

March 16, 2018

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

Re: SMART Academy, a community school proposed to open in Cleveland for the 2018-19 school year.

Dear Mr. DeMaria:

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance, I am writing in regard to SMART Academy, a new community school planned for Cleveland. SMART Academy has signed a preliminary agreement with Buckeye Community Hope Foundation, is working to secure a location in Cleveland, and is planning to open in August 2018.

The Transformation Alliance is concerned that this proposed school does not meet the standards of quality that *Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools* expects of all schools, both district and charter, in Cleveland. As you know, state law requires that sponsors use objective criteria created by the Transformation Alliance, the Ohio Department of Education, and the Ohio Association of Charter School Authorizers to determine if they will sponsor new community schools located within the municipal school district.<sup>1</sup> In this letter, we restate those criteria individually and address whether or not the proposed opening of SMART Academy meets them.

***Criterion 1.*** *The school's proposed mission, vision and educational philosophy are clearly articulated and demonstrate a design for the school that will likely lead to successful student outcomes within the municipal school district, tied to the district's student populations and the communities it serves.*

According to materials provided to the Transformation Alliance by the sponsor, SMART Academy has a clearly articulated mission, vision and educational philosophy, with a focus on early literacy. The Alliance, however, does not consider the school's proposed approach as one that will add value to Cleveland's current educational landscape.

SMART Academy is not a model that has been actively sought out by the Transformation Alliance, nor—as far as we can tell—by any coordinated Cleveland contingency. There is no known public demand for a school that only serves children grades K-2, as the school was originally planned, or even K-3, as the school is now reportedly planned. Cleveland schools generally serve PreK-8 or K-8 students to ensure continuity for families and to minimize disruptions in student learning. Students at SMART

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<sup>1</sup> **ORC 3311.87 School sponsorship; assessment of district and community schools.**

(A)(1) Objective criteria to be used by a sponsor to determine if it will sponsor new community schools located within the municipal school district. Beginning with any community school that opens after July 1, 2013, each sponsor shall use the criteria established under this division to determine whether to sponsor a community school in the municipal district.

Academy would have to transfer to another school upon completion of their time at this school, potentially disrupting their education without a clear and articulated path to continue.

Furthermore, a K-2 school would avoid the state's accountability system, making it virtually impossible to tell if the school is leading to successful outcomes for its students, who would then have to transfer to another school. Even a K-3 school would be less accountable than the typical school for the success of its students. A K-3 school would also be impacted by the likely retention of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders who do not meet requirements for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade under the state's Third Grade Reading Guarantee.

***Criterion 2.*** *The school's intended market, location and instructional design are clearly articulated and demonstrate a likelihood of educational and financial success. Specifically, the school's intended student population, market needs, school location and instructional program design are tied to the needs of the district's student populations and the communities it serves.*

There are 122 schools, both district and charter, serving grades PreK-8 or K-8 located within the boundaries of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD). Public schools in Cleveland—these 122 schools plus 50 high schools—serve a population of approximately 56,000 students, indicating that our city has a surplus of schools. This is particularly true for PreK-8 or K-8 schools. Within two miles of SMART Academy's new proposed location, 4341 E. 131<sup>st</sup> Street, Garfield Heights, Ohio, 44105, there are six PreK-8 or K-8 schools, both district and charter.

Two analyses have been conducted to determine the Cleveland neighborhoods with the highest need for quality schools, one in 2014 and one in 2017. These studies considered the number of school-aged children vs. the quality of schools in each neighborhood. Both studies identified Cleveland's Union-Miles as among the neighborhoods with the most relative need for a quality school, and SMART Academy's new proposed address falls just outside this neighborhood in Garfield Heights.<sup>2</sup> However, the Transformation Alliance cannot discern any intentionality about the location of the school. While SMART Academy is now proposing to open near the high-need Union-Miles neighborhood, online information had originally shown a different address on Cleveland's near east side. Also, given the location, the proposed school is also likely to draw students who live in non-CMSD parts of Garfield Heights and other suburbs.

It is clear that little market research was done to determine the need for a new school at its proposed location, either in Cleveland as a whole or in this neighborhood in Garfield Heights (which is within the CMSD boundaries). Furthermore, the school's website previously noted that SMART Academy's goal is to serve the "Cleveland Metropolitan Area" rather than the city of Cleveland or a specific neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The 2014 report is online: [www.iff.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IFF-Cleveland-Report\\_FINAL1.pdf](http://www.iff.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IFF-Cleveland-Report_FINAL1.pdf). See page 30 for K-8 neighborhood rankings. Information about the 2017 analysis is online at <http://www.clevelandta.org/additional-resources>.

<sup>3</sup> While the website, [smartacademycle.org](http://smartacademycle.org), had previously provided information about the proposed school, the site has been taken offline and now provides only contact information and a "coming soon" message.

**Criterion 3.** *The school's process for vetting and hiring a school leadership team is likely to result in high-quality leaders who are capable of implementing the design for the school, with ongoing accountability to the governing authority.*

According to documentation provided by the sponsor, two of four members of SMART Academy's founding board live and work outside of the Cleveland area: one in Defiance, Ohio, and one in western Pennsylvania. A priority for the Transformation Alliance is for charter schools serving Cleveland children to have a broad range of civic, educational, and community representation based in Cleveland.

According to documentation provided by the sponsor and found online, the school's co-founders—the principal and assistant principal—have limited school leadership experience of the kind that the Transformation Alliance considers necessary to undertake the difficult task of starting a charter school.

**Criterion 4.** *The rubric the sponsor uses demonstrates alignment with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers school standards and principles for quality authorizers in evaluating a new school application.*

The Buckeye Community Hope Foundation has shared its charter school application template with the Transformation Alliance, and it does appear to be thorough and aligned to NACSA standards and principles. Furthermore, BCHF Education Division Director Peggy Young has spoken highly of SMART Academy's application, noting that the school's founder has been updating the sponsor regularly about curriculum development, community outreach, and other issues, and that the school founder's focus on early literacy is sharp and compelling. This criterion, however, is just one of four essential criteria for new charter schools opening in the Cleveland school district.

## **Conclusion**

In 2015, the Transformation Alliance reviewed Buckeye Community Hope Foundation as a sponsor. Based on the rubric established as part of the review application process, created jointly by the Alliance, the Ohio Department of Education, and the Ohio Association of Charter School Authorizers, we awarded BCHF 24 out of 34 points and recommended its continued role as a sponsor in Cleveland. Our review team did, however, identify five concerns in 2015, two of which are relevant to the proposed opening of SMART Academy.

First, we noted a lack of a "clear, proactive alignment to the Cleveland Plan, particularly related to seeking local input in the application and review process for new schools." Second, we noted "the need for increased urgency in achieving its mission to provide only high-quality school options for children against an absolute standard, regardless of the performance of other Cleveland schools."

These concerns were discussed during the 2015 review process, and BCHF indicated a willingness to consider and address them. However, both concerns remain an issue for the Transformation Alliance related to the work of this sponsor and the opening of this school.

The spirit and intent of the Transformation Alliance is to work collaboratively with the charter sector, and we remain ready to work together to achieve our goal to ensure every child in Cleveland attends a high-quality school and every neighborhood has a multitude of great schools from which families can choose.

We have confidence that the Ohio Department of Education takes seriously the need to ensure all children receive a quality education, and trust that you will consider the issues raised in this letter. Please feel free to contact me at [Piet.van.Lier@ClevelandTA.org](mailto:Piet.van.Lier@ClevelandTA.org) or 216.592.2420 with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Piet van Lier". The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first letter of each word being significantly larger and more prominent.

Piet van Lier  
Executive Director

cc: Colleen D. Grady, Executive Director, Office of School Options, ODE  
Karl Koenig, Director, Office of Community Schools, ODE  
Peggy Young, Director, Education Division, Buckeye Community Hope Foundation