Salem Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time
Monday June 15, 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, Ilene Vogel, Imelda Barnhurst, Jeff Whitmore, Kara McLaughlin (remote), Laurie Kennedy (remote), Nohara Lopez-Okoli, Rich Cowdell, Robert Rogers

Trustees Absent
None

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

Vice Chair Rich Cowdell called the meeting to order at 6:07 PM.

C. Public Comment

There were no public comments.

D. Approve Minutes

Nohara Lopez-Okoli made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 05-27-26.
Imelda Barnhurst seconded the motion.
Date of graduation corrected to read June 5, 2026.
The board **VOTED** unanimously to approve the motion.

II. Chair Report

A. Updates from the Board Chair

Kara McLaughlin reported that the DESE review was overwhelmingly positive, noting that programming and performance are in line with our mission; we are stable, strong, need no outside assistance; and we are doing well in terms of inclusion and multilingual outreach.
DESE did indicate that minutes of both the Board and committee meetings need to state more clearly what happened and next actions, not just what was presented. Fallon Burke has spoken with Mike Mizzoni, who provided guidance on how to be more specific. DESE had also mentioned documentation; it was noted that all reports referenced during the Board meeting are listed at the end of the minutes.

Kara also reported that the staff and faculty evaluation of the Executive Director is under way. The family satisfaction survey went out June 12th. We reverted to Survey Monkey because it is easier for respondents to use and because, although the survey itself is available in multiple languages, the required verification page is not. We hope this will improve the response rate, especially among non-English speaking families. Providing incentives is difficult as the surveys are anonymous. Fallon and Leni De los Santos are exploring group incentives and other ways of encouraging participation.

Kara suggested trustees who have not contributed to the Staff Appreciation Breakfast can give cash to Rich Cowdell or talk to Fallon. She concluded her report by remarking on what a positive and happy event graduation was, with several trustees and Foundation members present.

No further actions were indicated.

III. ED Report

A. School Updates

Stephanie Callahan referred the Board to her written report for details on the Service Learning Fair held on May 29th, graduation on June 5th and the Read Trust visit on June 10th. She did note that the Read Trust visit was very complimentary, and we expect to hear back from them re funding next week. Rich Cowdell also commented on this visit, noting in particular the genuine passion teachers and staff have for our STEM programs.

In regard to staff hiring, Stephanie indicated that several offers are out and that new hires are for a one-year contract. The Board looks forward to her next monthly report.

IV. Education

A. Academic Updates

Drea Jacobs began her report by saying this is the first week in two months in which no testing is taking place. She will be reporting in full next month on how we are meeting our yearly goals, so this is a brief progress report.

- 100% of students in both the Lower School and Upper School took part in spring MCAS tests. Results will be reported in September.
- In regard to chronic absenteeism, we can still meet our goals—in the LS, 9.2% LS all students and 10.6% in the lowest performing groups (LPGs); in the US, 19.6% of all students, 6% LPGs)—if we have strong attendance this week. We are actively communicating with students and families but may come up slightly short. It has been particularly difficult to meet goals for lowest LPGs as the size and composition of these groups changes from year to year making it impossible to truly compare apples to apples. She pointed out that even if we do not meet some goals, we have made significant progress; for example, US LPG current rate of 23.6% is down from 28% last year.
- We have already met Objective 1 of our Charter Accountability Goals: 96% of our seniors were accepted in at least two four-year colleges or universities. We are tracking our progress on Objective 2 (90% of students earning proficiency in courses across subgroups of 20 or more students as well as making progress on our five-year goal of 80% of students across all subgroups of 20 or more students earning a 3.4 average on benchmarks). Grades are due today, which will show how we are doing and allow us to plan for additional instruction and credit recovery in both LS and US summer school programs.

Looking ahead, scheduling for next fall is well under way. Drea reported that we are looking forward to the next phase of our MTSS (Multi-tiered Systems of Support) program. We had consistent intervention this past year, both in academic support blocks in the LS and individual teacher interventions at all levels. We are excited to have a math interventionist, Mikayla Bloemberg, and Josh Meyers, our Student Services Coordinator, involved next year.

When asked how we compare to Collins Middle School and Salem High School, Drea indicated that we are often close on MCAS results, but it is difficult to do direct comparisons because we don't have enough students overall to have large enough, e.g., viable subgroups. Also, we do not have chronic absenteeism data from SPS, so we cannot compare that.

Rich Cowdell concluded the Academic Report by thanking everyone for a great year and wishing departing US principal Melissa Lassen the best of luck.

As noted above, staff will be working on a full academic report for next month's meeting.

B. Committee Updates

The Education Committee met with both LS and US principals to reflect on the past school year. They asked if such questions as what might have been surprising to them, what they might do differently, how hiring affected them. Committee members joined Rich in saying responses were thoughtful, and that it was helpful to get their perspectives and insights. The Committee will be using this information over the summer as they work on how to better support our teachers.

V. Finance

A. FY27 Budget

Stephanie Callahan reviewed the proposed FY27 budget line by line. Most revenues and expenses are as expected and similar to prior years. She pointed out that some expenses are higher than expected, e.g., gas utilities legal expenses, and paying for the Edgility compensation study, which is important to our staff recruitment efforts. Others, however, are lower, resulting in an anticipated small surplus at the end of this fiscal year. Surpluses can give us a better sense of what expenses for those line items will be like in the coming year and allow us to add back in resources for things like programing and teacher support.

Stephanie pointed out areas where expenses are budgeted at a higher level than previously.

- Budgeted legal expenses will accommodate possible litigation.

- Budgeting for computer hardware recognizes the need to continually replace the Chromebooks of graduating seniors.
- Student recruitment expenses recognize that we need to be more competitive to minimize 8th to 9th grade attrition and allow for recruiting beyond 9th grade.
- Development expenses are higher in order to support Annual Fund efforts.

Overall, our approach is very conservative.

- We did not budget for a possible state increase in tuition. It is currently projected at 4%; the state is currently saying 7%, but we will not know definitively until the end of the year.
- In regard to private funding, we are asking the Read Trust to roll over funds from FY26 to FY27.
- In the interest of being conservative, private funding for the year ahead is budgeted down $75,000 with the end of our Cummings grant, even though a renewal and other private funding, such as the van Otterloo Family grant, may compensate for that.
- Some expenses were recategorized; e.g., printing graduation programs is now part of graduation rather than printing expenses.
- If expenses are lower than anticipated, surplus funds will go to programming, e.g. field trips, instructional materials. If they are higher, we will put a freeze on some discretionary expenses.

In response to a question about high student transportation expenses, Stephanie explained that we must provide transportation for students living outside of the district. Historically, this is not a big expense, but it is unpredictable as students may be homeless, in foster care or other living situations beyond their control. We are looking at identifying additional funding sources to cover such situations, especially for new students whose transportation needs we do not know about in advance.

In response to a question about funding currently unfilled staff positions, Stephanie indicated that special ed teachers are very hard to find. We currently recruiting for a director of special Education and three other positions. We have not yet hired a Dean of Students and a few other positions. We have budgeted to fund all of these positions.

The Finance Committee proposed the FY27 budget so no additional motion or second was required. The budget was adopted unanimously via roll call vote.

B. May Financials

Chris Graham reported that we remain in good financial condition as we approach the end of the fiscal year. A combination of higher-than-budgeted tuition, fiscally conservative budgeting, unfilled positions, and tight financial management have resulted in having funds available for new chromebooks. Chris also noted that the percent of expenses covered by tuition is slightly lower than the benchmark but not of concern because of additional private funding.

VI. Governance

A. 2026-2027 Board and Committee Meeting Dates

Jeff Whitmore moved to approve the 2026-2027 Board and Committee meeting dates, with the final 2027 meeting date of the Governance Committee changed to read July 10, 2027. The motion was seconded by Domina DiBiase and passed unanimously via roll call vote.

B. Board Job Descriptions

Jeff presented Board job descriptions, noting that all committee chairs had participated and had many good suggestions. Mike Mizzoni of Board on Track has also reviewed the descriptions, which also include very loose estimates of time commitments. Because these are the first formal job descriptions we have done, they should be considered works in progress, always open to change, but good as a starting reference point, especially for prospective trustees and committee chairs.

Kara McLaughlin noted that some information is missing in the Board Chair description. This will be added as a modification once descriptions are approved. She also suggested that the date be included every time a job description is updated. The Board agreed and also suggested we add language about reviewing these descriptions every year or two.

Because adoption of the job descriptions was proposed by the Governance Committee, no additional motion or second was required and the descriptions were approved unanimously via roll call vote.

No further actions beyond those mentioned above are indicated.

C. Board Assessment Results

Jeff Whitmore introduced Mike Mizzoni to lead us through the recently completed Board Self-Assessment. Mike's presentation was not a detailed review of the findings but was intended to explain the survey and its rationale as well as provide an opportunity to ask questions and clarify next steps for committees. The discussion will be continued at our strategic retreat on September 25th.

He explained that the survey identifies key areas charter school boards should think about, from board meetings and structure to development and academic oversight. Because it is generic, not all areas are relevant to every school. Trustees rank a Board's level of competence in a given area on a 1-5 scale, from basic knowledge and primarily reactive approach to sustained excellence and strategic approach. The intent is to provide is a road map for improvement, not a judgment on performance. It is structured to provide a summary or aggregate finding, then the opportunity to drill down to individual responses.

Mike indicated that, in addition to noting perceived competency levels, he looks for discrepancies (and their causes) between the Board and the Executive Director, what is actually taking place, and educational opportunities, i.e., for those knowledgeable in one area to share their knowledge with other, perhaps newer, board members. The example cited was for the Finance Committee to share its more in-depth knowledge of audit procedures with the rest of the board. The only question about this was whether original prompts are visible (they are) if board members wish to revisit the results in detail.

Mike noted the following in regard to Salem Academy. While he works with charter school boards nationwide, he has worked more closely with us than with many others. His observations included
that, compared to other schools just beginning to work with Board on Track, our Board is quite strong overall. He compared this to many schools that are in a chronic leadership crisis and noted the importance of our partnership with Stephanie and the value of having a chief of staff like Fallon.

Areas that may be less relevant to us, where there is no reason for change because of our structure or because we are already strong in them include finance, development, goals/accountability, and academic oversight. They may, however, offer educational opportunities, as noted above. An area of high priority where we want to improve, on the other hand, is recruitment.

Other points brought up in the discussion:

- Four trustees had just joined the Board when the survey was done. Their inexperience and lack of SACS-specific knowledge would have been reflected in their responses.
- There is a difference between a “No” response and an “I don’t know,” which does not necessarily imply negativity.
- Board on Track is revising the assessment format to make it customizable in the future.

Next steps include giving committees time to review results and develop action plans before revisiting this survey during a future meeting or the September 25th strategic retreat.

Rich thanked Jeff and Beth for spearheading this self assessment.

D. Governance Commitee's Board Assessment

Beth O'Donnell presented the Governance Committee's assessment of the Board, noting three areas for improvement.

1. Timeline: We need a better understanding of the academic calendar so that we can orchestrate our work in alignment with same and contextualize our reports accordingly.
2. Board building: Mike Mizzoni indicated his belief that the committees should drive the Board's work. They need to be thinking about what they can do.
3. Fundraising: We need to review what we do and don't want to do.

Kara McLaughlin indicated committee chairs have begun some of this work, but it has not been discussed by the entire Board. There was no further discussion, but trustees were asked to think about this and email any thoughts to the Governance Committee. This will likely be a topic of discussion at the next meeting.

Rich Cowdell thanked Jeff, Kara, and Beth for all of their hard work on both assessments.

VII. Development

A. Development Report & Campaign Updates

Laurie Kennedy reported there have been no substantive changes since our last report. The Committee will be meeting soon to plan next year's development activities. Fallon Burke reiterated that we exceeded our $125,000 Annual Fund goal. There was no additional discussion. Jeff Whitmore congratulated the Committee, and Rich Cowdell added that Fallon did a great job on the Read Trust visit…prepared and ready to answer any and all questions. We came across strong and stable.

VIII. Facilities

A. Committee Updates

Robert Roberts provided the next chapter in the saga of the cafeteria kitchen sink. We are now getting final quotes, and the sink will be replaced this summer. Other more or less routine maintenance issues include recoating floors, inspecting the subflooring in the Learning Center, and Prime's replacement of the ramp on the south side of the building.

Robert reported on these additional matters.

- We have received the E2E grant, which will be used for wiring and perhaps to back up the firewall.
- The RFP was posted for a food service provider for next year. We have received two bids and must decide by August 1st. If Root is selected it would also meet the Committee's sustainability goal.

- Capital planning is focused on security initiatives, specifically, a new PA and camera system. We are waiting on grants; once received, we will submit a request to DESE.
- We have a strong trustee candidate who has been through the vetting process and had planned to attend tonight's meeting remotely. Because attendance must be in person, however, we now hope to have him join us in July.
- Prime made a late-notice visit to the school as one of their management team was here to meet with Mayor Pangallo. We pointed out our general concerns, that spaces are slightly too small, including the kitchen and recess yard.

Discussion followed on Prime's progress with its long-term plan. In general, no significant progress is apparent. They are focused on getting zoning approved. Limited stakeholder input means the City is in no rush to issue permits and Prime remains reticent re providing specifics.

In the meantime, we will meet the second five-year review point of our lease in July, so we are in close contact with Prime regarding both the master lease and interim space needs. We have not had a 15-year lease before, so we have no typical timeline to refer to. We are simultaneously dealing with short-term lease issues and long-term planning, including a valid Plan B if Prime's proposed development plan is not implemented. Domina DiBiase suggested that this be an agenda topic for the strategic retreat on September 25th.

No action beyond that described above is indicated.

IX. Human Resources

A. Committee Updates

Domina DiBiase's report primarily concerned the Edgility study,which was undertaken to learn more about compensation, but also other factors that are important to faculty and staff, e.g., what they like about Salem Academy and areas where there are concerns. The findings are important both to our recruitment and retention efforts.

The top line is that the findings were generally very positive, and there were no big surprises. They love the school's mission, programming, and supportive, collaborative culture. Not surprisingly, the biggest concerns are salary related. Our recent changes to salary structure do put us into alignment with district salary mid-points. Concerns included how attrition and vacancies increase the workload for others, the impact of certification, and our longer school day and year.

As a result of the study, we have been able to clarify a path forward for some non-faculty roles, and we have validated our general salary structure.
This was intended to be an informative tool, and it has indeed yielded many insights. We have identified gaps and will be exploring how we can fill them. Our philosophy can apply

to operations and non-teaching positions as well as teaching ones. The HR Committee will be presenting a more formalized salary structure at our next meeting.

Last, Domina reported that the Committee has reviewed the school handbook. HR Knowledge, now HILB Group, produces this for us annually, and it is reviewed regularly.

There were no additional questions, discussion or planned actions beyond those described above.

X. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

Ilene Vogel moved to adjourn, seconded by Robert Rogers. The motion passed unanimously via roll call vote, and the meeting adjourned at 8:02 PM.
There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:02 AM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Shelby Hypes

Documents used during the meeting

- Executive Director Report 6.15.26.pdf
- Academic Report 6.15.26.pdf
- Salem FY27 Budget.pdf
- Salem May 2026 Financials.pdf
- Salem May 2026 w updated FY27 Budget (2).xlsx
- BOT and Committee Meeting Dates 2026-27.pdf
- SACS_Board_Job_Descriptions_and_Time_Estimates_6.11.26.pdf
- 2026 Board Assessment Report.pdf
- Salem Academy Assessment Report.pdf
- Development Reports FY26 - 6.15.26.pdf