APPROVED

Lawrence Family Development Charter School

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

Date and Time
Wednesday August 13, 2025 at 5:30 PM

Location
Lower School Conference Room
34 West Street
Lawrence, MA 01841

ZOOM

Trustees Present
C. Needham (remote), D. DeFillippo (remote), E. Nolberto (remote), G. Lopez (remote), J. Cedeno (remote), J. Henriquez (remote), J. Tejada (remote)

Trustees Absent
L. McRae, L. Perez, R. Almanzar

Trustees who left before the meeting adjourned
J. Henriquez

Guests Present
A. Croes, C. Parcell (remote), D. Thakkar, L. Lawler (remote), M. Ventre, N. Arpin (remote), P. Macario, S. Stukuls, Y. Rodriguez

I. Opening Items

A.

Record Attendance

B. Call the Meeting to Order

G. Lopez called a meeting of the board of trustees of Lawrence Family Development Charter School to order on Wednesday Aug 13, 2025 at 5:44 PM.

C. Pledge of Allegiance

D. Approve minutes from the June 11, 2025 BOT Meeting

D. DeFillippo made a motion to approve the minutes from LFDCS Board of Trustees Meeting on 06-11-25.
J. Henriquez seconded the motion.
Dave D. asked whether we had been able to hire a school adjustment counselor.
Darshan T. responded that we have not yet found one.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

J. Henriquez	Aye
G. Lopez	Aye
C. Needham	Aye
J. Tejada	Aye
L. McRae	Absent
D. DeFillippo	Aye
E. Nolberto	Aye
R. Almanzar	Absent
J. Cedeno	Aye
L. Perez	Absent

E. Approve minutes from the June 18, 2025 BOT Meeting

D. DeFillippo made a motion to approve the minutes from LFDCS Board of Trustees Meeting on 06-18-25.
E. Nolberto seconded the motion.
Dave D. asked to update the salary amount to $226,800.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

D. DeFillippo	Aye
J. Cedeno	Aye
G. Lopez	Aye
L. Perez	Absent
R. Almanzar	Absent
J. Tejada	Aye
E. Nolberto	Aye
L. McRae	Absent
C. Needham	Aye

Roll Call

J. Henriquez Aye

F. Approve minutes from the June 25, 2025 BOT Meeting

D. DeFillippo made a motion to approve the minutes from LFDCS Board of Trustees Meeting on 06-25-25.
J. Tejada seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

E. Nolberto Aye
C. Needham Aye
L. Perez Absent
R. Almanzar Absent
J. Cedeno Aye
J. Tejada Aye
L. McRae Absent
G. Lopez Aye
D. DeFillippo Aye
J. Henriquez Aye

G. Approve minutes from the July 15, 2025 BOT Meeting

D. DeFillippo made a motion to approve the minutes from Board of Trustees Meeting-Zoom on 07-15-25.
J. Henriquez seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

D. DeFillippo Aye
J. Henriquez Aye
J. Cedeno Aye
L. Perez Absent
G. Lopez Aye
R. Almanzar Absent
L. McRae Absent
J. Tejada Aye
E. Nolberto Aye
C. Needham Aye

II. Superintendent's Report

A. Annual Report

Darshan T. reported on the annual report metric regarding board attendance. He noted that the school had to mark this category as “not met,” with a recorded attendance rate of

only 67.3%. He expects DESE will request strategies for how the school plans to improve this measure and avoid a “not met” result in next year’s report.

Darshan invited the board to share ideas, suggesting members take time to reflect and bring forward recommendations at a future meeting.

Dave D. proposed that members pledge to meet a 75% attendance rate. He added that if a member cannot meet that commitment, they should reconsider their position on the board.
Elizabeth N. agreed with Dave’s point and recommended holding one-on-one meetings with each trustee to discuss their intentions for the upcoming year and encourage realistic commitments.
Darshan then asked whether the bylaws should be revisited. Elizabeth agreed, and Dave pointed out that attendance is already addressed in the current bylaws. He also suggested adding a provision regarding the time members join meetings.

Elizabeth N. reiterated the value of one-on-one meetings to assess members’ ability to attend regularly, with the possibility of reevaluating participation if necessary.

Chris N. concluded by recommending that board attendance be reviewed at every meeting, or at least every other meeting.

B. Auditors

Darshan T. provided the Board with a summary regarding the new auditing firm under consideration. He explained that the school had previously discussed whether to continue with its long-standing auditors, Anstiss & Company (now known as Grassi), or to transition to a new firm. Given the separation of LFDCS and LFD, the Finance Committee determined it would be more appropriate to engage a different, independent auditor. The committee agreed and authorized the search for alternatives.

Out of the firms reviewed, the school received a proposal from AAFCPAs. Darshan, along with Chris N. and Mark V., participated in a call with the auditors. The proposal was shared with the Board for review, and Darshan highlighted key qualifications:
Charter School Expertise: Over 50 years of experience, including work with approximately 30 charter schools in Massachusetts; relationships with CMOs; involvement with state and national charter associations.
Regulatory Relationships: Direct connections with DESE and other regulators; expertise in charter renewals, compliance, and best practices.
Benchmarking & Best Practices: Financial ratio analysis and peer comparisons to support budgeting and growth.
Facility & Financing Guidance: Experience with debt financing, tax credits, and facility purchases, including lender introductions.

Independent & Agile: Strong commitment to independence, ensuring consistent service and timely decision-making.
The proposed audit timeline includes three phases:
Planning & Compliance (Aug 2025): Review of policies, internal controls, risk assessment, and IT systems.
Fieldwork (Sept 2025): Transaction testing, analytical review, and independent verification.
Reporting (Oct 2025): Presentation of financial statements, management letter, trend analysis, and benchmarks.

Mark V. noted that benchmarking will be particularly useful in comparing budgets and practices with other successful charter schools. He reminded the Board that the Fund has worked with Grassi for the past five years but expressed support for transitioning to AAFCPAs to ensure an objective perspective. He also mentioned AAFCPAs' prior experience working with the school's attorneys. Given the aggressive timeline, he recommended that the Board authorize the Finance/Audit Committee to accept the proposal, oversee the audit, and report back to the full Board.

Chris N. added that the FY24 audit presented a conflict of interest, as Ralph C. simultaneously served as both the nonprofit director and the school superintendent. He also noted that Anstiss had limited communication with Darshan T. during that process, which was an oversight. In hindsight, this arrangement was not ideal. Additionally, a staff member at the Fund has a family relationship with one of the auditors at Anstiss. For these reasons, Chris N. strongly recommended moving away from Anstiss & Co.

Mark V. asked Chris N. how he envisioned structuring the Audit Committee. Chris N. recommended that the Board first vote to approve AAFCPAs as the new auditors and then vote separately to authorize the Finance Committee to manage the audit process going forward.
C. Needham made a motion to accept AAFCPAs as the new auditing firm.
D. DeFillippo seconded the motion.
Chris N. also wanted to note that with the acquisition of Anstiss & Co. by Grassi, their rate did also increase.

He believes that the school will be getting a higher quality of service with the new auditing company.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

J. Henriquez	Aye
G. Lopez	Aye
E. Nolberto	Aye
J. Cedeno	Aye
L. McRae	Absent
L. Perez	Absent

Roll Call

C. Needham	Aye
R. Almanzar	Absent
J. Tejada	Aye
D. DeFillippo	Aye

C. Needham made a motion to the board to delegate the Finance Committee as the Auditing Committee for the fiscal year 2025-2026 to be efficient and getting this done completed by the deadline at the end of October and reveiw before reporting it to the full board.
D. DeFillippo seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

L. McRae	Absent
E. Nolberto	Aye
L. Perez	Absent
R. Almanzar	Absent
G. Lopez	Aye
D. DeFillippo	Aye
C. Needham	Aye
J. Cedeno	Aye
J. Tejada	Aye
J. Henriquez	Aye

C. Lease Agreement

Darshan T. reported that the school is close to finalizing the lease, emphasizing that this is one of the most important contracts the school can enter into, given the significant responsibility and financial commitment involved. He noted that there are still items that must be carefully negotiated and reviewed. The process has been ongoing for more than two months.

While all parties have agreed to the terms, the challenge remains putting the language into writing in a way that is clear and mutually understood. Darshan T. had anticipated presenting the final version today, but last-minute changes arose this morning that still need to be addressed.
Mark V. shared that four major components remain under negotiation. He noted that there was a call earlier today with attorneys, and another call is expected in the coming days to provide a counterproposal to the fund’s attorney. He expressed confidence that negotiations will be finalized in time for the start of the school year.

The fund has proposed a 60-day closing period for the purchase, which the school considers unrealistic. The school would require a minimum of 180 days. Mark V. added that negotiations over square footage, previously a major issue, have been resolved.

Darshan T. also raised the question of who will conduct the building survey and whether it would be prudent for both parties to obtain independent surveys.

Chris N. further noted that the school has already paid two months of lease payments. Darshan T. responded that both parties are operating as though an agreement is in place, as the general terms have already been settled.

Dave D. closed by thanking everyone for their continued efforts in the negotiation process.

III. Assistant Superintendent's Report

A. Updates from the Assistant Superintendent

Sally-Ann Stukuls, Assistant Superintendent, shared an overview of her background and experience. She has worked in education for approximately 28 years, including 18 years with Hopkinton Public Schools, where she held a variety of roles, many of them administrative.

After returning to school to pursue her administrative certification, she joined the Berlin-Boylston District in 2016, located outside Worcester. During her nine years there, she served as Assistant Principal for six years, Interim Principal for one year, and, most recently, as Director of Curriculum and Grants for the past two years.

She is also currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at UMASS Lowell.

J. Henriquez left at 6:27 PM.

B. Revised Budget

Sally-Ann S. and Mark V. presented an update on the budget and the adjustments made since its approval in June 2025. These adjustments reflect expenses reported from fiscal year 2025.

Sally-Ann reported that the school will receive approximately $818,770 in grants for the upcoming school year. This represents a decrease from the prior year, primarily because certain grants, such as the ESSER funds related to COVID and post-COVID support, are no longer available.

Some grants, including IDEA and Title I–IV, remain consistent with prior-year allocations.

Darshan T. noted that due to federal cuts, $1.8 billion of the $6.8 billion in federal education funding has already been released. He emphasized that the district's largest grants, Title I and Special Education, are still pending but expected.

Grant submission deadlines fall in September, and Sally-Ann is overseeing the process to ensure the school remains on track.
Mark V. reported that the school's revenue has decreased by approximately $800,000, primarily due to the expiration of ESSER funds.

Revenue Updates:

- Total revenue is down by about $165,000 compared to projections.
- Tuition revenue, based on a per-student rate of roughly $22,000, represents 96% of total revenue, with grants making up only 4%.
- Enrollment is expected to reach capacity by the October DESE reporting deadline. Changes to enrollment after February 1 will not affect revenue.
- Interest income is projected to increase by $120,000, and the school has protections in place to safeguard balances in the event of a bank default. Funds are being shifted into a money market account for greater security.

Expenses Updates:

- Salaries and Benefits represent 67% of total expenses.
- Shifts occurred after the transition of facilities and IT to the school as of July 1.
- The Fund had originally proposed a service contract of $968,000, plus $515,000 for IT. These costs were avoided, resulting in significant savings.
- FICA costs may be lower, as teachers are exempt from Social Security taxes.

Health Insurance:

- A variance of $450,000 was identified compared to the budgeted amounts.
- Only about 70 eligible employees participate, and claims remain low due to the younger staff profile.
- The health plan receives pharmaceutical rebates of about $100,000, which will benefit the school but are not yet included in the budget.

Accounting and Legal:

- Accounting fees will increase with the transition to new auditors.
- Legal expenses are also expected to rise due to ongoing negotiations.

Technology:

- IT expenses currently total about $1.545 million. Savings are expected in future years, as infrastructure upgrades will not recur annually.

Contracted Services:

- Special education expenses are trending upward. Tony requested a closer review of this line item to identify potential savings.
- Darshan noted that IDEA grant requirements mandate certain spending levels, which will need careful monitoring.

Instructional Supplies:

- Costs are difficult to predict, trending upward due to staffing increases and inflation.

Facilities:

- Mark V., Pedro M., and Darshan T. are reviewing expenses in this area for possible reductions.
- Rent has increased by $150,000.
- The 580 Haverhill Street lease issue remains unresolved, though the Fund has agreed to reimburse the school for those payments.

The budget currently reflects a loss of $112,351.25. This is expected to be offset by the $100,000 health plan rebate.
The overall variance from the budget approved in June is $15,000.

Chris N. asked whether this update required a board vote. Mark clarified that no vote was needed, as this was an informational update reflecting changes since June.

Mark V. emphasized that the drop in grant revenue was anticipated but not reflected in the initial budget.

Ongoing budget updates will be provided.

Chris N. asked if there was confidence that flexibility in other areas would balance the budget. Mark confirmed that he believes there are sufficient areas to adjust.

IV. Closing Items

A. Adjourn Meeting

E. Nolberto made a motion to adjourn.
D. DeFillippo seconded the motion.
The board **VOTED** to approve the motion.

Roll Call

L. Perez	Absent
R. Almanzar	Absent
G. Lopez	Aye
C. Needham	Aye
D. DeFillippo	Aye
E. Nolberto	Aye
J. Henriquez	Absent
L. McRae	Absent
J. Tejada	Aye
J. Cedeno	Aye

There being no further business to be transacted, and upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, the meeting was adjourned at 5:52 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Y. Rodriguez

Documents used during the meeting

None