APPROVED

New Heights Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time
Thursday March 27, 2025 at 7:00 PM

Location
1818 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10031

Trustees Present
A. Vasquez, D. Ortiz, M. Vargas, N. Weiss, W. Council

Trustees Absent
A. Cummings, N. Sunshine

Guests Present
Fred Givens, Gus Saliba (remote), Jeanne Groce, K. Valbrun, Khalyn Milton, L. Garcia, Shannon Williamson, 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 Mar 27, 2025 at 7:00 PM.

C.

Approve Minutes

A. Vasquez made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 02-27-25.
W. Council seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

II. Community Comments

A. Upcoming School Events

Wendy Ramos shared upcoming school events.

- **March 21 – 28**: High School Interim Assessments
- **March 31**: Eid al Fitr- School Closed
- **April 7 – 11**: College Trips
- **April 15 – 21**: Spring Break (School Closed)

Angel Vasquez more about the college trips and I shared that it would be discussed during the academic update.

Dr. Karen Valbrun execused both principals explainging the had to attend to and emegency sistuation with familly.

B. Staff Representative Update

Nikolass Weiss shared: setup of big, metal shelves compared to the previous tabletop display.

Student Engagement: The kids were very excited, especially towards the end of the fair. Some were hesitant at first but ultimately enjoyed exploring the books.

Target Achievement: We successfully hit our target for sales. Funds were put into a wallet, and we used that money to support students in purchasing books, especially for those who were a bit short on funds. If students were $2 short, we were able to dip into the fund to help cover the cost.

Prioritizing Students: The goal was to ensure that even students who don’t typically enjoy reading could still get books they were interested in. Some staff even spent their own money to help
students.

Classroom Contributions: Several books were purchased for classrooms, which was great to see. The kids were enthusiastic and offered feedback on which books they liked.

Some students expressed interest in other books as well, which gave us a chance to reorder additional manga titles, providing more options for the students.

Financial Outcome: The fair was a big success overall. There was a positive response from the students, and we were able to make sure every child could get something. As for the leftover money in the wallet, it was all spent, and we met our target, which allowed us to get a percentage back.

Target for Next Fair: We were able to reach a higher target this time compared to previous fairs, which contributed to the success.

C. Introduction of School Teams

Introduction
The Learning Strategists supporting Special Education (SpED) introduced themselves. They went on to present:

1. **Co-Teaching Models & Classroom Collaboration**

ITT (Integrated Team Teaching) Classes:
Lesson planning is done collaboratively with co-teachers.
Shared responsibilities for grading, creating materials, and preparing assignments.
Models used: **Stations** and **Parallel Teaching**.

Small Group & Intervention Sessions:
Includes SETSS (Special Education Teacher Support Services) and intervention classes.
Activities are differentiated.
One teacher may lead a small group.
Other students may work on iReady or independent assignments.
Effective Co-Teaching Models Highlighted:

One Teach, One Support
Station Teaching – popular with both students and teachers; increases engagement and movement.

Parallel Teaching – allows for small-group instruction during regular class time.

Team Teaching – identified as an area for growth; future PD opportunities suggested.

2. **Support for Diverse Learners**

Auditory Learners:
Use of tools like **Speechify** to support students with reading challenges.
ELLs benefit from engaging audio features like celebrity voices reading texts.

Kinesthetic Learners:
Activities include vocabulary matching games, sentence building, and group collaboration.
Examples shown from 5th and 8th grade classrooms.

Visual Learners:
Use of **color-coding** for:

- Identifying like terms and angle relationships in math.
- Proofreading and structuring ELA responses.
- Analyzing the balance of evidence vs. personal input in writing.

Math Strategies:
Use of **hand signals** and **visual cues** to reinforce concepts.
Approximation symbol ("phone number" wiggle).
Inequality symbols via hand gestures.
Fraction understanding through shopping analogies (e.g., money on top = numerator).

3. **Transition to High School**

Emphasis on maintaining consistency in instructional strategies while introducing independence and life skills.
Key strategies in high school:

- Clear and concise instruction.
- Use of **visual aids**, **graphic organizers**, and **assistive technology**.
- Promoting **accountability** and **time management** (e.g., timers in classrooms).
- Regular **check-ins and feedback** to support student progress.

4. **Student Support & Engagement**
All students provided access to modified materials (e.g., for *Macbeth*, *Of Mice and Men*).
Both **auditory** and **hard copy** versions of texts are made available.
Teachers implement **active monitoring** and **student tracking** during reading to maintain engagement.
Teachers build strong relationships with students to remove barriers to learning:
Example: Allowing students to step out briefly for a snack to refocus and return to learning.

Peer Support Structures:
“Student teachers” model used—stronger students assist peers after completing their own work.
Encourages **collaboration**, **communication**, and **peer accountability**.

5. **Collaboration & Planning Best Practices**

Weekly Planning Meetings:
All co-teachers collaborate to plan weekly lessons and structures.
Flexibility and responsiveness during lessons are encouraged.

Shared Responsibility:
No separation of general education vs. special education grading or planning.
Teachers are expected to know and support **all students** in the classroom.

Open Communication:
Teachers support each other professionally and personally.
Honest, supportive feedback helps maintain positive energy and effective learning environments.

III. Finance Update

A. Financial Update

Presenter: Gus Saliba, Auditor – PKF O'Connor Davies

Audit Update: FY Ending June 30, 2024
Gus expressed appreciation for being invited and looks forward to meeting more of the team soon. The **FY 2024 audit** is currently **in progress**. PKF received the audit package a few weeks ago.
Due to scheduling conflicts and March 31 deadlines, audit fieldwork is expected to begin **next week**. The team anticipates approximately **one week of work**, followed by **back-and-forth communications** for any outstanding items. Additional information may be requested from Liesha during the process.

Projected Timeline:
Draft Audit Report: Expected by **mid-April**.

Final Audit Report: Targeting **third or fourth week of April**.
Gus has communicated this timeline to **Erin Cochran (NYC DOE)** at the request of Karen or Liesha.
He emphasized this is the **first time New Heights has been late** in submitting the report due November 1.

Reflections on FY 2023 Audit Process:
No major concerns were raised about the previous year's audit.
Open to any questions about the FY 2023 audit process or findings.

Overview of Typical Audit Phases (for FY 2025):
Planning Phase (April–May):
Engagement letters are typically sent in early April.
PKF works with Liesha to establish audit timelines and expectations.

A planning checklist is prepared and circulated.

The **Finance Committee** is encouraged to review and discuss the checklist with the auditor.
This could include a short (15–20 minute) planning meeting with the auditor to review focus areas, timelines, and new pronouncements.

Interim Testing (May–June):
Conducted prior to the closing of books.
Includes testing:

- Cash receipts and disbursements
- Payroll (major focus)
- Student files, including IEP compliance
- Debit card transactions

Testing is aligned with New Heights' **fiscal policies and procedures**.
Any concerns identified are raised with the **Finance Committee**.

Fieldwork (August):
Begins when Liesha closes the books and prepares the final audit package.
Heavy communication and document exchange during this phase.

Wrap-Up and Presentation (September):
Aim to present the **draft financials** at the **September Finance Committee meeting**.
If meeting is early in the month, an alternative timeline may be needed.
PKF presents a summary document with highlights of the financial statements.
Committee can meet with the auditor directly or present to the **full board** for final approval.

Additional Support Offered:
Gus is available to provide **Charter School Finance Training** to the board between **April and**

August (prior to the busy season).
Includes a brief (~20–25 page) document and a half-hour discussion.
Offered **free of charge**, as PKF supports building informed board governance.

Presenter: Li'Esha Garcia, Chief Financial Officer
Financial Overview as of February 2025

- **Total Assets**: Just under **$35 million**
- **Cash on Hand**: Approximately **$1.76 million**
- **Total Liabilities**: Around **$30 million**
- **Net Assets**: Approximately **$4.03 million**

- The organization remains **financially stable** in both the short and long term.
- Continued focus on **adjusting to under-enrollment** and its impact on finances.

Statement of Financial Position

- This is a **snapshot** of the school's cumulative financial health from inception.
- Key indicators:
  - $34M in total assets
  - $30M in liabilities
  - $4M in net assets
  - $1.76M in cash

Statement of Activities (YTD through February 2025)

- Reflects financial performance from **start of fiscal year through February**.
- **Revenue** is **$530K below budget**, primarily due to **under-enrollment**.
  - Budgeted for 680 students; actual enrollment was 650 as of the last approved bill.
- **Expenses** are **$539K over budget**, largely unchanged since the prior board meeting.
  - Overspending continues in previously identified categories.

Enrollment Update

- Enrollment continues to fluctuate and impact financial planning.
- As of March 21, enrollment dropped to **647** (loss of three students since last update).
  - Two students at the middle school are pending expulsion due to disciplinary issues.
  - One high school student left due to credit recovery concerns.

Discussion Items

- **Fundraising Expense Clarification**:
  - William Council inquired about fundraising expenditures.
  - Li'Esha explained that **student recruitment is coded under fundraising** due to the original chart of accounts—not traditional fundraising such as grant writing.
- **Budget Planning for FY 2025-2026**:
  - Angel Vasquez asked if the next year's budget would be presented at the next meeting.
  - Li'Esha confirmed she will present the **FY 2025-2026 budget** at the **next board meeting**.
- **Cash Flow Outlook**:
  - Cash flow will remain **inconsistent** due to bi-monthly state payments and enrollment-based funding.

- Emphasis on **realistic budgeting** and **organizational restructuring** for next year to align with expected enrollment and build reserves.

Facilities Update – Potential Condominium Conversion

- Exploring a **condominium conversion project** to lower occupancy costs and increase long-term financial security.
  - A third-party organization has conducted a **walkthrough** and is **negotiating building upgrades and concessions with the landlord**.
  - The landlord is **supportive**, recognizing the benefit of extending the lease (possibly up to 30 more years).
- **Next Steps**:
  - Conduct research on similar charter schools that have gone this route.
  - Consult with the **NYC Charter Center** regarding any regulatory concerns or limitations for charter schools.
  - Goal: Determine feasibility and avoid potential compliance risks.
- **Potential Savings**:
  - Estimated annual savings of up to **$200K**, plus possible **free rent periods and landlord-funded renovations**.

Compliance

- **Wendy Ramos** provided an update on completed and upcoming compliance reports

IV. Charter Renewal

A. Updates

Dr. Karen Valbrun reported that she and members of the Board of Trustees met with the school's authorizer to discuss the upcoming charter renewal recommendation. The feedback from the meeting was **very favorable**. The **Board of Regents is scheduled to make a final decision on May 6th**. Dr. Valbrun will share the official term of the renewal once it is confirmed.

V. Executive Director Update

A. Executive Director Update

Dr. Karen Valbrun presented:

Board & Governance

- The team is proactively responding to recommendations, especially in finance. Reporting has improved, and efforts are underway to reestablish consistent communication with Gus and meet all upcoming deadlines.

- Finance/Education Academic Committee (EAC) meeting schedule will be adjusted; confirmation needed for new meeting times due to holiday conflicts.

Finance & Operations

- New formatting of financial deliverables has been implemented and well received.
- In-house recruitment team has launched targeted outreach:
- Weekly Wednesday school visits to recruit incoming 6th and 9th graders.
- Over 30 schools visited in under two weeks.
- Attended a recent charter fair, which yielded some applications. The next phase focuses on turning those applications into actual student enrollments.
- Weekend recruitment events continue to support enrollment goals.

School Culture & Family Engagement

- Increase in family engagement through virtual meetings; positive feedback shared and addressed collaboratively.
- Parent organization elections held, but with only one candidate. Still assessing a fair process to ensure parent representation at the board level.
- Goal: Strengthen attendance accountability. Current year-to-date attendance is 93%; the goal remains 95%. Staff survey to be distributed to gather feedback on current grading and attendance policies. Proposal for potential changes to be brought to the board in late April.

Key Metrics (as of March):

- Total Enrollment: 649
- Attendance Rate (February): 93.7%
- Special Education: 109 students

VI. Academic Update

A. State of the School

Middle School Report Presented by Nikolas Weiss on behalf of Dr. Joye

Honor Roll: 140 students
Promotion in Doubt: 37 students (number expected to decrease with intervention and student responsiveness)

Academic Interventions:

- Targeted re-teaching using exit tickets
- Small-group instruction based on student needs
- Summer Boost program: Academic enrichment and field trips funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies

Testing Prep:

- Use of Questar and Rally for practice
- CBT interface training for students
- State testing window shared across grades 5–8 (April 28 – May 13)

High School Report Presented by Fred Givens

Academic Progress:

- Notable strengths in Japanese and Italian courses
- 11th grade performing best: Over 100 students with A grades
- Areas for improvement: Higher failure rates in courses with new teachers or coverage (e.g., English 4, Earth Science, English 1)

Instructional Focus:

- Emphasis on classroom layout and student collaboration
- Increased use of trackers for monitoring student understanding
- Encouraging student talk and data-informed re-teaching

College Access:

- Acceptance rate: 93.95%
- Notable acceptances: Boston College, St. Lawrence University
- Over $9 million awarded in scholarships and aid
- College tours scheduled (PA to MA)
- Luis R. awarded $20,000 flexible scholarship via OneGoal

Looking Ahead
Budget and curriculum planning for 2025–26 will prioritize STEAM program expansion, supported by reallocating funds from salary adjustments.

VII. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

A. Vasquez made a motion to adjoun.
M. Vargas 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 8:15 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
W. Ramos