

**Minutes of the Meeting of the
Board of Trustees of Salem Academy Charter School
September 20, 2024**

Strategic Retreat

Members present in person:

Eddie Aroko, Rich Cowdell, Domina DiBiase, Kara McLaughlin, Sal Martinez,
Toyuwa Newton, Robert Rogers, Jeff Whitmore

Members absent:

Julie Rose, Mark Stevens, Amy Stewart

Staff present in person:

Anderson Bonilla, Fallon Burke, Stephanie Callahan, Andrea Jacobs

Guests present remotely:

Josh Moulton

Recorder present remotely:

Shelby Hypes

I. Call to Order and Welcome

Chair Toyuwa Newton officially called the meeting to order at 9:08 AM at Espacio Community Center in Salem.

A. Minutes of the Meeting of August 21, 2024

Rich Cowdell moved to accept the minutes of August 21, 2024, seconded by Eddie Aroko. The motion passed unanimously.

B. Public Comments

There were no public comments.

II. Ice Breaker

The meeting began with everyone sharing “two truths and a lie” about themselves, always a relaxing way to learn more about our fellow trustees and their multilingual dogs.

III. School Update

Drea Jacob provided an update on the start of the school year, beginning with a strong focus on strengthening our safe and supportive school culture. Highlights of her report, which summarized a more detailed written report, included the following:

- The new Lower School schedule, developed after much consultation with teachers, creates more collaborative faculty time and space for intervention on individual student needs
- “Onboarding” our 6th graders re organization and use of Chromebooks
- More Spanish classes, including an 8th grade advanced class

Outside of the classroom, traditional fall activities are underway, including pep rallies, Hispanic Heritage Month, all sports, 14 different clubs, music and theater. We are looking forward to a new partnership with the North Shore Children’s Theatre.

Drea reviewed several key therapeutic programs. She particularly noted how important and helpful it is to finally have the staff to implement these programs effectively.

- The PASS program is an alternative to suspension and involves sending high school students at risk of suspension to a three-day program in Beverly.
- We piloted a similar program for middle schoolers that involved a half-day restorative reflection, meetings with counselors and Jon Trapp, and developing a PowerPoint on how they could have handled the situation differently. It is proving to be effective.
- Jon came on board last year as our Student Success Coordinator. He serves as our 504 Coordinator and Homeless Liaison. He also manages the BRYT program. (Bridge for Resilient Youth in Transition provides clinical and academic support for students experiencing challenges in transitioning back into in-person learning due to mental health, addiction or family trauma issues.)
- We have had a number of “safe and supportive culture” grants that have nurtured our good partnership with the Y.
- As part of our professional development programming, faculty will be meeting with facilitators from TLPI (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative). We worked with them in 2015 to set up a safe and supportive culture model and served as a demonstration school for them. We will now be reviewing the program to see what does/doesn't work, what's missing, and what new priorities and action plans are indicated.

On the hiring front, our two new assistant deans are off to a strong start. Our leadership team now has a very noticeable physical presence in the school, able to respond quickly, and changing the feeling on campus. This team will be further strengthened by the arrival next month of Mark Hodgkins, our new Managing Director of Student Services.

While we do have new music and art teachers, the nationwide teacher shortage continues to make the hiring process a challenging one.

IV. Strategic Planning Enrollment

Stephanie Callahan began this discussion by reviewing the requirements for submitting a request to expand enrollment, all of which were provided in detail to trustees prior to the meeting. In summary, the response must provide a rationale for expansion, show that various stakeholders have had an opportunity to provide input, review the school's historical distribution of students, and provide detailed information on the school's academic performance and financial position, both current and projected. The request must show how expanded enrollment would translate to expanded educational and enrichment opportunities and changes in staffing. It must also include a detailed implementation plan.

That said, much of the above information was included in our charter renewal documents last spring. When the expansion opportunity arose in August, the Board had a brief discussion. While recognizing the new 18% cap would allow us to add up

to 428 additional students, we are and will remain a small school by MA standards. At that time, we opted to explore expanding by 60, 80, or 100 students.

Points to be taken into consideration:

- Our mission is to educate Salem’s diverse student population. “Through a unique integration of rigorous, college-preparatory classes with service to the community, we graduate informed, articulate, and proactive individuals of strong character.”
- In order to fulfill this mission, we have not backfilled students after the ninth grade. We need the full four years to provide the academic and social support required. Not backfilling openings in grades 10-12, however, has significant implications for how many students to admit to grades 6-9, allowing for normal attrition.
- Family satisfaction surveys focused on a desire for more language and AP programs as well as more afterschool programming. Concerns centered on improvements to our facilities as well as addressing disruptive behaviors that undermine our safe and supportive learning environment.
- Staff feedback indicated appreciation of the benefits of additional funding in terms of space and supplemental academic and extra-curricular programming. An expanded program could strengthen our community relationships and provide long-term stability. At the same time, there were concerns about the pace of expansion, hiring during a teacher shortage, retaining our “small school” feel, and straining existing resources.

There are both benefits and downsides to expansion.

On the upside:

- A larger high school would delight students,
- The gap between the size of the lower and upper schools would be smaller.
- Additional funding opens up opportunities for new academic, support, and extracurricular programs, not to mention funds for increased/enriched staffing.
- There are some other additional sources of funding, e.g., for siblings.

On the downside:

- We don’t want to lose our “small school” feel.
- The larger the expansion, the greater the need for more classrooms, teachers, and support services. More than 75 additional seats would require a fourth section in the Lower School in order to keep class sizes down.
- Increased funding could disappear if SPS moves out of the bottom 10% of state MCAS scores. We have not received clear guidance on what this could mean for SACS other than to see what has happened in other cities. Accordingly, any proposal must consider this possibility.
- We are leery of radical space changes, given Prime’s future plans.
- We are still dealing with post-pandemic issues; promoting “normalcy” is important.

As Stephanie's PowerPoint presentation indicated, we are in a good position to consider a moderate expansion. We know how to repurpose and adapt our current space and could downsize again if necessary. We have the staff to manage such an expansion; low attrition during the pandemic saw our student numbers increase to 495, and staffing proved adequate. Even though our student numbers have gone back down to 482, staffing has not been reduced.

That said, Stephanie presented several scenarios showing enrollment and financial projections for the next five years, from maintaining our current size to adding up to 100 additional students and showing what happens if do/do not add additional classrooms. (Class size—20 vs. 24 students—is important not just to teachers but because many of our rooms are small.)

All scenarios were based on similar assumptions:

- Gradual expansion in grades 6-9, adding a few students to each of those classes each year
- Typical attrition, based on historical data
- Conservative tuition expansion each year (2%)
- Adapting or renovating current facilities vs. adding a lot of raw space
- Maintaining flexibility by not filling all approved expansion seats

After discussion, Kara McLaughlin moved to authorize the Executive Director at her discretion to submit a request for expansion up to 75 students. The motion was seconded by Jeff Whitmore and passed unanimously.

V. Strategic Planning Update

Josh Moulton of Strategy Matters reviewed the status of our current strategic planning process via a prepared PowerPoint presentation. To date, we have reviewed our mission and vision as well as having conducted a SWOT analysis with different stakeholder groups. Our mission and vision remain unchanged from the strategic plan developed five years ago. The values that guide our decision-making have been tweaked to reflect our post-Covid world and expanded understanding of DEI.

Our strategies, i.e., how we deliver on our mission, identify the areas where our attention and efforts need to be focused. The new strategic plan will refine our current systems, structures and expectations to provide a more enriching environment for student growth and staff professional development. We have three priorities: improving student performance, supporting SEL, and building alignment and cohesion among faculty and staff.

Josh then discussed the specific goals and objectives these priorities entail. The goals outline what we want to accomplish, both internally and externally. They include:

- Facilitating equitable student outcomes to support academic excellence now and success in life after Salem Academy
- Strengthening a safe and supportive community culture for all

- Investing in faculty and staff, especially in terms of diversity
- Ensuring Salem Academy's sustainability, both in terms of growth and financial stability. This includes how the Board can function more effectively.

The objectives will provide measurable ways of tracking our progress. These are currently being finalized and metrics established. Strategy Matters will then provide action plans, dashboards, scoreboards, etc. that will be ready for presentation at our next meeting.

VI. Trustee Expectations

Toyuwa Newton reviewed the roles and responsibilities of trustees, as presented in the written document distributed prior to the meeting. While what happens at Salem Academy is under the jurisdiction of the Executive Director, it is the Board's responsibility to ensure that the school's mission and goals are achieved.

This is particularly challenging at present as most trustees have joined the Board within just the past two years and, in addition, we will be losing two senior board members at the end of the calendar year. Our current situation reflects the fact that, although new trustees were added in 2021, they are no longer board members and more recently added trustees are now being asked to step into leadership roles. This situation was graphically presented in a matrix of Board membership showing term expiration dates.

Several suggestions for what we can do better emerged from the discussion that followed.

- Focus on adding new Board members on a continuing basis.
- Communicate expectations of involvement and time commitments more clearly.
- Provide a one-page calendar of the year outlining activities and expected involvement from month to month.
- Fix the January Board meeting date as training for new members; strongly consider adding a second training date in the summer.
- Determine now what the January training should look like.
- Provide a checklist of what training is involved.
- Alert Board members via email to new info on the trustee dashboard.
- Hold an informal welcome coffee with a few Board members; this should be in person and perhaps off campus.
- Provide new members with more training and background documents; review with them several times.

For their part, Board members need to use their SACS email—perhaps have it feed into their primary email—and review the dashboard regularly.

VII. Committee Work

While committee goals and activities were not discussed in this meeting, they are important, and the following next steps were identified.

- Toyuwa Newton and Kara McLaughlin will be in touch with everyone within a week regarding their committee interests, level of involvement, and willingness to assume leadership responsibilities.
- Committees need to meet and develop goals and proposed activities for the coming year. These will be presented at our November meeting and finalized in December.
- We should plan to check on committee progress regularly, perhaps quarterly.
- All committees should have as a goal identifying prospects for Board and/or committee membership.

VIII. Vote to Adjourn

Kara McLaughlin moved to adjourn, seconded by Eddie Aroko. The motion passed unanimously, and the meeting ended at 1:51 PM.

[NOTE: The vote taken at this September 20, 2024 meeting concerning submission of a request to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education for a charter amendment to increase enrollment up to 75 seats was subsequently determined to be invalid. A subsequent vote was taken at a Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees held on October 15, 2024.]

Documents Referenced During the Meeting:

- August Meeting Minutes
- Academic Report
- SACS Amendment Request Letter (DRAFT 9.20.24)
- SACS Amendment Request Response to Criteria (DRAFT 9.20.24)
- 5 Year Projections
- BOT Amendment Request Presentation 9.20.24
- Strategy Matters Strategic Plan Review & Implementation Slides
- SACS Board Description
- Trustee Roles & Responsibilities
- Goal Setting Template