



Committee on Education and the Workforce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2176 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

July 20, 2018

Chairwoman Foxx, Vice Chair Wilson, and Ranking Member Scott:

Thank you for inviting Open Doors Academy (ODA) to participate in the Committee's Education Innovation Summit & Showcase. My name is Dr. Annemarie Grassi, and I am the founding Chief Executive Officer of ODA.

ODA tracks many data points about the scholars and families we serve, but I would like to offer one number for committee members to remember:

**100%.**

One hundred percent of ODA scholars who complete three years of our middle school program graduate from high school.

And of those scholars, 97% successfully pursue and obtain a post-secondary education credential.

What innovation is responsible for these statistics? In short, it is how ODA has operationalized the adage "It takes a village to raise a child." Our unique method of combining school and community partnerships, family engagement, a continuum of programming, and strong adult-peer relationships makes our model distinct.

More importantly, it makes our scholars successful.

### **Who ODA Serves**

ODA works in partnership with schools serving the cities of Cleveland, Cleveland Heights, University Heights, and Euclid, all of which are in Cuyahoga County. We work in partnership with public school



systems and charter school networks to serve the families who need a safe environment for their children when school ends for the day and for the summer.

In the 2017-18 school year, we served over 370 middle school students, 100 high school students, and over 160 legacy scholars who have graduated from high school. The demographic profile of ODA scholars shows that:

- 88% of our scholars are black,
- 85% come from families living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, and
- Over 70% come from single-parent households.

The scholars we serve are not the children welcomed into gifted programs for their strong academics. Additionally, they are not the children whose situations are so desperate that they receive intervention and support through behavioral health agencies.

Rather, the majority of our scholars are simply children born into impoverished families and communities that have been hollowed out by racism, segregation, red-lining, chronic neighborhood violence, inadequate educational opportunities, the out-sourcing of good-paying jobs, and a myriad of other factors.

### **The Innovation: The ODA Model**

At ODA, we believe that education is the key to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. We know that toxic stress, violence, hunger, housing insecurity, and other non-school factors fuel poverty and work against our children's success in the classroom. Unfortunately, the traditional school day – 8am to 3pm, late August through May – is not sufficient for the needs of our children or their families. Children need more engagement in their academics and in their interests, and working families need more support.

That is why ODA's seven-year continuum of evidence-based programming spans middle school, high school, summertime, and family advocacy. We partner with schools and other programs to provide high-quality, out-of-school time (OST) programming that supports adolescents' academic achievement, social emotional growth, and behavioral regulation. Our model is intentionally designed to support the whole child, because our goal is to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

To be clear, ODA is not a charter school. But we do partner with charter schools and public schools, to serve the kids who need the most help.



ODA began as a mission of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, in 1992. Back then, it was an informal, drop-in program for kids at the nearby public school. After a brief flirtation with closing during the Great Recession, we have grown to serve 10 middle and 4 high school campuses in Greater Cleveland. ODA employs a holistic model that brings together schools, families, and community partners in four distinct components.

1. Our **Middle School Program** addresses developmental barriers that inhibit the learning process and provides scholars with a safe environment to explore their interests. As mentioned earlier, this work focuses on the scholars' social emotional learning and behavioral regulation, while continuing to support their academic achievement.
2. ODA's **Pathways to Independence Program** prepares high school students for graduation and coaches them through career pathways.
3. The **Family Advocacy Program** connects over 1,000 family members with parent empowerment seminars, orientations, family events, and access to critical community services. In this way, we build trust and buy-in with our families, and we help them invest more deeply in their children's success.
4. Lastly, ODA's **Summer Camps & Internships** prevent summer learning loss by offering 8 weeks of camps focused on career exploration for middle school scholars and internships and service learning trips for high school scholars.

To serve these scholars and their families, ODA relies on a mix of philanthropic support. We receive generous gifts from individuals, foundations, and corporations, but it is the federally funded 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center Program that makes ODA available to the kids and families who need us the most.

### **The Center for Out-of-School Advancement**

Because of our impact with these children, ODA is embarking on a new challenge: we want to increase the quality of OST programming across Ohio. So, in September, we will begin working with 250 other OST agencies serving every corner of Ohio, from Cincinnati to Youngstown and from Defiance to Steubenville. The Center for Out-of-School Advancement (COSA), an ODA subsidiary, will provide professional development, coaching, and support to these other OST programs.

COSA is supported by the Ohio Department of Education, and it will leverage ODA's 17 years of experience and our data-focused approach. Our goal is to improve the quality of OST programming and to assess its collective impact on Ohio youth.



We will accomplish these goals by providing group trainings and individualized coaching to other programs. In our first year, we expect to identify opportunities for professional development and establish baselines for data collection. We will use that data to analyze the industry as a whole, and we will help all programs move towards high-quality programming.

### **The Challenges Confronting ODA and OST**

High-quality OST programming is the latest advancement and innovation in the field of education. As such, it faces many barriers. For example, it remains largely unprofessionalized. School-based educators often do not understand or value its potential. And, most importantly, there is a severe concern about financial sustainability.

ODA is working to address these challenges. COSA is one example of how ODA is working to professionalize the field. Other examples include our work with Cleveland State University to build an undergraduate degree program in OST and youth development, and the preliminary work we are doing to conduct a longitudinal study to show the impact of OST programming on youth.

To build trust and understanding with teachers and other in-school professionals, we work closely with our school partners to educate their staff on the value and benefits of OST programming. We also present at state-wide and national conferences to help build awareness, interest, and support for our work.

However, the largest issue right now is financial sustainability. In Ohio, our state government and local communities provide no dedicated funding for OST programs. There is no property tax levy, no state formula funding, nor any other governmental reimbursement for our work. Though there are programs that fund OST for early childhood education, they do nothing to maintain that investment as children enter adolescence. Multiple studies have shown that without continued support, those investments show diminishing returns.

People also often ask me about fee-for-service arrangements with our school districts. Unfortunately, that is a nonstarter. The school districts that could afford us often don't need us, and those that need us cannot afford our services. They depend on me and my team to fundraise in order to pay for staff, supplies, transportation, and more.

### **How You Can Help**

I must personally thank each and every member of Congress who has voted to support the 21st Century Community Learning Center Program. It is the only source of sustainable revenue for ODA and other



high-quality programs across the country. Until the landscape of funding changes, ODA and other organizations will continue to rely on this program to fund our innovations.

With that in mind, I ask you to consider the following:

- *Continue to support and invest in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program.* It is the only dedicated source of funding for OST programming. Without it, OST for children living in poverty would not be possible.
- *Encourage other elected officials to invest in OST programming with you.* With additional support from state and local policymakers, we can make stronger investments that spread high-quality OST programming to other children and families who need it.
- *Support efforts to improve the OST field.* American taxpayers and our representatives deserve to know that OST providers are performing high-quality work and interventions with youth from high-risk environments. We must hold organizations accountable for their outcomes, and we must invest in programs that work.
- *Visit ODA or another OST program.* Come visit ODA and our scholars, or visit a program closer to home. Learn about our work and how it complements what happens during the school day, but also how it is different from that work.

### **The Future**

To encourage you to learn more about ODA and the powerful work we are doing in Cleveland, early next month every member of this committee will receive a copy of ODA's 2016-17 Annual Report, "The Future."

This is no regular annual report.

This report was created last summer when a small group of our middle school scholars participated in a week-long summer camp that explored careers in marketing, photography, digital design, and storytelling. The team from Little Jacket, an internationally acclaimed marketing and design firm in Cleveland, asked the scholars to consider heady topics like the future of race relations, healthcare, hunger, and transportation. They tackled these topics thoughtfully and energetically. And, for the most part, with great optimism. (There was also time to explore some lighter subjects, like the future of snacks.) I know that you will enjoy their insights.



What makes this report even more special is that an ODA scholar designed each cover, so each one is a piece of art that you won't find anywhere else.

And that is why each report is also a window into the future – as seen through the eyes of our scholars.

I would like to extend our gratitude to Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, who invited us to participate and represent her district and – as it turns out – the State of Ohio at this Education Innovation Summit. We are grateful for her continued support, and the support that we receive from the broad collection of stakeholders who make our work possible.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to submit a written statement and to provide testimony to the Committee.

Should any of you have any questions about ODA, our scholars, our model, or any other aspect of our work, please know that you have an open invitation to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'a' followed by a large, rounded 'm'.

Annemarie M. Grassi, Ph.D.  
Chief Executive Officer