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 St. Aloysius Orphanage

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 HB 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 2017, the Transformation Alliance has conducted an expedited review of St. Aloysius Orphanage’s role as a sponsor, and with this letter we are submitting our recommendation to the Ohio Department of Education.

**Review of St. Aloysius Orphanage**

As a sponsor planning to authorize a new community school in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District in 2017, St. Aloysius 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 St. Aloysius 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 representatives of St. Aloysius, which was held by phone on
Thursday, August 3. Following its dialogue with St. Aloysius, the task force subsequently scored St. Aloysius’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 St. Aloysius’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 St. Aloysius on the precise criteria established in this section. Instead, the task force reviewed the publicly available data on academic performance of schools sponsored by St. Aloysius over the past three years. The task force’s comments are noted below. For each of the remaining seven sections, listed below, task force members individually scored St. Aloysius’s application.

**Overall Observations**

St. Aloysius engaged collaboratively in the application process. The task force appreciated this cooperation considering the expedited timeline required for this process. Sponsor representatives were forthcoming and respectful during the call.

The sponsor representatives addressed questions from the task force about the relationship between St. Aloysius, the nonprofit that is eligible to be a sponsor in Ohio, and the for-profit firm with which St. Aloysius contracts to perform all its sponsorship services, Charter School Specialists. The task force was left without complete clarity on the arms-length relationship between the two entities, how the academic performance of its sponsored schools fits within St. Aloysius evaluation of Charter School Specialists, and the motivation that drove St. Aloysius to become a statewide sponsor of community schools, particularly given its original mission to serve families in the Cincinnati area.

**Section 1: Applicant Information**

The application was complete and submitted on our revised deadline.

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

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

St. Aloysius noted its focus on the growth of community schools across the state to provide families alternatives to failing district schools. St. Aloysius did not articulate specific goals for its overall sponsorship strategy beyond that, nor did it articulate an explicit commitment to excellence. In making the decision to open a new school in the Westpark neighborhood, St. Aloysius noted the availability of an empty building. St. Aloysius did not make use of 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. That report shows that Westpark is not a high-priority neighborhood in terms of new schools, and the task force noted that this neighborhood is home to schools with a history of higher performance. The task force expressed concerns
about whether the school would reach its first year enrollment goal of 150 students for the 2017–18 school year. St. Aloysius made it clear that it relies on schools and operators to do market research and propose schools, and does not see its role as assessing the validity of that research or the need for a school in a particular location.

Orchard Park, the school St. Aloysius has authorized for the 2017–18 school year, is a Cambridge Education Group school model, a for-profit school model that lacks a strong track record in Cleveland. St. Aloysius indicated that the new school’s principal was the principal at the previous school in that building—Menlo Park Academy—but it was not clear to the task force the exact impetus for this school, nor the sequencing of events that led to its proposal. The choice of this particular school model does not, therefore, align well with the goal of the Cleveland Plan to replicate high-performing school models.

St. Aloysius’s focus on growth was also evident in the fact that it is a prolific community school sponsor. It currently sponsors 42 schools throughout Ohio and anticipates opening another six this year (eight community schools are opening in Ohio for the 2017–18 school year). For the 2015–16 school year, St. Aloysius approved approximately 33 percent of the applications it received from community schools. For the 2016–17 school year, it approved approximately 55 percent.

The task force also noted that most of the schools sponsored by St. Aloysius in Cleveland have not provided information requested by the Transformation Alliance for its School Quality Guide and website. Furthermore, a number of the sponsor’s Cleveland schools are among the few Cleveland schools that have not been reviewed by community members on the Alliance’s website.

Although St. Aloysius demonstrates adherence to meeting minimum state standards of quality, it does not demonstrate a willingness to use the Transformation Alliance criteria to determine whether or not it will sponsor a new school in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. The documentation provided, and the subsequent interview, also fail to establish meaningful criteria for rigor or alignment with the goals of the Transformation Alliance. 

**Score for Section 2: 1.7 out of a possible 4 points**

**Section 3: Sponsor Contract**
The task force found that St. Aloysius does not adequately articulate high standards and expectations for its schools above and beyond state minimum standards. Thus, the academic performance criteria in St. Aloysius’s contracts with its schools do not meet the standards of the Transformation Alliance. While the contract includes a description of Orchard Park’s educational, operational and financial plan, it does not make clear that the school model is explicitly tailored to Cleveland and the goals of the Cleveland Plan.

Documentation provided in the application seemed to show that the sponsor holds its schools to a minimal standard of “C” ratings and that most of its schools are on academic probation or in multi-year intervention status. When pressed on this question during the interview, the sponsor noted that its schools perform better than those of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, rather than addressing their performance against an absolute standard of excellence. This is not aligned to the goals of the Cleveland Plan.
The task force also noted that St. Aloysius’s sponsorship fee is 3 percent of a school’s state funding allocation, the maximum allowed by the state.

Score for Section 3: 2.2 out of a possible 4 points

Section 4: Ongoing School Oversight
St. Aloysius demonstrated its capacity to provide services to schools as a sponsor, including staff in Cleveland with long-term experience in the city’s schools, and showed that it engages regularly with the schools it sponsors. However, gaps in the type and quality of oversight are apparent. St. Aloysius staff represented on the interview team were unable to adequately answer questions about specific school improvement efforts. It was also not clear that St. Aloysius’s board had any member with an education background, though other sectors are represented. St. Aloysius’s annual report to the public is limited and does not make any mention of school improvement efforts.

The task force also expressed some concern that Charter School Specialists, which delivers all sponsorship services for St. Aloysius, also provides school treasurer and other services for sponsored schools for a separate fee. It is not clear how arms-length assurances are maintained.

Score for Section 4: 2.5 out of a possible 4 points

Section 5: Charter Renewal and Revocation
While St. Aloysius has an articulated process of charter renewal and revocation, this process does not appear to be driven by schools’ academic performance nor tailored specifically to individual schools. Examples were given of two Cleveland community schools that were closed by the decision of St. Aloysius, but in one case St. Aloysius approved a new school governed by the board of the closed school at a nearby location.

Score for Section 5: 2 out of a possible 4 points

Section 6: Oversight Capacity and Track Record
The task force found that St. Aloysius did not sufficiently demonstrate a clear vision for quality authorizing and failed to demonstrate an adherence to high academic standards described in the Cleveland Plan. St. Aloysius noted that it has staff with long-term experience in Cleveland to help oversee schools, but the knowledge that could be gained from that local perspective and expertise does not seem to translate into an absolute commitment to high-quality schools.

Score for Section 6: 2 out of a possible 4 points

Section 7: Technical Capacity and Track Record
St. Aloysius 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. It brings consultants with expertise appropriate to the school’s model to provide guidance and intervention. However, the task force remained concerned that with the large portfolio of schools that St. Aloysius sponsors, the capacity may not sufficiently provide for the individual needs of struggling schools.

Score for Section 7: 3 out of a possible 4 points
Section 8: Academic Performance
A review of three years of publicly available data on St. Aloysius’s 27 K–8 schools across Ohio shows mixed results, notwithstanding Ohio’s turbulent accountability system. Literacy standards for grades K–3 are met in only one of 21 reporting schools. Gap closing is not met in any of the reporting schools. Value-add is met in 13 of the 26 reporting schools. The schools’ 2015–16 performance index scores range from 41.5 to 87.5, with a median of 55.7.

In 2015–16, two-thirds of St. Aloysius’s 15 high schools, all of which are dropout recovery schools, did not meet state standards, compared to 40 percent in that category for all dropout recovery schools across the state. One-third of the sponsor’s dropout schools met standards, compared to half of all similar schools statewide. None of St. Aloysius’s dropout schools exceeded standards – 10 percent of such schools did across the state.

Last year’s performance is difficult to judge on its own, as the entire state saw a significant drop in academic performance indicators. St. Aloysius does not yet have performance results from 2016–17. The uneven and weak academic performance of St. Aloysius’s schools is a cause for concern. We expect St. Aloysius to do more to ensure schools improve their performance in the coming years, or to make the difficult decision to close failing schools.

Overall Score
St. Aloysius’s score on the seven sections totaled 15.4 points out of a possible 26 points, or 59.2 percent. The inclusion of Academic Performance would have brought that percentage down even further.

Recommendation and Conclusion
After thorough review and consideration, the Cleveland Transformation Alliance recommends to the Ohio Department of Education that St. Aloysius Orphanage’s authority to continue sponsoring community schools within the boundaries of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District be revoked.

The Cleveland Transformation Alliance thanks St. Aloysius Orphanage for engaging in this review process, and the Ohio Department of Education for its consideration of our recommendation.

Sincerely,

Piet van Lier
Executive Director

cc: Pam Shannon, Executive Director, St. Aloysius Orphanage
    Dave Cash, President, Charter School Specialists

Attachments:
Sponsor review application
List of reviewers and interview participants
School performance data addendum
Alliance Sponsor Review Task Force Members

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

Ann Mullin
Cleveland Transformation Alliance Board Member and Task Force Chair
Senior Program Officer, The George Gund Foundation

Judith Z. Peters
Cleveland Transformation Alliance Board Member
Interim Executive Director, InMotion

Monyka S. Price
Cleveland Transformation Alliance Board Vice Chair
Chief of Education, City of Cleveland

David Quolke
Cleveland Transformation Alliance Board Member
President, Cleveland Teachers Union

Victor A. Ruiz
Cleveland Transformation Alliance Board Member
Executive Director, Esperanza, Inc.

Catherine Smith
Program Coordinator, Cleveland Transformation Alliance

Piet van Lier
Executive Director, Cleveland Transformation Alliance