August 8, 2017

Paolo DeMaria
Superintendent of Public Instruction
Ohio Department of Education
25 South Front Street
Columbus, OH 43215-4183

Re: Recommendation regarding the sponsorship authority of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

Dear Mr. DeMaria:

As you are aware, the Cleveland Transformation Alliance is a nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to growing a portfolio of high-performing district and community schools in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Our role is described in Cleveland’s Plan for Transforming Schools and codified in law through H.B. 525, passed by the Ohio Legislature and signed by Governor John Kasich in 2012. Through that legislation, the Transformation Alliance is granted the authority to review sponsors seeking to open community schools in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District when the sponsor’s contract with the Ohio Department of Education is up for approval or renewal, and to make a recommendation to the Ohio Department of Education based on that review (ORC Sec. 3311.86(E)).

The review application process, created jointly by the Alliance, the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Association of Charter School Authorizers, and reviewed by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, is designed to seek evidence of quality sponsorship and evaluate sponsor commitment to the Alliance’s goal that every child in Cleveland attends a high-quality school. A primary goal of our review process is to provide a local assessment of community school oversight and quality.

As agreed upon by the Ohio Department of Education and the Transformation Alliance in July, the Transformation Alliance has conducted an expedited review of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation’s role as a sponsor, and with this letter is submitting its recommendation to the Ohio Department of Education.

**Review of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation**
As a sponsor planning to authorize a new community school in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District in 2017, Fordham is required by state law to submit an application to the Transformation Alliance for its review and recommendation for continued sponsorship authority. Accordingly, the Alliance Board of Directors formed a sponsor review task force and requested that Fordham prepare its application, which it submitted on July 24, 2017.

The Alliance task force met on August 2 to review the completed application materials in advance of an interview with Fordham representatives, which was held by phone on Thursday, August 3.
Following its dialogue with Fordham, the task force subsequently scored Fordham’s application against the required criteria for community school sponsorship in a municipal school district. On Monday, August 7, the Board of Directors of the Transformation Alliance discussed the task force’s work and voted on a recommendation regarding Fordham’s continued authority as a sponsor in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

**Scoring**

The sponsor review application (attached) includes eight sections: the scoring results for the first seven are listed below. Our task force determined that it could not complete the eighth section of the application according to the rubric, which assesses the academic success of the schools the sponsor oversees based on criteria developed in 2013. Given the significant changes to Ohio’s accountability system and the information available through the Ohio Department of Education, the task force determined that it was not possible to score Fordham on the precise criteria established in this section. Instead, the task force reviewed the publicly available data on academic performance of schools sponsored by Fordham over the past three years. The task force’s comments are noted below. For each of the remaining seven sections, also listed below, task force members individually scored Fordham’s application.

**Overall Observations**

Fordham engaged fully and collaboratively in the application process. The task force appreciated this cooperation considering the expedited timeline required for this process. Furthermore, Fordham’s interview team fully represented the organization’s staff leadership and clearly possessed deep knowledge across all areas of the sponsor’s work with community schools in Cleveland and throughout Ohio.

**Section 1: Applicant Information**

The application was complete and submitted on time per our revised deadline.

**Score for Section 1: 2 out of a possible 2 points**

**Section 2: New Community School Application Process**

Fordham noted its focus on sponsoring high-quality school models in Cleveland in high-need neighborhoods, as identified by the 2015 IFF report on Cleveland, which compared the supply of high-quality seats to the number of school-age children in each Cleveland neighborhood. This aligns well with the goal of the Cleveland Plan to ensure every neighborhood has quality schools from which families can choose.

Citizens Leadership Academy East, the school Fordham has authorized for the 2017–18 school year, is a replication of a school model with a strong track record in Cleveland: Citizens Leadership Academy, part of the Breakthrough Schools network. The Fordham application noted that the new school’s principal was the dean of students at the flagship Citizens Leadership Academy. Additionally, the new school will be co-located with Citizens Academy East, which will feed students into this new middle school. The choice of this particular school model aligns well with the goal of the Cleveland Plan to replicate high-performing school models.

Fordham’s focus on quality was also evident in the fact that it approves only about 25 percent of the applications it receives from community schools each year. Fordham also has a plan to grow slowly, adding no more than one or two schools statewide each year to its portfolio of 11 schools.
Score for Section 2: 4 out of a possible 4 points

Section 3: Sponsor Contract
The high standards and expectations Fordham holds for itself and its schools, and the sponsor’s willingness to be transparent about its challenges, were apparent in both the completed application and the phone interview. Fordham’s contract standards for its schools go above and beyond minimum standards set by the state. The contract thoroughly details Citizen Leadership Academy’s educational, operational and financial plan, and makes clear that the school model is explicitly tailored to Cleveland and the goals of the Cleveland Plan.

The task force also noted that Fordham’s sponsorship fee ranges between 1.5 and 2 percent of a school’s state funding allocation, less than the 3 percent allowed by the state. Fordham explained that if it doesn’t expend the full amount it collects for its work with each school, it returns the funds to the school.

Score for Section 3: 4 out of a possible 4 points

Section 4: Ongoing School Oversight
Fordham brings in evaluators with specific expertise to do comprehensive reviews of schools as needed, noting two occasions in recent years where this type of review led to substantial changes at the school level and early promising results. Fordham also detailed its process for intervening in schools that are struggling, the timeline for when it expects results, and how it continues to monitor developments at the school through regular visits, attendance at board meetings, and the review of documents. Fordham’s annual report to the public is comprehensive, introspective and informative.

Score for Section 4: 4 out of a possible 4 points

Section 5: Charter Renewal and Revocation
Fordham’s renewal process is well informed by schools’ academic performance and tailored specifically to individual schools. Fordham provided details about three school closure cases, each of which presented a different set of challenges, and gave an in-depth explanation of the circumstances under which the sponsor would terminate or not renew a school’s contract. Fordham provided an honest appraisal of lessons learned from its involvement in school closures and resulting implications for its now, more stringent approval process.

Score for Section 5: 4 out of a possible 4 points

Section 6: Oversight Capacity and Track Record
The value Fordham brings to Cleveland was made clear in both the documentation provided and in the phone interview. Fordham has more than a decade of experience sponsoring quality schools in Ohio and a national perspective that informs the guidance it offers schools. It draws on the experience of its own staff and the staff of the policy-focused Fordham Institute, the sponsor’s sister organization, as well as outside experts and Fordham’s board of directors, many of whom have education backgrounds. Fordham has been a longtime leader in pushing for community school quality across Ohio and was instrumental in the passage of H.B. 2 in 2015, which significantly increased accountability for Ohio community schools and sponsors.

Score for Section 6: 4 out of a possible 4 points
Section 7: Technical Capacity and Track Record
Fordham attends all meetings of the governing authorities of its schools, makes site visits twice each year while class is in session as required, and does comprehensive reviews of how schools are meeting contract benchmarks and criteria twice each year, including a thorough assessment of both the schools’ education plans and operations. It brings consultants with expertise appropriate to the school’s model to provide guidance and intervention.

Score for Section 7: 3.7 out of a possible 4 points

Section 8: Academic Performance
A review of three years of publicly available data on Fordham’s 11 K–8 schools (see attached) shows a mixed picture, notwithstanding Ohio’s turbulent accountability system. Literacy standards for grades K–3 are met in only one of the six reporting schools. Gap closing is not met in any of the reporting schools. Value-add is met in seven of the nine reporting schools. The schools’ 2015–16 performance indexes range from 47.1 to 81.5, with a median of 67.9. Last year’s performance is difficult to judge on its own as the entire state saw a significant drop in academic performance indicators. Fordham does not yet have performance results from 2016–17. The uneven and weak academic performance of Fordham’s schools is a cause for concern. We fully expect Fordham to focus its energies on ensuring schools improve their performance in the coming years, or to make the difficult decision to close failing schools.

Overall Score
Fordham’s score on the seven sections totaled 25.7 points out of a possible 26 points, or 98.7 percent. The inclusion of Academic Performance would have brought that percentage down to some degree, but Fordham’s overall score would remain high.

Recommendation and Conclusion
After thorough review and consideration, the Cleveland Transformation Alliance recommends to the Ohio Department of Education that Thomas B. Fordham Foundation continue to sponsor community schools within the boundaries of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

As noted, the primary concern we believe should be addressed in the sponsor’s contract with the Ohio Department of Education is the academic performance of the community schools it authorizes.

The Cleveland Transformation Alliance thanks the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation for engaging in this review. We look forward to a productive partnership with the sponsor as, together, we strive to ensure the highest quality schools for all Cleveland’s children.

Sincerely,

Piet van Lier
Executive Director

cc: Kathryn Mullen Upton, Vice President for Sponsorship and Dayton Initiatives, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
Attachments:
Sponsor review application
List of reviewers and interview participants
School performance data addendum

Alliance Sponsor Review Task Force Members

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Cleveland Transformation Alliance Board Member
Senior Director, Community Relations, Cleveland Clinic Foundation

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