

APPROVED



Salem Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time

Wednesday April 29, 2026 at 6:00 PM

Location

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

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.

Trustees Present

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

Trustees Absent

Laurie Kennedy, Nohara Lopez-Okoli

Guests Present

Drea Jacobs, Fallon Burke, Melissa Lassen, Sabrina Williams, 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 6:10 PM.

C. Public Comment

There were no public comments.

D. SFC Update

There was no update as the SFC did not meet this month. Stephanie Callahan indicated that they are seeking candidates for next year's officers.

E. Approve Minutes

Domina DiBiase and Chris Graham noted that their names had been misspelled. Jeff Whitmore moved to accept the minutes of the March 25, 2026, meeting with the corrections noted above. Chris Graham seconded the motion, which passed unanimously via roll call vote.

Jeff Whitmore made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 03-25-26.

Chris Graham seconded the motion.

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

II. Chair Report

A. Updates from the Board Chair

Kara McLaughlin reported on three different topics.

The DESE virtual site visit went well. All officers as well as the chair of the Governance Committee participated and were able to answer all questions. Topics included academic oversight, our policy approval process, the ED's evaluation, trustee recruitment and onboarding. We have not yet heard back from DESE.

Staff Appreciation Week takes place May 4-8. Due to the current testing schedule, however, suggested dates for a Meet 'n Greet breakfast are Monday, 5/18, and Thursday, 5/21. The Board unanimously agreed on the Thursday date and will participate in different ways. Everyone will contribute financially (\$25-30), bring food, help set up, and/or be on hand to meet people and wrap up. Kara McLaughlin will follow up with everyone. Looking ahead to next year, we may want to consider other ideas; gift card raffles, an espresso cart, and breakfasts are all popular.

The REACH for College Gala is this Friday, May 1st. Trustees can help by, first, attending, and then serving as ambassadors for the school, talking to attendees in

general and potential trustees in particular. Help is especially needed with crowd and noise control during the speaker program and performances. Acoustics are awful in the Hawthorne ballroom. Keeping the program short, forgoing a live auction and stopping bar service during the program will help.

III. ED Report

A. School Updates

Stephanie Callahan reported on enrollment and staffing.

Enrollment

Applications for this year's lottery were down slightly, which primarily reflects overall declining student population and fewer sibling applications. Also, with no more K-8 schools in Salem, Collins 8th graders have already found their niche and are headed to SHS with their friends. As a result of the lottery, we admitted 72 students for 6th grade and 20 for 9th grade.

Specific issues we face include making sure parents know siblings are not automatically enrolled; parents must complete an application. Ninth grade enrollment continues to pose problems; we lost half of our 9th graders last year and know that many 8th graders plan to leave, with Essex Tech and SHS being the big draws, especially for CTE options. Even before a new high school attracts more students, we need to create demand for a smaller high school experience and market our differences and advantages effectively.

Staffing

Teacher/staff retention, a major goal for this year, is good so far, with only a few teachers having not yet responded to offers or having opted to leave. A few offers have yet to be extended due to changing job descriptions or failure to meet MTEL/SEI licensing requirements. The latter requires structured individual management; we are moving deadlines up next year to prevent last-minute crises in the future.

The Edgility study has been important to understanding factors affecting teacher retention. They vary, although salary and compensation are primary, and we have worked to address that. Grants as well as fundraising, e.g., the Annual Fund, are important ways in which we strive to provide programming, professional development, and other benefits important to teachers. Our longer school day and school year are the key reasons people leave. Attrition is equal among male and female teachers.

In terms of staffing for next year, the good news is that we do have a math interventionist and a new Upper School principal, Meghan Blume, who comes to us from KIPP

Academy in Lynn. Both Blume and the other finalist were strong candidates. Blume's experience as an assistant principal and teacher were key.

Staffing for special ed remains a problem; the pipeline of qualified candidates is limited, so positions remain open. This means more work and stress for current special ed staff and for the academic management team as well.

Stephanie ended her report encouraging trustees to attend the gala and graduation events.

IV. Education

A. Q3 Academic Report

Drea Jacobs, Melissa Lassen, and Sabrina Williams all contributed to this discussion.

Testing

Lower School interim tests are over, and we are in the midst of MCAS exams. Drea reported that we are seeing growth across most interim tests. Sixth grade is always the most difficult as it comprises students who came from different school experiences and have different learning gaps. She pointed out that growth over the year is underscored by the fact that the tests get more difficult and test different things each time. Interim tests also are important as they accustom students to testing in general as well as prepare them for MCAS.

Overall, students are focused and confident. Although MCAS are no longer a state requirement for graduation, 100% of our 10thgraders completed the ELA MCAS; math MCAS are currently in progress. Students are getting good support from their teachers, all of whom have been here at least three years, and know how to prepare their students for these tests. They have reviewed test data and are ready to go with needed interventions.

Drea indicated that inability to type meant many students were not doing well on written (vs. multiple choice) questions, so there has been a focus on this. A number of students now have extended time to take tests.

Chronic Absenteeism

We have just received DESE's updated target goals and, while our prediction for the all-school goal was accurate, goals for the other three groups we monitor were lower than we had anticipated, especially for the lowest performing student group and especially in the Upper School. This is in part due to differences in how DESE is now defining the groups and the number of students in the group. Despite monitoring and working with

families, it is unlikely that we will meet the 6% target for the Upper School lowest performing student group.

V. Finance

A. March Financials

Chris Graham reported that our financial position remains strong. Being able to use funds intended for positions that were not filled has been helpful in dealing with overrides in other areas. We expect to end the year in roughly the same position.

We did have a tuition overpayment from the state, but it was identified early enough for us to pay it back completely by the end of the fiscal year. As a result, the percent of expenses paid by tuition is 90%, lower than previously calculated. The financial summary still shows 94%, as reported in February.

The Finance Committee has been meeting with the Facilities Committee and they have identified the need for \$150,000 for a new PA system as a priority. While there is no immediate solution to funding this, it is under active discussion. The Committee is also developing a plan for how much cash on hand we need to hold.

B. FY27 Draft Budget

Budget planning for the upcoming fiscal year continues, and a final draft budget will be presented at our May meeting. In the meantime, Stephanie Callahan reported on two significant developments.

First, the Q3 tuition projections from DESE are in and are slightly below what was projected at the end of Q2. That decrease in funding is more than balanced, however, by much lower fringe benefits expenditures than originally anticipated.

When tuition is less than anticipated, funding for other programs has to be cut. Our biggest expenses, salary and compensation, are contractual obligations, so it is discretionary programs like professional development that suffer.

Stephanie explained that Line 5910, Additional Lease Expense, is an accounting requirement to account for increases in rent over the life of a lease, i.e., it is an accrual account, not an actual cash expense.

VI. Development

A.

Development Report & Campaign Updates

Fallon Burke had excellent news in the Development Report. We have raised more than \$45,000 in Gala sponsorships, an all-time high surpassing even last year's 20th anniversary event. The online auction went live today and has already raised \$2,800. We are well on our way to reaching our Annual Fund goal of \$125,000 and may even do so in the next few days after the Gala. Stephanie was quick to attribute this wonderful success to Fallon's hard work, especially in securing sponsorships.

Fallon also addressed how trustees can help. Promoting the Gala is important. Also, taking turns promoting the online auction and the Giving Wall can make a big difference, especially as there is no live auction this year.

She also indicated that we do have a few comp tickets available if anyone has a friend or prospect they think would like to know more about Salem Academy. Last, there will be a Board photo at 7:30, with the program scheduled for 8 pm and student performances to follow.

VII. Governance

A. Committee Updates

Jeff Whitmore indicated that the Governance Committee will be meeting next week with Mike Mizzoni of Board on Track to discuss the Board self-assessment. He requested that anyone who has not completed this needs to do so by May 4th in preparation for that meeting. Jeff is hoping Mike will also walk the Board through the findings.

Job descriptions are still in process. They will be sent to committee chairs for their comments. These descriptions should include expectations as well as what the job looks like. Kara pointed out that there is always a range, depending on the office holder's other commitments.

Last, Jeff said we looking to fill two trustee openings. We especially seek people with financial or educational backgrounds. We have one strong candidate for the Education Committee in the pipeline now. As always, candidates not ready to serve as a trustee are welcome as committee members.

VIII. Facilities

A. Committee Updates

Robert Rogers reported on three topics.

Efforts to replace the kitchen sink continue; we now need to ascertain whether the City considers this an industrial sink.

The E2E grant has been submitted. This will be key to our ability to replace the PA system.

Bids for our food contract need to be put out as this has to be decided by August. Because sustainability is a focus for the Committee, we have been interested in what Root has to offer, including possibly composting and minimizing packaging. While we're not thrilled with our current contractor, Trio, we recognize that there are challenges: We do not have a full-service kitchen, and it is difficult to meet state guidelines.

IX. Human Resources

A. Committee Updates

Domina DiBiase reported that the topics she would normally discuss have already been addressed. Stephanie reported on staffing, and lower cost of benefits was covered in the Finance Report. The HR Committee is focusing right now on Edgility's findings, which are not yet public.

X. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

Robert Rogers moved to adjourn, seconded by Imelda Barnhurst. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote and the meeting adjourned at 8:11 PM.

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:11 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Shelby Hypes

Documents used during the meeting

- Executive Director Report 4.29.26 (1).pdf
- Academic Report 4.15.26 (2).pdf
- Salem March 2026 w updated FY27 Budget V2 Summary.pdf
- Salem March 2026 w updated FY27 Budget V2.xlsx
- Salem March 2026 w updated FY27 Budget V2 - Draft FY27 Budget.pdf
- Development Reports FY26 - 4.27.26.pdf