

**Minutes of the Special Meeting of the
Board of Trustees of Salem Academy Charter School
October 15, 2024**

Members present in person:

Eddie Aroko, Rich Cowdell, Domina DiBiase, Kara McLaughlin, Sal Martinez, Toyuwa Newton, Robert Rogers, Mark Stevens, Amy Stewart Jeff Whitmore, Rick Winters

Members absent:

Julie Rose

Staff present in person:

Fallon Burke, Stephanie Callahan, Megan Franco, Andrea Jacobs, Sabrina Williams

Guests present in person:

Providing public comment: Salem Teachers Union President Ann Berman, School Committee member Beth Anne Cornell, Lise Hansen-Damato, Nohara Lopez-Okoli, Elizabeth Nash Wrenn, Mayor Dominick Pangallo, Dr. Brendan Walsh, Sabrina Zemlansky, Superintendent Stephen Zrike. Other unidentified members of the public were also present.

Recorder present in person:

Shelby Hypes

I. Call to Order and Welcome

Chair Toyuwa Newton officially called the meeting to order at 6:06 pm with a welcome to all city officials and guests. This meeting was held in the Salem Academy gymnasium at 16 Lynch Street, Salem, MA

II. Public Comments

Microphones were provided and members of the public were invited to offer their comments. Several speakers made similar points. These are summarized below with the caveat that it is difficult to capture the live comments of those speaking quickly from prepared notes. This reporter apologizes for any errors.

Those speaking in opposition to the expansion request noted the following:

- They believe tuition revenues should be used to support ALL students, not the small minority at Salem Academy. The requested expansion would represent the loss of \$1.2 million to SPS and would limit the district's ability to meet the needs of students, particularly English language learners (ELLs) and those with disabilities.
- Salem Public Schools (SPS) have made tremendous progress in the past three years and may well rise above the bottom 10% of statewide MCAS scores next year. A number of specific achievements were mentioned, including improved academic performance at the high school and meeting many accountability targets. Also mentioned were, an innovative middle

school model, decreased absenteeism and attrition rates, higher teacher salaries and retention.

- Salem Academy failed to post Board meeting notices and agendas on its website 48 hours in advance as required by law.
- More collaboration and the opportunity to discuss the request would have been appreciated.
- Admission to Salem Academy by annual lottery was seen by some as exclusionary as students entering the Salem school system at other times of the year do not have a Salem Academy option.

Those speaking in favor the expansion request noted the following:

- Some children need more individual attention than is possible at SPS; at Salem Academy they feel seen, supported and challenged.
- Education is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Salem Academy's smaller class sizes and flexibility to meet individual student needs are critical, and having a choice in schools is important.
- Several credited Salem Academy for playing a major role in their children's success in college and beyond.
- An alumna spoke to the investment of faculty and staff in her personal success. As a first-generation American attending college, she reflected on how important the support was to her and her parents in navigating the college application process, support not available to her friends in SPS.

Speakers on both sides of the issue expressed disagreement and unhappiness with the system by which monies are allocated to charter schools, effectively pitting charters against their district and creating an unfortunate adversarial relationship. In regard to the expansion request, the application has been submitted, and it is up to DESE to evaluate, then accept or deny the request. We anticipate that all parties will respect DESE's decision.

III. Review of the Open Meeting Law Complaint of October 1, 2024

Toyuwa Newton reviewed the specifics of the complaint filed by Superintendent Zrike and the Salem School Committee on October 1, 2024, and the remedies requested.

The full complaint was provided to trustees. In brief, it charges Salem Academy with

- Failure to provide required public notice and agendas of Board meetings 48 hours in advance on both the school website and the city bulletin board.
- Referring to the expansion request in vague terms, i.e., as a strategic planning discussion
- Failure to provide supporting documents for said strategic planning discussion

In remedy, it requested that any vote and subsequent action related to the request for expansion be voided.

Kara McLaughlin asked for clarification on whether non-compliance automatically nullifies the vote of September 21, 2024. It does. Although the September 20th Board meeting agenda was posted on the city bulletin board 48 hours in advance, it was

not posted on the school website until 9:19 a.m. As a result, both the vote and subsequent actions are nullified.

IV. Reconsideration of Charter Amendment Request

Since September 21st, additional information has become available, specifically, spring 2024 MCAS results along with attendance, retention and attrition data. Stephanie Callahan acknowledged the timing, expressed in public comment, about the amendment request deadline being close to the public MCAS and accountability data release. She also noted our shared concerns about the charter cap in general, i.e., being unable to move forward and grow unless SPS is in the bottom 10% of the state for MCAS performance.

MCAS and SGP (Student Growth Performance) results are relevant to establishing the proven provider status required in a request for charter expansion. Stephanie Callahan reviewed the spring results of ELA and math tests for both 6-8th and 10th grades. A full report with details by subgroup and cohort was made available to trustees in a printed document.

The pandemic had a significant negative impact on performance for virtually all students in all subjects, grades, and subgroups at SACS and across the Commonwealth. To mitigate learning loss, Salem Academy introduced:

- A new middle school ELA curriculum in 2021-22.
- ANet interim exams in grades 9-11 to more quickly identify and respond to learning deficiencies
- Pre-AP Geometry, Statistics and Algebra in 2023
- A new middle school math curriculum in 2022
- Extensive professional development is needed to better understand and implement that curriculum, promote inclusion, and foster collaboration among general ed, special ed, and ELL teachers.

Looking at results by grade and subject, Stephanie noted that even where there has been improvement, scores are not where we want them to be; we are focused on further improvement.

- 10th grade ELA: Since 2017, Salem Academy students generally and consistently have outperformed statewide averages and exceeded the statewide SGP. This includes high-needs, economically disadvantaged, and Hispanic/Latino students. Even students with disabilities, who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, showed improvement in 2024.
- 10th grade math: Results saw a decline in performance for all student groups post-pandemic, but we are on par with state performance for most subgroups. SGP performance, however, saw significant growth.
- 6-8 grade ELA: Since 2017, Salem Academy students generally and consistently have outperformed statewide averages and exceeded the statewide SGP, including most major subgroups.
- 6-8 math: Overall, performance is below state average post-pandemic, but key subgroups are similar to the state average and all students and subgroups are showing strong growth and improvement.

Stephanie also reviewed data regarding attendance, suspension, retention, attrition, and graduation levels. We meet the state average in attendance, are below in chronic absenteeism, and at or below the average in retention and graduation rates.

- We are working to lower our suspension rate through new programs and increased staff to provide needed services.
- We have seen significant growth in attracting both students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students. Recruitment, particularly of ELL students, is difficult because we admit students only through the annual lottery and cannot control who is admitted at that time. Nor can we admit students at other times in the school year, when ELL students are arriving in Salem. Stepped up recruitment efforts are working; newly enrolled ELL students are up 14.7 percent, and we did not lose any ELL students over the past year.
- Our graduation rate remains strong and drop-out rate low, driven by extensive pro-active support and planning.

Questions and comments from Board members, both in response to Stephanie's presentation and to public comments included the following:

- Why do we not accept students beyond 9th grade? While our model and our mission is based on having students for the full high school years, we are also unable to accept new students because we have been at capacity.
- The lottery system does not promote exclusivity. In fact, 54.5% of our students are low income or disadvantage, and 63.4% are classified as high needs.
- Expansion would be gradual, admitting only an additional 14 students across grades 6 through 9, in the first year, with the option, not a requirement, to grow to 65-67 students over four years, and the school could work with SPS to layer in students gradually.
- SPS would receive financial reimbursement for each seat added to Salem Academy's capacity: 100% in year one, 50% in year two, and 40% in year three.
- Comparing outcomes of students admitted in 6th vs 9th grade shows those here longer do better.
- The proposed expansion would not require significant additional faculty, staff, services, or facilities, although there would be some shifting of classrooms and spaces.
- As a charter school, Salem Academy bears a significant facilities expense that SPS does not.
- If an expansion request is approved, Salem Academy could be at risk of possibly losing the added funding when/if SPS moves out of the bottom 10%.
- A 2021 request to add 30 seats was denied as SPS was not in the bottom 10%. At that time, SACS was overenrolled at 495 students due to lack of attrition. Shrinking to approved capacity over recent years has meant admitting fewer 9th graders, causing fluctuation in the high school program.
- As was the case during the public comments portion of the meeting, the Board agreed that the way in which funds are allocated to charter schools creates an adversarial relationship with the school district. This is not helpful.

Following this discussion, Rick Winter moved to submit the expansion request for 70 additional seats. The motion was seconded by Domina DiBiase and passed unanimously.

Kara McLaughlin then moved to authorize the Board Chair to finalize on behalf of the Board, the Board of Trustees' response to the Open Meeting Law complaint received from Salem Public Schools' Superintendent Stephen Zrike and Salem Public Schools' School Committee members on October 1, with such changes as may be made in his discretion. The motion was seconded by Mark Stevens and passed unanimously.

V. Vote to Adjourn

Mark Stevens moved to adjourn, seconded by Robert Rogers. The motion passed unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 7:35 pm.

Documents Referenced During the Meeting:

- Open Meeting Law Complaint and attachments received from Superintendent Stephen Zrike and School Committee
- Charter Amendment Request Cover Sheet
- Charter Amendment Request Letter
- Charter Amendment Request (Response to Criteria)
- Proven Provider Draft 10.15.24