APPROVED

New Heights Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time
Thursday February 27, 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

Trustees Absent
M. Vargas, W. Council

Guests Present
Cristina Cruceta, Devin Spencer, Fred Givens, K. Valbrun, L. Garcia, W. Ramos

I. Opening Items

A. Record Attendance

B. Call the Meeting to Order

C. Approve Minutes

A. Vasquez made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 01-30-25.

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.

- **Report cards** are currently being emailed following the return from break.
- **Literacy Night** took place yesterday and was a successful event.
- **Parent-Teacher Conferences** are scheduled for **the 6th and 7th**.
- **Board Members:** Please confirm attendance through **Board On Track**, the platform we are using to manage board materials and communication.
- If you are not receiving the appropriate emails, please notify the administration.
- **Angel Vasquez** inquired whether **Board On Track** is our vendor, as they reached out regarding board development. Confirmation was provided that Board On Track was founded by professionals specializing in governance coaching. Angel will follow up with them.

https://otter.ai/u/VDJOe-RSRsR0H3hY_34KDcg-D6E?utm_source=copy_url

B. Staff Representative Update

Nikolas Weiss provided an update on the upcoming Scholastic Book Fair:

- The fair will be larger this year and will run from **March 17–21**.
- The **e-Wallet and QR Code** have been created to facilitate transactions.
- The school's **Scholastic website** has been set up.
- An email with all details has been sent to **Wendy Ramos**.

Wendy Ramos will share the **website, e-Wallet, and QR Code** with the board tomorrow.

Angel Vasquez reminded the board that this is connected to a commitment that was discuss during an earlier meeting.

C. Introduction of School Teams

Introduction of School Teams & Special Guests
Karen Valbrun introduced the school team.

Thank you all for being here! This month, we have special visitors from the **LOTE Department** and the **ESL Department**, including **Mr. Devin Spencer and Ms Cristina Cruceta**.

Andrea Mazzella, our coachr for **Languages Other Than English (LOTE)**, oversees the school's **Spanish, Italian, and Japanese** programs. Currently, we offer **Spanish, Italian, and Japanese**, and next year, we plan to expand with additional sections of **Spanish and Japanese**.

Devin Spencer is our **Japanese teacher** and also leads an after-school martial arts program. We wanted to take this opportunity to introduce him and give him a chance to meet the board.

Remarks from Devin Spencer
"Hello, my name is Devin Spencer, and I'm the new Japanese instructor this year. I also coach and instruct the **Bushido** after-school program, which serves middle and high school students.
In my Japanese language courses (Levels 1–3), I tailor lessons based on student interests, incorporating modern and traditional Japanese culture. Many students are passionate about anime, J-pop, and Japanese history, such as **samurai and bushido** traditions.

- **Level 1**: Students learn the basics of **hiragana**, the Japanese alphabet, and simple words.
- **Level 2**: We expand vocabulary and focus on sentence construction.
- **Level 3**: Students work on conversational skills and presenting themselves in Japanese.

In addition to teaching Japanese, I also focus on **martial arts discipline** through Taekwondo and tournament-style training. While students have the opportunity to compete in the future, my goal is to help them balance both their **academic performance and martial arts training**.

Afterschool Bushido Club & Sponsorship
Wendy Ramos shared pictures from **Mr. Spencer's afterschool Bushido Club**, which includes sparring, **kata**, and discipline-based training. Many students have shown strong dedication to the program over time.

Mr. Spencer shared that his sponsorship connections helped support the program. Previously, he worked with an organization that provided resources for schools, and he also serves in a private capacity for the **United States Army**. The **U.S. Army has donated equipment** to support the **club's activities**, promoting both student health and academic growth.

When asked whether this was a new opportunity for students, Mr. Spencer confirmed that the **Bushido Club officially launched on November 27, 2024**.

Remarks from Cristina Cruceta – Middle School ESL Program
Cristina, the middle school **ESL teacher**, introduced herself and provided an overview of the school's increasing population of **English Language Learners (ELLs)**.
"We have seen a large influx of newcomer students, many of whom arrive with little to no English skills. While this presents challenges, it also creates opportunities. Our priority is ensuring they receive the right resources to improve their language development, academic success, and integration into our school community."

Christina highlighted the steps taken to support these students, including **piloting translation headsets** to assist with their learning.

Translation Headsets – Implementation & Student Feedback
The school has started testing **translation headsets** with three students to determine their effectiveness. Christina shared her observations and student feedback:

- Students using the headsets feel **more confident** in the classroom.
- They can **understand English-speaking teachers** without relying on peers for translation.
- One student, **Fatima**, noted that the headsets help her comprehend discussions with classmates, allowing her to participate more actively.
- A small challenge: The headsets sometimes pick up background conversations, causing minor confusion.

How the Headsets Work
Each headset is paired with a barcode that the student scans to download an app onto their phone. The device offers four modes:

1. **Silent Mode** – Displays only the translated text.
2. **Earphone Mode** – Translates the teacher's speech in real-time through the student's phone.
3. **Speaker Mode** – Allows students to speak and have their words translated for the teacher.
4. **Two-Earphone Mode** – Enables paired students to communicate using separate earpieces.

Christina shared a **short video** of a student using the headset to follow teacher instructions without assistance, demonstrating how it supports independent learning.
Student Progress & Data

Christina presented data showing how translation headsets have impacted student learning:

- One student who initially tested at a **kindergarten English level** made significant progress in **high-frequency words** on the **i-Ready diagnostic** after using the headset.
- Another student, also starting at a **kindergarten level**, showed substantial improvement in reading and writing skills.
- Compared to students without translation headsets, those using them **advanced more rapidly** in language acquisition.

When asked about the cost, **Li"Esha Garcia confirmed that each headset costs $31**.

Discussion on Enrollment & Outreach
Board member **Nicky Sunshine** raised the issue of **student enrollment**, sharing observations from visiting other schools:
"Some schools uptown feel like a 'Spanish world,' which makes it harder for students to fully immerse in English. Meanwhile, I saw Success Academy recruiters aggressively promoting their school in public spaces. If we want to grow enrollment, we need to adopt similar strategies."
The board discussed launching an **outreach initiative** to actively engage families and promote the school's offerings.

Daniel Ortiz raised concerns about **connecting the translation headsets to student phones**. Cristina shared other language in school are **Haitian Creole, Fulani, and French Creole**.

Key Takeaways & Next Steps
✓ **Continue piloting** translation headsets and explore funding for more devices.
✓**Expand outreach efforts** to boost enrollment.
✓**Further develop** language support services for non-Spanish-speaking ELLs.

III. Charter Renewal

A. Updates

Public Hearing

Wendy Ramos provided an update on the **upcoming public hearing on March 3rd.** , highlighting the outreach efforts to ensure strong participation:

- A **short slide presentation** is being prepared for the hearing.
- Scheduled **emails** have been sent to **parents and staff** to inform them about the event.
- A **reminder email** will be sent tomorrow, including the sign-up link for participation.

Wendy noted that during the **last hearing**, held in person in our **DINO**, attendance from the community was low, with only **five participants**, most of whom expressed **opposition to charter schools**. However, with the **hearing now accessible via Zoom.**

Angel Vazquez encouraged the trustees to really take a few minutes, join the zoom, say your piece for a minute or two. I think it's always helpful to have that kind of stuff,

Board Interview Update – Angel Vasquez

Angel Vasquez shared his thoughts on recent **hearings** and the **Board interview**:

- **Hearings** can sometimes become **very heated**, particularly those managed by **CMOs** like **Success Academy**, which tend to be intense.
- **Our school** has **unique approach**, being more **community-based**, with roots founded by **teachers and parents** from the community.
- Even with this supportive foundation, it's important to remain **prepared** for challenging situations.

Angel Vasquez shared his thoughts on recent **hearings** and the **Board interview**:

- **Hearings** can sometimes become **very heated**, particularly those managed by **CMOs** like **Success Academy**, which tend to be intense.
- **Our school** has had a **unique approach**, being more **community-based**, with roots founded by **teachers and parents** from the community.
- Even with this supportive foundation, it's important to remain **prepared** for challenging situations.

Regarding the **Board interview**:

- **Four board members** participated, and the discussion centered primarily on **vision** and **recruitment challenges**.
- Angel felt the interview went **well** overall. There were no **"gotcha" questions**, and the atmosphere was **supportive**.
- While there was **positive feedback**, the interview also included suggestions for areas of **growth and improvement**.
- In general, the interview left a sense that the board is **on the right track** and that their efforts are aligned with the school's goals.

Key Questions Asked During the Interview:

- What is the **vision** of the Charter School Board of Trustees?
- Where does the board see the school in **three years**?
- How is the board building its **capacity to connect with the community**?
- How does the board **include parents** in decision-making?
- How are parents **notified about board meetings** and kept informed about board activities?

- How does the board **onboard new members**, ensuring they are aware of **legalities** and the **history** of the school?

Angel noted a **humanizing moment** during the interview when a board member's daughter unexpectedly walked across the screen, adding a lighter, personal touch to the otherwise serious conversation.

Next steps is that the DOE will present the school to the Board of Regents in May and that is when the final decision will be made. The determination can be short term less than five years or a full five year rnewal.

Nicky Sunshine shared that she was in a meeting and learned that the Regent exames would be going away in 2026. Nicky said she would connect us with one of the presentors.

IV. Executive Director Update

A. Executive Director Update

1. Major Activities and Updates

- **Renewal & Immigration**:
  - The team discussed the renewal process.
  - No major activity around immigration.
- **Strategic Plan**:
  - A strategic plan for the upcoming year is being developed.
  - The plan will incorporate information from the renewal and will be refined once a date is set for crafting vision, goals, and outcomes.
- **State Testing**:
  - There are **seven weeks remaining** until the state testing at the middle school level.

2. Board Development and Governance

- **Board Deliverables**:
  - A question was posed regarding monthly deliverables for the board.
  - It was suggested to align activities that can help the board grow, with a focus on better connecting the school and board.
  - This initiative is in progress, and further discussions will be had to determine a suitable structure.

3. Recruitment and Staffing

- **Staff and Student Recruitment**:
  - With nearby **Catholic school closures**, the school is **aggressively recruiting staff and students**.

- **Recruitment season** is ongoing, with efforts to find the best talent for the upcoming school year.
- Most teachers have expressed an intent to return, but their final commitment often depends on external offers and benefits (e.g., insurance).
- Efforts are underway to address these challenges ahead of time to avoid last-minute resignations before the start of school.

• **Community and Parent Engagement**:

- **Family meetings** will be conducted differently, with a **link to board meetings** provided so parents can listen remotely.
- Parents may also attend in person if there's sufficient interest.
- The **PTO** will vote on new members this month, and it's recommended to invite them to board meetings to connect before any decisions are made regarding new board members.

4. Student Enrollment and Attendance

• **Current Enrollment**:

- The current student enrollment stands at **653**, with a **95.4% attendance rate** for January, which meets the target goal for the month.
- No significant changes in the number of **SPED** or **ELL** students, but there has been a notable boost in confidence among many students, particularly in middle school and high school ELL programs. This positions the school to attract additional ELL students in the future.

• **Recruitment and Outreach**:

- Recruitment efforts include **presentations** at six to seven different schools targeting **6th and 9th-grade students**.
- Future outreach plans involve attending **parent-teacher conferences** at other schools and distributing flyers to encourage recruitment.
- **Marshall's locations** near 170-179th Street were identified as potential recruitment sites, as there is heavy foot traffic and many local resources.

5. Facilities and Safety

• **Discretionary Grant for Facility and Safety Updates**:

- **Wendy Ramos** submitted a grant to address facility and safety updates.
- A **$100K request** has been made to remodel the chemistry lab.

6. Technology and Innovation

• **PowerSchool Usage**:

- **PowerSchool** is being used for student information, grades, attendance, and communication with parents.
- **Parent usage** of PowerSchool is low compared to student usage, and efforts are being made to increase parent logins and engagement.

- It was noted that PowerSchool can send notifications to parents regarding grades and updates, which may help increase parent involvement.
- One suggestion was to offer incentives, such as a quiz or rewards for parents who sign up.

7. Advocacy and Policy Issues

- **Funding for Charter Schools**:
  - Concerns were raised about **funding for charter schools**, particularly for **special education**.
  - The **funding formula** for charter schools will likely see a **4% increase**, but charter schools are not a top priority for the governor at the moment. Angel Vasquez shared that charter schools are not top of mind for the governuer.

8. Miscellaneous Updates

- **Dr. Joye**:
  - Dr. Joye is dealing with a **family loss** (two deaths), and the board sent their condolences.

V. Finance Update

A. Financial Update

Financial Update – Budget and Expenses

Overview:
As of the end of **January**, the school is still **32 students under enrollment**, which translates to approximately **$607,000** under budget in revenue.

Expenses remain consistent in the same categories that have been over budget in the first few months of the year. These include:

- **Real estate taxes**: Higher than expected.
- **Maintenance and repairs**: Still over budget.
- **Classroom instructional expenses**: Continuing to be over budget.
- **Support services**: Also showing continued overages.
- **Professional services**: Including costs for substitutes, security contracts, etc.

Cost-Cutting Efforts:

- The team continues to meet **weekly** to identify potential areas where savings can be made.
- There has already been a **downsizing of staffing**, and efforts are ongoing to find additional savings on the **operational side**, without impacting student services.

- The focus is on **non-student impacting areas** before considering cuts that might affect students.

Cash Position:

- As of **January**, the school had **$639,000** in cash on hand, which is enough to cover **25 days** of operations.
- The school received its next **bi-monthly payment** on **February 15**.

Additional Updates

Authorizer Comment:

- The **authorizer** made a comment regarding **signage**.

Lease Conversion:

- **Li'Esha Garcia** is working with **Open Impact** to convert the school's lease into a **condominium**.

VI. Academic Update

A. State of the School

Nikolas Weiss shared on behalf of Dr. Crystal Joye

1. ELA and STEM Updates

- **ELA Progress**:
  - ELA proficiency is trending toward the goal of **54%**. This is considered excellent progress, supported by successful practices over the last few years.
  - **Partial state tests** are currently averaging **58%**, which is on track for the goal.
  - **Writing** is a strong focus, as it accounts for approximately **33%** of the grade. Efforts are made to support students in improving their writing, particularly on essays and short responses, which help students perform better even if they struggle with multiple-choice questions.
- **STEM Engagement**:
  - Students are actively working with **state-released questions** to become more familiar with the test format. This includes using old tests, released materials, and student examples.
  - Test prep is integrated into the curriculum, with students scoring state-scored responses to understand evaluation criteria.
- **Growth and Support**:

- Data from **debate, IEP**, and **ELL students** shows that growth targets are being met.
- There is a need for **increased tiered support** to better meet the needs of students.
- **ELA Teachers** are working on leveraging instructional coaches to improve support for **ELLs** and **IEP students**.

2. Intervention and After-School Programs

- **Eagle Academy**:
  - All students in **SWD** (Students with Disabilities) and **ELLs** are invited to the **academic after-school program** called Eagle Academy.
  - Enrollment has been strong, with **20 students** attending the **Monday ELA session** for 7th grade.
- **Intervention Programs**:
  - The school uses **i-Ready** and **IXL** for intervention, and **Rally Program** will be introduced next month for simulated state test preparation.
  - **ELA teachers** have implemented a **7-week assessment and intervention plan** based on diagnostic data.
  - Students are grouped by ability level:
    - **High achievers** are working on **advanced level** material.
    - **Cusp students** are focusing on **prerequisite work**.
    - **Students with more unfinished learning** receive **remedial support**.

3. Data and Goal Progress

- **Data Review**:
  - Karen Valbrun will reorganize the data to show progress since the beginning of the year for each area being assessed.
  - The updated data will allow clearer comparisons of current progress toward goals.
  - A **comparison of current data** with the same time last year will also be provided.

Fred Givens, High School Principal

- **College Acceptance**:
  - The school is currently seeing about **$7 million in scholarships** from grants.
  - The **acceptance rate** is **87%** for level one, with **100% acceptance** expected once final decisions are made, though some students have not yet finalized their college decisions.
- **Triple A Partnership**:

- The school has partnered with **Triple A Academic Attendance Athletics**, a nonprofit supported by **Jim Jones** and **Shaquille O'Neal**.
- This initiative aims to incentivize students to come to school regularly.
- The program includes monthly rewards, with **50 students** having the opportunity to earn **$120-$150** worth of gift cards for consistent attendance.

Further Updates:

- Old Regents exams are being used for the **Q3 IA** (Interim Assessment) in high school.
- **Ms. Bailey** is taking over the **Algebra I** course for the high school.
- **Students do not take the Regents LOTE exam until 11th grade**.

VII. Executive Session

A. Executive Session

A. Vasquez made a motion to go into Executive Session.
N. Sunshine seconded the motion.
Personnel matters
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.
A. Vasquez made a motion to come out of Executive Session.
N. Sunshine seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

VIII. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 8:28 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
W. Ramos