

APPROVED



## Salem Academy Charter School

# Minutes

## Board of Trustees Meeting

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### Date and Time

Wednesday February 25, 2026 at 6:00 PM

### Location

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

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The Salem Academy Charter School Board of Trustees will meet in-person at Salem Academy Charter School located at 45 Congress St., Salem, MA 01970.

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### Trustees Present

Beth O'Donnell, Blake Cullimore (remote), Chris Graham, Domina DiBiase, Giselle Ortega, Ilene Vogel, Imelda Barnhurst, Jeff Whitmore, Kara McLaughlin, Laurie Kennedy (remote), Nohara Lopez-Okoli, Rich Cowdell, Robert Rogers

### Trustees Absent

*None*

### Guests Present

Drea Jacobs, Krissy Sgambellone, Melissa Lassen, Michah Hapworth, Sabrina Williams, Shelby Hypes

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## I. Opening Items

A.

## **Record Attendance**

### **B. Call the Meeting to Order**

Chair Kara McLaughlin called the meeting to order at 6:02 PM.

### **C. Public Comment**

Upper School Principal Melissa Lassen, who will be leaving Salem Academy at the end of the school year, took the opportunity to thank the Board for its support of the school and of students over the years. In turn, Kara McLaughlin noted the huge impact Melissa has had on so many lives. We appreciate all she has done and wish her well in the next phase of her life.

### **D. SFC Update**

Micah Hapworth reported that this is a relatively quiet time for the SFC. It is in good shape financially, with a balance of \$4,000+ in the bank, and more activities are coming. The first will be the annual pizza fundraiser, which will be at Amazing Pizza on Tuesday, March 3rd. We will receive 10% of proceeds on both eat-in and take-out sales between 4 and 8 PM.

The next SFC meeting will be on Tuesday, March 11th, at which time discussions regarding the Rachel Hunt Award and the moderator election will be on the agenda.

### **E. Approve Minutes**

Nohara Lopez-Akoli moved to approve the minutes of the December 17, 2025 meeting, seconded by Jeff Whitmore. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote.

Nohara Lopez-Okoli made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 12-17-25.

Jeff Whitmore seconded the motion.

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

## **II. Chair Report**

### **A. Consent Agenda**

Jeff Whitmore moved to approve the following routine items, which were submitted in writing. The motion was seconded by Ilene Vogel and passed unanimously via roll call vote.

- School Calendar 2026-2027
- Public Comment Policy
- Board Succession Plan

### **B.**

### Updates from the Board Chair

Kara McLaughlin reported that our DESE review will be a virtual rather than site visit and is scheduled for Thursday, March 26, at 10 AM. This is the review that takes place in the middle of our five-year charter renewal cycle. Although only an hour long, it covers a wide range of topics. Kudos to Fallon Burke and the whole team for pulling together a massive amount of documentation.

Board members are invited and encouraged to participate; we hope to have the chair or a representative of every committee present. This would be informative and show Board support for the school. Kara will follow up with Board members re attending.

On a different note, she noted close to 100% board participation in support of fair funding initiatives coming before the state legislature. Of the 2,000+ charter schools in Massachusetts, Salem Academy's 250 support actions were the most, and our senators and representatives received more emails or letters than other legislators. She is proud of the Salem Academy community.

## III. Education

### A. Charter Amendment Request — Updated Expulsion Policy

Rich Cowdell explained that in Massachusetts, per G.L. c. 71§37H, a student in grades 9-12 can be expelled for bringing a weapon or drugs to school, for assaulting a school staff member, or (§37H½) if charged with a felony. The expulsion decision is made by the school principal, and the school must recommend an alternative education plan, such as tutoring or a different setting. If the student moves out of the district, the receiving school must provide such a plan.

Any appeal goes to the next higher level of authority; in our case this is the Executive Director. Currently, however, our charter says the next level of authority is the Chair of the Board of Trustees. DESE has requested that we revise the expulsion policy wording in our charter to reflect actual practice and be in line with normal practice and with the wording in our handbook.

Rich moved **approve an expulsion policy amendment request**, authorizing the **Executive Director** to submit the request on behalf of the Board of Trustees, and further authorizing her to work with **DESE** to make any **minor technical changes** necessary to ensure the request complies with all statutory and regulatory requirements. The motion was seconded by Jeff Whitmore and passed unanimously via roll call vote.

### B. Q2 Academic Report

The second quarter has closed, and mid-year tests and survey data are available, as reported by Drea Jacobs and Sabrina Williams.

## **Midyear MAP tests**

One of the key ways we have of monitoring academic progress are MAP (Measuring Academic Progress) tests, which allow us to track our students' personal performance and growth as well as see how they are performing compared to other students nationwide. MAP testing is done K-12 across the country; although we do not know the mix of schools, the tests provide a broad base for comparison.

We introduced fall and spring MAP tests in grades 6-9 in the last academic year, but this is the first time we have included grade 10 and done midyear testing as well.

Drea reviewed the results and pointed out several trends:

- Our students show progress but, with a more established curriculum and stable faculty, we look forward to raising our achievement numbers.
- Ninth and tenth grades remain an area of concern, in large part because of attrition at the beginning of high school and the resultant influx of students who are new to Salem Academy and have different academic backgrounds.
- We generally show higher achievement in reading than in math.

Results are tracked individually as well as by cohort and have been shared with families. Students and teachers know where their skill gaps are and the impact on MCAS and SATs. Plans for improvement are in place.

Because this is only our second year using MAP tests, we are still learning ways in which we can use what is proving to be an important measurement and guidance too

## **Lower School Interims**

Sabrina Williams reviewed how teachers are using interim test data to identify specifically where reteaching is needed, create action plans, and prepare students for 8th grade MCAS. Steady progress or growth was noted in general, with particular progress in 8th grade math and history.

Students receive very individualized attention; in addition to their daily Connections class and academic support blocks, every student has a faculty advisor who is familiar with their academic needs and with whom they meet weekly. This is important not only to improving current performance, but also to helping them understand the relevance to MCAS and SATs and become more accountable. Improve now; avoid interventions later.

At the same time, teachers are becoming more familiar not only with their advisees, but with testing questions and devising ways of addressing knowledge gaps. Newer faculty are receiving a lot of attention and support in moving this work forward.

The Board recognized the importance of this detailed monitoring and support; it is a significant achievement for which they applauded Sabrina.

### **Midyear Student REACH Survey**

REACH surveys track our DESE accountability goals for whether students consider Salem Academy a safe/supportive environment and whether they believe they are applying their academic skills in Service Learning.

We are just shy of meeting our all-school goals and are on track to do so by the end of the year. Sabrina Williams discussed how we are reviewing results for different cohorts in order to understand the findings more fully.

The survey indicated that middle schoolers want to know what Service Learning is like in 9th and 10th grade; exposing them to this is another way to prevent losing 8th graders to other high schools. This was the first year 11th graders had independent projects; we are seeing more ownership and buy-in as a result;

All of these test and survey results discussed above were reviewed in detail with the Education Committee. They are important not only in terms of tracking individual student growth, but also subgroups. Additionally, they indicate our progress in achieving our five-year accountability goals. DESE looks at fall and spring results; interim results are used only internally to identify and address gaps.

### **Absenteeism**

We monitor attendance carefully to identify students in danger of being chronically absent (10%+ of days over the year). We work with them and their families to understand why they are absent and resolve problems that affect attendance. We want them to want to come to school. This is important both for the students themselves and for the school's progress in meeting its DESE absenteeism goal.

Last year we met or came close to both our goals and are on target to meet this year's all-school goals. The lowest performing student groups are more difficult to address, especially at the high school level. These students were in middle school during the pandemic when remote learning was in place and they operated more independently. Also, one or two students can have a big impact on a very small cohort. Overall, however, we are doing better than in the past.

## **C. 2026 Education Committee Goals**

Rich Cowdell reviewed the Education Committee goals submitted in written form prior to this meeting. These focused primarily on meeting our DESE accountability goals.

## **IV. Finance**

### **A. January Financials**

Chris Graham presented the financial report, noting that we remain in good financial condition. He pointed out that five open positions have provided a financial cushion to counter higher than anticipated expenses in some areas, such as providing transportation for one student.

The Committee is currently working on developing the FY27 budget to be presented next month. Similar to last year, providing competitive staff compensation is a major focus. He noted that we are expecting health insurance costs to increase.

### **B. 2026 Finance Committee Goals**

Chris reviewed the Finance Committee goals submitted in written form prior to this meeting. These include making us more attractive to potential lenders should future facilities require borrowing.

## **V. Development**

### **A. Development Report & Campaign Updates**

Laurie Kennedy reported that we are at the halfway point in our fiscal year, and we have raised 68% of our Annual Fund goal. The focus now is on the REACH for College Gala, specifically on obtaining sponsors. We are well ahead of last year, have secured \$27,000 vs. \$9,000 in sponsorships at this time in 2025. We are also looking for auction items.

### **B. 2026 Development Committee Goals**

Laurie reviewed the Education Committee goals submitted in written form prior to this meeting. Of note are an event of some kind in collaboration with the Foundation and a more granular approach identifying potential trustees.

## **VI. Human Resources**

### **A. Committee Updates**

This is a new committee, still outlining its basic responsibilities, and has not yet developed goals for the next fiscal year. Chair Domina DiBiase reported that they have met and begun reviewing the FY27 budget, including proposed compensation. They are working closely with the Education Committee as there is overlap in a number of areas, including goals, handbook review, performance management and staff retention. Domina indicated that we have fewer vacancies now than at this time last year and that fewer people have indicated they will be leaving. The Committee plans to meet monthly.

## **VII. Facilities**

### **A. Facilities Committee Update**

Robert Rogers reported that all smaller repair jobs in progress have been completed, but we do have a long list of needed capital improvements, mostly safety related. We are applying for two grants that would help.

### **B. 2026 Facilities Committee Goals**

Robert reviewed the Facilities Committee goals submitted in written form prior to this meeting. These focus on safety, sustainability, and implementing current capital plan initiatives in the short term and developing a viable long-term facility plan. He noted that the Committee will continue to collaborate with the Finance Committee.

## **VIII. Governance**

### **A. Foundation Board Investment Committee Representative**

Jeff Whitmore explained that, as Chair of the Finance Committee, Chris Graham is automatically a member of the Foundation's Investment Committee. The Board needs a second trustee on this committee and asked who might be interested; Jeff will talk with those who are interested.

### **B. 2026 Governance Committee Update and Goals**

Jeff reviewed the Governance Committee goals submitted in written form prior to this meeting. The Committee continues to seek trustee candidates, especially with a financial or educational background. With the resignation of Toyuwa Newton, we now have 13 trustees.

Jeff also noted that we will be piloting the use of Board on Track's document storage and goals/tasks management functions. Last, planning is underway for a Board strategic retreat at the end of September. Having all trustees present will be important. Scheduling extra time into Board meetings to compensate for the cancellation of last year's retreat was not ideal.

### **C. 2026 Board Committee Goals**

Jeff moved to approve the 2026 goals of the Governance, Finance, Education and Facilities Committees. The motion was seconded by Nohara Lopez-Okoli and passed unanimously via roll call vote.

## **IX. Other Business**

### **A. Family Satisfaction Survey**

It was noted that the Family Satisfaction Survey conducted last April had a very low response from non-English speaking families. Simply providing the survey in Spanish and via email is not enough; it needs to go out as a hard copy. Suggestions for other ways to reach out to these families are welcome.

## **X. Closing Items**

### **A. Adjourn Meeting**

Before adjourning, Kara MCLaughlin thanked Krissy Sgambellone for filling in so admirably in Fallon Burke's absence.

Domina Dibiase move to adjourn, seconded by Jeff Whitmore. The motion passed via roll call vote, and the meeting ended at 8:00 pm.

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:00 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Shelby Hypes

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## **Documents used during the meeting**

- SACS Public Comment Policy.pdf
- SACS Yearly Calendar 2026-27.DRAFT.pdf
- SACS Board Succession Plan 2026 Drafts.pdf
- Salem Academy Expulsion Policy 2015 2016.2.doc.pdf
- SACS Checklist for Expulsion Policy (02.18.2026)(2294124.1).pdf
- SACS Updated Expulsion Policy (Amended 02.20.2026)(2294125.3).pdf
- Academic Report 2.5.26 (1).pdf
- Salem January 2026.pdf
- Salem January 2026.xlsx
- Development Reports FY26 - 2.25.26.pdf
- RFC Gala Sponsorship Packet 2026.pdf
- SACS BOT Committee Goals 2026.pdf