

APPROVED



## Salem Academy Charter School

# Minutes

## Board of Trustees Meeting

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### Date and Time

Wednesday March 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, 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, Fallon Burke, Shelby Hypes, Stephanie Callahan

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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 6:03 PM/

### **C. Public Comment**

There were no public comments.

### **D. SFC Update**

There was no SFC report.

### **E. Approve Minutes**

Nohara Lopez-Okoli made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 02-25-26.

Rich Cowdell seconded the motion.

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

## **II. Chair Report**

### **A. Consent Agenda**

The consent agenda comprised Board mentor descriptions and the appointment of Laurie Kennedy as the Board's representative on the Investment Committee of the Salem Academy Charter School Foundation. Domina DiBiase moved to accept the consent agenda, seconded by Chris Graham. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote.

### **B. Updates from the Board Chair**

Kara McLaughlin reported that the DESE virtual site meeting will take place Thursday, March 26th. Five trustees, including the officers, will participate in this one-hour meeting. She thanked them for volunteering and for the many documents read in preparation.

## **III. Education**

### **A. School Updates**

Drea Jacobs referred to her written report in providing an overview of what is happening at Salem Academy currently. Key topics included the following:

- The spring testing season is under way.
- We have new staff members, including three special ed teachers.
- This year's college fair was once again very successful, and this year included even more schools and representatives from more career pathways.

- Ten teachers shared their experiences in the best practices showcase. This is very popular with faculty and offers them the opportunity to think about what they might want to learn or share. It is also a good way for newer faculty to learn from more experienced teachers.
- Efforts to promote a safe and supportive environment are ongoing; these actions are implemented at the grade level and are customized by teachers specifically for the students they monitor.
- Non-academic events have included the celebration of Black History Month, the school musical, and the attendance of Upper School students at the Hamilton Hall lecture series. Spring sports have begun, and record numbers of students are turning out, even juniors and seniors trying sports in which they have not previously participated. Last, preparations for graduation have begun in earnest.

#### **IV. Finance**

##### **A. February Financials**

As Chris Graham reported, the school's financial position remains strong. Five open positions have provided unplanned but helpful additional funds.

##### **B. FY27 Draft Budget**

Determining salary and wages projections for the FY27 budget depends on several factors: the likely increase in tuition we receive from the state, the size and salary levels of our staff, projected compensation related expenses, and what the SPS and surrounding schools will pay.

Assessing the accuracy of DESE's tuition increase projections is a moving target. Although projections are provided throughout the year, the final number is not determined until after our budget is approved and our new fiscal year has begun. DESE is currently projecting an 8.57% tuition increase to \$11,274,480 over prior year's \$10,384,141. Given that the actual percentage increases have been much lower in the past three years—2.69%, 4.26%, and 3.64%—the Committee is proposing a more conservative projection of 4%, i.e., to \$10,799,506.64. With the addition of other anticipated sources of revenue, such as grants, the Committee is recommending a 5% increase in overall salaries and wages (Line 5000).

We engaged Edgility Talent Partners to conduct a thorough compensation study, addressing salaries and other staff compensation concerns to ensure we remain competitive. Our goal is to be at average with our neighbors and particularly with SPS. Salem will be significantly above the North Shore average in the year ahead, especially for those with bachelor's and advanced degrees. This remains a competitive marketplace for us as there is still a national teacher shortage and SACS has both a longer school day and school year.

Discussion covered several areas:

- We reviewed the different ways employees are paid; there are different pay scales for teachers, paraprofessionals, operations positions, senior administrators and faculty who have maxed out of the scale guidelines.
- Compensation for those with advanced degrees is quite nuanced; we cannot always be competitive, but we are attuned to the importance of retaining experienced teachers. It was noted that obtaining a Masters degree is often tied to the need for teachers to renew their license every five years.
- Stephanie indicated that retention has improved, noting that we lost only two teachers mid-year during this academic year. This has been a significant problem recently due to Covid exhaustion and career changers and first year teachers deciding teaching was not for them. We are focusing on hiring more experienced teachers.
- Independent from competitive concerns, we want to increase salaries for lower level positions significantly.
- Actual cuts in staffing are minimal as some positions have been restructured to support multiple needs and others are no longer considered necessary.
- We are in good position in terms of vacancies; several open positions have been filled; our biggest immediate need is in Special Ed.
- Edgility's detailed recommendations are providing a good basis for updating our compensation scale, and more refinements to come.
- Offers to returning employees will go out the week of March 30th. and they will have two weeks to accept or decline.
- Blake Cullimore asked about the feasibility of a differential system with more flexibility to consider things like performance-based bonuses. This is something the HR Committee would have to look into once Edgility has completed its study.

Based on the above factors, the Finance Committee moved to include a 4% increase in tuition revenues and a 5% increase in the total salaries and wages line of the FY 27 budget. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote.

Although it was not part of the above vote, the Board did discuss likely increases in wage and salary related expenses. These will be higher in large part due to Edgility consulting fees; we are hoping for lower health insurance expenses, however. These costs will be part of the budget discussion at the next meeting.

Kara thanked the Committee for the work that went into preparing this important part of the draft budget.

## **V. Development**

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

Fallon Burke had excellent news to report. We are already at 86% of our \$125,000 Annual Fund Goal; this includes the proceeds from the school musical. The focus now is on the REACH for College Gala, which is five weeks away. We have collected \$39,000 in sponsorships, with more sponsorships available. We will be recognizing two partners, Salem Coast Watch and the Clothing Connection. We are still looking for auction items, especially for experiences like hotels in Boston or golf at Kernwood.

Laurie Kennedy thanked Fallon for all of her hard work all she has accomplished. She noted that we have 77% Board participation and hopes to see all trustees at the Gala.

## **VI. Facilities**

### **A. Committee Updates**

Robert Rogers reported on ongoing maintenance issues, e.g., work on the kitchen sink and the door into the Opps Annex not closing. He also indicated we have received an E2E technology grant, which we will use for wiring.

Meetings with Prime, including community meetings, remain very general with everything open for discussion and no solid commitments. They are finding the entire process, including permitting, costs, community pushback, etc. daunting.

The Committee's goals remain centered on working with Prime and safety; the E2E grant above addresses the latter. There were no updates on recruitment or sustainability.

The Committee will soon be talking with the Finance Committee about a Capital Campaign.

In connection with discussions about our long-term home, the question was raised where Salem High School will be located during the construction of a new school. All we know now is that Carlton will be merging with Saltonstall and the former's building will house Salem Prep and New Liberty.

## **VII. Human Resources**

### **A. Committee Updates**

Domina Debiase, chair of this new committee, said they will be meeting monthly and will set its goals once Edgility has completed its work. In the meantime, priorities include reviewing the HR handbook, the staff retention policy, and finding a new Upper School principal. We have two strong semi-finalists and hope to extend an offer before the April break.

## **VIII. Governance**

### **A.**

### Committee Updates

Jeff Whitmore reported that the Committee is working on job descriptions for Board officers and committee chairs; these will be presented at the next meeting. He encouraged everyone to think about serving as an officer and indicated that, as always, we are looking for candidates to fill two Board seats.

### B. Board Self-Assessment

Jeff indicated that the Board on Track survey we are using this year is similar to last year's survey but looks different, will provide more information, and allows for school-specific questions. It is a brief, 30-minute survey and all trustees are asked to complete it before April 8th in order to have results for discussion at the next Governance Committee meeting. Results will be used to develop content for the fall retreat.

## IX. Executive Session

### A. Motion to Enter Executive Session

Nohara Lopez-Okoli made a motion to enter into Executive Session pursuant to G.L. c. 30A, § 21(a)(3) ["Purpose 3"] to vote to enter into executive session for the purpose of conducting strategy sessions with respect to two (2) ongoing litigation matters because discussion in open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the litigating position of the School in each case. The Board will not reconvene in open session at the conclusion of the Executive Session.

Jeff Whitmore seconded the motion.

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

#### Roll Call

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

### B. Executive Session

Upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the committee entered into Executive Session and will not reconvene in open session.

## **X. Closing Items**

### **A. Adjourn Meeting**

The meeting adjourned following the executive session.

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 7:45 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Shelby Hypes

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### **Documents used during the meeting**

- Board Mentor Description Draft - 20240125.docx (2).pdf
- Academic Report 3.25.26.pdf
- Salem February 2026 V2.pdf
- Salem February 2026 V2.xlsx
- Executive Director Report 3.25.26 (1).pdf
- SACS Compensation Philosophy and Salary Guidelines.FY27 (2).pdf
- Salem FY27 Budget.v1.xlsx - FY27 Budget.pdf
- Salem FY27 Budget.v1.xlsx
- Development Reports FY26 - 3.25.26.pdf
- RFC Gala Sponsorship Packet 2026.pdf