

The Owensboro Public Schools and Daviess County Public Schools districts are proud to submit a shared nomination for the KSBA PEAK Award for a program that exemplifies the highest ideals of Public Education Achievements in Kentucky.

Owensboro Innovation Academy, a small, stand-alone high school in Owensboro, has been proven to enhance student learning and is an outstanding example of a program that promotes the positive impact of public education in Kentucky.

- 1) The overall objective of the Owensboro Innovation Academy is to offer an individualized, project-based learning opportunity for students who discover authentic learning through active engagement. As Owensboro Innovation Academy (OIA) students themselves have said, this experience is not just hands-on learning, but takes the next step by putting learning in the students' hands. OIA is aligned with [Owensboro's economic development workforce strategy](#). Students are given the opportunity to select a pathway in one of the [three fields](#) that offer the potential for career opportunities that exist in our community. Students choose a Project Lead the Way pathway in [computer science](#), [engineering](#) or [biomedical science](#). Through the pillars of the [New Tech Network](#) (NTN) curriculum, students also learn the necessary "soft skills" – trust, respect and responsibility – that are essential to success in the workplace and in life. Being affiliated with NTN affords access to a network of more than 140 schools around the world. OIA combines all these factors (regional economic need, affiliation with an innovative school network, support from local philanthropy and willingness of partner school districts and postsecondary to collaborate) to increase life readiness with a purpose. Students are immersed in innovative authentic experiences with multiple opportunities to earn college credit. Neighboring colleges ([Brescia University](#), [Kentucky Wesleyan College](#), and [Owensboro Community and Technical College](#)) offer both dual credit courses and an [early college program](#) where students can simultaneously earn both a high school diploma and associate's degree.
- 2) The Owensboro/Daviess County region enjoys a confluence of focused [economic development executives](#), a progressive cadre of [city](#) and [county](#) leadership, a [philanthropic community](#) interested in education, and a collaborative-minded K-12 and postsecondary spirit. The Regional Alliance for Education provides a framework for these groups to meet regularly and focus efforts. The scope, then, was a charge from this group to provide something different than a traditional high school experience. OIA began in the 2015-16 school year with students primarily from the [Owensboro Public Schools](#) (OPS) and [Daviess County Public Schools](#) (DCPS) districts. OIA also welcomes students from neighboring school districts. The school has been expanded by a grade level each year since its introduction and will continue to grow with a goal of reaching 350-400 students each year by 2019. OIA is the only education and training experience of its kind in Kentucky.

- 3) The OPS district serves as the fiscal agent for OIA. Funding comes from a mixture of local tax dollars and state SEEK funding. (SEEK follows the student to OIA from their home school district.) Students, in effect, maintain an A1 school membership with their traditional home high schools, but also are able to attend the A5 OIA through Memoranda of Agreements between school districts. OIA allows students to return to their home high school for 25% of the day to participate in specialized programming and elective courses. Each school district provides transportation for the students in their district. An essential elementary in the early success of OIA was the commitment of the [Public Life Foundation](#). This philanthropic institution, rooted in educational opportunities for students, committed a significant contribution of \$400,000 to provide the start-up effort and pay for the New Tech Network affiliation. A partnership with a local real estate developer allowed OPS to lease space for OIA at an affordable rate.
- 4) Both the OPS and DCPS school boards are strongly supportive of OIA. The willingness of both school boards to collaborate is a perfect example of two school systems not only working together for the best interests of the students, but also demonstrating responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars and pooling resources. Both districts have proud traditions of providing outstanding educations to our students, but we recognized there was an opportunity to enhance learning experiences for students in Owensboro/Daviess County and resolved to try something new that was directly aligned with community needs in terms of workforce. Working together, the districts envisioned and brought to life a new learning environment. Leveraged by the OPS [District of Innovation](#) status, OIA offers unique project-based learning experiences in a competency-based environment. OIA serves as a model in the state of Kentucky, where legislators are pondering charter legislation regarding how local school boards can act as sole authorizers of such innovative schools.
- 5) OIA is innovative in every possible facet, from the visionary collaboration that has made it possible to the way instruction is delivered. Even its location is unique. The school is based in a local business incubator called the [Centre for Business and Research](#). The building itself offers the perfect opportunity for students to form internships with the businesses that are right upstairs. The teachers are true facilitators of learning; instead of lecturing, they challenge the students to find solutions through [curriculum](#). There are no bells to change classes and students' possessions aren't kept in lockers. Through the three pillars, students trust each other, respect everyone and are responsible for themselves. Community partnerships instantly developed as a result of all these influences. Students have embraced the challenges and blossomed in an environment that nurtures creativity and critical thinking – and they are rewarded with the knowledge that they are making a positive difference in our community and beyond. Recently, students developed an app that teachers can use district-wide to communicate with students for whom English is a second language. Students worked with Habitat For Humanity to design, build and paint shelters for

- people in need. Students used skills in geometry to design 3-D puzzles for participants at [a local special needs adult daycare](#). Recently, a national game designer tested a new game, “Kingdoms,” with OIA students, saying he wanted their feedback on innovation and design. For a teambuilding activity, facilitators made an [Escape Room](#) by designing a series of puzzles where students had to use math, science and English to unlock a box so they could escape a room. After visiting OIA, [Kentucky Commissioner of Education Dr. Stephen Pruitt](#) tweeted: “Incredible experience. We need to engage students like this across Kentucky.” During OIA’s ribbon cutting, former Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear said, “There wasn’t a more meaningful or more exciting ribbon cutting than what we are doing right here today at the Owensboro Innovation Academy. [This is the future of Kentucky](#). This is going to set students up for a road of success like we haven’t been able to do before.”
- 6) The program’s progress toward its goals has been incredible. Recently, New Tech Network school development coach Leah Henry visited the school. “As the New Tech Network school development coach for OIA, I have been able to witness firsthand how well this school has embraced the notion of the three pillars of the New Tech model that lead to student success,” Henry said. “Their nation-building program is just one part of a slew of strategies that they have used to create a ‘Culture that Empowers’ both students and staff. Their use of robots, computers, coding and other tech tools have shown that they understand ‘Technology Enables.’ Through their own refinement of the New Tech learning outcome rubrics, they have been teaching and assessing the ‘Outcomes That Matter,’ and through the quality of their authentic and community driven project-based instruction, they get at the heart of ‘Teaching that Engages.’ As the only New Tech Network school in Kentucky, OIA is leading the way in creating opportunities for students to engage in deeper learning, which research has proven to be the pinnacle of instruction that sticks. This school has already hosted many tours of local and regional parties who are interested in what can work for their community, and I anticipate that this school will soon be an official New Tech Network Demonstration site.” [Nationally](#), students engaged in New Tech Network schools grow 61% more in higher order thinking skills than those attending traditional schools. In addition, 70% of New Tech students enroll in college, and 92% persist in four-year colleges. In OIA’s latest culture survey, 85% report they have positive connections to the school, 71% report positive learning experiences through project-based learning and 86% report positive adult relationships on campus.

Owensboro Innovation Academy is a truly an innovative learning experience that is changing lives, one student at a time, while also changing our community by ensuring a workforce that is confident and capable of meeting the challenges of the future.

On behalf of the Owensboro and Daviess County Public Schools districts, and the students and communities we serve, we proudly and respectfully submit this shared application to the Kentucky School Boards Association for consideration for the 2017 PEAK Award.



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PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1871

TRADITION • INNOVATION • EXCELLENCE

Owensboro Innovation Academy

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Phone: (270) 686-1085

Beth Benjamin • Director

February 17, 2017

Matt McCarty
PEAK Award
Kentucky School Boards Association
260 Democrat Drive Frankfort, KY 40601

Dear Matt McCarty, PEAK Award Coordinator:

I have been facilitator at Owensboro Innovation Academy for the past two school years (since its inception). I consider myself lucky to be a part of a system that will provide lasting impact on students. I have been a teacher since 1998 and have always known that when students make connections to their lives and can see how content crosses disciplines they retain their knowledge. I knew I wanted to create a learning environment that teachers more than just content: collaboration, critical thinking, networking, problem-solving, etc.; however, I did not have the resources or instructional freedom to make this venture on my own because of logistics, resources, or funding.

Owensboro Public schools partnered with New Tech Network, a national non-profit, with about 200 schools within its network. Other facilitators, directors, and I have access to extensive coaching and networking in a proven problem-based philosophy. For over 20 years, this network has been a design partner for school change using project-based learning to empower and challenge students to learn and succeed, to collaborate and communicate, and to engage in the world around them. Owensboro Innovation Academy is structured differently than “traditional schools.” At OIA, students collaborate to solve authentic problems/projects with their peers, facilitators, and community partners. The students understand community is truly global. For our projects we have partnered with local businesses, museums, and colleges; Video conferenced (Skype/Google Hangout) with organizations in California and West Virginia.

Many of our courses are co-facilitated so that students understand cross-content connections. I no longer teach language arts and literature in a box (classroom). Now my curriculum blends with social studies seamlessly. Students read literature and research history to understand how it connects to their lives today. A concept like *revolution* develops into a project to learn ways students can help North Koreans gain their independence through awareness and knowledge. We created videos to work with organizations that help North Korean refugees escape to freedom in South Korea and other safe locations and have partnered with our resources to spread an authentic product.

Mission: Engaging ALL students with innovative teaching and learning
Equal Education and Employment Opportunities M/F/D

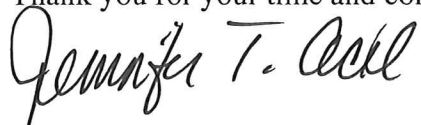
Students must solve problems and think critically within the project-based model of learning. OIA students are learning not to wait to be told what to do. We help them learn to manage time, monitor task sheets, and develop their next steps for their projects. When students first arrive at OIA, they often think that facilitators, formerly known as teachers, will delineate a plan and tell them exactly what we want them to know. However, it isn't long before students take learning into their own hands. They begin to reach out to community partners, organize guest speakers, and take learning to levels I've formally thought were not possible.

Our goal at OIA is to provide an innovative learning environment that blends authentic experiences with content standards so that the graduate leaves with skills needed to be successful, not just a fact-filled brain. One of the subtle, but possibly the most important, results from project-based learning is students' enhanced soft skills. Many freshmen students feel comfortable introducing themselves to community and business members or governors and state representatives? Through OIA's authentic projects, students are directly and indirectly taught soft skills to help them prepare for college and the workplace. Each project embeds oral and written communication so that students practice these skills in every content area. Students understand the reading, writing, and speaking needs that are specific to various career pathways. Likewise, OIA exposes students to appropriate business attire and etiquette through constant exposure to business and government professionals.

Since our school is only in its second year, I have only observational data that proves students are engaging in meaningful learning. However, the New Tech Network's Annual Outcomes Report released that students grow 61% in higher order thinking skills between their freshmen and senior years than a comparison group. Furthermore, New Tech students graduate at a rate 9% greater than the national average and enroll in college at a rate of 70%. The persistence rate of 92% of those enrolled in 4-year colleges and 72% in 2-year colleges. Without a doubt, I know the productive struggle students overcome throughout their high school years prepare them for the college and work environment.

Owensboro Innovation Academy and Owensboro Public Schools is deserving of recognition. I'm proud to be a part of this school's efforts to enhance learning that promotes and improves student learning and achieving. Just like Dr. Seuss, I cannot wait to see all the places our OIA students will go.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



Jennifer T. Cecil
OIA English Facilitator

As a parent of a child who would be in the top classes at a traditional high school, I will have to say, I was uncertain when my son said that he wanted to attend the Owensboro Innovation Academy. Since he would be part of the first class, I did my research, to say the least. Ultimately, the decision was left up to my son, as he would be the one going to the school. In the end, OIA was chosen and we couldn't be happier with his choice!

In two years, I have watched my son, like many of the other students, thrive. The facilitators at the school truly want each student to succeed, not just get by. Project-based learning is such an amazing way for young minds to learn! The students are not just getting a top-notch education, but they are also learning skills that they will take with them through life, such as working with others as a team and problem solving.

My son is doing the engineering pathway, which is one of three offered at OIA. Biomedicine and computer science are the other two. As a sophomore, he knows he is leaning toward astronautical engineering. As a kid from a small city in Western Kentucky and neither parent having a college degree, it is pretty amazing that he is interested in such a complex field. OIA has done this for him. It has given him the confidence and actually, the discipline, to focus on such high goals. He knows he will eventually earn a PhD and he looks forward to working to get that. OIA has made him excited for school and excited to learn. Here are his thoughts on OIA.

At the Owensboro Innovation Academy, facilitators allow students to get involved with the community. We are a project-based school, meaning that students work together toward the same goal, whether that is completing a simple benchmark or presenting an idea or product to a business' manager.

Also, because our school is so different and new, we get a lot of

visitors. Students can volunteer to talk to these news crews, state legislators, and board of education members for talking experience and practice. For example, I have started getting involved in these school tours and meetings to overcome nervous tendencies that, before OIA, I could not overcome. The school has helped me get over a lot of obstacles, such as that and learning how to work with others as a team.

When students get into the school, we get to choose two pathways (engineering, biomedicine, computer science) to get into. These courses, along with our facilitators, heavily encourage attending and finishing college for our careers in the future. The school has been a great influence, both for the community and students like myself.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Logan Kuegel".

Logan Kuegel,
OIA Sophomore

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shannon Kuegel".

Shannon Kuegel,
OIA Parent