Trustees in attendance
Emmanuel Fordjour (Trustee), Glenn Hopps (Co-Treasurer), Nadine Sylvester (Secretary), Oral Walcott (Trustee), Shelly Cleary (Co-Treasurer), Stanley Taylor (Trustee), Tracy Dunbar (Trustee), (all via videoconference)

Ascend staff in attendance
Alessa Garland Smith, Alexandria Meyers, Amirah Johnson, Anjya Thomas, Brenda Smith, Catherine Jessup, Chenell Sheppard, Cora Neville, Danique Day, Emily Acuna, Faiza Onque, Janna Genzlinger, Jonathan Masci, Jordan Akhurst, Lauren Kinrich, Lisa DeRoché, Maryann Li, Nicole Duckett, Recy Dunn, Sophie Kramer, Tanneka McIntosh, Tracy DeOliveira Lewis (all via tele- or videoconference)

Public in attendance
Amir Hackshaw, Arriana Beadle, Berthide Figaro, Dale Robinson, Daina Thomas, Gillian Atkinson, Isabella Croft-Smith, Janai Jeter, Juliana Courtney, Kayon McKenzie, Laurie Joseph, Melissa Alstrom, Rajai Gooden, Sandrea Thomas, Sheilla Gay, Susan Best, Theodore Irolienne, Tyrone Coleman, Wendy-Ann Ducille (all via tele- or videoconference)

Nadine called the meeting to order at 6:04 pm.

I. Public comment

Dale Robinson, a parent at Canarsie Ascend Middle School, shared with the Board her concerns about student behavior in her child’s classroom.

Susan Best, a parent at Brooklyn Ascend Middle School, requested that the Board consider a virtual learning program to run concurrently with in-person learning.

II. Public comment update

No public comment was offered at the prior Board meeting.

III. Consent agenda

Nadine presented to the Board the minutes of the September 8, 2021 meeting and executive session. Shelly moved to approve the minutes, Glenn seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

IV. School and network updates

Shelly summarized the financial highlights from August 2021, which show continued strong financial performance in the first two months of the year. A revenue shortfall due to the conversion of six schools to the DOE food service program is offset by cost savings, yielding a net income ahead of budget. We are tracking favorably against all covenant, SUNY and financial stability metrics.
Danique and Anjya summarized changes to instructional management and academic data for SY21-22, including a focus on mastery, rather than presenting data based on projections. They shared initial lower school benchmark test results and previewed that we are in the process of developing a benchmark data dashboard. Shelly and Stanley asked about our performance in comparison to past years and peer networks.

Maryann updated the Trustees on Ascend’s enrollment data for SY21-22, which continues to exceed targeted enrollment. She shared that the student recruitment team is now fully staffed and has developed a new enrollment strategy and approach, with updated key messages shared through multiple outreach channels. Maryann shared with the Board a video created by the student recruitment team of student interviews sharing why they love their school.

Lisa presented a summary of hiring trends across the schools, where we are seeing high offer rates but vacancies that reflect nation-wide teacher shortages. This past September saw the highest number of immediate hires in any September in Ascend’s history, but hiring in October has begun to slow down. In response, the people team has added hiring resources, investing particularly in direct outreach, marketing, and staffing agencies. Lisa then shared updated data on our staff’s vaccination status, with 79% of respondents having had at least one dose. Ascend’s staff Covid-19 vaccination policy requires that all staff be fully vaccinated by December 1st, 2021.

Jordan provided an update on some initiatives to actualize Ascend’s commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism. The Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Anti-Racism Leaders (IDEALs) program launched on October 5, with IDEALs at each school and Ascend Learning office. We have started optional monthly DEIA workshops, and the Equity Advisory Committee reconvened in September and continues to meet monthly.

Cathy provided an updated summary of Ascend’s plans for Covid stimulus spending as of August 2021.

V. Purpose work and IDEO

Recy and Sophie gave an overview of Ascend’s work to redefine our purpose, mission and values, a crucial aspect of charting the course of Ascend’s next chapter. This work will help establish a clear identity for Ascend, which we will then leverage to create a five-year strategic plan. IDEO was selected as Ascend’s partner in this project given their expertise, their approach to human-centered design, and their understanding of Ascend’s need for broad stakeholder engagement in crafting our purpose. Throughout the fall and winter, we will work with IDEO and the Ascend community to craft our purpose, mission, and values statements, and Board engagement will include an upcoming design workshop.

VI. Executive session (minutes recorded separately)

At 7:08 pm, Emmanuel moved to enter executive session to discuss a school leadership transition and potential acquisition of real estate. Nadine seconded the motion, and all Trustees voted in favor and entered executive session.

VII. Exit executive session; resumption of open meeting

At 7:29 pm, Stanley moved to exit executive session, which Oral seconded and was unanimously approved.

VIII. Adjournment

At 7:29 pm, Stanley moved to adjourn the meeting, which Oral seconded and was unanimously approved.