



**PALM HARBOR ACADEMY, INC.**

---

May 3, 2018

VIA EMAIL

James Tager, Superintendent  
Flagler County Public Schools  
1769 East Moody Blvd. Bldg. #2  
Bunnell, FL 32110  
superintendent@flaglerschools.com

RE: Palm Harbor Academy

Dear Superintendent Tager:

The purpose of this letter is to address concerns that have been raised by the Flagler County School District (the "District") regarding 1.) the withdrawal of students from Palm Harbor Academy, Inc. ("Palm Harbor"), 2.) the submission of documentation related to transportation, and 3.) compliance with the requirement that Palm Harbor provide an extra hour of instruction each day. Set forth below are the facts surrounding these issues.

**1.) Student Withdrawals**

The District has raised concerns over the withdrawal of thirty-one (31) students from Palm Harbor over the time period spanning approximately April 2, 2018 to April 9, 2018. As explained more fully below, fourteen (14) of these students withdrew from Palm Harbor because they enrolled in schools outside of Flagler County. The other seventeen (17) students enrolled at The Academy of Excellence of North Florida, Inc. ("Private School") because their parents believed it was in their best interest. No parents were ever pressured to transfer their child to the Private School, nor were any students involuntarily transferred there.

During the months of February, March and April 2018, fourteen (14) Palm Harbor students, for various reasons, enrolled in schools outside of Flagler County. One family consisting of six (6) children in various grades (the Brown/Scott family) enrolled their children in Volusia County schools. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 1-3. One family consisting of two (2) children in various grades (the Andrews family) enrolled their children in Chisholm Elementary School in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 4-5. One family consisting of three (3) children in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades (the Burnett/Perkins family) enrolled their children in Duval County schools. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 6-7. One family consisting of three

(3) children, two (2) kindergartners and one (1) second-grader (the Williams/Samedi family), enrolled their children in Horizon Elementary School in Port Orange, Florida. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 8.

Although these students left Palm Harbor in February and March, requests from their various new schools for their records were not received until the end of March or early April.

- The request for the records of the Brown/Scott family were received on March 29th and 30th. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 1-3.
- The request for the Andrews family was received on April 3, 2018. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 4-5.
- The request for the Burnett/Perkins family was received on April 2, 2018. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 6-7.
- The request for the Williams/Samedi family was received on March 27, 2018. Exhibit A, Requests for Records, 8.

The students were officially withdrawn from Palm Harbor during the period from April 2<sup>nd</sup> to April 9<sup>th</sup>. Prior to this, the parents simply had not informed Palm Harbor of their desire to withdraw their students. Once the requests for records were received by Palm Harbor, the School timely inputted this information into Skyward.

Of the thirty-one (31) students that were withdrawn from Palm Harbor at the beginning of April, seventeen (17) enrolled at the Private School, which was organized on February 9, 2018. Exhibit C, Signed Registration Forms. Once the Private School was established, parents became aware of the Private School and inquired about enrolling their children. Many parents stated that the small size of the Private School might afford a better opportunity and environment for their students.

On or about April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018 a school code was secured for the Private School. Thereafter, the parents of seventeen (17) students who desired to enroll in the Private School submitted to Palm Harbor requests for records, copies of which have been attached as Exhibit B. Subsequently the students' parents registered them at the Private School, as evidenced by the signed registration forms for each student attached hereto as Exhibit C.

It has been suggested that certain parents were induced by Palm Harbor employees or representatives to enroll their students at the Private School, especially students that were at risk of failing the Florida Standards Assessment ("FSA"). This was simply not the case. The parents that withdrew their students from Palm Harbor and enrolled them at the Private School did so on their own volition. Many of these parents expressed to Principal Taylor Croot that they wanted to enroll their students in the Private School because they felt like it was a better fit for their student. Exhibit D, Affidavit of Taylor Croot. Some of these parents also expressed concern that their

student may not pass the FSA and were interested in the Private School because teachers there do not have to teach to a standardized test.

In the months leading up to the withdrawal of these students, Ms. Croot had conferences with parents or conducted home visits to discuss the academic progress of students at-risk of failing the FSA. Exhibit D, Affidavit of Taylor Croot. Such conferences and home visits are standard procedure for Ms. Croot and part of Palm Harbor's efforts to promote student success. Exhibit D, Affidavit of Taylor Croot. Dr. Betty Green, one of the Board members of Palm Harbor, also attended some of the home visits in March. Exhibit N, Affidavit of Betty Green. During these conferences and home visits, some parents, concerned that their student was at-risk, inquired about the Private School and the possibility of enrolling their student there. Ms. Croot or other representatives of Palm Harbor did provide information about the Private School at the request of parents, including information about the smaller class sizes and intense remediation. Exhibit D, Affidavit of Taylor Croot. However, by no means did Ms. Croot or any other representative of Palm Harbor pressure or induce parents to enroll their students at the Private School. Exhibit D, Affidavit of Taylor Croot.

It has also been suggested that certain students were involuntarily transferred to the Private School without the permission of the parents. No student was ever withdrawn from Palm Harbor or enrolled at the Private School absent the express authorization and direction of the parents. In fact, parents completed an online registration for the Private School, which they were required to sign, as evidenced by Exhibit C.

In response to the District raising concerns over the withdrawal of Palm Harbor students, Palm Harbor conducted its own internal investigation and hired an outside investigator. Each of the parents interviewed so far by the outside investigator have confirmed that they did not feel pressured to enroll their student at the Private School. Exhibits E-G, Sworn Affidavits of Parents and Staff. Further, these parents have indicated to us that they expressed the same sentiment when contacted by District personnel inquiring about this issue. Exhibit E, G, Sworn Affidavits of Parents.

The District has particularly focused its concern on the withdrawal of students who are in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. It has been suggested that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students were enrolled in the Private School to avoid having them take the FSA. Parents were not pressured to enroll their students at the Private School to avoid taking the FSA. As explained herein, not all of the students that transferred to the Private School were at risk of failing the FSA. Further, some of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students that were at risk of failing remained at Palm Harbor.

In February 2018 Palm Harbor had approximately thirty-seven (37) students in two (2) separate 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classes. Two (2) of the children withdrawn from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in April, Ashlynn Burnett

and Gerriana Brown, withdrew and subsequently enrolled in schools in other districts. The parents of eleven (11) other 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students withdrew them from Palm Harbor and enrolled them in the Private School. According to the i-Ready report for January, four (4) of the eleven (11) students enrolled in the Private School were on or approaching grade level:

- Rhea Hammons was on level in both math and reading.
- Arrhianna Smith was on level in math and approaching level in reading.
- Jamiya Chiles-Bennett was on level in math.
- Aabry Kennedy Casanova was approaching level in math and reading.

Many students that were below grade level have remained at Palm Harbor. Of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students that remained at Palm Harbor, half of them were below grade level in reading and around 72% were below level in mathematics as of the January i-Ready diagnostic. If Palm Harbor were trying to prevent at-risk students from taking the FSA, it would not make sense that students below grade level remained at Palm Harbor.

Palm Harbor has taken a number of measures to improve the proficiency of its 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, particularly after the January i-Ready report was released. During winter break and spring break, Palm Harbor conducted an intensive academic boot camp for students. The school has also implemented a Saturday and Sunday school where the students are tutored for approximately four (4) hours each day by math and reading interventionists. The school also provides free transportation to and from the Saturday and Sunday school. Additionally, Palm Harbor has intensified its afterschool tutoring. The School felt encouraged that many of the above-referenced students would do well on the FSA exam. However, Palm Harbor complied with the requests of the students' parents to place their children in the Private School.

It has been asserted that Palm Harbor sought to remove 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at risk of failing the FSA exam, yet the facts do not support this conclusion. Some students who were on or approaching grade level were enrolled in the Private School, while others that were below grade level remained at Palm Harbor. At no time did Palm Harbor staff and representatives pressure or induce parents to enroll in the Private School, but Palm Harbor did comply with parents' requests to have their students withdrawn from Palm Harbor and enrolled at the Private School.

## 2.) Transportation Issues

Recently, Palm Harbor was informed that the Transportation Department had not received its turn by turn bus routes, bus evacuation drills and driver-signed attendance sheets for FTE survey 3. The delay in getting the paper copy of these documents was the result of a simple misunderstanding. After the October FTE window closed, a representative of the District came to the school and picked up physical copies of these documents. Palm Harbor initially believed that this would also occur after the February FTE window closed. Regardless, the turn by turn bus routes were available

in a binder that is kept in the front office and the FTE survey information was inputted into Skyward. Further, the required bus evacuation drills were completed on February 8, 2018.

The District has indicated that multiple requests were made for these documents. However, the Principal of Palm Harbor, Ms. Taylor Croot, is unaware of any request for these documents other than a request from mid-March and another email dated April 10<sup>th</sup> from the District that the District initially sent to an incorrect email address. Exhibit M, April 13<sup>th</sup> Email from Leonard Wood. As of April 26, 2018, Palm Harbor has provided the District with all required paper copies of the bus routes, bus evacuation drills and driver-signed attendance sheets. Exhibit H, Transportation Documents.

The District has also expressed concerns about the arrangement between Palm Harbor and the Private School, whereby some Private School students are riding Palm Harbor buses to get to and from school. Palm Harbor and the Private school have entered into a formal agreement for these services. Under the agreement, Palm Harbor is charging the Private School approximately \$2.26 per day per student to transport students on its buses which is approximately the annual allocation of \$407.00 divided by 180 days. The executed agreement between Palm Harbor and the Private School is attached hereto as Exhibit I.

### 3.) Additional Hour of Instruction

It has been asserted that Palm Harbor was not providing its students an extra hour of reading during the day, but in fact the School is providing an additional hour reading block. Last year, the school day ran from 9:00am to 3:00pm. This year, to account for the extra hour required by statute, the school day was extended to run from 8:00am to 3:00pm. Attached as Exhibits J and K are printouts showing the bell schedules for the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. As you can see, Palm Harbor has extended the school day to provide for an extra hour of instruction as required by law. This is also evidenced by the times on the bus routes submitted to the District, showing that the Blue Bus arrives to the campus around 7:52am and the Red Bus arrives around 7:40am. Exhibit H, Transportation Documents, 10-14.

Palm Harbor acknowledges that the 2017-2018 bell schedule is not accurately reflected in the Skyward system. However, this is solely due to an error that occurred at the beginning of the school year. In July, Evan Bryan, the Information Technology System Administrator at Palm Harbor, attended a training conducted by the District on performing the duties of a registrar. Exhibit L, Affidavit of Evan Bryan. At the time of this training, Mr. Bryan was unaware of the changed bell schedule for the coming school year. A District employee inputted the prior year's bell schedule and instructed Mr. Bryan that he could change it later. *Id.* This information was never changed in Skyward, though the school day was extended by an extra hour beginning with the 2017-2018 school year. As of the date of this letter, Palm Harbor has corrected the bell schedule in Skyward to accurately reflect the actual bell schedule for the 2017-2018 school year.

Conclusion

The Private School affiliated with Palm Harbor was created with the idea that it could better serve certain students. I believe that the Private School creates more choice for parents throughout Flagler County who may be interested in having their student in a more intimate environment without the stress often experienced by students participating in state-mandated testing. At no time did Palm Harbor pressure parents to enroll their student at the Private School. Those parents that decided to enroll their students at the Private School did so on their own accord. Further, Palm Harbor has fully complied with the requirements for submitting documentation related to transportation and providing an extra hour of instruction each day.

To the extent that there may have been any charter violations, those have been cured. We appreciate the opportunity you have given us to provide additional information and clarification on these issues. We respectfully assert that the renewal of Palm Harbor's Charter Contract should proceed with the conditions already approved by the School Board. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns about the contents of this letter.

Respectfully,

Rev. Gillard S. Glover  
Board Chair  
Palm Harbor Academy

C: Adam Miller, Executive Director, Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice  
([adam.miller@fldoe.org](mailto:adam.miller@fldoe.org))  
Kristy Gavin, General Counsel, Flagler County Public Schools

Attachments: Exhibit A: Requests for Records (Other Districts)  
Exhibit B: Requests for Records (Private School)  
Exhibit C: Signed Registration Forms  
Exhibit D: Affidavit of Taylor Croot  
Exhibit E: Affidavit of Renaye Linton  
Exhibit F: Affidavit of Shakeyria Chiles  
Exhibit G: Affidavit of Stefanie Hammons  
Exhibit H: Transportation Documents  
Exhibit I: Signed Transportation Agreement

Exhibit J: 2016-2017 Bell Schedule  
Exhibit K: 2017-2018 Bell Schedule  
Exhibit L: Affidavit of Evan Bryan  
Exhibit M: April 13<sup>th</sup> Email from Leonard Wood  
Exhibit N: Affidavit of Dr. Betty Green

