

OPINION

State shouldn't remove Odyssey Charter School's invaluable founders (opinion)

Maryann Yarram Published 7:56 a.m. ET July 10, 2019

Maryann Yarram is a staff member, union member and a parent of a child at Odyssey Charter School.

This year, Niche.com ranked Odyssey Charter School 1st of 119 public and charter elementary schools in Delaware and 1st of 51 public and charter middle schools in Delaware. Odyssey has established and maintained its excellence through the efforts of people who share the vision of this unique institution.

Odyssey was created by the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA), a fraternal organization founded in 1922 in response to bigotry against minorities. Since then, AHEPA (and its sister organization, the Daughters of Penelope) have funded hospitals, cancer research, battered women's shelters, victims of natural disasters, millions in scholarships, affordable housing, and supplying veterans with service dogs.

AHEPA's mission is to "promote the ancient Hellenic ideals of education, philanthropy, civic responsibility, family and individual excellence through community service and volunteerism."

Background: Odyssey Charter faces potential probation, conditions to retain charter

When Odyssey was founded by AHEPA, the school's Department of Education-approved charter specified that the board of directors was to have five of nine members (including the President) appointed by AHEPA so they could ensure the school remains true to its founding vision. In the spirit of AHEPA's mission, AHEPA members:

1. Served as teachers and administrators — including one who handled finance and HR for nine years and another who served as headmaster for a year, both without pay.
2. Were instrumental in obtaining \$34 million in tax-exempt bonds to purchase the Barley Mill campus and all required permits.
3. Volunteered on an almost full-time basis over four years as part of renovating approximately 250,000 square feet of K-12 environment, across four buildings at the Barley Mill Plaza campus, for roughly \$25 per square foot. According to Tim Skibicki, one of the architects, said that this staggeringly low amount represents millions of dollars of taxpayer money that was saved throughout this process.
4. Raised over \$2.7M in grants and donations for OCS.
5. Were instrumental in developing partnerships for OCS with Harvard's Center of Hellenic Studies, the University of Delaware, and several Greek universities.

However, AHEPA does not operate in a vacuum. Odyssey excels because of the combined efforts of AHEPA and the board, administration, teachers, parents and students. One group cannot succeed in maintaining the culture of excellence without the others.



Students leave the Odyssey Charter School on Monday afternoon, January 6, 2014. The school took out \$34.6 million in conduit bonds to obtain 35 acres of the Barley Mill property in Greenville, formerly owned by the DuPont Co. (Photo: JENNIFER CORBETT/THE NEWS JOURNAL, JENNIFER CORBETT/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

AHEPA raises the funds for the buildings and school; the board and administration provide leadership, structure, and a guiding vision for the school. Teachers are the core of instruction and drive the outstanding education at the school.

Given stories of scandal and failure at charter schools across the country, it's reasonable to see headlines about Odyssey and "misappropriation of funds" and assume something nefarious is happening. That is not the case at Odyssey.

Unlike public schools, Delaware charter schools do not get money from the state for facilities – each school must find funds to pay for buildings and similar costs. AHEPA has been the primary driver behind securing such funds for Odyssey.

Because of this need, Odyssey acquired two buildings to rent out when purchasing the Barley Mill campus. The primary issue between the Charter School Accountability Committee (CSAC) and Odyssey is whether Odyssey was permitted to spend money related to these buildings, potential tenants and certain fundraising activities in ways the board believed would benefit the school and the students.

Neither AHEPA nor any board member profited from those expenditures.

CSAC's position is that Odyssey's income from these privately purchased buildings constitutes "state funds," and, therefore, certain Odyssey expenditures related to the buildings, tenant cultivation and fundraising activities were not permitted uses of state funds (i.e., misappropriation). The OCS spending decisions were made after consultation with Odyssey's lawyers; Odyssey's financials are reviewed by a Citizens Budget Oversight Committee and are annually independently audited and publicly available.



Maryann Yarram is a staff member, union member and a parent of a child at Odyssey Charter School. *(Photo: Submitted by Maryann Yarram)*

The amount in question is less than one percent of the school's annual budget.

The Board agreed to CSAC's recommendations that the school strengthen its internal governance and improve communications and transparency with the Odyssey community to avoid any appearance of impropriety. However, CSAC wants to go one step further and has proposed that the Secretary of Education require a change to the OCS charter so that AHEPA – the entity that founded the school and has contributed so much to it – no longer appoints the majority of the board members.

Thanks to its teachers, administration, board and the support and partnerships from AHEPA, Odyssey is becoming a world-class educational institution. AHEPA's vision has been the bedrock and touchstone of the school for the last 14 years.

The OCS board, with its AHEPA-appointed majority, should continue to lead the school, in cooperation with its administration, teachers, parents and students, to deliver a unique, quality, Hellenic-based education.

July 8th, 2019

Education is a collaborative effort.

In their book, "District Leadership that Works" by Marzano and Waters, two leading researchers in the field of educational leadership, state that research shows that the highest performing schools in the world have tightly coupled district and school leadership systems in place and as a result have high student achievement rates.

The recommendations made by CSAC are imbalanced and too specific. I feel as though the voices of those of us who had a different perspective were not heard at all. The recommendations were not middle of the road. They favored only one side. You are demanding a change in Board leadership. By demanding a change in Board leadership to the level where AHEPA, Odyssey's founding organization, be moved to be a minority representation on the Board. By doing so, you are publicly humiliating the very same organization that relentlessly worked hard to bring Odyssey to the high caliber functioning school that it is.

Education is a collaborative effort and AHEPA had a major role in it. Besides giving it a vision and a mission, members of AHEPA worked to provide the school with its campus. They have undertaken a large mission that requires the support of all stakeholders at this point.

We are on the verge of becoming a K-12 school with building projects that need to be completed. If you insist that the AHEPA majority has to change, you will potentially risk diluting the passion with which they have worked to build the school thus far.

If projects have stopped in the middle, it's because we didn't have anyone to raise the money needed to complete the projects that were started. By changing the Board, you will stall the projects and that will negatively affect the school overall.

I am not saying that they are the only ones responsible for the school's success but what I am saying is that they worked on a voluntary basis because they believed in the school. A public humiliation of this sort will affect the passion with which they will work for the school.

As a charter school, we need people who work passionately for the school to raise the money that is needed for the school to fill the gaps that we can't fill with the money that the state gives us.

But having the Greek leadership is more than ensuring we get the funds needed to build buildings. It's also about making a paradigm shift in education. It's about connecting the ancient world to the modern. It's about studying ancient myths to understand the eternal human nature. It's about valuing reflection and understanding that when knowledge is disseminated, we all benefit. It's about being driven by curiosity and passion and what it means to systematically pursue truth. The school has so much potential to establish itself as an educational setting that values the pursuit of knowledge through a conscious decision to foster dialectic methods in education – just like the way Socrates and Aristotle did many years ago and unleashed their excellence in many fields.

Lawrence Sheila

From: Chris Lazop <chrislazop73@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, July 11, 2019 12:40 PM
To: infocso
Subject: The Odyssey School

Dear Department of Education,

I am writing in support of keeping the Board of The Odyssey School having the AHEPA as a majority, to preserve the mission and integrity, as it was intended by its founders.

As a former teacher and center coordinator of New Castle County Head Start, Inc., I witnessed several older siblings who would come to the preschool with their parents to pick them up. The student's pride in their uniform(which identified the school) and being able to speak some Greek was evident. As a second generation, American born person, of Greek decent, I felt great pride and joy in seeing students from multi-ethnic backgrounds, share in this knowledge.

It is imperative that the passion for Hellenism be infused in the Odyssey school with primary board members having a majority influence through their own knowledge and, that they either have first hand or having had stories passed down through generations and through history itself.

I, myself, learned Greek as a child from my grandmother that was further completed at the Greek School through our church. AHEPA was instrumental, from the church's inception, in being a hub for the Greek community to build and flourish in Wilmington, as well as the rest of this great country.

As a member of the Daughters of Penelope, I would like the ideals and traditions of Hellenism to spread promoting Hellenic Education, Philanthropy, Civic Responsibility, and Family & Individual Excellence. The Daughters of Penelope cultivates leadership in philanthropic, educational and cultural activities with local chapters in the United States, Canada, Greece and Cyprus.

Please keep this in mind as determining the fate and future of The Odyssey School.

Sincerely,

Christina Lazopoulos
Former Director of The Goddard School, Wilm., DE

Lawrence Sheila

From: Nikoletta Klezaras <nklezaras@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, July 11, 2019 11:45 AM
To: infocso
Subject: Ahepa and Odyssey School Support

Hello, I am Nikoletta Klezaras. I am the chapter president of the Daughters of Penelope, Xanthus 149, the Wilmington DE AND I am the proud aunt of my 2 nephews who attend Odyssey.

The objectives of the Daughters of Penelope are to promote Hellenism, Education, Philanthropy, Civic Responsibility, and Family & Individual Excellence. The Daughters of Penelope cultivates the ideals and traditions of Hellenism; promotes opportunities of education; and promotes the spirit of cooperation and works closely and in harmony with the whole AHEPA Family – AHEPA, Daughters of Penelope, Maids of Athena and Sons of Pericles.

Today, the Daughters of Penelope is a leader in philanthropic, educational and cultural activities with local chapters in the United States, Canada, Greece and Cyprus.

My Brother AHEPANs share these objectives. They had a dream to further our AHEPA family objectives and create an educational journey ... what is known today as the odyssey charter school. Many doubted they could accomplish such an ambitious goal. But they did. And now Odyssey Charter School has one of the best scholastic achievement records in the State of Delaware.

For those of you that may not know, the Odyssey is an epic poem written by Homer that tells the tale of Odysseus and his long journey home. During his travels he experiences obstacles which teaches him life lessons that we can apply to our lives today.

The odyssey school is a journey such as Odysseus'. Where the students grow, learn and experience life lessons through the development of education.

I am proud that my 2 nephews are students at the odyssey – but I am even prouder to see children from all cultural backgrounds join together and speak and even sing in Greek during school events and activities. This is truly a unique educational experience.

We all know that a second language is required as part of the state's curriculum. Starting this education as early as Kindergarden and First Grade provides a solid learning foundation for young minds.

The Odyssey school has created a foundation that sets itself apart from others. Some schools are known for their arts, while others for science. The Odyssey school is known to promote lifelong learning through awareness of world citizenship and culture that ties the ancient world into the modern one.

The odyssey school teaches its students about a broader world view with exposure to other world cultures. In today's modern world, wouldn't we want to promote a world of understanding, respect and appreciation for all cultures worldwide?

The passion that is shared by my brother Ahepans, Daughters of Penelope, Maids of Athena and Sons of Pericles is and will always be to maintain the core mission and goals of the odyssey school. In order for that to happen I support the OCS Board and believe that it is in the best interest of the school to retain the Ahepa Family majority.

Thank you for listening.

--

Nikoletta Klezaras
President
Xanthus #149
Wilmington, DE

Lawrence Sheila

From: Ted Hantzandreou <tghantz202@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, July 11, 2019 8:37 AM
To: Bunting Susan
Cc: infocso
Subject: Odyssey Charter School

Dear Secretary Bunting,

I am writing in support of AHEPA's current role on the Odyssey Charter School. AHEPA volunteers have provided guidance, support and assistance since the School's founding. The academic success Odyssey has achieved, as well as, year-after-year fundraising to meet building demands for the the still increasing student population is a testament to AHEPA's desire to make Odyssey one of the best schools in the State and Country!

As an AHEPAN, a business owner and a donor to the school, I full-heartedly support AHEPA's role with the School.

Sincerely,

Theodore Hantzandreou
Libby's Restaurant
227 W. 8th St.
Wilmington, DE 19801
302-655-4246

