

APPROVED



Salem Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time

Wednesday February 26, 2025 at 6:00 PM

Location

Salem Academy Charter School
45 Congress St.
Salem, MA 01970

Trustees Present

Amy Stewart (remote), Chris Graham, Kara McLaughlin, Laurie Kennedy (remote), Nohara Lopez-Okoli, Rich Cowdell, Robert Rogers, Sal Martinez, Toyuwa Newton

Trustees Absent

Domina DiBiase, Edward Aroko, Jeffrey Whitmore

Guests Present

Bessie Marashi, Fallon Burke, Megan Franco, Sabrina Williams, Shelby Hypes, Stephanie Callahan

I. Opening Items

A. Record Attendance

B. Call the Meeting to Order

Kara McLaughlin called a meeting of the board of trustees of Salem Academy Charter School to order on Wednesday Feb 26, 2025 at 6:07 PM.

C.

Public Comment

None

D. Approve Minutes

Robert Rogers made a motion to approve the minutes December 18, 2025.

Toyuwa Newton seconded the motion.

Via roll call vote

The board **VOTED** unanimously to approve the motion.

II. SFC Report

A. SFC Report

Bessie Marashi reported that the next SFC fundraiser will be Tuesday, March 4th between 5 pm and 8 pm at Amazing Pizza. They will donate 20% of the profits to Salem Academy, including online, phone, and in-person sales. There will be a 50/50 raffle as well as merchandise for sale.

Melissa Lassen will be at the March SFC meeting to discuss activities and expectations for parents of graduating seniors. A new moderator will be elected in April; Bessie has prepared a detailed calendar notebook for her successor.

III. ED Report

A. Bullying Prevention & Intervention Plan

DESE requires that this plan be reviewed and revised as needed every two years. Other than personnel title changes, there were no significant changes to the plan. With new staff on board the plan is a good reference for them to understand our approach to bullying as well as what it does and does not cover. Toyuwa Newton moved to accept the revised plan, seconded by Rich Cowdell. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote.

B. Charter Amendment Request Update

Stephanie Callahan reported that Interim Commissioner Russell Johnston did not recommend our request to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. We will not know specifically why until we receive their written reasoning, at which time we will discuss with DESE. Factors that may have entered into the decision include continued post-Covid recovery needs and the fact that a permanent Commissioner of Education is not in place. We will continue to do what we can to grow our program and support our students.

C. School Updates

Stephanie Callahan reported that the musical *Once on This Island* will be presented March 21-23.

Regarding enrollment, applications for the next school year have just closed; a week before the March 6th lottery we had 25% more applications than last year.

Recruiting and retaining faculty remains a long-term goal...and a challenge given the nationwide post-pandemic teacher shortage. Although teaching at Salem Academy rewarding, it is more demanding than many teaching positions. The most important issue for teachers is compensation, as the Mid-Year Survey indicated. In order to be competitive, we want to be above the regional average and ensure that our step scale is on a par with SPS. Danvers leads in compensation; Salem has just increased salaries significantly; Beverly and Marblehead have just experienced strikes leading to salary increases; and we don't know what will happen in Peabody or Lynn. This scenario presents an additional challenge for us.

In addition to compensation, we are paying close attention teachers' priorities and ways in which we can address them. Our Mid-Year Survey, Ideal Job Survey, and Leader Feedback surveys all provide important data. In general, they do feel their job is important and that we are paying attention to them. They continue to be concerned about work/life balance, and we recognize that our longer school day and school year are issues for many. It's a complicated issue that impacts many areas—teacher morale, chronic absenteeism, meeting our required instructional hours, and coordinating bus transportation with SPS. Providing new opportunities for development and for teachers to be heard are areas where we are actively working to improve participation, e.g., non-academic roles such as service learning leaders.

Next month's Board meeting will include a first draft of the FY2026 budget, including salary and compensation. There will be two versions, one that includes federal grants and one that does not. While the state is currently projecting a 4.5% tuition increase, we never know the actual increase until December, halfway through our fiscal year, which is why we will continue to budget very conservatively. We will also be looking at ways to reassess roles and reallocate resources to where they are most needed.

IV. Chair Report

A. Updates from Board Chair

Kara McLaughlin reported on the following:

- Rather than create a new committee to oversee implementation of our strategic plan, committee chairs will be responsible for ensuring that the goals and actions relevant to their committee are being addressed.
- Kara will be calling all Board members individually to discuss their involvement.
- Kara, Stephanie Callahan, and Fallon Burke are creating an annual calendar of Board activities and topics. Fallon will coordinate with committee chairs to ensure all relevant topics are included.

Salem Academy is co-hosting a Know Your rights seminar in partnership with Elsabel Rincon of The Welcome Immigrant Network on Thursday, February 27, 2025.

V. Education

A. Education Committee and Academic Report

Rich Cowdell reported that the Education Committee met with Drea Jacobs, Megan Franco, and Sabrina Williams. Megan and Sabrina then updated the Board on Q2 interim performance. Per the submitted written report and comparing this year's performance to last year, in the Lower School, students are performing a little better on ELA ANets, ok in science and history, and struggling in math. Upper School tests were aligned to MCAS tests. Results varied by class and subject, with 9th and 10th grade ELA being strong. We are especially pleased to welcome the expertise our new geometry teacher.

It is important to note that our interim tests are based on external vs internally developed standards and that the results are being used to identify and address specific skill gaps through the WIN and RTI intervention programs, both of which are well received and are getting results.

We are watching chronic absenteeism and tardiness closely, meeting with students and their families to communicate why timely attendance is important. Jon Trapp, our Student Success Coordinator has also been working with students. This has been a particular issue with some seniors who skipped the first week of school, giving them a head start on reaching the 16 absences that define chronic absenteeism.

The Education Committee is also assessing which areas and programs should be monitored monthly vs. bi-monthly. Rich ended his report with kudos to our academic leadership team, noting in particular their openness to recognizing when something isn't working and their willingness to try something new.

VI. Facilities

A. Committee Updates

Addressing more immediate issues, Robert Rogers reported that the new Door #3 has been installed along with new air quality monitors, which are so sensitive they are picking

up perfume as well as evidence of smoking or vaping. We decided not to make some doors part of the Raptor system as installation is expensive and access can be unlocked remotely.

Stephanie Callahan and our facilities consultant Bob Baldwin had a positive meeting with Bob Moser, the CEO of Prime. Prime has charter schools on some of its other properties, and we remain central to their plans; SACS would be one of the first buildings to be constructed. Nonetheless, we still want a non-binding letter of agreement and more public awareness. We also want to be ready with our wish list when/if asked.

The Committee is working with Krissy Sgambellone on a needed overhaul of our PA system; when details and cost are more defined, they will work with the Finance Committee re funding.

Last, we have reviewed our front desk policy and safety checklist to make sure they are consistent with other SPS guidelines, which can differ from school to school. We have also asked the SPS Safety Committee to include us on the list of schools for the police to visit.

VII. Finance

A. January Financials and Committee Updates

Amy Stewart reported that our finances remain stable and in good shape. Our conservative approach to budgeting paid off this year; DESE tuition estimates, which are usually fairly reliable, were off negatively by about \$150,000, but the impact was minor thanks to our conservatism. As noted above, because actual tuition figures don't become available until the end of the calendar year, which is halfway through our fiscal year, we budget as conservatively as possible without jeopardizing programming.

It was suggested that Annual Fund revenues be held in reserve in case they are needed to offset cuts in federal funding next year.

VIII. Development

A. February Development Report

Fallon Burke began her report with the good news of two gifts, a \$20,000 gift to the Salem Academy Charter School Foundation endowment and a \$10,000 gift to the Annual Fund. We have raised about \$61,000 of our \$110,000 goal. She reviewed the status of our various private grants, which are, along with the Annual Fund, are the focus of the Development Committee, as opposed to the endowment, which falls within the purview of the Foundation.

B. REACH for College Gala Updates

Tickets for our May 9th Reach for College Gala are now on sale, and we are actively soliciting sponsors. The Gala will be held at the Hawthorne Hotel and will honor Steve Palmer, who has been closely involved with Salem Academy since its beginning.

C. Trustee Engagement

Fallon will be in touch with all trustees to discuss their involvement.

D. External Affairs

Civic Learning Week will be March 10-14; State Senator Joan Lovely will be at Salem Academy on the 14th and will meet with Civics students. This will also be an opportunity for us to discuss our priorities, both individually and sector-wide with her. We are also reaching out to our State Representative, Manny Cruz. Last, thanks to a grant from the Salem Education Foundation, Salem Academy students are attending the Hamilton Hall Speaker Series on World Affairs.

IX. Governance

A. Bylaws

Kara McLaughlin thanked everyone for their input in updating our bylaws, which must be done every 10 years. We did so in 2018 but with the charter renewal last year, DESE requested another review and provided a checklist. We had worked with an attorney but are now able to obtain legal advice through Board on Track. Changes include when to bring on new trustees, simplifying language, and eliminating founding language no longer needed. Discussion also covered whether a quorum must be present in person for a vote. Fallon Burke clarified this: the requirement that a quorum be present in person was waived during Covid, but the waiver expires March 30, 2025. Rich Cowdell moved to accept the amended bylaws as presented, excluding the last sentence of Section 7, to DESE for provisional approval. The motion was seconded by Chris Graham and passed unanimously via roll call vote.

B. Committee Updates

Regarding potential Board candidates, we do have one person in the pipeline. Kara indicated we have reengaged Latinos for Education to help us identify potential trustees. The organization is no longer providing board training but has some graduates of that program who may be suitable. We will be looking into this more fully.

In other Committee business, all but one trustee have completed the self-assessment. Implementation of Board on Track is going well. The Committee is developing a mentor program and is drafting trustee job descriptions.

X. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

Toyuwa Newton moved to adjourn, seconded by Robert Rogers. The motion passed unanimously by roll call vote, and the meeting adjourned at 8:10 pm.

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:10 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Fallon Burke

Documents used during the meeting

- 12-18-24 draft minutes v2.docx
- Revised Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan 1_17_2025.docx.pdf
- Executive Director Report 2.26.25.pdf
- Academic Report 2.26.25.pdf
- Salem FY25 Financials_1.31.25 v3.pdf
- Development Report as 2.26.25.pdf
- 2.12 SACS Bylaws for Review.doc