

Testimony of Stuart Muszynski, President and CEO of Values-in-Action Foundation
May 4, 2021

Dear Honorable Members of the Ohio Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

I come to you today on behalf of the nearly 1.7 million Ohio students attending public schools in our state. Since 1994, Values-in-Action (VIA), based in Cuyahoga County, has been serving Ohio students and currently VIA has social-emotional learning, character-education, kindness, anti-bullying and soft-skills workforce-readiness training in schools throughout the state. This school year, VIA programming was in 73 Ohio counties in 475 schools. VIA also serves 2500 schools in all 50 states. Our programming, described in the information packets distributed today, consists of **(1) Social-Emotional Learning, (2) Character-Education, (3) Workforce Soft-skills, and (4) Anti-bullying and Kindness training. This programming goes under the brand categories of Project Love, Just Be Kind and VIA: How You Get There Workforce Training.** Our trainings are co-administered by licensed teachers and trained facilitators and are endorsed by the Ohio Education Association, teachers, administrators and counselors.

The results of VIA's programming is demonstrated by the outcomes in the Cleveland Metropolitan Schools (CMSD). Based on a third-party evaluation from Candor, Inc., VIA's Project Love social-emotional and character education programming increased "conditions for learning" by 16% in CMSD middle schools. At John Adams High School, one of the most violent in Cleveland, Project Love social-emotional and kindness programming (from 2017-2020) increased the graduation rate from 50% to 93%, decreased suspensions by 67%, and achieved zero fights in the school. That was following a year when the school lost four young men to gang violence. A very compelling video is attached with our supplement.

I come also with a relevant question: **Why are we educating our children? Why do we invest so much money from the state's budget?** I believe a universal answer is that we want our children to have successful lives, and we believe that education is a ticket to success. A larger question though is: **how do we achieve success? Is success rooted in the "Three R's"?**

No doubt, success requires some basic level of proficiency. However, the most recent post-pandemic McKinsey & Company Global Survey — "Building Workforce Skills at Scale to Thrive During and After the COVID-19 Crisis" — points to a "skills gap" that can be best filled through social-emotional learning. Quoting from the study: *"The results also point to a shift in the most important skills to develop, which tend to be social and emotional in nature: for example, empathy, leadership, and adaptability."*

This has been known for years. The best workers and exemplary contributors to society have social-emotional grounding, including integrity, resilience, adaptability, kindness, empathy, collaboration and self-awareness. The people who are successful in careers and in life possess the ingredients to this special sauce. The people we wish to be around and interact with — whether friends, workers, teachers, lawyers, doctors or senators — have these ingredients.

In the 1930's, Andrew Carnegie commissioned Napoleon Hill to travel around the country to find out what made the most successful men tick. In his iconic 1937 book "Think and Grow Rich" (the sixth most-read business book in the world), Hill concluded that while the "original idea" is essential to success, the soft-skills (namely passion, faith, confidence and self-awareness) are the factors that will get the success from starting point to the finish line.

In another perspective, President Theodore Roosevelt's noteworthy message to the nation was: **"To educate a man in mind but not in morals is to create a menace to society."**

We have many menaces to society that our state is currently facing. The pandemic has left a serious gap in the social-emotional soft-skills within our students. The social-isolation and remote learning — despite the best-efforts of our districts and educators — have left many students depressed, bereft and lacking communication and interpersonal skills that are pre-determiners for success in the workplace, family-place and in life. The shut-downs of many entry-level, after-school and summer jobs during the pandemic have also left high school students unprepared for the workplace. Steps will have to be taken to fill these success gaps.

This fact is exacerbated by the already-prevalent complaint by employers (pre-pandemic) that they can teach the hard-skills to new employees but they cannot teach the soft-skills — especially the character, values and kindness elements — that are needed for workplace success. In 2018, Neighborly, Inc. which owns Mr. Rooter, Glass Doctor, Rainbow Painting and many other home service brands, reported that it took going through eight employees to find one “keeper,” which they defined as someone with the soft-skills and attitudes to stay on the job for one full year. Getting kids into well-paying jobs and enabling them to stay is key.

For all of the above reasons, Values-in-Action Foundation is respectfully requesting a special allocation from the upcoming biennial state budget of **\$2,996,052** to support placement of VIA’s “Just Be Kind” programming (kindness, anti-bullying, communication, character and social-justice programming) in all K-8 schools and an expansion of the “VIA: How You Get There” Workforce Soft-Skills Training in twenty underserved 9-12 schools throughout the state.

This specific request is outlined in the adjoining document, along with budget and exhibits. It is our informed anticipation that, following the 2022-23 school year, employers and sponsors will support this programming, bringing it further to scale, ultimately within all schools throughout Ohio.

We are making this request directly to the Senate as opposed to receiving trickle-down funds from the districts themselves because the districts have by-and-large demonstrated that funds received from the state, even when specifically tagged for “success projects,” were not utilized as such. We recognize that districts will often parlay dollars to the most urgent demands, whether that be buildings, hard education, retrofitting buildings in response to the pandemic, or other needs. There are many such urgencies within schools in the post-pandemic environment. And that is why we are asking you to support this request as a carved-out innovation grant that will benefit Ohio’s schools, students, families and employers.

A few weeks ago, our first teacher — history teacher Charlie Caputo of Berkshire High School in Geauga County, passed away. VIA started in May 1994 with an all-day training of 150 of his Juniors, which the principal had described as the meanest group he had seen in 35 years. By the following fall, they were transforming their school through kindness, caring and respect. Several of his students contacted us to reminisce. They didn’t remember the specifics of the War of 1812, nor did they remember the details of the Alien and Sedition Acts; but they did remember their Project Love experience, and they remembered the teachings that Charlie sprinkled throughout all of his lessons about how to be a decent human being and good citizen. All of those Berkshire students went on to lead productive, successful and decent lives.

Thank you for your attention to this request.



Stuart Muszynski, Values-in-Action Foundation