APPROVED

New Heights Academy Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time
Thursday September 25, 2025 at 7:00 PM

Location
1818 Amsterdam Avenue (Conference Room)
New York, NY 10031

Trustees Present
A. Vasquez, N. Sunshine, N. Weiss, R. Zumaya

Trustees Absent
A. Cummings, D. Ortiz, M. Vargas, W. Council

Guests Present
Crystal Joye, Emmanuel Alagbon, Fred Givens, K. Valbrun, L. Garcia, W. Ramos (remote)

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 Sep 25, 2025 at 7:11 PM.

C. Approve Minutes

A. Vasquez made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting on 08-28-25.
N. Sunshine seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

II. Presentation by UNDERDOG

A. Underdog Strategies

Presenter: Allison Newell, Co-Founder, Underdog Strategies

Ms. Newell presented a proposal outlining how **Underdog Strategies** could support student recruitment through **digital marketing, phone outreach, and lead generation**. She described the firm's background in charter school advocacy and digital engagement, noting that they currently work with approximately ten charter schools across Manhattan and the Bronx.

Key points discussed:

- Due to existing commitments, Underdog cannot provide in-person canvassing for New Heights at this time but can support digital marketing and phone banking.
- Cost per lead ranges from $30–$60, with approximately 20–30% of leads converting to applications and 10–15% of applicants enrolling.
- The firm's monthly cost is approximately $6,000, billed on a month-to-month basis.

Board Discussion:

- Members expressed concern about the lack of canvassing support, noting that community engagement and face-to-face outreach are vital to recruitment success.
- Trustees discussed developing an internal or local street team approach for canvassing at community sites (e.g., laundromats, supermarkets, playgrounds).
- Suggestions included engaging local artists and influencers (e.g., Ivan Velez) and social media content that appeals directly to students.
- The Board agreed that additional conversation with Underdog and potential in-house canvassing strategies should occur before finalizing a contract.

Action Item:

- Ms. Garcia and Mr. Vasquez will confer with Ms. Valbrun to review possible canvassing options and follow up with Underdog regarding next steps.

III. Student Board Representative

A. Introduction

Presenter: Karen Valbrun

Dr. Valbrun introduced Student Representative Emmanuel, a senior at New Heights Academy. Emmanuel shared his background and academic interests, including his participation in AP courses, dual enrollment, and various student leadership and mentorship programs. Student Feedback Highlights:

- Students experienced delays with class schedules, Chromebooks, and PowerSchool access at the start of the school year.
- Students praised the guidance counseling team for being highly supportive and accessible.

Leadership acknowledged the issues raised and outlined ongoing efforts to improve technology management, communication, and student engagement

IV. Board Professional Development

A. The Five Dysfunctions of a Team (Book Discussion)

Facilitator: Karen Valbrun

Trustees and leadership discussed Chapter 1: Trust, reflecting on how vulnerability, accountability, and open communication strengthen team effectiveness. Discussion Highlights:

- Members connected the themes to current school operations and personal leadership experiences.
- The importance of addressing conflict constructively and maintaining accountability among leaders was emphasized.
- The Board agreed to read Chapter 2: Vulnerability for the next meeting.

V. Board Committee Discussion

A. Board Committees

Mr. Vasquez reviewed proposed committee assignments. Committees will meet monthly, prior to full Board meetings.

Proposed Committees:

- Executive Committee: Angel Vasquez, Daniel Ortiz, and Megan Vargas
- Education Accountability Committee: Nilolas Weiss and Megan Vargas
- Finance & Audit Committee: William Council and Angel Vasquez

- Fundraising Committee: Amryll Cummings, Nicky Sunshine, Rocio Zumaya

No objections were raised. The structure was accepted as presented.

VI. Financial Policies & Procedures

A. Financial Policies & Procedures

Presenter: Li'Esha Garcia

Ms. Garcia presented updates to the Fiscal Policies and Procedures Handbook, noting it had not been revised in 10 years. Updates included:

- Revised debit card procedures to reflect practical internal controls while maintaining accountability.
- Increased dual signature thresholds to align with the school's current size and financial activity.
- Updated titles and names of personnel.

A. Vasquez made a motion to approve the updates.
N. Sunshine seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

VII. School Update

A. School Report - Building Strong Structures

Presenter: Karen Valbrun

Dr. Valbrun reported on the following:

Enrollment and Academics

- Current enrollment: 609 students, 74 below projection (target 683).
- Special Education: 100 students; ELLs: 94 students.
- Focus areas: Strengthening instruction in science and math, small-group instruction, and enhanced support for ELLs.

Engagement and Well-Being

- Weekly feedback surveys from students and staff are being adjusted to a biweekly cycle.
- Initiated a three-part Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships advisory series for 11th graders.

- Continued parent support for social services, food insecurity, and housing assistance.

Operations

- Increased focus on attendance accountability by grade teams.
- Continued progress on compliance and policy updates.
- Considering longer-term adjustments to the school configuration if middle school enrollment remains low.

Innovation and Growth

- Expansion of AP Computer Science and City College Biology programs.
- Positive reception of the Yondr phone policy and SmartPass system.
- Field trips to Broadway productions (“Hell’s Kitchen” and “MJ the Musical”) to enhance arts engagement.

Finance Report
Presenter: Li’Esha Garcia

Ms. Garcia provided a financial overview:

- Budgeted enrollment: 683 students; actual enrollment: 609.
- Revenue shortfall of approximately $1.6 million due to lower enrollment.
- Current projected deficit: approximately $1.3 million.
- Reserve balance: approximately $100,000.

Next Steps:

- Exploring additional funding and cost-saving measures, including a leasehold condominium arrangement that could save $200,000 annually in taxes.
- Reviewing budget cuts if enrollment does not increase by December.
- Continued search for enrollment and fundraising opportunities.

The Board expressed concern over the financial implications of the shortfall and emphasized the urgency of recruitment and strategic planning.

Middle School Update
Presenter: Dr. Crystal Joye

Highlights included:

- Review of student and teacher survey data showing strong engagement but variable instructional experiences.
- MAP assessment results indicated growth opportunities in mathematics and literacy; intervention groups are being organized accordingly.

High School Update
Presenter: Fred Givens, High School Principal

Yondr Phone Policy: A student survey of 30 students showed mixed feedback—some frustration about limited access, but many, especially 10th graders, reported improved focus. Overall, implementation has been positive with few issues. Minor concerns include lost pouches and increased paper use for schedules and notices.

Social-Emotional Learning: Juniors participated in *Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships* workshops. The social work team expanded with a second intern, increasing student support capacity.

Discipline: One significant incident occurred, leading to a short suspension. Four total suspensions were issued this period, each resolved quickly. Behavior overall remains stable.

Academics: The first grade check is scheduled for September 30, 2025; detailed results will be shared at the next meeting.

Schoolwide Highlights

Student Engagement & SEL:
SEL Fridays and advisory projects continue to promote perseverance and teamwork. Students completed creative projects and Latin Heritage Month activities.

House System:
The high school expanded to five houses in grades 9 and 11. House Captains have been elected, and alumni engagement remains strong, with 16 alumni on staff (11 as teachers).

Culture & Behavior:
Kickboard launched schoolwide as a digital behavior incentive system. Students earn or spend points redeemable at the “Dino” school store to encourage positive behavior.

Academic Supports:
The high school launched a daily SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) program for grades 9–10. Spanish-language books have been ordered to support multilingual learners. Teachers continue to share inclusive practices and instructional resources.

Staff Collaboration:
Teachers report growing confidence in supporting ELL students, aided by bilingual staff and shared strategies from last year’s training.

VIII. Executive Session

A. Governance Matters

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

IX. 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 9:00 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
W. Ramos