Distinctiveness of the ODA Model, Program, and Organization

ODA is the only program in Northeast Ohio that offers a continuum of support for students, beginning in middle school and continuing throughout high school graduation and beyond. Each ODA child receives nearly 1,200 hours of direct service each year, at an approximate cost of $4/hour per child. This cost is $3/hour less than the average afterschool program, and $9/hour less than the average cost of schooling in the districts that we serve. Boldly underscoring the success of our program, ODA boasts a 100% high school graduation rate for all students who complete our 3-year middle school program. About 80% of our students do remain in the program all 3 years, with most of our attrition rate attributed to student transiency between schools and school districts (representative of the population served).

Over the last 10 years, Open Doors Academy has demonstrated monumental success, both in its work with its students, and in its growth (expanding from 1 site to 8 sites in the past 3 years). Four key factors grounded in theoretical research are at the center of the Open Doors Academy Model. These factors include: quality adult relationships, family engagement, strong school-community partnerships, and duration of programming. These factors which drive the organization's innovation and success are detailed below.

Quality Adult Relationships

 "The best documented asset of resilient children is a strong bond to a competent and caring adult, which need not be a parent" (pp. 83).   In an effort to narrow in on the importance of these relationships, we must develop an understanding of the impact of caring adult relationships in the home, school and community setting and how these relationships can affect a student's achievement (Masten and Reed, 2002).

Many complex factors are seen as contributing to the achievement gap in today's educational system.   Over the years, a comprehensive list of social factors has been produced to explain the achievement gap including: cultural context, social economic status (SES), inequities in teaching and learning styles, family history, gender, and parental involvement. When working with youth we cannot change all of these societal factors. However, we might consider the opportunity of influencing additional environmental factors, such as those identified by the 40 developmental assets (www.search-institute.org), in an effort to strengthen a child's achievement, including engaging the family, developing culturally sensitive curriculums, and providing outside supports to strengthen the identity of the child. Huitt (2004) states that there are basic experiences that students need for their social development, which are facilitated by the adults around them. These include having nurturing and caring adult-child relationships, adult modeling societal values, critical thinking and discussions regarding moral and ethical issues, collaborative learning experiences with peers and other social groups, and experiences that promote empathy and concern for others.   Many educators indicate that

one experience with a caring adult can significantly impact the future of that young person. Many successful charter schools and youth development programs base their success on the impact of their staff on the young people they serve. Studies of successful high-poverty urban schools consistently report personal caring relationships between youth and adults (Towns, Cole-Henderson, & Serpell, 2001; Murray and Malmgren, 2005)

Masten, A.S., & Reed, M.G. (2002). Resilience in development. In S.R. Snyder, & S.J. Lopez (Eds.), The Handbook of Positive Psychology, (pp.74-88). Oxford University Press.

Huitt, W. (2004). Moral and Character Development. In Chang, F. Munoz, M.A. (2007). School Personnel Educating the Whole Child: Impact of Character Education on Teachers' Self-Assessment and Student Development. Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education, 19, 35-49.

Murray, C. & Malmgren, K. (2005). Implementing a teacher student relationship program in a high poverty urban school: Effects on social, emotional, and academic adjustment and lessons learned. Journal of School Psychology, 43, 137-152.

Towns, D.P, Cole-Henderson, B., & Serpell, Z. (2001). The journey to urban school success: Going the extra mile. The Journal of Negro Education, 70, 4-18.

Family Engagement

A recent study conducted by Hanlon, et.al. (2009) looked at the effectiveness of quality afterschool programs targeting 6th grade urban African American youth. The study sought to understand whether youth engaged in an afterschool programs that promoted remedial education and an appreciation for African American cultural heritage, and parental involvement, would result in stronger school bonding, social skills development and academic achievement. Findings of the study indicated that among other factors, greater participation of parents in the program positively related to academic improvement as measured by grade point average. Of those parents who participated in the study, quality of engagement was measured by attendance and involvement in family events, 88 (slightly over one-third) were judged to be good to excellent.   The remaining 145 parents were rated fair to poor. Findings of this study indicated that those parents who demonstrated strong involvement, was correlated with student increase in grade point average from baseline to follow-up. These findings were significantly different from those parents who demonstrated fair to poor involvement, indicating that youth with more involved parents demonstrated greater strides in academic performance.

ODA is grounded in the belief that it takes a community to raise a child. Therefore, parents are required to contribute a minimum of 16 service hours to their child's programming annually. These hours can be completed by attending parent education workshops (offered twice a month in the evenings), participating in parent support groups (offered on Saturday mornings monthly), attending our family events with their child (offered five to seven times per year), and volunteering on field trips, during homework

hour, or in our administrative office. This past year, 98 percent of ODA parents completed this service requirement, contributing over 2,825 hours throughout the program year. The two percent who did not complete their hours were required to complete their hours in the new program year, prior to their child re-enrolling in the program.

The family engagement component contributes to the wellbeing of our students by creating opportunities for families to come together and spend time in a healthy and safe atmosphere, and by enhancing parents' knowledgebase and toolset for how to support their child emotionally, psychologically, financially, and physically throughout adolescence. For example, one of our workshops this past year taught parents how to recognize differences in learning styles between parents and their children and to find strategies for helping a child with a different learning style. Additionally, just a couple months ago after one of our parent workshops for fathers, the men decided to initiate a support group for fathers in our program. This support group, "On Their Shoulders" was organized voluntarily by our fathers and has been running ever since, enabling the men to build relationships with our staff and other fathers who desire to participate in and contribute to their children's education.

Hanlon, T., Simon, B.D., O'Grady, K.E., Carswell, S.B, & Callaman, J.M. (2009). The effectiveness of an After-school Program Targeting Urban African American Youth. Education and Urban Society, 42(1) 96-118.

A Strong School Partnership
The second key in the success of the ODA model is that we strive to establish a close working partnership with each school we serve. In order for our students to receive the greatest possible impact, it is critical that ODA staff works together with school staff to ensure strong follow-through of expectations throughout the entire school day.

Successful afterschool programs recognize the importance of strong community connections and actively pursue them. The benefits of these collaborations include: greater relevance of curriculum for students; increased student responsibility for learning; improved connections between school and community; stronger problem-solving skills, teambuilding, higher order thinking, time management, and other critical skills that benefit students' school achievement; expanded learning environments; greater motivation of reluctant learners; enhanced problem solving and conflict management skills; and reduced behavior problems (Decker, 2000). During the day, our staff spends approximately 24 hours per week in the classroom at the schools, observing students, modeling appropriate classroom behavior, meeting with teachers and counselors, serving as a support to youth during transitions between classes, and often having lunch with the youth.

As a result of the close partnership, we have seen an increase in academic performance among student participants. In our annual program evaluation, we looked at the differences in academic performance between the schools that we serve, and we found what seems to be a strong correlation between the relationship that we have with the school and the student performance at that site. Sites that boast stronger relationships with the administration and teachers, and maintain more interaction in the classroom with students also demonstrate overall higher academic performances as reported in math and reading grades and overall grade point averages.

Decker, L.E., et al. (2000). Engaging families & communities, pathways to educational success. National Community Educational Association, Florida Atlantic University.

Continuum of Programming
The most critical element to our success as a holistic enrichment program is the long-term service provision that we offer our students and their families. Open Doors Academy is the only program in Northeast Ohio that works extensively with youth, beginning in the 6th grade, and continuing through high school graduation and beyond.

A longitudinal study conducted by Darling (2005) looked at student attitude and engagement in school among students who participated in extracurricular activities for the duration of one, two, or three years. Results of the study found that students who remained in programming for two or three years demonstrated greater academic aspirations than those who only participated one year or did not participate at all. Results also revealed a positive relationship between middle and high school students who engaged in programming for three years and multiple young adult outcomes.

A follow-up study examined the relationship between the duration and intensity of participation in organized activities during high school and educational, civic, and occupational success in young adulthood. It found that youth who participated in organized activities for two years demonstrated more favorable educational and civic outcomes as young adults than those who participated for one year. In addition, more intensive participation was associated with greater educational, civic, and occupational success in young adulthood.

Darling, N. (2005). Participation in extracurricular activities and adolescent adjustment: Cross-sectional and longitudinal findings. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34, 493-505.