



VITAL SOURCE

SPRING 2015



Lenny Schafer, M.Ed., PCC-S
Executive Director

The past several months have been tough for the charter school movement. There has been a wave of reports claiming that Ohio's charter schools have issues with performance, attendance, poor oversight from their sponsors, and poor governance. Those who believe in or adhere to quality oversight, management or governance will not defend the indefensible. However, our successes continue to go unnoticed, under recognized, or simply get explained away by our critics. Charter opponents are seizing the moment to capitalize on charter school failures. This has garnered much statewide (and even national) attention, and we as a movement have become disheartened.

Those of us committed to quality charter schools have varying beliefs about and responses to each of these reports, and the steps that are currently underway to reform charter school policy. I'm not here to argue what those beliefs or responses

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OCCS works to increase capacity of charter school governing boards



Ohio charter schools have been in the spotlight lately, with questions emerging about not only their financial and academic performance, but also the manner in which they are governed and held accountable. The Ohio Council of Community Schools (OCCS) recognizes the critical role played by the various partners that oversee, govern, and operate charter schools, respectively: sponsors, governing boards, and – depending on whether the governing board contracts with an outside entity for key services – management companies.

Understanding that high-quality governing boards are key to ensuring that charter schools are run successfully, OCCS has been working hard to improve the capacity of governing board members who have volunteered to serve its sponsored schools. All charter schools in Ohio are governed by not-for-profit boards made up of five or more members, who must be free from conflicts of interest, undergo criminal background checks, and operate in alignment with all Sunshine and public records



should be. Part of what has made us successful as a movement is how fiercely independent we are. It's unreasonable to expect that we will always be on the same page. But in the face of criticism, I hope that we can collectively observe this as an opportunity to band together to do three things.

First, consider if and where you can increase your knowledge and capacity, or make improvements to what you're doing. Whether you're a school, a management company, a sponsor, a board or a choice supporter, there is always room for improvement. This isn't to say that we should agree with criticisms levied against us. But neither should we insist that charter schools are perfect, or resort to calling out traditional public schools for their failures. Our responsibility is to our students and their futures; no one wins by bashing "the other team" or by refusing to discuss areas for improvement. The Ohio Council of Community Schools took notice last year (spring of 2014) when governing boards were being contacted, and criticized widely, by media. Our staff brainstormed ways to help improve the capacity of governing board members, and launched two new initiatives (which you can read about in the article on pages 1 and 3).

Second, celebrate your successes. Celebrate them loudly. Share them out unapologetically and get creative in how you share the message about what charter schools are doing right. OCCS was proud to co-host this year's National School Choice Week celebration, which featured success stories of students and united people from across the choice spectrum (traditional, charter, online, private – see page 4). Our annual teacher of the year award

is meant to celebrate and honor the success of our schools' most innovative teachers (page 5) and our recently launched annual report showcases our schools' accomplishments as well (page 8). Remembering personal success stories about our movement is the quickest way to dissipate that feeling of disheartenment. We are making a difference in the lives of students and families across our state. Nothing can take away from that.

Third, transform your frustration into a call to action. In my recent article about dropout recovery and prevention programs (which can be found on OCCS' website), I wanted to encourage our partners to brainstorm productive ways to address some of the criticisms we are facing. This includes getting your governing boards, school leaders, students and parents involved by inviting lawmakers, the media, and others to see the good work you are doing. For example, invite them to attend or even keynote a graduation or visit the school to speak with students. This can help dispel misinformation and empowers your partners to get involved.

Over the course of the next few months, the legislature will solidify its plans for reforming Ohio's charter school sector. The media and the public will take notice; in fact, the rest of the nation will be watching. We may not agree as a movement on every change that occurs, but we must resist the urge to let frustration or in-fighting consume us. Be honest about areas for improvement, shout your successes from the rooftops, use data and passion and consider these attacks as a great opportunity to call your partners into action. Thank you all for changing the face of public education.

Save the date for OCCS' Next Generation of Teaching and Leadership conference

In partnership with The University of Toledo (UT), The Ohio Council of Community Schools (OCCS) is hosting its second annual conference for school leaders, teachers and special education staff on July 14-15, 2015 at The University of Toledo.

Please join us for this free two-day event focused on equipping schools for success in the midst of a rapidly evolving accountability system. Sessions will focus on the PARCC assessments, Common Core, special education, and other key topics and challenges facing teachers, leaders, and special education staff.

We are pleased to announce our keynote speakers, Ron Clark and Dr. John Hodge.

Ron Clark is the 2000 Disney American Teacher of the Year, a two-time *New York Times* Bestselling author, the subject of a television movie and the founder of The Ron Clark Academy. Ron is regularly featured on network and cable television (The Today Show,

CNN and Oprah,) and was dubbed by Oprah Winfrey as her first "Phenomenal Man." Among his many accomplishments, he taught in Harlem taking his class of "low-achieving" students to scoring above the district's gifted students by the end of the year.

Dr. John Hodge is president and co-founder of Urban Learning and Leadership Center (ULLC), an organization focused on student achievement and reduction of the achievement gap. He has served as a reading teacher, English teacher, AVID teacher, assistant principal and associate director of AVID Center Eastern Division. He also served as director of An Achievable Dream Academy, an inner city school that piloted many of the interventions used by Urban Learning and Leadership Center.

We hope you can join us for the event's valuable breakout sessions and discussions, networking, and professional development as Ohio ramps up for the next generation of teaching and leadership.



laws that apply to all public schools. Aside from performing the essential monitoring and oversight work of a sponsor, OCCS has launched two new initiatives during the 2014-15 school year to ensure that governing boards are not only in compliance with rule and law, but equipped to govern more effectively.



The first of these is a series of complimentary regional governing board trainings across the state, which cover topics such as charter school finance, academic reports, Sunshine Laws, public records requests, and how to run an efficient board meeting. The first training for charter school board members was held in Toledo on October 29; all OCCS sponsored schools from Northwest Ohio were represented by the 26 board members in attendance.

The second training took place on December 10 in Akron, and covered similar topics as the Northwest Ohio training, with 27 board members representing 11 schools in attendance.

At both trainings, OCCS staff members trained board members in their areas of expertise. Adrienne Shreve, OCCS' Director of School Fiscal Services, gave an overview of charter school finance and what school board members should be asking for from their schools fiscal officers. OCCS' Chief Oversight Officer Darrin Becorder summarized the local report cards and explained what information is important for boards to know, and Tim Clements, Esq., and Becky Scheiman, Esq. provided a historical perspective for attendees to gain knowledge of charter laws and gave specific examples on how to run effective board meetings.

The third training took place in Columbus on February 25, and featured Jamie Callender, Esq. along with OCCS staff. Jamie outlined charter school law, the history of the charter movement, and gave recommendations on how to run board meetings effectively. The fourth and final training will occur in Cincinnati on April 22, 2015. Tim Clements, Esq., and Becky Scheiman, Esq. will be the featured speakers.

OCCS Executive Director Lenny Schafer said of the trainings, "OCCS feels a responsibility to increase the capacity of our partnering governing boards. The landscape of our entire education movement has changed and will continue to change over the next few years. Our goal is to provide a training in academics, finances, public records and state laws that is just as useful for a board member with five years' experience, as a board member who is new to charter schools - and I think these trainings do just that."

The second initiative aimed at equipping governing board members for success is a members-only platform available on the OCCS website. On this site, board members can log in to access key documents related to their schools (such as financial reports, school academic progress reports, school contracts and attachments), communications from the sponsor, and exclusive

access to training material from Brian Carpenter. Mr. Carpenter is a renowned expert in charter governance, the author of two books on charter schools, and former CEO of the National Charter Schools Institute at Central Michigan University. Board members of OCCS-sponsored schools can tap into myriad resources through the OCCS website, at no cost. Moreover, governing board members can earn credit toward their ongoing training requirements (as spelled out in each school's contract with OCCS) through this virtual platform, making their ongoing professional development not only meaningful but convenient for the volunteers who serve.

OCCS remains committed to working with the various stakeholders in the movement to ensure success of the schools it oversees, and looks forward to building on these initiatives for governing board members.

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LENNY SCHAFER
OCCS Executive Director



OCCS cohosts statewide School Choice Week celebration

School choice supporters from across the state gathered Monday, January 26th at the Capitol Theatre, Riffe Center to celebrate National School Choice Week. Although a snowstorm hindered travel and cancelled schools around the city, the rally went on as scheduled.

OCCS' Director of School Fiscal Services, Adrienne Shreve, emceed the event, and opened the day by welcoming guests and explaining that school choice is vital for reaching ALL students' needs and providing diverse, high-quality options to Ohio's children.



David Hansen, Executive Director of Quality School Choice from the Ohio Department of Education, spoke about the numerous types of schools to meet students' needs and how the type of school doesn't matter, as long as the school is a quality choice for students. Eric Gordon, CEO of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, spoke next, and discussed Cleveland's model of school choice and partnership throughout the city. He said, "Choice is not unidirectional (out of public schools into other options), shifts can go either way."

Sam Smith, legislative aide for Ohio House Representative and Chair of the Education Committee Bill Hayes, said that quality choice was on the agenda for the House this year and is an important focus point.

Nicole Graves, the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools' (OAPCS) Teacher of the Year and OCCS' 2013-14 Teacher of the Year from Central Academy of Ohio, talked about how as a child, school was not enjoyable for her. As a teacher, she wanted to make learning fun for her students and did so by using dancing and yoga to teach lessons. She said working at a charter school allowed her to teach in a way that she wanted to and make a difference for her students.

EdChoice scholarship recipient and former student of Tree of Life Christian School in Columbus, Walter Woodard, told attendees of his troubled past while in his traditional district school, and how his transfer to private school helped him thrive in the classroom. He said, "I want other people to be able to receive the type of education I received. Without it, I would just be another statistic."

Representative Andrew Brenner (R-Powell), of the Ohio House of Representatives, praised school choice options for allowing students access to high-quality options, and read Governor John Kasich's resolution to declare January 25-31 School Choice Week.

School board member from Ohio Connections Academy, an online community school, Bonnie Smith, recited the beginning of a poem she learned in seventh grade, saying "Good, better, best...schools should not rest until their good is better, and better best." She also talked about parents' responsibility to research the best school for their child to get them the best education possible.

Jeff Murray, a parent of students who attended Metro Early College High School, talked about his children's positive experience with the school, saying "Everyone should have the choices I've had as a parent." Metro Early College High School is a STEM school affiliated with Battelle.

Cheryl Bowshier, special needs outreach manager of School Choice Ohio, spoke about her experience navigating the education system for a child with special needs. She said that all children deserve a quality education regardless of disability, race or income.

OCCS worked with a variety of education advocates to plan the event including, Agudath Israel of America, American Federation for Children, School Choice Ohio, Northwest Ohio Scholarship Fund, the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Students First, and National School Choice Week.

This year, National School Choice Week was January 25-31st. Featuring more than 11,000 independently organized events across all 50 states, National School Choice Week shines a positive spotlight on effective education options for children. It is independent, nonpolitical, and nonpartisan, and embraces all types of educational choice – from traditional public schools to public charter schools, magnet schools, online learning, private schools, and homeschooling.



OCCS announces 2014 Teacher of the Year Awards

The Ohio Council of Community Schools proudly announced its 2014 Teacher of the Year, Kathy McDonald, from Mount Auburn International Academy (MAIA), and the 2014 Virtual Teacher of the Year, Kristi Molter, from Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA), in November.

This was OCCS' third year granting the Teacher of the Year Award. Winners were selected for demonstrating a commitment to their school's mission and vision statement, excelling in their content areas, delivering innovative instruction, and being a leader in the school who embraces teamwork.



Kathy McDonald



Kristi Molter

Kathy, a 9-12 grade math teacher at MAIA who has taught at the school for six years, was chosen for the award because of her dedication to students both inside and outside of the classroom. According to her colleagues, she works tirelessly to make the school a better place on a daily basis.

"Kathy's commitment to teaching math is not just visible through the way she interacts with students, but most importantly through the actions of those she is teaching. Students are honored to be a member of her classroom and are proud of the effort they put into homework and class activities... In addition to promoting academics, Kathy is constantly involved in extra-curricular activities or going out of her way to meet a student's needs. In my time here, I have seen her feed a student, clothe a student, help a student with transportation so they could be in school, provide a shoulder to cry on or be the person who gives hard advice. The list goes on and on and I've lost count of how many times she has put the needs of the student before her own," said Wissam Sabbagh, MAIA's school leader.

Kristi, a 3rd-grade teacher at OHVA, was chosen for being a passionate teacher that provides innovative instruction to inspire her students to learn. She has taught at OHVA for nine years.

Amy Helm-Borchers, OHVA's elementary school leader, said the following of her: "Kristi conducts enriching instructional classes for her students in her virtual classroom. She uses the virtual tools available to engage her students in interactive lessons and uses many sources of student data to drive her daily instruction. It is evident that she knows all of her students including their strengths

and weaknesses. Kristi fosters a strong partnership with the families of the students in her class, teaming with them to further each child's education. She has been praised by parents of students in her class for being 'gentle and patient' with their children... Kristi uses exit tickets at the completion of each lesson to measure student's mastery and determine the next standard for instructional focus. As a result of her strong instruction, her students grow academically each year."

High-quality teachers are essential to ensure that students are engaged and invested in their learning, and achieve at high levels. Caring, committed and talented educators make a lasting difference for students. For this year's award, we received several nominations and they were all worthy of recognition. Each nominee received an Amazon gift card.

Congratulations to this year's Teacher of the Year finalists, who received an OCCS Teacher of the Year glass apple and a gift certificate to be used for classroom items. This year's finalists were:

- Shawn Martin, Alternative Education Academy (OHDELA)
- Michelle Huffman, Wildwood Environmental Academy (WEA)
- Laura Schoon, Columbus Arts and Technology Academy (CATA)
- Ashley Faller, Lake Erie College Preparatory School



Columbus Preparatory Academy receives federal recognition

Columbus Preparatory Academy (CPA) received one of the most prestigious and hard-to-achieve national public education awards – the National Blue Ribbon distinction from the US Department of Education, and was named a National Title I Distinguished School of the Year by the National Title I Association, for the school’s 2013-14 academic performance results.

CPA was named a National Blue Ribbon School in the fall. US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan named only 337 schools across the country (public and private) as 2014 National Blue Ribbon Schools. Only 290 of these were recognized as Exemplary High Performing Schools – including CPA – and an even fewer number of these were public charter schools.

According to its site, “The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program is an important part of the US Department of Education’s efforts to seek, identify, replicate, and scale up education practices that work. Secretary Duncan praised the National Blue Ribbon Schools as ‘a national treasure’ and challenged them to share their knowledge with peers in other schools and districts, ‘to become engines of educational innovation, galvanizing others to transform their schools as well.’”

CPA was also named as a National Title I Distinguished School of the Year by the National Title I Association in December. The award recognizes schools for their positive educational advances and is only awarded to two schools in each state every year.

The Ohio Department of Education nominated CPA for the award for its outstanding performance in exceeding adequate yearly progress for two or more years and significantly closing the achievement gap between subgroups of students.



Title I schools have a high population of low-income students and receive funding to help disadvantaged students reach Ohio’s rigorous academic standards. The National Title I Association has selected examples of superior Title I school programs for national recognition through the National Title I Distinguished Schools program since 1996 and is dedicated to improving and implementing the Title I program so that more children reach their academic potential.



OCCS staff present at the Office for Exceptional Children conference

OCCS is proud of Heidi Isaacs, Assistant Director of Special Education, and Todd Burger, Regional Representative for Columbus and Special Education Coordinator, for presenting at the Ohio Department of Education’s Office for Exceptional Children 2014 Special Education (SPED) Leadership Conference in October.

Heidi’s presentation, “Introduction to Non-Violent Crisis Intervention,” taught educators and school administrators how to effectively respond to various behaviors that students may display in response to a trauma in their lives. The Non-Violent Crisis Intervention model (NCI) Heidi used in her presentation teaches that educators must ensure their responses to students are professional, supportive and consistent to ensure the safety and security of all students and avoid re-traumatization.

Todd’s presentation focused on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which offers a set of principles for curriculum development to give all individuals, even those with disabilities, the opportunity to learn. Todd taught educators that through differentiated instruction, flexible means of action and expression, and creative engagement, UDL provides access to the curriculum for all learners.

OCCS is proud to have in-house special education expertise dedicated to helping sponsored schools navigate all of the challenges and opportunities associated with serving students with disabilities.



School highlights:



Stepstone Academy was featured on Channel 19 Action News segment, Romona's Kids, for the school's student-led technology management program. Students in the "Tech Squad" are trained to handle common computer problems that their peers may experience in the classroom.

Mount Auburn International Academy (MAIA) was awarded \$5,000 for winning the Financially Literate Youth (FLY) grant presented by CompareCards.com. MAIA will use the monetary award to launch a six-week program that gives students the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors needed to make sound financial decisions.

Cleveland Arts and Social Sciences Academy (CASSA) received an "A" and ranked among the best in the state for the value-added measure on the state report card. The school also received an "A" in the "lowest 20%" value-added category and was recognized by Battelle for Kids

OhioGuidestone, **Stepstone Academy's** management company, won the 2013 Anisfield-Wolf Memorial Award in November. The Anisfield-Wolf Memorial Award is given to a nonprofit community organization for outstanding service and carries a \$20,000 prize. OhioGuidestone was chosen for the award for the great work the organization is doing through Stepstone Academy.

Performance Academies' Springfield Preparatory and Fitness Academy (SPFA), Middletown Fitness and Preparatory Academy (MFPA) and Trotwood Fitness and Preparatory Academy (TFPA) were named as three of *Dayton Business Journal's* top ten charter schools in the Dayton area. The schools were ranked based on the 2013-14 performance index score, in which SPFA scored 95.50, MPFA scored 90.71, and TFPA scored 82.5.



Trotwood Preparatory and Fitness Academy students and staff enjoyed a field trip to the Learning Tree Farm in October to learn about farm life in the fall. Students played a game to find their own pumpkin, walked in the woods and hayfields to see the fall changes, toured the location's garden to taste fall vegetables, and explored the barn to observe how the animals prepare for winter.

The *News-Herald* featured a story on two **Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA)** students who stand out as examples of the many types of students who thrive in a virtual environment.

The **I CAN Schools** and **Stepstone Academy** were highlighted in an announcement last fall that Cleveland was designated as a "Compact City" by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Compact Cities are recognized for transformative, collaborative efforts between traditional districts and charters to increase the number of students enrolled in quality public schools.

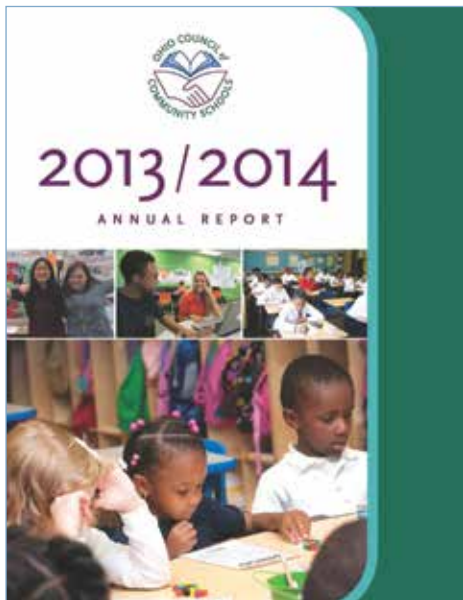
OAPCS hosted its 8th annual conference at Kalahari in the fall. **Nicole Graves**, a 2nd grade teacher at **Central Academy of Ohio** and OCCS' 2013-14 teacher of the year, won the OAPCS Teacher of the Year Award. **Christine Allen from Columbus Preparatory Academy (CPA)** was runner-up. **Columbus Preparatory Academy** won school of the year at the event, while **Toledo Preparatory and Fitness Academy (TPFA)** was honored as one of OAPCS' "school of distinction."



TEACHER OF THE YEAR



In case you missed it

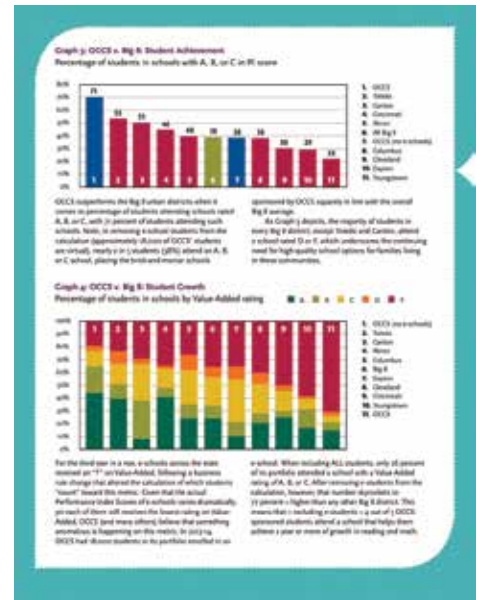


This year, OCCS released its first annual report, which highlights its sponsored schools' accomplishments, achievement on Performance Index and Value-Added from the 2013-14 school year, its unique relationship to The University of Toledo, compliance scores from the statutory annual report to the Ohio Department of Education, as well as its own best practices as a sponsor. The report was released in late February and is available on OCCS' website.

Lenny Schafer, Executive Director of OCCS, recently issued a statement about the vital work that dropout recovery schools are doing in Ohio. A shorter version of the piece also ran in the *Canton Repository*. He wrote,

"Not only are the wrong questions being asked (about charter schools), but the attacks are focusing on a group of dedicated people who have risen to the challenge of doing something about Ohio's dropout epidemic. Our youth dropping out of school is an epidemic of epic proportions that affects each of us... We all have the same goal: a quality education for every student resulting in 100% graduation rate leading to an eventual 100% rate of gainful employment."

The full statement can be found on OCCS' website under "What's New."



OCCS released an analysis evaluating how its overall portfolio of schools is performing, identifying areas for growth, and measuring its own performance as a statewide sponsor. The report is based on Ohio's 2013-14 Local Report Card data and is available on OCCS's website under the School Performance tab.



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If you have school or student success stories you'd like to feature in an upcoming OCCS newsletter, please email them to brittany@ohioschools.org