September 15 Columbus Dispatch article: Charter CEO still heads school after fraud plea.

The Charter operator pleaded guilty in 2024 to using $265,000 dollars in public tax money to buy his house. The operator is still running the same charter business.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, criminal conviction does not automatically bar a person from operating a charter school. A Department of Education spokesperson stated conspiracy to commit bank fraud does not appear to be a disqualifying offense according to a State Board of Education list.

The charter school industry is largely unregulated. The lack of regulations for charters doesn't seem to be of concern to state officials. Fraud and corruption have been a hallmark of the charter industry for three decades, but state officials don't address such matters. It is hard to believe that state officials in Ohio refuse to adequately regulate the charter school industry.

Charter CEO still heads school after fraud plea

Farah used academy's money to buy a house

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Columbus Dispatch

USA TODAY NETWORK

A charter school operator who pleaded guilty in 2024 to using a quarter- million dollars of charter school money to buy his house is still running the same charter school.

And while the school's sponsor said they believe the operator's two charter schools were doing a good job educating kids, one was flagged Sept. 4 as one of the Ohio schools with anomalies on state standardized testing results.

Abdirizak Farah pleaded guilty in federal court in 2024 to conspiring to commit bank fraud after using $265,000 from Focus Learning Academy of North Columbus, a charter school he founded and operates, to help buy a house in New Albany. He was sentenced to three years of probation, a $15,000 fine and $37,000 in restitution to Focus Learning Center.

Farah founded Focus Learning Academy of Northern Columbus on Dublin Granville Road in 2007. The school serves about 700 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Focus Learning Academy of Central Columbus, formerly on Cleveland Avenue, was founded in 2020 and serves over100 pre-K through third grade students.

In 2026, he is still running both schools, and a letter to families from him in his role as CEO is prominently displayed on both websites.

Farah declined to comment on the story through his attorney.

Focus Learning Academy of Central Ohio is also on a list released Sept. 4 of dozens of schools, mostly charter, that the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce identified as having anomalies on state standardized testing.

Both schools are sponsored as charter schools by the North Central Ohio Education Service Center, a regional education service provider that also sponsors charter schools. Charter school sponsors ensure that schools adhere to their contracts, as well as providing oversight and technical assistance.

Service center Superintendent Todd Martin told The Dispatch that it was aware of both Farah's plea and the testing anomalies.

He said the center feels “pretty good” about the quality of education the Focus Learning schools are providing. He said he didn’t believe Farah was handling day-to-day operations or school financials anymore.

“I think with all eyes on it, I think it’s run pretty smooth,” Martin said. “From what I’ve seen, it seems to be running fairly well.”

State, sponsor have few options for managing charter leadership

According to a statement from the state education department, a criminal conviction does not automatically bar someone from operating or being involved in the leadership of a charter school “as no one ‘owns’ a charter school and operators are contracted service providers.”

“However, if the convicted individual is actively involved in the school – physically present, acting as superintendent, principal, treasurer, or serving as the on-site operator – and their conviction falls under one of the offenses that legally bars school involvement, then they would be prohibited from taking part in those roles,” state education department spokesperson Lacey Snoke said in a statement.

Conspiracy to commit bank fraud does not appear to be disqualifying offense, according to a State Board of Education list.

Snoke said the state “does not have statutory authority to approve, remove, or otherwise regulate charter school operators in Ohio.” The State Board of Education of Ohio, she said, can suspend or revoke a licensed educator’s credential, which would bar that individual from serving in any on-site role at the school.

She added that the department “will continue to examine this issue and have conversations with the legislature this session.”

State Sen. Andrew Brenner, R-Delaware and chair of the Senate Education Committee, said it was “completely inappropriate” for a someone who took a plea deal for misappropriating charter school money to remain in charge of the charter school.

“We need to make sure the parameters are all correct on that,” Brenner said.

According to the state education department, charter school sponsors have the ability to terminate contracts with community schools they sponsor. Martin said that while they do have this option, there is a question of whether that would “do a disservice to the kids.”

“Because all the evidence is pointing that these kids are growing in the community, flourishing with this school, this group,” Martin said. “You don’t want to punish the kids for the mistake of an adult, at least in my world.”

Charter CEO appealed probation, denied because of need for ‘protecting the public from further crime’

According to the U.S. District Court in Columbus, Farah purchased a $900,000 home in New Albany in 2020 and, two days before his original closing date, requested a $265,000 wire from a Focus Learning bank account to another person and stated the purpose was for “learning materials.”

That same day, Farah wrote to the bank handling his real estate closing, stating he received $260,000 in gifted funds. The next day the person who received the wired funds in turn wired $260,000 to the title company handling the closing. In the following days, several Focus Learning vendors made payments totaling $265,000 to the person who assisted Farah, and that money was returned.

In May, Farah's attorney appealed his probation, saying he served 18 months with good behavior and has "continued to be a pillar in the central Ohio community, while receiving tremendous support from his family and his community."

"Farah's efforts to right the wrong of his mistake, as well as the totality of his continuing contributions to central Ohio, are the reasons that the Board of Directors at Focus Learning Academy still steadfastly stand behind Mr. Farah as he continues his role as superintendent," the filing claims.

In a response, a U.S. attorney said continued supervision remains appropriate because Farah "remains the head of the school from which he misappropriated funds."

"As Mr. Farah notes in his latest motion, he still serves as superintendent of the school whose money he used to fund the fraudulent purchase of his home, and whose vendors he used to fund the school's repayment," the U.S. attorney said. "He cites this fact as though it supports the termination of probation, but the opposite is true. Because he still holds the position of power he recently abused, supervision remains appropriate."

The U.S. Attorney's Office declined to comment further.

In July, a federal judge denied the motion, saying despite Farah continuing to accept responsibility and mentor atrisk youth, "the court believes that the nature and circumstances of the offense and protecting the public from further crime both weigh against early termination of supervision at this time."

One school is on list of schools with 'testing anomalies'

An Ohio education department investigation found anomalies on standardized testing at dozens of schools across the state, including Focus Learning Academy of Central Columbus.

After Columbus City Schools self-reported its own testing anomalies, the state "proactively" directed its testing vendor to investigate the matter. The investigation found 52 unreported yet "significant" testing anomalies at dozens of public and charter schools around the state on tests administered in spring 2026, The Dispatch previously reported.

Focus Learning Academy of Central Columbus told The Dispatch on Sept. 4 that it has robust systems in place to prevent cheating on standardized testing and that "almost 100%" of the student group in question was projected to score accomplished or advanced on the test in internal predictions.

"The school stands by the accuracy and integrity of its student achievement results, and we are confident that this review will reinforce the compliance of its practices," the statement said.

According to state report cards, Focus Learning Academy of Central Columbus has a five-star rating, although it was only rated on the "gap closing" metric.

Martin said "the jury was still out" on the testing anomalies and it could be nothing.

"We're going to watch and see where it lands and respond," Martin said.

Cole Behrens covers K-12 education and school districts in central Ohio. Have a tip? Contact Cole at cbehrens@ dispatch.com or connect with him on X at @Colebehr_report