

APPROVED



Salem Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time

Wednesday May 27, 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), Imelda Barnhurst, Laurie Kennedy (remote), Rich Cowdell, Robert Rogers

Trustees Absent

Ilene Vogel, Jeff Whitmore, Kara McLaughlin, Nohara Lopez-Okoli

Guests Present

Drea Jacobs, Fallon Burke, Micah Hapworth, Shelby Hypes, Stephanie Callahan

I. Opening Items

A. Record Attendance

B.

Call the Meeting to Order

Vice Chair Rich Cowdell called the meeting to order at 6:10 PM

C. Public Comment

There were no public comments.

D. SFC Update

Micah Hapworth reported on recent activities of the SFC.

- Parents will be providing food for the Teacher Appreciation Lunch on May 29th, at which time the Sean O'Neill Award will be presented.
- June 17th is 8th Grade moving up ceremony and the 3.8 Brunch, which honors students who have achieved an average of 3.8 or better. Parents will be providing food for that and T-shirts for 8th graders.
- For graduation on June 6th the SFC is providing flowers and balloons. They will also be awarding the Rachel Hunt Scholarship. All seniors write essays on how Salem Academy's REACH goals have inspired them; SFC parents read these essays and select the recipient.
- Possible candidates are being considered to replace Micah as moderator.

Rich Cowdell thanked Micah for her hard work, especially for all the SFC does at this time of year.

E. Approve Minutes

Robert Rogers made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 04-29-26.

Beth O'Donnell seconded the motion.

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

II. Chair Report

A. Updates from the Board Chair

Due to Kara McLaughlin's absence, there was no Board chair report.

III. ED Report

A. School Updates

Stephanie Callahan reported that the Service-Learning Fair on May 29th will be in the gym and organized like a science fair with different tables, exhibits, etc. This is an opportunity for students to show what they learned and advocate for their various causes.

Although this is predominantly a Lower School event, a number of seniors will be doing presentations as well. It will be a big day for them, as graduation is also on May

29th. Stephanie noted that it takes place this year at 5:00 PM to allow City officials to then attend the Salem High graduation at 6:00 PM. There will be no conflict in dates next year.

On the hiring front, many positions have been filled or will be finalized soon. We are actively recruiting for the remaining open positions. New Upper School Principal Meghan Blume officially begins on July 1, but is already attending some meetings and onboarding activities.

IV. Education

A. Academic Updates

Drea Jacobs's report focused on our college/career and alumni support programs. Our team comprises two college counselors and one alumni support coordinator. Beginning with touch points in the 6th grade, their work becomes more intensive as students move up. Key goals include having all seniors accepted by two or more schools (100% met) and having a post-secondary plan, including financial considerations, in place by June 1st (96%).

There have been relatively few changes to the goals or program, which was established and driven so successfully by Melissa Lassen. The most intense work is in students' junior and senior years, when they take a course for college credit and are actively applying to schools. An important way in which we help students is diligently monitoring accommodation requests for AP, PSAT, and SAT tests.

This is a very effective program and our success, which is tracked by DESE, is much higher than at most high schools. This is due in part to the fact that our counselors work with far fewer students (25-30 as opposed to 200 or more) than most high school guidance counselors, but also because these goals because they are so closely aligned with our mission.

One recent modification was to require acceptance by two or more schools (as opposed to just one) so that students and their families can compare offers, especially in terms of financial assistance. We encourage applying to higher level schools because they often offer considerably more financial aid. The counselors also meet with families, with a translator if needed, to ensure everyone understands their options.

Our alumni support program is now in its third year, which means we are now tracking alumni who have graduated since 2023. Bernie Peeples is in touch with all alums, visits schools, and is on hand to help with problems, especially financial processes and requirements. Her work is an important way of knowing whether alumni are still enrolled in college after the first year and of helping to make sure they are remaining on track to meet their own goals.

This program was funded by a three-year grant from the Cummings Foundation. While we will reapply, we are also seeking funding from other sources. We have received \$20,000 from the Van Otterloo Family Foundation and hope to receive funding from the Mifflin Memorial Fund and the Read Charitable Trust.

B. SACS Curriculum Notice and Opt-Out Policy

Rich Cowdell presented a proposed curriculum notice and opt-out policy (vetted by our lawyer) as well as an application form. We have not had any such parental requests, so this is a proactive policy. Usually, such requests are for religious reasons; if valid, we are obligated to provide alternative material, suggested either by us or the parent. It was noted that, if approved, an opt-out request is valid only for that school year and must be resubmitted each year. It was also noted that our policy does not govern MCAS exams. The State does not have an opt-out policy regarding MCAS, and a parent would have to apply to DESE for such an exemption.

Because this was proposed by the Education Committee, no seconding motion was required, and the proposal was approved unanimously via roll call vote.

C. Artificial Intelligence Policy for Students

Also on behalf of the Education Committee, Rich presented a proposed AI policy for students. We already have a policy in place regarding plagiarism, cheating, and the proper use of technology, so this is really modification to clarify that our policies do cover using AI specifically, including fake images, as a means of harassment or bullying.

With no seconding motion required, the policy was approved unanimously via roll call vote.

V. Finance

A. April Financials

We remain in sound financial condition, as reported by Chris Graham. He pointed out that, once again, the timing of incurred expenses and the receipt of revenues may inaccurately suggest a discrepancy from budget. Two examples were an extra payroll in April that elevated that expense and the percent of program covered by tuition. We anticipate ending the fiscal year in good shape.

In addition to general preparation of the FY27 budget, the Finance Committee is looking into how we can set aside funds for capital improvements.

B. FY27 Draft Budget

Work on the FY27 budget continues, as presented by Stephanie Callahan. The unexpectedly low increase in health insurance benefits (3.9% vs. an anticipated 12-15% increase) is important. If overall expenses do not exceed budget, we will need to decide

how best to allocate those savings, e.g., in technology, facilities, or possibly funding a reserve account. We have previously considered doing so but have never had the needed funds. We are working closely with Central Source, our accounting consultants.

Stephanie responded to two questions. 1) Higher than anticipated expenses for student transportation cannot be avoided, e.g., if a family or foster student is given housing outside of Salem we are obligated to provide transportation to school. 2) We will not know about Read Trust funding, which is key to our budgeting, until late June, after the date by which we must approve the FY27 budget.

VI. Development

A. Development Report & Campaign Updates

Laurie Kennedy expressed her gratitude to the trustees for their active involvement in fundraising this year. We had 100% participation in the Annual Fund, which exceeded its \$125,000 goal by \$10,000. We will still do an end-of-year campaign for those who prefer to give at this time.

She also complimented Fallon Burke on how she has grown into her job and, finally, noted what a great school culture the management team has built, as expressed by so many teachers at the Staff Appreciation Breakfast.

Fallon Burke also thanked the trustees for their financial contributions and for their help in making the Gala a success. We are finishing the year strong and looking ahead to FY27.

B. Read Trust Visit Preview

The Read Trust visit is scheduled for June 10th. Representatives of the trust will be here to meet with us, SPS, LEAP, and Salem Hospital, so the visit will be brief, roughly an hour, and is our opportunity to share what we have done and plan to do with their funding. We hope to have teachers, alumni, Board and Foundation members participate.

We have a strong relationship with the trust, more than 20 years, as does the City of Salem, for which the trust used to sponsor an annual picnic but now offers free admission to either the Museum of Science or the New England Aquarium each September.

The trust's STEM focus rewards excellence, innovation, and encouraging students to pursue STEM careers. It has funded computers, math programs and more for us over the years. Our proposal is due at the end of April each year and, after the visit, they may have some follow-up questions before letting us know towards the end of June what we will receive in funding for the next fiscal year.

VII. Governance

A. Committee Updates

Beth O'Donnell reported that we had 100% participation in the Board self-assessment survey. While there were a few disconnects, it was generally positive. The Governance Committee is in the process of reviewing the results with Mike Mizzoni of Board on Track.

They are also working with committee chairs on Board job descriptions. They will report on both at our June meeting.

VIII. Facilities

A. Committee Updates

Robert Rogers provided the next installment in the kitchen sink saga. The sink stays, but new stainless steel counters will be installed over the summer. He also reported that Prime has been helpful in dealing with minor issues, such as awning damage, and that the power outage on May 12th provided a successful test of our emergency procedures.

We are still in discussions with Root regarding catering school lunch. Quality food aside, this would be a good sustainability action in terms of zero transportation costs, elimination of packaging, and composting or donating left over food.

The Committee is looking at capital plan projects as part of the FY27 budgeting process. A new PA system would be the most expensive, but camera replacement and other options are on the table.

IX. Human Resources

A. Committee Updates

The HR Committee continues working with Edgility interpreting its survey findings and clarifying next steps. This is a helpful but very dense report so the Committee will be presenting only high-level results and key takeaways to the Board as these are what align with our overall goals.

The Committee is still working on its overall goals.

X. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

Domina DiBiase moved to adjourn, seconded by Robert Rogers. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote, and the meeting ended at 7:18 PM.

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 7:18 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Shelby Hypes

Documents used during the meeting

- Executive Director Report 5.27.26.pdf
- Academic Report 5.27.26.pdf
- SACS Statement on Curriculum Opt-Out Requests 26-27 (K&B Draft 05.18) (2310646.2).docx.pdf
- SACS Curriculum Notice and Opt-Out Request Form 26-27 (K&B Draft 05.18) (2310648.2).docx.pdf
- SACS AI Policy for Students (K&B Draft 05.18)(2310687.2).docx.pdf
- Salem April 2026 w updated FY27 Budget (3).pdf
- Salem April 2026 w updated FY27 Budget (3).xlsx
- Salem_April_2026_w_updated_FY27_Budget__3_.pdf
- Development Reports FY26 - 5.27.26.pdf