APPROVED

# New Heights Academy Charter School

# Minutes

## Board of Trustees Meeting

**Date and Time**
Thursday January 30, 2025 at 7:00 PM

**Location**
1818 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10031

**Trustees Present**
A. Cummings, A. Vasquez, D. Ortiz, N. Sunshine, N. Weiss, W. Council

**Trustees Absent**
M. Vargas

**Guests Present**
Dr. Crystal Joye, Fred Givens, K. Valbrun, L. Garcia, W. Ramos

### I. Opening Items

#### A. Record Attendance

#### B. Call the Meeting to Order

A. Vasquez called a meeting of the board of trustees of New Heights Academy Charter School to order on Thursday Jan 30, 2025 at 7:02 PM.

#### C. Approve Minutes

A. Vasquez made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 12-19-24.
N. Weiss seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

## II. Community Comments

### A. Upcoming School Events

Wendy Ramos shared upcoming school events, will share calendar invite with the board.

- Family Meetings
  - Dates: February 7 & 10
- Mid Winter Recess
  - School Closed: February 17 – 21
- Literacy Night
  - Date: February 26 from
  - Time: 5:00 pm – 7:00 pm

### B. Board Meeting for Renewal Process

Nikolas Weiss shared that the authorizer visit for renewal went really well. The tone was positive. Teachers and student shared the same.

### C. Staff Representative Update

Nikolas Weiss shared about the authorizer for renewal visit.

**Reflections on Renewal Visit:**

- Students and staff expressed positive feelings about the visit.
- Observers noted strong alignment between the lesson, student work, and instructional goals.
- Teachers felt well-prepared, with Dr. Joy's guidance on data and key language contributing to their confidence.
- A co-teacher in a focus group described the discussions as thorough and reflective of a positive school environment.
- Feedback from various stakeholders—instructional staff, facilities, food service, administrators, and teachers—highlighted a shared commitment to students and the school community.
- Students who participated in focus groups appreciated having a voice in the process.

- Wendy Ramos shared that the authorizer provided dates and times for the board renewal meeting, and an email was sent to check board members' availability.
- Angel Vasquez inquired whether the meeting would be in-person or virtual, as that would impact attendance. Wendy will follow up to confirm.
- A question was raised regarding the renewal timeline. Wendy clarified that the school is authorized by the DOE, and as a DOE-authorized school, its policies and processes align with DOE regulations.
- She outlined the key steps in the accountability process, which include:
    - The renewal visit.
    - A meeting with the board.
    - A public hearing.
    - A back-and-forth review process with the authorizer before they submit their final recommendation on the renewal term.
- Angel Vasquez clarified that SUNY refers to the State University of New York, and SED is the New York State Department of Education.
- Since the school is authorized by the DOE, the DOE will present the case for the school's charter renewal to the Board of Regents.

**D. Introduction to High School Team**

**Guest Speaker: Mr. Mantin, College & Career Counselor**

- Mr. Mantin, in his ninth year at New Heights, emphasized his commitment to flexibility and dedication in supporting students on their post-secondary paths.
- He highlighted the success of students attending both traditional colleges (including Ivy League and top universities) and trade programs like Co-Op Tech.
- The school’s partnership with **OneGoal** has significantly improved student retention, particularly during the critical first year of college, with follow-ups through calls and texts. New Heights' retention rate is now above the national average.
- Mr. Mantin described New Heights as a **family-oriented** charter school, where strong relationships with students and their families foster long-term success.

**New York Post Interview**

- Mr. Mantin was interviewed about the school's close-knit community and student success.
- Two students also spoke with the reporter about their experiences at New Heights.
- One of the students shared his perspective, having briefly attended **Randolph** before transferring to New Heights, emphasizing the **strong teacher-student relationships and support systems** that set the school apart from traditional public schools.

**Impact of Affirmative Action Changes on College Admissions**

- Mr. Mantin initially had concerns about the Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action.
- However, since many New Heights students qualify for **EOP/HEOP (based on financial need rather than race/ethnicity)**, the impact has been less significant than anticipated.

**University of Chicago Pipeline:**

- New Heights has developed a **growing relationship with the University of Chicago**, which began with a visit to the school a year or two ago, followed by a student trip to Chicago.
- As a result, two students were accepted, one was waitlisted, and one ultimately attended.
- The upcoming senior class is particularly strong, with a notable **cohort of female students** who could further establish this pipeline.
- To strengthen the connection, a current New Heights alum at UChicago is interested in visiting in the spring to host an **essay workshop** for students.

**Guest Speaker: Sharon Collins, High School Math teacher**
**Presidential Award Recognition**

- **Sharon Collins**, a long-time educator at New Heights, has been named the **2023 New York State awardee for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching**—the highest honor for STEM teachers in the United States.
- The award, announced on **January 13, 2024**, while President Biden was still in office, recognized **three years' worth of honorees (2021, 2022, and 2023)**.
- This prestigious recognition **connects New Heights Academy Charter School to the White House** and highlights the dedication of STEM educators nationwide.

**Sharon Collins' Reflections on the Award**

- She expressed deep gratitude for her teachers, family, and the opportunities that shaped her journey from a **small-town math-loving student to a teacher in America's largest city**.
- Her selection for this award affirms the mission of New Heights: to ensure **students succeed in college and life**.
- She emphasized that the award is a recognition of her **immigrant students**, showing them that they are seen, valued, and capable of achieving their dreams.

**Recognition for New Heights Academy**

- Sharon Collins is the **only charter school teacher in New York to receive this honor**, making this an **extraordinary achievement** for both her and the school.

- The **National Science Foundation** features all awardees on its website, putting New Heights Academy on the map alongside top educators from across the country.
- She thanked **Dr. Valbrun** and the school leadership for celebrating the award and sharing the news across social media and the school's website.

**Closing Remarks:**

- The New Heights community expressed deep appreciation for **Ms. Collins' dedication** and the transformative impact she has on students' lives.

## III. Executive Director Update

### A. Executive Director Update

**Authorizer Visit Recap**

On Monday, the authorizers visited the school. The team consisted of three individuals, including Erin Cochran as the primary reviewer with two c colleagues and a representative from the Committee on Special Education.

During morning meeting, they met with the Senior Leadership Team, and the Instructional Leadership Team. The discussion centered around the progress made over the past five years, as well as expectations for the classroom observations.

The authorizers conducted classroom walkthroughs, observing student engagement. In Ms. Collin's class, they saw students engaged in station work. Mr. Weiss noted they also visited his classroom. After each observation, the group held debriefs to align their insights, which led to a productive and honest discussion about strengths and areas for growth.

Following the classroom visits, the authorizers met separately with student leaders from both middle and high school. While staff were not present, feedback indicated that students were well-prepared and effectively articulated how they use data to support their learning. The consistency between teacher instruction and student understanding was a notable highlight.
Next, the authorizers met with parents, who spoke highly of the school. However, one key takeaway was the need for increased parent representation on the board to further strengthen parent engagement.

Afterward, the team addressed operational questions and held a final debrief. The authorizers were pleased with the school's progress over the five-year period. As Wendy mentioned, the next steps involve discussions with the board, a financial audit, and additional documentation before a final decision is made.

Nicky Sunshine asked about test schools.  It was shared that the authorizer had all the data and shared the data materials prior to the visit.

**Preliminary Feedback & Areas for Growth**
The authorizers provided initial feedback, including:

- Encouraging more **student voice in classrooms**, shifting away from heavily teacher-led instruction.
- Strengthening **differentiation strategies** for high-performing students.
- Expanding **special education support** in science and social studies.
- Increasing the use of **trackers during instruction** to monitor student comprehension in real-time.

William Council asked what is the biggest are for growth?

**Key Concerns & Strategic Planning**
The primary concern raised was **financial sustainability** and enrollment stability for the next charter term. The school must provide a clear plan for sustaining operations and increasing enrollment if necessary.

Discussions also included potential program enhancements:

- **STEM Expansion:** Strengthening science labs, robotics, and coding programs, especially with Ms. Collins' growing influence in science and math.
- **Dual Language Program:** Dr. Joy is researching the feasibility of introducing dual language instruction at the middle school level to build fluency by high school.
- **JROTC Initiative:** Exploring the return of JROTC as a scholarship opportunity, emphasizing leadership development rather than military recruitment.

**Nicky Sunshine** suggested establishing a partnership with CUNY to enhance STEM offerings through dual enrollment or college credit-bearing courses. **Fred Givens** confirmed prior discussions with CUNY, particularly City College, to align students with college-level coursework.
The **Governor's recent initiative** to standardize college credit programs across the state was also noted as a resource to explore further.

**Academic Performance & Retention**

- **College Retention Data:**
  - 2023: 94%
  - 2022: 86%
- **Fall Semester Performance:** Principals are reviewing recent Regents and interim assessment data. A more detailed analysis will be shared the February EAC meeting.

**Budget & Staffing Updates**

- **Budget & Financial Health:** A key focus area for renewal discussions.
- **Curriculum Planning:** Adjustments will be made to align with feedback on student voice and instructional practices.
- **Staffing:** Still short **one math teacher**, with additional personnel changes under consideration.

**School Culture & Community Engagement**

- **Staff Culture:** Monthly celebrations continue to promote a positive environment. The upcoming **Super Bowl All-Staff Meeting** will include team-building activities.
- **Community Engagement:**
  - **Immigration Support:** A pressing issue emerged when a parent had to withdraw two students due to immigration concerns. The emotional impact on students and staff was significant.
  - **Proactive Measures:**
    - Distribution of **"Know Your Rights" red cards** in English and Spanish.
    - Creation of an **Immigration Resource Hub** with legal support information.
    - Collaboration with **Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights** for additional assistance.

**Facilities & Safety Updates**

- **General Operations:** Facilities are running smoothly, with security measures like random student screenings in place.

Nicky Sunshine asked about the outcome of the sink incident.

- **Incident Update:**
  - **Bathroom Sink Incident:** A student was taken to the hospital but sustained no evidence of fracture or sprain.  It appears the family have not further concerns.

**Technology & Policy Updates**

- **PowerSchool Breach:** Minor issue noted; L'Esha Garcia will provide further details.
- **Advocacy & Governance:**
  - Board members should anticipate questions about **committee meetings and governance structures** during renewal discussions.
  - A **role-play session** via Zoom may be scheduled to prepare for these conversations.

**Enrollment & Attendance**

- **Total Enrollment (as of 1/24):** 647 students (anticipated loss of 2-3 students next week).
- **Attendance Rates:**
  - **December:** 92% (goal: 95%)
  - Notable seasonal declines due to extended family vacations.
- **Special Education Enrollment:** 109 students.

## IV. Finance Update

### A. Financial Update

Li'Esha Garcia share the financial update:

- **Highlights**
  - **Overall**
    - Revenue: $417K under what we budgeted.
    - Expenses: $399K more expenses than budgeted
    - Net Revenue: surplus of $189K
      - 2/3 per pupil payments were based on projection
    - Still positive cashflow
      - 1.5 million approx. 60 days.
- **Notable Revenue Items**
  - Both GenEd & SpED numbers are down
    - Last Per Pupil Invoice was 647.920 (32 less than budgeted)

- **Notable Expense Items**
  - **(-)Fringe Benefits under by 89K**
    - Workers Comp,401(k) Match, and disability insurances
  - **(+)Facilities Expenses over by 61K**
    - Maintenance repairs, supplies, and real estate taxes
  - **(+)Classroom Instructional Expenses over by 74K**
    - Field trips, classroom supplies additional curriculum & testing
  - **(+)Instructional Support Expenses over by 114K**
    - Mostly summer school expenses originally not budgeted for, Capital Prep being one of the larger ones.
  - **(+)Professional Services over by 158K**
    - Subs, outside IT consultant and staff recruitment
  - **(+)Misc Expenses over by 71K**
    - Special activities staff, NYC SpEd Collaborative, and dues & fees

## V. Academic Update

### A. State of the School

**Dr. Crystal Joye shared the Middle School Update:**

**Student-Led Conferences**

- Successfully completed student-led conferences.
- Special thanks to Ms. Roberts and Mr. Council for their participation.
- First time students were able to articulate their growth goals and overall progress for the school year.

**Academic Updates**

- **ELA Performance:** Trending above 60% proficiency in interim assessments.
- Goal for the school year: 57% proficiency.
- Last year saw a significant increase, leading to the stretch goal.

**Math Performance:** Data is still being reviewed.
**EAGLE Academy:**

- After-school academic program for students with disabilities and ENL learners.
- Launches on February 3.
- Sessions held twice per week.
- ESL specialists will provide targeted support for newcomers and students needing language assistance.

**Attendance Updates**

- **Student Attendance (January 13-17):** 94.3%.
- New attendance board on the second floor listing all student names.
- Monthly incentives: Ice cream social planned for students with 100% attendance.
- **Staff Attendance:** 100% until a recent situation.

Overall, staff morale is high, and they are engaged.

**Accountability & Student Engagement**
**Staffing:**

- Currently, zero vacancies.
- Preparing for 2025-26 hiring cycle.
- Thanks to Ms. Collins, partnerships with TFA are being developed.
- Interviews have already begun.

**Student Surveys:**

- Monthly student survey conducted, focusing on self-efficacy.
- Data will inform future advisory work.

**Professional Development & Community Initiatives**

- **Teacher-Led PD (January 3):**
- Facilitated by three educators, including Mr. Weiss on "Bringing Joy into the Classroom."
- **Karen University Initiative:**
- Proposed by Dr. Valbrun to enhance English conversational skills for families and students.
- Aiming to launch in March with teacher-led sessions.

**Cell Phone Policy**

- **Issue Identified:**
- Student survey revealed excessive phone usage impacted study habits and engagement.
- Many students admitted to being on TikTok or using phones instead of studying.
- **Implementation Process:**
- Conducted student surveys to collect qualitative and quantitative data.
- Discussed findings with Student Council.
- Engaged Dr. Valbrun in discussions.
- Sent letters home to parents explaining the disruptions caused by phone usage.
- Held a parent meeting via Zoom to discuss policy enforcement and seek parental support.
- **Current Policy:**
- Phones are collected and stored in designated phone boxes in classrooms.
- No suspensions or major disciplinary issues reported related to this change.

**Angel Vasquez inquired about the policy.**
Dr. Joye confirmed the presence of phone collection boxes in classrooms.

**Student Recognition**

- **Students of the Month:** Recognized students from grades 5-8.
- Featured on the bulletin board, creating excitement and engagement among students.

Angel Vasquez confirmed that cell phone ban is moving through legislation.

**Fred Givens shared the High School Update**

**Academics**

- Interim Assessment and Regents week concluded on Friday 1/24/25

**Attendance**

- December: 90.3%

**Accountability**

- 1 expulsion

**Atmosphere**

- Pep Rally & Homecoming Dance
- College Acceptances - 57/97 = 58.76%
- Grants, Aide & Scholarships - $3, 368, 820

Fred Givens will be attending:

**Leadership of Color Conference**

- TFA alumni attending the Leadership of Color Conference.
- First attended 15 years ago as a Morehouse student.
- Conference originally focused on Black male leadership, but has since expanded.
- Limited participation, primarily for alumni and employees.
- Plans to visit a school but noted that most schools will be on spring break.
- Gained fresh perspectives and insights on leadership and maneuvering challenges in the current educational landscape.

Nicky Sunshine asked about the board committees. Wendy Ramos responded that Angel Vasquez and Karen Valbrun will discuss and review and share with the board during the next meeting.

## VI. Executive Session

### A. Discussion of Personel Matters

A. Vasquez made a motion to move to Executive Session.
D. Ortiz seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.
A. Vasquez made a motion to come out of Executive Session.
W. Council seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

## VII. Closing Items

### A. Adjourn Meeting

A. Vasquez made a motion to adjoun the meeting.
W. Council seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.
There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:25 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
W. Ramos