Trustees in attendance

Shelly Cleary (Co-treasurer), Glenn Hopps (Co-treasurer), Stephanie Mauterstock (Chair), Stanley Taylor (Trustee), Nadine Sylvester (Secretary), Oral Walcott (Trustee) (all via videoconference)

Ascend staff in attendance


Public in attendance

Ginia Bellafante

The meeting began at 6:04 pm.

I. Public comment

There was no public comment.

II. Public comment update

No public comment was offered at the prior Board meeting.

III. Consent agenda

Stephanie presented to the Board the minutes of the August 16, 2021 meeting and executive session. Nadine moved to approve the minutes, Stanley seconded, and the motion was carried unanimously.

IV. School and network updates

Shelly summarized the financial highlights from July 2021, which shows we have started the year with strong financial performance. A small revenue shortfall due to the conversion of six schools to DOE food service was offset by cost savings, yielding a net income ahead of budget. We are tracking favorably against all covenant, SUNY, and financial sustainability metrics, except the 12-month cash low point, where we’ve raised the bar and will achieve the metric once 2021 low-cash months are dropped from the calculation. The finance committee also reviewed the 2021 audit planning document presented by O’Connor Davies.

Maryann updated the Trustees on Ascend’s first three weeks of school. All schools have been following Covid-19 safety protocols, and leaders have been leading with students in mind and quickly implementing feedback. She shared some of the systems that have been launched and the impact seen, including daily morning observations by network instruction, schooling, and ops teams, with daily
principal huddles, leading to significant weekly improvement in areas of focus. Ascend Learning teams have continued to conduct lens norming visits to schools, and AL staff were in school buildings for the first days of school to provide support.

Maryann then provided an update to the Board on student enrollment. Across the network, projected student enrollment is higher than the target enrollment. Ascend is hiring staff for the student recruitment team and shifting its focus to the next recruitment season.

Aaron spoke to talent hiring trends across the schools, where we are seeing high offer rates but low applications and low acceptance rates, reflecting sector-wide teacher shortages. In response, the talent team has increased its investment in direct outreach. Stephanie, Nadine, and Shelly inquired into our rewards package and support for new teachers.

Jordan informed the Board that we have launched the Supporting Transgender and Gender-Expansive Students Policy and the Guide to Supporting LGBTQIA+ Students. The guide and policy provide information and guidance to staff on how to develop and maintain a safe, inclusive, and affirming environment for all students, informed by legislation, NYC DOE guidance, and research. Professional development opportunities to support the application of the guide and policy will be available throughout the year.

Cathy updated the Board on Ascend’s plans for the Covid stimulus funding, which the finance committee reviewed in depth at its committee meeting. In addition to the commitments previously shared with the Board, Ascend will use stimulus funding to clean and disinfect rugs in K-1 classrooms and for HS teacher sign-on bonuses.

Recy shared that we have surveyed all of our staff on their vaccination status, and 74.5% of respondents have had at least one dose. We see the news of the DOE mandating vaccines, and we are actively discussing this with leaders now.

V. Lefferts Gardens Ascend name change

Anastasia shared with the Board a recommendation to change the name of Lefferts Gardens Ascend Charter School. The neighborhood name “Prospect Lefferts Gardens” was conferred on the area in 1969 and refers to Prospect Park, the Botanical Gardens, and the historic Lefferts Manor. The Lefferts family owned significant numbers of slaves and engaged in the trade, sale, and purchase of enslaved people until emancipation was enacted in New York in 1827. In response to this history, Nadine Rubinstein and the school community engaged staff and families in a rigorous and inclusive process to identify a new school name. The Lefferts Gardens Ascend school community and the staff of Ascend Learning asked the Board to approve changing the school’s name to Flatbush Ascend Charter School.

Stanley made a motion to approve changing the name of Lefferts Gardens Ascend Charter School to Flatbush Ascend Charter School. Nadine seconded, and the board voted unanimously in favor of the name change.

VI. 12-month greenlighting

Recy provided an overview of Ascend’s greenlighting process and shared that the executive team engaged this summer in the 12-month greenlighting process for three schools that could potentially open in July 2022. The first school is the Cypress Hills Ascend Middle School (CHAMS), as the Cypress Hills lower school is now fully grown. We are proceeding with planning for CHAMS and will incubate the 5th grade in the lower school building, launching the independent middle school the following year (July 2023). We have also been reviewing whether to open our second high school, given the pressing need to create sufficient seats for all of our middle school students. We are reviewing our options, focusing on either opening a second high school at this time or expanding our existing high school. Finally, we are in
the middle of our second planning year for the BACS 6 lower school, Ascend’s unopened charter. We are reviewing our options and speaking with SUNY about a potential third planning year, which would require Regents approval.

VII. Ascend’s goals

Recy shared Ascend’s strategic imperatives: chart the course of Ascend’s next chapter in serving our students and families; bolster our financial foundation to ensure Ascend’s financial sustainability and support future growth; hone our student learning model to close the academic and social learning gap created by Covid-19 and integrate technology into our instructional model; and build a community where all people can thrive, including actualizing Ascend’s commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. Shelly asked about our approach for bolstering our financial foundation, and Recy and Cathy shared the supporting goals for this imperative. Stephanie asked how we will close the academic and social learning gap, and Danique and Anjya spoke to our strategy of better understanding and leveraging our data, providing targeted feedback across the network, and engaging in just-in-time remediation.

VIII. Board’s goals

Stephanie asked the Board if they supported writing Board goals in committees, and the Trustees agreed the committees will create goals and align at the next Board meeting.

IX. Adjournment

At 7:15 pm, Oral moved to adjourn the meeting, which Glenn seconded and was unanimously approved.