

May 24, 2017

Chairman Hite and the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, I am the Director of the Newark Digital Academy (NDA), a Dropout Recovery and Prevention (DORP) e-school sponsored by the Newark City Schools (NCS). We are very proud of the achievement of our students and our organization. Through continuity and the relationship we have with our sponsor, NDA has recorded academic scores in the top ten percent of all DORP schools in Ohio and graduated 302 students over the last 3 years. We are projected to graduate over 100 students and post a test passage rate of 83% this school year. We are proud of these accomplishments given the climate that the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has created for our school, students and families during the 2016 – 2017 school year.

We are facing multiple “crisis issues” that threaten our current and future work. Currently we are navigating new procedures for establishing FTEs and changes to the rules governing DORP schools. This correspondence focuses on a third challenge – Sponsor Evaluations. We wish to raise the following objections to the procedure that ODE has implemented that, as a result, has placed NDA’s school sponsorship in question.

1) ODE did not release the 2016-2017 sponsor evaluations until February 10<sup>th</sup> well into the school year

- ODE made substantial changes from the previous year.
- NCS cannot comply with items reliant on first semester data if they were not aware that they would need to collect such data.
- Once released, ODE made changes to the rubrics.
  - Specifically, ODE made changes to the Quality Practices Rubric, just days before the information was due on April 30<sup>th</sup>.
- ODE is requiring information from sponsors that they simply cannot meet.
  - Example: Item S-101 requires sponsor to provide a report of expenditures pursuant to guidelines established by ODE; however, ODE NEVER established nor provided the guidelines.
  - Overall the training and communication governing this process from ODE has been poor at best.

***We Request: ODE release the rubrics before the start of the school year so sponsors have time to compile the information.***

2) ODE does not allow sponsors to appeal their ratings prior to the scores being made public.

Districts have access to data that is utilized by ODE to determine a district’s high stake ratings. This data is available through ODE’s Secure Data Center. Districts monitor this data and corrections are made by ODE where appropriate. Schools engage in this process all summer prior to the release of report cards. When NDA’s rating is made public, we already know what rating we can anticipate. This transparency has served both districts and ODE well. Why would

ODE not want to establish the same transparency with regard to Sponsor Ratings? It would hold ODE accountable for establishing a fair rating system. It would build confidence by all stakeholders in the process. It would serve as a series of checks and balances to ensure that evidence submitted by sponsors has been properly credited.

***We Request: Sponsors should be permitted to appeal their projected ratings if rated poor or ineffective.***

3) ODE's scoring forces sponsors that receive a "0" in any component to receive an automatic "ineffective" and a sponsor that receives a "0" in any two components to receive an automatic "poor" overall rating.

***We Request: The scoring rubric be simplified by clarifying that ODE should issue ratings based on points and not an automatic designation based on receiving a "0" in one or two of the components.***

4) Due to ODE's late release of the evaluation rubrics, and due to their retroactive nature it has made it highly unlikely that sponsors will be rated effective, and even more unlikely that any will be rated exemplary. Is a system where over 80% of sponsors receive "ineffective" or "poor" a fair evaluation?

***We Request: All sponsors rated "poor" or "ineffective" should be provided Safe Harbor until ODE provides sufficient and timely guidance on all procedures and evidence required during the Sponsor Evaluation process.***

Our students' lives are dominated by the challenges of poverty, mental and physical health, homelessness, abuse and addiction to name a few. For many the Newark Digital Academy is their only refuge. NDA provides services to the Newark community that are difficult for a traditional school to provide. Our "niche" has grown from the relationship that has developed with our sponsor – Newark City Schools. Now, due to the lack of leadership and professional ethics at the Ohio Department of Education, we feel that all that we've built together is in jeopardy. We do not believe that the Sponsor Evaluation mandate in HB2 was implemented by ODE as the legislators intended. Instead, districts have attempted to comply with a "make it up as you go" system. Students and their families have already felt the ill-effects of ODE's actions. Please correct the issues with the Sponsor Evaluation process so that the Newark City School District continues as NDA's sponsor. There is much work for us to do in this community – work that only a DORP and a sponsor dedicated to improving the community in which they live can together accomplish.

Sincerely,

John Lutz – NDA Director