Meeting Minutes

Trustees in attendance
Kwaku Andoh (Trustee), Shelly Cleary (Co-treasurer), Amanda Craft (Trustee), Stephanie Mauterstock (Chair), Christine Schlendorf (Trustee), Nadine Sylvester (Trustee), Stanley Taylor (Trustee), Oral Walcott (Trustee) (all via videoconference)

Ascend staff in attendance

Stephanie called the meeting to order at 6:04pm

I. Public comment

Jaleel Hasan, a teacher at Bushwick Ascend Middle School, shared questions related to a potential school reopening. He asked about the reopening decision-making process, staffing plans, student schedules, building ventilation, and mask protocols. He also asked how their school community, who lost a teacher to Covid-19, will return to their building.

Miatta Massaley, principal at Bushwick Ascend Middle School, asked that Jaleel’s questions receive a prompt response given that schools may reopen prior to the next board meeting.

II. Public comment update

No public comments were offered at the prior meeting.

III. Consent agenda

Stephanie presented to the Board the minutes of the November 18, 2020 meeting. Christine moved to approve the minutes, Oral seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

IV. Financial report and ACS investment policy

Shelly reviewed with the Board the content of the finance committee meeting. Due to proactive budgeting and conservative projections, Ascend is currently in a strong financial position. Revenue is on track to budget and overall expenses are on track and within 2% of budget. The committee discussed the network’s debt to asset ratio, which they will continue to monitor.
The finance committee presented Ascend Charter School’s new investment policy to the Board, which will guide Ascend as it shifts funds from checking to investment accounts. The finance committee also presented the framework for monitoring Ascend’s fiscal health. The Trustees had reviewed both documents in their pre-reads.

The Board considered a resolution to approve the investment policy and to grant Raji authority to open a brokerage account on behalf of Ascend Charter Schools. Amanda moved to approve the resolution as written in the board package, Kwaku seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

V. Amending subleases for 123 Linden Blvd and 260 Shepherd Ave

Raji shared updates to the rent schedule for the 123 Linden Boulevard and 260 Shepherd Avenue subleases. Due to Ascend taking over the buildings later than anticipated and the buildings remaining unoccupied with lower carrying costs, rent at these two buildings is lower for this fiscal year.

The Board considered a resolution to amend the subleases for 123 Linden Boulevard and 260 Shepherd Avenue to reflect the revised rent schedules. Shelly moved to approve the resolution as written in the board package, Kwaku seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

VI. Schools and network update

Brandon reviewed with the Board the plans for network reopening. Ascend is on track to make a decision by January 8 as to whether schools will reopen for in-person learning on January 19. The network is continuing to monitor public health data closely and is basing the reopening decision on the belief that most kids should remain remote, but our most vulnerable students should be accommodated in person. The feedback received during Ascend’s summer town halls has driven planning in the time since. Ascend is ensuring our schools are ready to return by holding trainings on COVID-19 procedures, preparing our buildings, and finalizing each school’s instructional model.

The academic committee reviewed the ELA and Math benchmark results in depth at its committee meeting. Amanda summarized the benchmark data for the Board. As expected, the results after the first benchmark exam show evidence of Covid-slide, with students’ proficiency currently projected to be lower than prior to school closure. Unique circumstances surrounding this benchmark administration, such as it being students’ first time taking the exam online, complicate the projections, yet the math results were better than expected.

Carl provided the Board with an overview of student enrollment and recruitment. The network is currently exceeding its network-wide enrollment goal. Applications for next year are lower than in typical years, mirroring a trend seen sector-wide. Ascend continues to prioritize retaining current students and is focusing marketing initiatives on the 2020-21 school year.

Aaron updated the Board on talent and staff recruitment efforts, highlighting that Ascend is 99% staffed network-wide. Aaron noted that retention is higher across the sector overall as people are remaining in their current roles due to Covid-19 and fewer candidates are entering the marketplace.

Jordan highlighted work happening across the schools to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. Individual school initiatives include book clubs, building inclusive family partnerships, forming of social justice and DEIA committees, organizing PD sessions focusing on self-reflection and identity, fostering inclusive hiring practices, and more. Jordan showed the Board the DEIA resource library, a database for Ascend staff to continue their DEIA education with extensive content to read, watch and listen. The library is currently being launched to staff.
VII. BACS 6 and BWHS: Request for planning year

Brandon shared the extended leadership team’s recommendation that the opening of BACS 6 and the second high school be postponed a year and that a second planning year be requested from SUNY for both BACS 6 and BWHS. The Trustees discussed and unanimously supported this request given the need to focus this year on remote learning and navigating the pandemic.

Stanley moved to approve the resolution, as presented in the board package, to request a planning year from SUNY for BACS 6 and BWHS. Oral seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

VIII. Executive session (minutes recorded separately)

At 7:27pm, Amanda moved to enter executive session to discuss proposed litigation and two personnel matters: a Trustee nominee and the ongoing CEO search. Christine seconded the motion, and all Trustees voted in favor and entered executive session.

IX. Exit exec session; resumption of open meeting

At 7:42 pm, Amanda moved to exit executive session. Oral seconded the motion, and the motion was carried unanimously.

X. Nominating committee

Oral motioned to approve the nomination of Emmanuel Fordjour to the Ascend Charter Schools Board. Stephanie seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

XI. Adjournment

Christine moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:45pm. Amanda seconded and the motion was carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted by: