APPROVED

Bridge Preparatory Charter School

Minutes

Board Meeting

Date and Time
Thursday October 23, 2025 at 7:00 PM

Location
Bridge Preparatory Charter School
Petrides Educational Complex
715 Ocean Terrace, Bldg. A
Staten Island, NY 10301

Remote Locations:

- *113 West 60th St., New York, NY 10023*
- *3298 Victory Blvd, Staten Island, NY 10314*

Join Zoom Meeting:
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Trustees Present

Amanda Wolkowitz, Jennifer Sammartino-Mallen, Mark Harmon-Vaught, Nicole DeStefano, Rebecca Peters (remote), Tara Gore (remote), Traci Frey

Trustees Absent
None

Ex Officio Members Present
Tim Castanza

Guests Present
Kathy Baldassano (remote), Rose Marie Illuzzi (remote)

I. Opening Items

A. Record Attendance

As per Public Officers Law, Article 7, § 103-a *(Videoconferencing by public bodies)* although Board members Tara Gore and Rebecca Peters are not present in-person for this meeting, they are attending via videoconference from locations posted on the public meeting notice/agenda and open to the public; they are therefore considered to be in attendance for purposes of quorum and are permitted to vote. **QUORUM IS MET FOR THIS MEETING.**

B. Call the Meeting to Order

Mark Harmon-Vaught called a meeting of the board of trustees of Bridge Preparatory Charter School to order on Thursday Oct 23, 2025 at 7:03 PM.

C. Welcome & Kick-Off

T. Frey offered a welcome to everyone. We're very happy to welcome our brand new board member, Jennifer Sammartino. We're very excited to have you all here this month, so thank you for joining us.

D. Approve Minutes of Board Meeting on 09/11/25

Mark Harmon-Vaught made a motion to approve the minutes from Board Meeting on 09-11-25.
Nicole DeStefano seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** unanimously to approve the motion.

E. Approve Minutes of Special Board Meeting on 09/15/25

Mark Harmon-Vaught made a motion to approve the minutes from Special Board Meeting on 09-15-25.

Traci Frey seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** unanimously to approve the motion.
M. Harmon-Vaught thanked everybody and said tonight's meeting will be in two parts. In the first portion, we'll do our committee updates and discuss our NYSED midterm report which was circulated to the board in advance, and then we'll move into closed Executive Session for other discussions. But we're beginning with our CEO report from T. Castanza.

II. Reports & Updates

A. CEO Report

T. Castanza gave the following CEO report:

- **FAMILY ASSOCIATION UPDATE**: The Family Association held their elections for their new president about 2 weeks ago and a new president was elected. We're excited because it is both a current parent and an alumni parent who was elected: Georgia Orosz. She has a lot of good ideas and a lot of passion, and someone that really knows the school as it was and as it is now. So we're excited about that, and we have that knowledge on the Board as well, so it's a good addition to have for us at the school level. The new president has decided not to seek a Board of Trustees seat. And so that means per the new changes to the bylaws, there will be a new election for the Board of Trustees representative from the Family Association. The only limitations being that that person has to be able to serve for the 2 year term that the Board bylaws set out, limiting the person to be a parent of a student in kindergarten through 5th grade parents. There's been some interest from members in that group, and the anticipation is that they will have their election, at their next meeting, which is scheduled for October 28th. Once that representative is elected, he will let the Board of Trustees know. T. Frey reminded him that we're still subject to approval by the state (NYSED). T. Castanza responded that's correct and we will do a clear job during that representative's election process of explaining specifically what the Board member role looks like because in the past the Family Association president has known what the role is, and it makes it a little easier. This may be someone who is new to this so we will do some good explaining on what the role entails. And he has some questions for the representative nominee because this will leave the hands of the nominating committee, and go to the new executive board who also need to understand some of the processes. The Family Association elections themselves were contested due to some process issues, but everything worked out fine. He's very pleased with the full slate of new Family Association officers from a very diverse group of families which really represent the community of students that we serve.
- **RESIGNING CEO POSITION:** T. Castanza stated that he will be stepping aside and leaving his role as Chief Executive Officer at Bridge Prep, effective January 2026. This timeline will allow time to gradually transition. He made this personal decision and shared his thoughts in person and through email with our families and staff. This has been a very emotional week, and he chooses not to use this time right now to

rehash everything because we will have time together to do that later. He spoke with the staff on Tuesday afternoon and the reaction was as expected, with some shock and a lot of feelings. He told the staff how proud he is of their growth, and the growth that we've made as a school and a community over the course of 8 years. It is a drastically different place than where we started, The amount of growth that has been made by our teams also translates over to the Board of Trustees. The growth that the Board and the organization has made as a whole, and how it has evolved from an idea to a place where students feel truly seen, feel truly heard, feel truly valued, and are getting access to an education that they were not getting elsewhere. Parents continue to choose us and wonder how we do this. It is a testament to a lot of people, some who are no longer here but worked here at some point and contributed something. He was the face of Bridge Prep for a long time, but Bridge Prep is never one person and never about one person. It's about a group of people that really believe in what they do. He feels very hopeful about the team that sits on the Board of Trustees and those that work in this building every day. And he knows that Bridge Prep will continue to be strong and whoever comes next will take it to higher levels under the Board's leadership. This is his way of leading up to thank you, but we'll share more appreciation at a later time because there's still work to do. M. Harmon-Vaught remarked on behalf of the board and others that there will be plenty of moments to celebrate and recognize T. Castanza and his contributions, and he wants to mention one specific thing from yesterday, which relates to an item on tonight's agenda, the NYSED Midterm Review. Yesterday, we joined T. Castanza in a meeting with Paolo, our NYSED liaison. And our relationship with NYSED is challenging sometimes, although we're grateful for their leadership and support. But when we shared the news about T. Castanza's resignation, Paolo was saddened, but reflected just how positively he was feeling about where the school is now. It was the first time we've ever been on a call with a NYSED representative with that level of desire to support us and a genuine, clear sense that we are on the right path. And there will be so many moments to recognize T. Castanza's leadership in getting us there, but we are on the path we need to be on and our CEO's leadership has made that possible. We want to say thank you in this moment. There'll be more moments in the future to do that, but we just want to say thank you, Tim. Thank you. T. Castanza replied that Bridge Prep is feeling more comfortable, confident and positive. He led with the NYSED Midterm Report when he met with staff to let them know that a lot of staff worked really, hard last year. C. Otterbeck, worked hard to improve teaching and learning, the area we wanted to improve. And our team, Traci and Kara, really got that work done and they deserve to be recognized along with the teachers that continue to do the work. So we're on the right path. We need to keep going, because we're doing the right things. So thank you again, and he agrees that the call with NYSED was very fine. NYSED was not only positive, but really hopeful and asked us to tell them more about what's next.

B. Academic Committee Report

T. Frey gave the following report on the *Academic Committee* meeting on October 6, 2025:

- **HIRING & STAFF UPDATE:** One of the social workers left. The vacancy was immediately filled with the current Dean of Culture, and no students are missing mandates. The Dean position was posted, and candidates were interviewed. T. Castanza will let us know if someone has been hired. One 2nd grade teacher left, and they filled that vacancy on October 16th. They had hired someone for the HR Generalist position, but the candidate backed out at the last minute, but they made an offer to a new person who accepted and starts on October 29th.
- **NYSED MIDTERM REPORT** was reviewed at the committee meeting, which we're going to go into more depth later tonight.
- **CLASS EXPANSIONS**: We are opening a second section of 2nd grade, and each section will have between 10 and 12 students instead of a larger classroom of 24 and they're hiring a new teacher. Keep in mind that this is the same group of students who, as 1st graders, went through multiple teacher changes, so we wanted to be wary of that and make sure that this particular group has a good start to their 2nd grade. T. Castanza and his staff met with families at Back to School Night, which went well. The new teacher is working out well and that group of 2nd grader's families are very happy. No sections other than that additional 2nd grade are going to be added.
- **STUDENT ENROLLMENT & RETENTION:** One of the things that we need to focus on is enrolling and retaining English Language Learner (ELL) students, which is something NYSED has pointed out to us multiple times, and we're very aware of. But we notice when we look at other charter schools on Staten Island that some of them do have a higher percentage of ELL students than the district schools but we have a higher percentage of students with IEPs and who are economically disadvantaged than the district schools, So it balances out, but it doesn't balance out enough for NYSED which still flags for it. So we have to do a better job of recruiting and retaining ELL students. Total student enrollment is fluctuating and we're in the 250 to 255 student range now, and our maximum student number is 270 so we still have room if we wanted to accept more students. T. Castanza and his staff noticed that more students are moving out or transferring earlier than before. Some of it has to do with a misalignment with placement of setting, if this is not the right setting for their IEP needs. Some of it has to do with siblings being enrolled in different schools and it's easier for the parent if they're both in the same school. We also noticed that the students who are leaving are tilted more towards students with IEPs than general education students. NYSED has repeatedly asked us how we are serving our General Education students, so we need to make sure that, in addition to serving our students with IEPs, that we're also looking at better serving our Gen Ed students. Most of the student movement is in the early childhood grades (K-2) rather than in the upper grades.
- **NEW DATA SYSTEMS**: Principal Livingston shared some data from Culture. They use a program called Dean's List, which gives a breakdown of incidents. They're rolling out the Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS). They were doing a

kickoff for students 2 weeks ago. As for the teacher observations, every teacher has been seen at least once, and they're in the middle of phase one. Teachers like the immediate feedback. A complaint that we heard from teachers at our focus group last year was that teachers were not getting feedback right away. Now teachers are getting immediate feedback and are sharing that they're welcoming it. And Principal Livingston also shared a MAP workbook that teachers use for data to identify students for MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) for the supports they need. Teachers are now meeting and discussing flexible grouping, which hadn't really happened before. Previously they were using MAP data to put kids in groups, but then those groups weren't changing until the next MAP assessment, which is a couple of months. Kids should be moving, changing groups much more fluidly. Teachers are now working in data Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) which are giving them skills on how to actually take the data and use it to change classroom instruction. Previously teachers mentioned that they were being given data but they didn't know how to use it or what to do with it. Now they're going through activities where they're learning what to do with the data, how to look at the data and figure out what the data is telling them how to regroup students or know what to reteach. They focus on this every Tuesday during their data PLC.

- **ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS**: The Reading Interventionist is now focusing on Gen Ed students that are on the cusp of ELA proficiency (Level 3). If a student is considered proficient, that means they scored at least a 3 or a 4 on their NYS ELA exam. If they scored a Level 2, they are approaching proficiency and if they score a Level 1 they are not meeting proficiency. Students that are on the cusp are students that score as high Level 2 and it wouldn't take much to push them into Level 3. The Reading Interventionist has identified which students are high Level 2 and need a little extra support. After-school academic intervention will be open to every student that's on the cusp.
- **NEW READING PROGRAM:** *Wit & Wisdom* is the new reading curriculum that the school started this year, which teachers are still learning how to navigate the system, how to use the system, how to integrate the system. They're working on annotating lessons to be able to identify the learning objectives, how to scaffold learning for students, and how they can differentiate for the students in their classrooms. So there's a learning curve. There's a lot of resources that come with the program and teachers will be getting more professional development from the *Wit & Wisdom* company who will come and work with teachers so that they can get up to speed.

T. Castanza wants to add two further details to the *Academic Committee* Report:

- **AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS**: He has been meeting with Principal Livingston to talk about the need to get started on after-school intervention. We're having a small issue with not having enough teachers that want to work after-school programs. This is the first time that's happened. The regular school day ends between 3 and 3:15 PM and after-school intervention ends at 5:30 PM two days per week. Saturday Academy is different. There's a demand for people to teach Saturday Academy, so you would

think that we should have the opposite problem, right? But he understands why: childcare, also, teachers work a long day and are working really hard. They're being pushed hard, maybe harder than they have been pushed, and so they want to get home. We also have a lot of newer younger staff that are still attending classes themselves and many are going right from here to class. It's something that we're going to watch, and Principal Livingston and T. Castanza are trying to troubleshoot some ways to fix that because we don't want to not offer after-school intervention. Our families like it and been more historically successful for us than Saturday Academy, but we can't offer it without teachers that want to do it. And it's not something that we want to bring in external teachers to do, but it was a suggestion raised by a colleague. His colleague at the Hungerford School asked if we had any need for staff for some other things, and so that's something that we could discuss at the Campus Council if we decide we want to do that. We also have a NYCID after-school program, Monday through Friday, but it's not academic in nature. It's more of a social enrichment after-school program and gets its staffing through NYCID. We will be sending surveys at the end of the 1st trimester to staff, students and families and one of the questions for teachers asks what would incentivize them to want to work in after-school programs or why do they not want to work after-school so we can figure out the root causes for this. We've given the green light for Saturday Academy to go, and that's starting in November. He will give the *Academic Committee* the date at the next meeting.

- **ENROLLMENT UPDATE:** Student enrollment numbers are still around 253-254 students. We are seeing more movement in students leaving than we've seen historically this early in the school year. He asked our enrollment coordinator, who's done a phenomenal job keeping the enrollment process moving, to do an audit and to see who's leaving, what grade are they in, and do we know why they're leaving? And we did an exit interview, similar to what we do when a staff member leaves. We have a small enough school so we've been able to get reasons and rationale for why students are leaving. Is it something that was our fault, or was it something out of our control? And we're going to debrief the results at our cabinet meeting on November 4th. We'll keep everybody posted on that.

C. Finance Committee Report & Review of School's Audit

R. Peters gave the following report on the *Finance Committee* meeting held on October 14, 2025:

- **FINANCIAL AUDIT**: The committee was mainly focused on the audit, which was clean, as it has been in past years. As a reminder, the financial audit is a yearly requirement that all charter schools must have. A quick audit conversation is always good - it's the lengthier and more detailed audits you need to worry about. We sat down with the auditor and she went through the report with us. There was nothing to note from our end, other than a few questions about some of the wording. Thank you to T. Castanza and the team for getting us through, and our financial consultant, Josh from BoostEd. The school is in very healthy financial condition and the audit

was clean. The auditor didn't have any notes for us beyond the regular scheduled scope of the audit. So, all's good on that front.

- **OPTIMIZING BANKING STRUCTURE**: We were planning to move some bank accounts this past summer as a project for the *Finance Committee*, but we are still sorting that out. We want to make sure that we are making the most of our bank accounts and optimize our finances. Thankfully we're in a place where that is one of the tasks for the Finance Committee to look into. T. Castanza added that obviously, we always like a clean audit, and we've historically had perfectly squeaky clean audits, no school-based process issues. We updated the *Financial Policies & Procedures Handbook* this year, so in next year's audit, they'll be looking at how we adapted to the changes that were made to the policies and procedures in the new handbook. They were very clear, when they talk about strong fiscal condition, they're not just talking about good policies and procedures, or not doing anything crazy or out of the ordinary, They're talking about how much cash on hand we have in the bank and thinking about future goals. How are we maximizing that cash on hand? We're optimizing our bank accounts, but how are we really thoughtfully using that cash because it just continues to grow. On Monday, he will meet with Josh for a budget refresh, to look at the budget approved in June, and see where we are in terms of spending and projections. Based on the audit results we're going to see that the revenue that we have from cash interest is significantly higher than we budgeted for. And if not spent this year, it will continue to enhance and grow the cash on hand. So his recommendation is to give the *Finance Committee* some really thoughtful guidance, focus and support on using that cash. How are schools that have large cash on hand using their cash? What can we do with this cash, and what can we not do? How does it get realized/actualized for students in classrooms, or teachers, or families, and how does it not? We need to know because eventually NYSED will question what are we doing with all the cash on hand? M. Harmon-Vaught commented that it's a good problem to have that we need to focus on moving forward. It comes back to the question of the highest and best use of our money for our school's mission, and making sure that we're spending the money on students. The Board can vote on the audit now.

D. Approval of Bridge Prep Charter School's Financial Audit

Rebecca Peters made a motion to approve the Bridge Preparatory Charter School's financial audit for the year ended June 30, 2025, as presented to the Board.
Mark Harmon-Vaught seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** unanimously to approve the motion.

III. Special Areas of Focus

A. NYS Education Department's Mid-Term Visit Report

T. Castanza began the discussion by explaining that Bridge Prep just recently completed a charter renewal cycle with NYSED; renewal terms come in the following increments. 2, 3, 4,

and 5 years. Five years is the optimal goal, which means that NYSED believes your school is exemplary and is meeting or exceeding all of their charter performance benchmarks. This was our first charter renewal with NYSED and they gave us a 3-year renewal term because there were specific benchmarks that we were scored as "approaching" and other benchmarks that we scored as "meets". But we were scored as "approaching" in enough benchmarks that they awarded us only a 3-year renewal, A decision with which we disagreed and benchmark scoring that we disputed. But we're moving past that and trying to figure out the best strategy to get a better and longer renewal term next time with a goal of 4 or 5 years. Prior to NYSED's most recent mid-term visit on May 16, 2025, we looked at the areas where we were scored "approaches" to see how we could move those benchmarks to "meets". He then highlighted those specific benchmarks where we did make those gains in the latest NYSED visit report dated September 30, 2025. The NYSED report was shared with the Board members and discussion followed regarding the benchmarks which changed from "approaches" to "meets": Benchmark #2 *(Teaching & Learning)*; Benchmark #8 *(Mission and Key Design Elements)*; Benchmark #10 *(Legal Compliance)*. On the NYSED report, we now "meet" 7 out of the 10 benchmarks. There are only 3 benchmarks remaining "approaches": Benchmark #1 *(Student Performance)*; Benchmark #7 *(Organizational Capacity)*; and Benchmark #9 *(Enrollment, Recruitment, and Retention)*. The NYSED report is considered to be favorable and we are optimistic that we will see more growth and improvement in all benchmark areas.
A question and answer session followed regarding the NYSED report.

IV. Other Business

A. Proposed CLOSED Executive Session

Mark Harmon-Vaught made a motion to enter into CLOSED EXECUTIVE SESSION as per as per Public Officers Law, Article 7, §105 (1)(f) to discuss the employment history of a particular person.
Traci Frey seconded the motion.
The Board of Trustees entered into CLOSED EXECUTIVE SESSION at 7:52 PM.
The board **VOTED** unanimously to approve the motion.
The Board of Trustees returned to public OPEN MEETING SESSION at 8:34 PM.

V. 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 8:34 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Kathy Baldassano