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Open Society Institute-Baltimore Awards Grant to Support New “Accelerator Schools”

Editors’ note: Incoming freshmen of Baltimore Community School, an Accelerator School opening this fall, will attend an orientation August 6th. This is an opportunity to hear more about this new school and talk to students. If interested in attending, please call Cassandra Millette at 1-866-753-6535 or 443-691-9677.

BALTIMORE –The Open Society Institute-Baltimore has provided \$675,000 towards the Baltimore City Schools’ Transformation Schools Initiative. The grant will support City Schools’ effort to create high schools that will accelerate students’ progress towards graduation, particularly those who are two or more years older than their classmates and those whose challenging lives would be better served by a new educational model. With extended school days and years, additional educational supports and a streamlined curricula, these schools aim to graduate students with their peers or earlier. At one school, for example, the freshman year will run from August to December, and sophomore year from January to June.

OSI-Baltimore awarded the Fund for Educational Excellence a three-year grant of up to \$675,000 to help the Baltimore City Public Schools launch “Accelerator Schools,” which permit students who need -- or want -- to finish high school in less time to do so. The Fund is a Baltimore nonprofit that supports school reform and improved achievement.

The grant will help school officials identify successful models and will provide start-up funding for up to six new high schools – **three of which are opening this fall** – that will serve students who have fallen far behind their peers in middle or high school and are at least two years older than others in their class. The schools also will benefit students who want to complete high school in fewer than four years because of life challenges or personal circumstances, such as young parents who must support families.

OSI-Baltimore director Diana Morris says the Accelerator Schools model is essential in a city where about half of the students don’t graduate. “It’s clear we have many students for whom the traditional four-year model is not working,” she said. “OSI-Baltimore is focused on increasing learning opportunities and providing better options for young people. And we know that, to become successful citizens, kids need to stay in school.”

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, nationwide approximately 1.2 million students every year fail to graduate on time. Dropouts have trouble finding good jobs, are less healthy, die earlier, are more likely to become young parents, are more at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, and more likely to need welfare.

Accelerator schools have specific programs that enable students to complete high school on a different timeline than their peers, including:

Accelerated course and credit recovery
Guidance and career counseling services
Internship and apprentice opportunities
Transition support for students moving to the next stage of their careers.

The OSI grant will support Accelerator Schools already slated to open as part of the school district's Secondary Transformation Schools initiative.

"With all our initiatives, we are working to create options that meet all students' needs," said City Schools CEO Andrés A. Alonso. "In this case, we are focusing on the large number of students who have been retained for two or more years and are behind. The Accelerator Schools we open this fall will give those students the chance to catch up and graduate on time, and they will be run by operators with successful track records in helping students in urban districts like ours transition into life after school."

Baltimore Community High School, operated by Philadelphia-based One Bright Ray, Inc., is one example. The school opens this fall for students, ages 16 to 21, who are two years behind. Their freshman year will run from August to December; sophomore year from January to June. The school year will consist of eight-week "modules," and students will start school one week earlier than at other city schools and close a week later. Students will adhere to a strict attendance, discipline and uniform code, but they also will be treated to college tours and other higher-education and career-related field trips.

"We're not an alternative school in the traditional sense," says Cassandra Millette, executive director of Baltimore Community School. "We are a choice school. Students choose to come here because they've said to themselves, 'If I continue on this track, I will probably graduate when I'm 21, if I graduate at all.' Our main goal is to keep them on track to graduate when they would normally have done so if they hadn't fallen behind."

Two other accelerator high schools are opening this fall: Baltimore Antioch Diploma Plus High School and Baltimore Liberation Diploma Plus High School.

Jane Sundius, director of the education and youth development program at OSI-Baltimore, said OSI's funding also will encourage cutting-edge expansions of the accelerator concept to include students whose life circumstances or personal motivations would be better served by a shorter tenure in high school.

"We believe that Accelerator Schools can provide a much-needed educational option for young people who have started families, or who have challenging, unsafe or unstable living situations," Sundius said. "In addition, we believe that youth who have career or higher-education ambitions that can be jump-started by an earlier graduation date would greatly benefit from this new model. The beauty of this accelerated concept is that it removes barriers for those who are behind – and for those who are advanced as well."

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Founded by philanthropist George Soros, OSI-Baltimore is a private operating foundation that supports a grantmaking, educational and capacity-building program to expand justice and opportunity for Baltimore residents. With support from a range of

investors, its current work focuses on helping Baltimore's youth succeed, reducing the social and economic costs of incarceration, tackling drug addiction, and building a corps of Community Fellows to bring innovative ideas to Baltimore's underserved communities.