Meeting Minutes

Trustees in attendance
Kwaku Andoh (Trustee), Shelly Cleary (Co-treasurer), Amanda Craft (Trustee), Tracy Dunbar (Trustee), Emmanuel Fordjour (Trustee), Glenn Hopps (Trustee), Stephanie Mauterstock (Chair), 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

Ian Ulmer, a teacher at Brownsville Ascend Middle School, encouraged Ascend to create a position for an educational technologist as we are now a school that provides all students with laptops. He noted that Ascend would benefit from having individuals focused on integrating technology effectively for educational purposes as we continue with remote learning and look to our return to in-person instruction.

II. Public comment update

Brandon responded to public comments by Jaleel Hasan and Miatta Massaley of Bushwick Middle School at the December 16 board meeting. Mr. Hasan asked questions related to reopening plans and sought information about inputs for a return to school. Miatta requested a timely response to Jaleel’s questions. On the day of the December board meeting, the network office was in the midst of determining whether to reopen hybrid learning models. Since then, the network office made the decision not to reopen hybrid models, which was determined earlier than expected and communicated to all.

To ensure that all staff had answers to the questions Mr. Hasan raised, Brandon explained that school leaders were trained on COVID protocols in November and December, then turnkeyed those protocols to staff. The day after the December board meeting, Bushwick Ascend Middle School held its COVID mitigation training, which network leaders attended as well to answer questions regarding safety protocols, mental health, and building ventilation. Marsha Gadsen, the MD of upper schools, also met with Ascend’s student support team during that time to brainstorm additional support and resources for schools when they open, in particular for BWMS, where we lost one of our teachers, Zoe Mungin, as COVID emerged in NYC last spring. We are still in planning phases, but Ascend will provide additional trauma informed professional development for staff and have gathered resources targeted toward staff mental health. Additionally, several leaders will attend a summit focused on educator mental health and wellness.
III. Consent agenda

Stephanie presented to the Board the minutes and executive session minutes of the December 16 meeting. Oral moved to approve the minutes, Kwaku seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

IV. Financial report

Shelley provided the Board with updates from the recent finance committee meeting, highlighting that the network is in a good financial position. Overall revenue is on track to budget and expenses are below budget. Shelley noted that Ascend’s debt-asset ratio improved in this reporting period, and the committee will continue to monitor this metric. At last month’s meeting, the Board reviewed and approved Ascend’s new financial sustainability dashboard, and Shelley reported that Ascend is on target with almost all thresholds indicated in the dashboard. The finance committee also reviewed two proposals from brokerage firms and will soon determine in which to invest.

V. Schools and network update

Brandon and Sulafa presented the Board with an update on school reopening. In December, the network decided to remain all remote as it anticipated a rise in infection and hospitalization rates early this year. The earliest possible hybrid reopening date is March 9. While learning pods do not take the place of in-person learning, they are a step towards in-person instruction and providing a safe and predictable space to focus on students who need it most. Building on learnings from the Ascend Learning Support Center pilot, we are expanding from serving 50 scholars to approximately 250 scholars across the network, with all Ascend campuses opening their own learning pods.

As education workers are now eligible to receive vaccines through the city, Sulafa shared with the Board how Ascend is supporting staff in receiving their vaccinations. The network is allowing staff to take time off to receive their vaccinations during work hours and is exploring whether we can partner with a provider to offer vaccinations at our schools. In response to Trustee questions, it was clarified that staff are not required to be vaccinated at this time, but Ascend is encouraging vaccinations and connecting staff with opportunities for education on the vaccine.

Carl reviewed the state of student enrollment with the Board, and Ascend is overenrolled as compared to budget. For next school year, we are seeing sector-wide depression in applications. A joint effort between schools and the student recruitment team is underway to bolster student applications, and these activities include partnerships with community organizations and monthly virtual info sessions.

Aaron updated the Board on school staff hiring. Currently open roles represent only 1% of all network roles, and most schools are 100% staffed. For the coming school year, preliminary data shows that fewer people are entering the hiring market. The recruitment team is focused on the hard to fill roles of special education, math and science using a multi-pronged outreach strategy.

Amanda noted that the academic committee reviewed high school benchmark results in their meeting. The second round of benchmarks for high school is March 11, and the results will provide the committee with a clearer comparison.

VI. Ascend’s curriculum and a DEIA lens

Anjya reviewed the network’s strides to diversify Ascend’s curriculum and make it more inclusive. Last year, Ascend conducted an audit of its curriculum and created a plan to adjust the curriculum based on those findings. Within ELA, the reading curriculum was revised based on school feedback and includes authors whose identity markers and life experiences are varied, and books that showcase stories of people of different races, genders, sexual orientations, nationalities, and ability. Within the social studies
curriculum, we realigned from whose perspective we tell our history, and units are now designed by the network’s curriculum team and revised in consultation with teachers. Math instruction is now guided by a culturally responsive mathematics teaching framework, which strives to engage in deep learning by elevating student voices and honoring student experiences and communities.

VII. Mid-year progress towards goals

Lisa reviewed progress toward network goals, which are on track to be achieved by the end of the year. At this mid-year point, the network is deeply listening to feedback from staff, students and families, including conducting 19 town halls, TNTP staff survey, and a CEO listening tour. Insights drawn from the staff surveys are being unpacked at the town halls, but Brandon shared with the Board preliminary headlines from the teacher and school support staff surveys.

VIII. Board matters

Stephanie stated that the Board has signaled its intent to renew the management agreement between Ascend Charter Schools and Ascend Learning. The Board will review the revised agreement in February to be finalized by end of March. Stephanie shared the Board’s goals and the Trustees reviewed their strong progress toward goals at this mid-year point.

Stephanie deferred the committee membership topic to the February 17 meeting.

IX. Adjournment

Amanda moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:34pm. Glenn seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted by:

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Name       Date