

## Response to NACSA Recommendation for Opportunities Academy Type 1 Charter Application November 2018

We appreciate the consideration given to the charter application by NACSA; thank you for the opportunity to participate in the process and for the thoughtful evaluation of our application to establish Opportunities Academy (OA) as a school with its own charter.

In response, we hope to address a few core misunderstandings about the school model and proposal as characterized by the evaluator's report. We cite specific language in the application to further clarify our thinking. Per the constraints of the process, we do not add additional information not included elsewhere in the process.

**“The greatest concern in this section [School] was that the application did not provide a clear, comprehensive, and detailed plan describing how all students with special needs will succeed.... The application lacks evidence of the applicant's knowledge, plans, and capacity.”**

OA's student population consists of 100% students with disabilities. The entire application should be read in this context, including extensive discussion the academic model. We are unclear on what additional content regarding plans for students with disabilities would be needed. We received no clarifying questions or requests for further detail on the “Special Student Populations” section of the application.

The review claims the school lacks “a research base”. Our application noted engagement with national leaders serving similar populations (Page 24: “existing relationships with organizations and providers that are currently serving similar populations with success. These include: REACH Iowa, ThinkCollege!, The Arc of San Francisco, and the Program for Successful Employment in Bossier, Louisiana.”). Deep partnership with these national leaders has formed the backbone of our program design: the best practices that we are extending and adapting to OA's context both draw on a research base and add to the existing body of research for future programs to replicate.

Finally, as outlined in the application, across Collegiate Academies' high schools, nearly 20% of students receive special education services and nearly 10% receive English Language instruction. Our network is considered locally and nationally to be a leader in the field of serving students with diverse learning needs. The application also explains that OA has been a program within Collegiate Academies schools since 2014, garnering local and national praise and recognition for our special education supports, structures, and programs. We strongly believe that this extensive experience and success indicates significant capacity to serve students with disabilities.

**“The applicant's goals for overall student achievement were not provided.”**

Due to the highly varied needs and achievement levels of OA students, desired outcomes for each student will be aligned to each student's personal goals and defined in partnership with the student, their family, and their IEP team. This is the appropriate approach for a school that will serve 100% students with disabilities. As outlined in the application, while the specific goals will vary, PATH plans provide a consistent framework to understand OA's overall student achievement goals:

Collegiate Academies utilizes person-centered plans, or PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows of Hope) plans, that we use both to obtain a baseline of student transition abilities and to allow us to progress monitor each student's individual growth over their years in Opportunities Academy. Plans and objectives are modified to address skills for all students at all levels and to ensure instruction is appropriate and rigorous for everyone.

The PATH plans serve as the cornerstone of student progress towards goals, with each level of the plan helping students to target and develop a variety of skills grounded in the major domains of transition necessary for an independent adult life. OA supports students in reaching their individualized goals and monitors their progress in the major domains of transition, including employability, daily living, community, personal life, personal interests, and lifelong learning.

We aim to have students achieve one full level of growth on their PATH plans and to reach maximum independence on the goals outlined on their plans. By April of its pilot year, 80% of students in OA had

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already met their goals. (Page 27)

Further, we have developed a systematic and effective progress-monitoring process to ensure that students are making progress on their PATH plans and that instruction is responsive to student data:

To foster this progress, benchmark goals are tracked on a nine-week cycle and the data is used to plan for maximizing instruction and experiences for the next cycle in order to achieve goal attainment at the end of the year. (Page 27)

Exactly how the results from OA's data-driven, goal-focused program translates into a School Performance Score issued by the Louisiana Department of Education is an open question. OA would provide a critical real-life example to advance the statewide conversation about appropriate accountability for non-traditional schools. This ongoing conversation, however, should not be mistaken for a lack of clear student achievement goals and systems to ensure progress towards those goals.

**It was concerning that the applicant declined to participate in the performance task during the interview because the review team was unable to observe how team members interact and cooperate to solve problems collectively. The board chair stated that the scenario posed for the performance task (i.e. response to the school leader's resignation during winter break) would never happen because the organization has a "deep bench" and the board does not get involved in school-level decisions. While it is appropriate for a board to not overstep into school management, it would be appropriate for the board to have questions regarding this situation in an oversight capacity.**

We feel this is a regrettable misunderstanding. The interview scenario posed in the interview would appropriately gauge board engagement in the context of a single-site charter; in the context of a charter network, it does not provide a suitable test of board capacity. As outlined in detail on Pages 18-22 of the application, all personnel matters at Collegiate Academies are the responsibility of the Chief Executive Officer. The board focuses solely on holding that leader accountable for overall network performance. The board chair's answer in response to this interview scenario sought simply to emphasize this point, as it is at the core of our philosophy of the division of duties between board and management.

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Finally, we consider the remainder of negative assessments from the evaluator to be rooted in two facts.

First, OA's programming is substantially different than a typical charter applicant. To meaningfully assess the likelihood of success requires a deep understanding of the needs of this student population, the tragic lack of options currently available to them, and the range of strategies that must be employed to ensure they successfully meet their ambitious goals. While the broad categories of the application are appropriate, the concepts and plans we emphasize in our application likely did not align to typical expectations (e.g., elements of the academic program, student goals, curriculum, staffing, etc.). This was a deliberate choice, as it accurately represents the different thinking that is needed to meet the needs of young people that current have no other path forward in their academic journey. We could not adhere to the charter application "formula" because the needs of OA students are not formulaic.

Second, the reviewer's assessment largely ignores the fact that this program has been successfully operating for nearly three (3) years within Collegiate Academies schools. If the core operational, financial, staffing, and special education programming concerns (e.g., related service provision; creation and progress-monitoring of IEPs) that were listed were actually representative of OA as it exists today, the program would have already failed. Instead, enrollment has quadrupled, the number of sending high schools has grown from one (1) to ten (10), new internship and externship opportunities are emerging on a monthly basis, and nearly a quarter of students are accessing concurrent enrollment opportunities through Delgado Community College. We anticipate higher-than-ever demand in the latest EnrollNOLA process.

The written content of the application is not a hoped-for vision; it is a day-to-day reality in the classrooms of OA. That this fact seems to have been dismissed by the reviewers is mystifying to our team.

We ask you to reverse your preliminary recommendation and support the approval of Opportunities Academy's Type 1 Charter application.