

APPROVED



Salem Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time

Wednesday October 22, 2025 at 5:30 PM

Location

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

The Salem Academy Charter School Board of Trustees will meet at 5:30 PM. This meeting will take place in-person at Salem Academy Charter School located at 45 Congress St., Salem, MA 01970.

Trustees Present

Amy Stewart, Chris Graham, Domina DiBiase, Edward Aroko (remote), Giselle Ortega, Jeff Whitmore, Kara McLaughlin, Laurie Kennedy (remote), Rich Cowdell, Robert Rogers, Toyuwa Newton (remote)

Trustees Absent

Ilene Vogel, Nohara Lopez-Okoli

Guests Present

Drea Jacobs, Fallon Burke, Mike Mizzoni (remote), Shelby Hypes, Stephanie Callahan

I. Opening Items

A.

Record Attendance

B. Call the Meeting to Order

Chair Kara McLaughlin called the meeting to order at 5:38 PM.

C. Public Comment

There were no public comments.

D. SFC Report

For the benefit of new trustees, the SFC's new moderator, Micah Hapworth, briefly explained that the School Family Community functions much like the PTO at other schools, sponsoring events, raising funds, and otherwise supporting activities that will benefit students, teachers, and the school in general. She reported the following:

The SFC has about \$1600 in its account and is currently supporting the Salem Education Foundation (SEF) *Food for Thought* raffle. The prize in this annual Haunted Happenings fundraiser is dinner for two anywhere in the world. The school receives \$1 for each ticket we sell over 100 tickets; we have already reached that milestone.

The SEF funds small grants (\$1000, \$3000 if multiple sites) for teachers. Two Salem Academy teachers received grants this year. The SEF provides encouragement as well as funding, and our relationship with the SEF is growing.

The SFC began the school year with the all-school picnic, which was a big success. The next fundraisers will be staffing the Universal Steel parking lot on Halloween and then the December calendar raffle, for which the SFC is currently seeking donations. The money from the calendar raffle goes directly to students' accounts, not to the SFC.

E. Approve Minutes

Two amendments were made to the draft minutes submitted. The requested review of the summary of the June Financials was completed, and funding from the Read Foundation mentioned in the June Development report was for Goal #1.

Jeff Whitmore moved to accept the minutes as amended. The motion was seconded by Rich Cowdell and passed unanimously via roll call vote.

II. Chair Report

A. Updates from the Board Chair

Updates from the Board Chair

Kara McLaughlin began her report by welcoming new trustee Giselle Ortega and announcing that Sal Martinez has resigned due to distance and the responsibilities of a new job. She noted how many responsibilities and competing commitments all of us have; dedicating time and energy to Salem Academy is thus truly appreciated.

That said, we need to speak out about three upcoming bills in the Massachusetts legislature that could significantly undermine the viability of charter schools. While Stephanie Callahan will address this in greater detail, Kara emphasized that it will be important for trustees to act in terms of letters, emails, etc. to legislators.

Kara then queried the Board on the best time to address issues that were on the strategic retreat agenda. The options are an early start time (5 PM) at our November 19th meeting or a dedicated meeting in January, which would necessitate rescheduling orientation for new trustees. Neither is ideal. Because the Executive Director (ED) evaluation process must take place in November and we don't want to wait until January to set 2026 goals, the Board opted for an early start on November 19th, although some members may be late or unable to attend.

III. ED Evaluation

A. Overview & Timeline

Kara introduced Mike Mizzoni of Board on Track. He spoke first to the importance of the ED evaluation. Research shows CEOs who get regular evaluations are happier and do better. He will share a link that discusses this in more detail.

Mike explained that this evaluation is part of an ongoing annual cycle. The Board approves goals set by the ED and management team, monitors progress, and evaluates at the end of the year so that new goals can be set for the next year.

We are in the evaluation phase of the cycle, which commonly takes place in late fall in Massachusetts as the data needed to evaluate progress doesn't become available until September. Board on Track is currently customizing and tailoring the evaluation tools for Salem Academy. Stephanie and her team will populate and add documentation and relevant information. Stephanie will also complete her self-evaluation by November 7th, after which the Board will be asked to complete their evaluations by November 18th, ready for discussion at the November 19th meeting. The goal for that meeting will be to have agreement on key strengths, issues, and opportunities as well as an overall performance outcome.

Kara and Stephanie will then draft a memo for discussion at our December meeting, which will constitute the formal evaluation and goals for the coming year. This is an important process because it ties back directly to what happens in the classroom.

When asked whether newer board members should participate, Mike indicated there are no hard and fast guidelines. Brand new trustees probably should opt out, but anyone with even partial experience can provide valuable insights. The more information, the better. This is just raw data; it is only the final memo that is official.

Kara noted that this process was recommended by Board on Track and is a very different process from how it was done in the past. It is important that the whole Board be engaged in this discussion.

IV. Finance

A. FY25 Auditors Report

Amy Stewart reported good news on all financial fronts. The FY25 Auditors Report is excellent. Its unmodified opinion is the best comment possible. Kara thanked everyone involved; such a good report would not be possible without the hard work of all. Jeff Whitmore moved to accept the report, seconded by Chris Graham. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote.

B. September Financials

The September Financial Report is also excellent. Although it is based on 477 students, we now actually have 479. Amy pointed out that negative numbers in net income reflect the fact that federal grants were not included. Monies from these grants are often received in June but are usually not used until September, i.e., in the subsequent fiscal year, which begins in July. Funds are not recognized until they are actually brought in from the Salem Academy Charter School Foundation. The Finance Committee is discussing a shift in how funds are accounted for next year in order to align more accurately with the school and fiscal years.

V. Education

A. School Updates

Stephanie Callahan referred to her written report to highlight upcoming events. A Mobile Mayor's Office will be held at Salem Academy on November 20th; last year, one was held at Salem High School. Safety issues are paramount, so Mayor Pangallo will talk to classes during school hours and open the mobile office to the public after classes end. We are building a good relationship with the Mayor's office, meeting bimonthly, collaborating and communicating well. Alumni Fall Games are happening November 26th and will include alumni vs. student football, volleyball, and basketball.

As Kara McLaughlin noted in her report, advocacy for charter schools at the state level is crucial right now. Proposed bills could cut affect funding significantly as well as limit access. Lowering the current 9% cap on the number of district students a charter school can accept threatens a school's viability; a 5% cap, for instance would force most to close. Trustees are asked to contact their legislators and, if at all possible, to come to hearings. The next one is on November 12th; Stephanie will email everyone re the specific time. This is extremely important.

B. Enrollment

There is back history to the enrollment issue and the current request to be able to backfill beyond Grade 9. After expanding to 495 students at a time when the cap was higher than 9%, we were told we had to retrench to 480 students when the 9% cap was reinstated. We did this by shrinking the Lower School a bit, including the 9th grade. The combination of the small class, attrition post pandemic, and a no-backfill beyond Grade 9 policy has resulted in a very small senior class this year, just 60 students. Even a few students makes a difference in terms of funding in general and in what we can offer programmatically.

Additionally, DESE denied our expansion proposal in part because our Upper School (US) classes were so small. Our no-backfill policy in the Upper School was established as a way of graduating students who have had a full Salem Academy experience and reflect our mission, goals and culture.

While we still believe this is the best way to prepare our students, we need the flexibility to admit students beyond 9th grade, for instance, former students who would like to come back. State law mandates backfilling only up through grade 8. To date, we have addressed 9th grade attrition by accepting students from our wait list. Now that there is no wait list, if more than one student has submitted an application, we hold a lottery to ensure equitability. Backfilling in grades 10-12 would also promote accessibility for more students. We do not have plans to actively recruit high school students, but the proposed enrollment policy amendment demonstrates to DESE that we are paying attention to US enrollment and lays the groundwork for a future charter amendment.

Rich Cowdell moved to pursue a charter amendment to expand backfilling to grades 10-12. The motion was seconded by Robert Rogers and passed unanimously via roll call vote.

It was noted that our regular admission lottery takes place in March. When a seat is not accepted, it is offered to the next person on the wait list. If they do not accept within three days, their name is removed from the wait list. No one is admitted after February 15th.

C.

Human Resources

Stephanie reported that we have contracted with Egility to conduct a market analysis on both faculty and non-faculty compensation. Retaining staff is important, and recent compensation changes in local districts highlight our need to be more comprehensive in our understanding and policies regarding compensation. This will include surveying staff and address such topics as our longer school day and year.

D. MCAS & Accountability Results

Drea Jacobs's report began with the great news that Salem Academy has been designated a "School of Recognition" by DESE, a testament to how we are using data and acting on it. The highlights include the following:

- We are in the 86th percentile of all (130) combined middle/high schools in Massachusetts, a 20% jump over prior year.
- MCAS scores in ELA and math showed both good achievement and student growth in both the LS and US; growth is just as important as achievement.
 - The percentage of 6th graders meeting or exceeding expectations in math increased by 21 percentage points.
 - 8th graders improved by 16% in ELA, 15% in math, and 11% in science.
 - 10th grade math improved by 12%.
 - Student growth percentiles (SGP) increased in six of eight assessments. Tenth grade math jumped 20%, from 52 to 72. Seventh and 10th grade cohorts had high growth in both English and math.

Schools are assigned points in different categories; the methodology involved in computing those points is complicated, involves averaging over multiple years with more weight on the most recent data. The details are explained fully in Drea's written report.

One of our big wins was in addressing chronic absenteeism. We had a significant 20% improvement thanks to concentrated efforts ranging from cracking down on student behavior to making sure families understood how all absences, including extended vacations, contribute to chronic absenteeism.

One area we need to work on involves students with disabilities. We need to hire staff and provide more incentives for teachers; this is especially hard to address when there is a nationwide educator shortage.

Drea also noted that some students fall into multiple subgroups, e.g., disabilities, low income, and ESL. We made good progress with many of these students.

MCAS, although not a state mandated requirement for graduation, are still a valid measuring stick. Drea reported that our students did not take a pass on these tests, but showed up and performed well.

All in all, our results are cause for celebration. We have shared the good news with parents at conferences and with students in classrooms and pep rallies. On a final note, Rich Cowdell pointed out how frustrating it is for teachers to work so hard and not see results; it's difficult to stay motivated. This year's accomplishments are wonderful and truly cause for celebration.

VI. Committee Updates

A. Governance

Trustee recruitment continues to be a problem, as Jeff Whitmore reported. Committees have not made referrals; perhaps all committee chairs should meet to discuss ways to improve recruitment. That said, Jeff indicated that we do have two prospects in the pipeline currently, one with an architectural background and one with financial expertise. In addition, we are in preliminary discussions with three other candidates. We particularly need trustees with legal, HR, education, or financial backgrounds.

The Committee is also looking at who will serve as officers and committee chairs for 2026. We need someone with a financial background to serve as treasurer and, with Eddie Aroko's term coming to an end, someone with HR expertise. If trustees are hesitant about the time commitment or heavy responsibilities, we can discuss ways to make serving in one of these positions more feasible

B. Development

September Development Report

Fallon Burke reported that the Annual Fund goal for this fiscal year will be \$125,000. We are off to a good start, having exceeded our Reach the Beach goal. There are two campaigns yet to come in 2025, Giving Tuesday and an End-of-year ask.

We are in good shape, but the budget is tight, which highlights the importance of the Annual Fund to help fill funding gaps. Last year, 92% of the trustees contributed to the Annual Fund; the goal is to have 100% participation this year. Currently, we are at 50 percent, and Fallon is having conversations with all trustees to ascertain when giving works best for them. She hopes to have those interviews completed by November 14th.

Last, Fallon also reported that the Salem Academy Charter School Foundation (SACSF) held a strategic retreat, and one of the main topics was how to strengthen communication and collaboration between the two boards. Many SACSF members are former trustees,

and this is likely to continue, but SACSF will also look at bringing on members who could eventually become trustees.

Grants Update

With federal funding so uncertain, grants are more important than ever. We have applied for another three-year Cummings Foundation grant; this funds our alumni success and support program.

Fallon also referred to the SFC mentioned report above, noting that two Salem Academy teachers received Salem Education Foundation grants.

Laurie Kennedy concluded the Development Committee report by welcoming Giselle Ortega to the committee and asking for trustees to help on the Gala committee.

C. Facilities

Facilities Chair Robert Rogers reported on both short-term and long-term issues. We have asked Prime to repair the green walls by the cafeteria as they need structural reinforcement. We have not heard back from them on this. Prime is, however, repairing the flood damage in the Albright Center entry. The Committee is working on funding for the new PA system.

Although Prime is talking to various groups, not much is happening on the long-term facilities planning front. This means we may not know before our lease is up whether a new school will be part of the project. Bob Baldwin is helping us draft a letter to Prime asking about rent, timing, our requirements, and more detailed specifics of what they are planning. This will be the first time much of this is put in writing. We need a lease promise at the bare minimum.

VII. Other Business

A. Proposed Bylaws Amendment

We still have not received a response regarding our proposed bylaws amendment. We did, however, hear from DESE that, because we are in year two of our five-year plan, we will have a virtual vs. an in-person visit and trustee interviews this year.

Last, it was noted that Salem Academy achieved national ranking this year in US News and World Report.

VIII. Closing Items

A.

Adjourn Meeting

Jeff Whitmore moved to adjourn, seconded by Amy Stewart. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote and the meeting adjourned at 8:16 pm.

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:16 AM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Shelby Hypes

Documents used during the meeting

- Finance Committee Presentation.pdf
- Draft_with_the_MD_A_-_Salem_Academy_Charter_School_FY25.pdf
- Salem Financials September 2025 Revised.xlsx
- Executive Director Report 10.22.25.pdf
- DESE Accountability Summary and MCAS Results 2024-2025.pdf
- Development Reports FY26 10.22.25.pdf
- Grant Descriptions + FY26 Expenditures.pdf