Ascend Public Charter Schools  
Meeting of the School Board of Trustees  
July 29, 2020  
4:00 pm  

Location:  
Dial-in  

Meeting minutes  

Trustees in attendance  
Amanda Craft, Glenn Hopps (treasurer), Kwaku Andoh, Oral Walcott, Shelly Cleary (treasurer), Stephanie Mauterstock (chair) (all via videoconference)  

Ascend staff in attendance  
Alim Uddin, Anastasia Michals, Amanda Cunniff, Brandon Barnet, Brittney Jean-Louis, Carl-Anthony Watson, Christina Pena, Cora Neville, Crystal Lane, Danya Schneyer, Dellianna Burrows, Dianette Diaz, Eleni Mara, Erica Murphy, Hamna Mela, Hannah Haves, Kianna Odom, Lauren Kinrich, Leyde St. Leger, Lisa Margosian, Lissette Roman, Livia Angiolillo, Marsha Gadsden, Miatta Massaley, Nancy Alexander, Raji Kalra, Richard Tucker, Rosanna Castro, Shani Foster, Sophie Kramer, Sulafa Bashir (all via teleconference or videoconference)  

Public in attendance:  
Julia Bator, Mike Sullivan (all via teleconference or videoconference)  

Stephanie called the meeting to order at 4:04 pm.  

I. Public comment  

Danya Shneyer, a teacher formerly at Brooklyn Ascend High School and now at Brownsville Ascend Middle School, shared her concern about students with IEPs at the high school receiving their special education services in the coming year, particularly with changes to the staff structure. Danya also asked about fire drill protocols and how those will be executed in accordance with health and safety protocols, as well how air circulation will be promoted.  

Cora Neville, an Assistant Principal at Brownsville Ascend Middle School, shared concerns about equity of compensation for grade team leaders, mentor teachers, and Assistant Principals. She asked about a compensation pay scale and salary reductions at Ascend Learning. Cora also asked if a parent or teacher could sit on the Ascend Charter Schools Board and whether meetings can be sent out via email. She also posed the question of how we will lead with racial equity, beyond the DEIA sessions planned for Institute.
II. Public comment update

There was no public comment at the prior board meeting.

III. Consent agenda

Stephanie presented to the board the minutes of the July 7 meeting. Kwaku moved to approve the minutes. Shelly seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

IV. Financial report

Shelly shared discussion from the finance committee meeting. Consistent with reporting over the past 90 days, Ascend anticipates ending the year with $2 million in net income. While this net income is lower than projected last month, due to severance payments and PTO payout, it is above plan. In addition, the SUNY and lender financial covenants will be met. The finance committee also discussed FY21 per pupil revenue, which has not yet been confirmed by the state.

Over the coming months, Raji will review the possibility of real estate refinancing to reduce the debt service burden of our real estate portfolio. Our lease agreements will also be reviewed as another potential area of savings. Shelly shared that the finance committee is looking to create and adopt an investment policy for Ascend’s reserves, which will then be recommended to the full board. The finance committee also discussed the need to develop a new five-year plan. Over the course of the year, the committee will focus on this question as well as creating financial sustainability for Ascend.

Shelly shared that in addition to being co-treasurers of the board with Glenn, they will be co-chairs of the finance committee.

V. Executive session (minutes recorded separately)

At 4:22 pm Oral moved to enter executive session to discuss personnel matters related to school restructuring. Shelly seconded, and all trustees voted in favor and entered executive session.

VI. Exit executive session; resumption of open meeting

At 4:34 pm Oral moved to exit executive session. Kwaku seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

VII. School and network updates
Erica shared the purpose and vision of Leader Institute, which launches August 3, as well as Teacher Institute, which begins in mid-August. Both institutes will take place entirely remotely and will emphasize preparing staff to teach and lead virtually.

Erica and Carl provided an overview of our plans and preparation for returning to school. When we launch hybrid learning, we will not be able to host all students in our buildings due to capacity limits while maintaining the required social distancing. We will therefore prioritize bringing in-person students in Kindergarten and grades 1, 5, 9 and 12, as well as scholars with IEPs, ENL students, and scholars striving in other ways.

As Ascend determines when to launch hybrid learning, we are seeking input from all stakeholders in our community. We have data from June about staff comfort with returning to work and what families would like school to look like next year. We are currently holding town halls and receiving feedback via survey to gather additional and more current input from families and staff. In early August we expect the Governor to communicate a decision about whether schools can open. We will incorporate this information and feedback gathered from our community to share a decision about when our school buildings will reopen for in-person learning. In September we will launch family and student orientations before the first instructional day, whether remote or in person. Carl then shared some of the health and safety protocols in place for students and staff when we do return to school. These protocols center around physical distancing, cleaning and disinfection, PPE, daily screening, and promoting healthy hygiene practices.

Shelly inquired into the process around guidelines from the state. Carl and Sophie shared that we received requirements from the NYS Department of Health, and then we submit a plan with procedures that conform to these guidelines. The NYC Department of Health will provide additional procedures that Ascend will implement upon receipt.

Kwaku asked for clarification around social distancing and our capacity to host all students. Carl and Erica explained the school buildings cannot hold all students in person while maintaining social distancing, so family choice, student grade, and students’ special needs will inform which students and families return to in-person learning and which learn remotely.

Shelly asked whether charter schools are working together to buy in bulk and leverage better pricing. Carl explained that we have purchased sufficient PPE for the first quarter, and New York State is asking for our projections for the year to leverage economies of scale and access more competitive pricing.
Amanda asked how we will promote safety when there are staff who move between buildings. Carl responded that masks will be used and virtual meetings held when possible.

Carl provided an update on student enrollment and progress towards September 1 enrollment goals, which is currently 91%, up from 89% at this time last year. Ascend has been leveraging social media, which has led to an increase in applicants who found Ascend via internet and social media. A Spotify ad was played for staff, and Hannah showed the Trustees a Vanguard mailing sent to homes, as well as Ascend’s updated enrollment page on the website.

There are six pillars of the DEIA priorities, one of which is instructional delivery and training. Brittney shared an update on Ascend’s progress in this domain. A working group was formed to create a three-year DEIA training scope and sequence, segmented by school teams, managers, and the AL network. The intended outcome is for all staff to actively build DEIA mindsets and skills that enable them to serve and support students at the highest level and create spaces that affirm the diverse backgrounds of Ascend staff, families, and scholars. External consultants will use a train the trainer model so Ascend employees can carry on this forever work.

Lisa concluded by sharing that the Equity Steering Committee will be reconstituting itself in August to revisit its purpose and composition.

VIII. Adjournment

At 5:14 pm, Stephanie moved to adjourn the meeting; Glenn seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted by: