

CASE STUDY: MAGGIE L. WALKER GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL & ONE SMALL STEP



Overview:

The Maggie L. Walker Governor's School (Richmond, VA) is a public high school with a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. Librarian and teacher Wendy DeGroat was an early adopter of One Small Step (OSS) DIY, integrating OSS practices into her teaching even before formal partner courses existed. Now in its fourth year, the school's OSS program has evolved into both an extracurricular offering and a two-year-old in-class Honors Government unit.

Approach:

“There is no...’ALL kids believe (blank).”

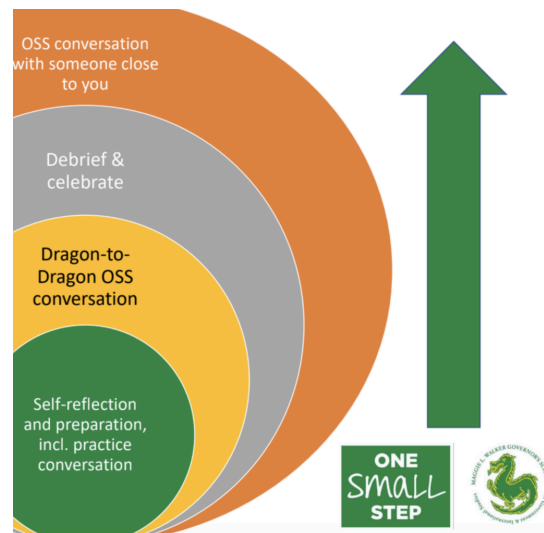
The OSS program consists of three phases—self-reflection, a paired conversation with a classmate, and an optional conversation with someone outside school. Students complete three preparatory workshops (including a practice conversation) and participate in a structured debrief afterward.

A growing team of returning student organizers leads outreach, scheduling, recruitment, participant prep, and all logistics. They design the sign-up forms, matching questionnaires, and communication templates, making the program increasingly youth-led and sustainable.

Conversations focus on developing dialogue skills rather than producing recordings; most students share their audio privately via a “secret link” on the StoryCorps archive. Sessions now occur in a shared classroom environment to reduce pressure and allow real-time support.

“Concrete beliefs always have a backstory.”

Key Insights & Lessons Learned:



Student leadership has proven essential to sustainability. As organizers return year to year, institutional knowledge grows and peer recruitment becomes more effective. The organizing team expanded from four students to ten over two years.

Students consistently distinguish OSS conversations from debate-based coursework. The emphasis on listening, curiosity, and understanding feels different from



traditional academic discussion and is often cited as the program's primary value.

Matching based on nuanced similarities and differences builds trust. By avoiding rigid political categorization, organizers create conditions for conversations that feel exploratory rather than adversarial.

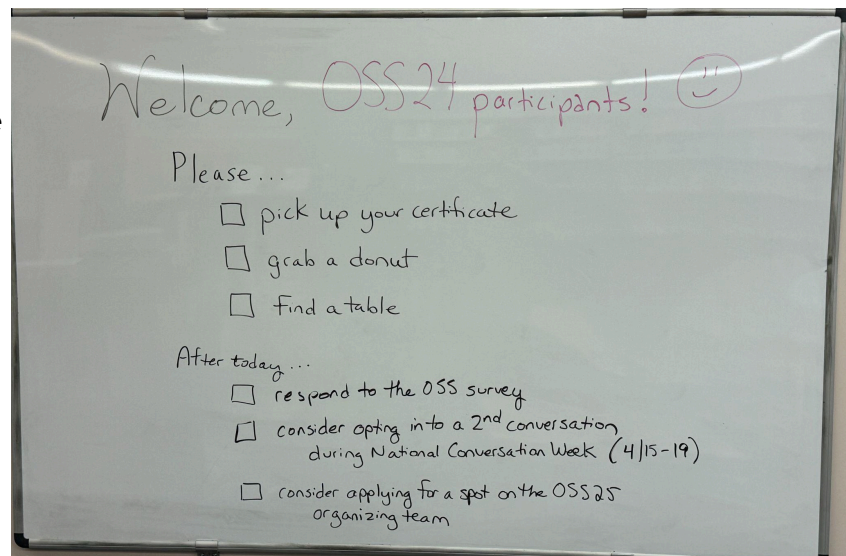
Physical environment matters. Holding all conversations in a shared space lowers

“It’s possible to understand another opinion without agreeing with it.”

intimidation and helps students feel supported, particularly during their first experience.

Structure reduces stress. Clear scaffolding, preparation workshops, the StoryCorps app, and defined conversation phases help students approach challenging dialogue with more confidence.

Notable Outcomes:



Participation has grown steadily, with 56 students completing the program across four years, including an expanded in-class pilot. Students report improved skills in active listening, face-to-face communication, and articulating their perspectives.

“If I had been in their shoes, I’d probably think about that issue a lot more often than I do.”

The program continues to expand through student-led outreach and peer recommendation. Wendy DeGroat presented the model at the American Library Association Conference in June 2024. The combination of student leadership and a replicable structure supports long-term continuation despite scheduling constraints.



Key Takeaways

Maggie Walker’s OSS program demonstrates that with thoughtful preparation, youth leadership, and a strong emphasis on listening, high school students can meaningfully practice courageous dialogue across differences. A structured, student-driven model—paired with OSS tools—creates a supportive environment where deeper understanding feels accessible, manageable, and genuinely rewarding.



“I kept discovering what impacts my beliefs throughout the conversation just by talking about it out loud.”

Project Links:

- Hear from Wendy DeGroat, Librarian and Project Planner, as she explains how the One Small Step program works and why it resonates with students: [Video](#)
- [Project Intro Blog Post and Video](#)
- [Sign up form](#)
- Workshop #1: [Project Info and Self-Awareness](#)
- Workshop #2: [News Habits and Widening Awareness](#)
- Workshop #3: [Listening to Understand](#)
- Workshop #4: [Keeping the Conversation on Track](#)
- [Pooja and Elizabeth](#)
- [Ryan and Isaac](#)
- [Emma and Violet](#)