under way that spring, according to DeCoursey and state records.

But the state investigation appeared to back up much of what the teachers had written in their note.

A team of at least seven people -- independent experts as well as officials from the department of education and the state-run Recovery School District -- visited the school and recorded their observations in written reports.

Though Abramson advertises a special focus on science and technology, state officials found lab materials "still boxed, with most of the instruments still packed and sealed" after two years sitting at the school.



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Eliot Kamenitz, The Times-Picayune

Four teachers at the Abramson Science & Technology Charter School reported a 'general feeling of fear' among the school's staff because of what appeared to be retaliation against teachers, parents and students who had spoken up about the school's practices.

Robert Daigle, an educational consultant who visited Abramson wrote, "It was the cleanest science equipment I had ever seen in my 21 years as a science teacher. I speculate lack of use kept them so clean. And this was in the science lab that all teachers go to for experiments."

Another outside expert who visited Abramson, Barbara Cassara, reported that several students confirmed they had done little or none of the work that went into their science projects: "One child indicated that her mother would not let her participate in the off-campus fair because she had not done the work herself. Another said the teacher did her brother's project."

A group of ninth-graders, asked at random how their grades were, all responded by saying they had straight A's or B's, and said they felt the state's standardized exams were "easy." Asked why, "they said that if you participated in the review, you would know what to do. They described practice on items that were very close to the items on the test."

Another group of students was "very vocal about their outrage over the firing of the 'best' teacher," later identified in the state record as "Mrs. Baker."

The school declined to give its reasons for firing Baker, citing a policy against discussing the conduct of its teachers.

The state audit also turned up a significant lack of resources for special-needs students.

Federal law requires that every student classified with a special need have an IEP, developed through observation and interviews.

Margaret Lang, executive director for the state department of education's intervention services, reported that all of the special-needs students at Abramson had IEP's that called for one hour-long session of special education instruction per week. "This would indicate that this is not an individual decision when all students have similar and very limited special education instruction," Lang wrote. The special ed coordinator told Lang that "instruction was limited because that was all she could do as the only special educator for the K-11 school."

There were also complaints from teachers and students about the difficulty of communicating with some of the foreign staff.

One group of students apparently grew "animated" as they told state auditors that there were "many teachers in the school who did a poor job of communicating material to them because of poor language skills and poor teaching skills." After an interview with one of the middle school math teachers, the state's audit notes, "The teacher has poor English skills and is very difficult to understand."

While the school employs foreign teachers, there is no evidence that Abramson or any other school associated with the Cosmos Foundation has ties to Islamic extremism.

Teachers who traveled to Turkey on an Abramson-sponsored trip brought back written materials about the Gulen Movement. But none of the teachers who spoke for this article described any trace of the movement's teachings in the curriculum at Abramson. And there is no mention of Gulen in records that came from the state.

One of the pamphlets brought back by an Abramson teacher describes the movement as "neither an Islamic nor a religious movement." Instead it "centers its works and efforts on high human values and the human person."

Still, Dunbar, the state's academic advisor for charter schools, described a series of bizarre encounters as he and others carried out the audit that suggest a network of associations at Abramson extending beyond Louisiana.

When his team made its initial unplanned visit to the school, they were told the high school students would be leaving for a field trip. But students "indicated that they did not know about the trip," Dunbar wrote, and "a few teachers said it was put together at the last minute. Team members suspect that it was done because of the review."

On a follow-up visit to the school, Dunbar was told that representatives from both the Cosmos Foundation and Atlas Texas had arrived and wanted to meet with him.

"They proceeded to shower me with compliments, to the extent that it made me feel uncomfortable," Dunbar wrote. Akpinar, the vice president from Atlas Texas, even contacted Dunbar after the meeting to see if they could get drinks that evening.

"I declined," he wrote.

After persistent requests, Dunbar said he agreed to meet her at the Starbucks on Magazine Street, where Akpinar offered \$25,000 to help "fix this problem," Dunbar wrote. He recalled explaining that it would be a conflict of interest for a state official to take money from the school.

She responded that he would "only need to advise them," adding, "You are the only one who can help us."

Dunbar concluded in the same memo that the state board of education should revoke school's the charter. He suggested the state bring in another charter operator for the lower grades and disperse the high school students to other campuses.

"Later in the day I joked with my wife, 'I might need to enter a witness protection plan,'" Dunbar wrote. "In retrospect, I'm starting to think it's not all that funny."

A spokeswoman for the state education department said Dunbar reported the incident to the New Orleans Police Department, which couldn't find "hard evidence" to substantiate the incident.

Ultimately, the state decided to renew Abramson's charter for one year, contingent on the school carrying out a detailed corrective action plan. (A typical renewal lasts anywhere from two to 10 years.)

The school would have come up for review again this summer, but the state board of education altered its policy on all charter renewals this year. Instead of considering applications in the summer, the board will conduct reviews after school performance scores are calculated in October. The idea is to make sure the latest scores are available and, if necessary, give the state more time before the beginning of a new school year to find a different operator.

State officials have followed up with numerous site visits, and the school claims to have bulked up its special education staff.

But after Friday's sudden shut-down, it appears families will have to find a new school for their children, with little more than a month left until classes begin.

In recent interviews, several teachers who worked at Abramson this past year said problems have continued at the school, in particular around students with special needs.

Genevieve Redd, a first-year Teach for America recruit at Abramson this past year, described making several failed attempts to get help for a student she suspected of being abused, an account the school disputes.

Redd said she encountered a 5-year-old student from her kindergarten class in a school bathroom, poised in what appeared to be a sexual position with another student who had stripped naked.

But she said she hit a wall when she took the incident to the school's administration. She said the dean of students told her to give the child "the benefit of the doubt," while the principal remarked that "we all know he's goofy, anyway." She said they told her to throw away the page-long write-up she had prepared on the incident and simply log it as a minor classroom disturbance. The dean of students, she said, promised to handle contacting the child's parents and the authorities but never followed through.

When she caught her student pulling the same classmate into a supply closet, Redd said, the school's guidance counselor finally called Child & Family Services and the parents, but neither were aware of a previous incident.

The principal at the time, Cunyet Dokmen, has left the school. But the current principal, Andrea Estavan, refuted Redd's version of events, saying the school contacted the police and the child's parents immediately after the first incident. Estavan said the school decided not to renew Redd's contract because of poor classroom management, speculating that her allegations are retaliation.

Patrice Yaris, the dean of students, recalled a slightly different version of the incident. Yaris said that after questioning the students after the first encounter, the administration felt unsure of what had happened. She said the school did not call police after the first incident and could not remember whether parents had been contacted.

Redd claims that she left the school on amiable terms after Dokmen explained that she would be let go because of budget cuts.

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