



MINUTES

Excel Academy Massachusetts Board Meeting

Friday, September 22, 2023 – 8:30-10am

Location: Zoom

Board Members in Attendance: Caitlin Brumme, David Stolow, Pam Klein, Bernabe Rodriguez, Dave Sachs, Rob Lytle, Devon Petersmeyer Johnson, Nery Castro

Board Members Absent: Steve Zrike

Staff Attending: Owen Stearns, Andrew Solomon, Arthur Kaynor, Nina Keough, Ferny Reyes

Members of the Public Attending: Maher Colaylat, Traci Griffith Walker, Shirley Verónica Cardona

1. Call to Order & Welcome

Brumme called the meeting to order at 8:33 am and presided over the meeting. Kaynor kept the minutes.

2. Public Comment

None

3. Academic Oversight Committee & Network Academic Team Update

Keough provided summary updates to the Board on Academics, which were also outlined in more detail in the Academic Update slides and data that were provided to the Board in advance of the meeting. While the school has seen positive growth, we are not yet seeing the achievement levels that we would like to see, and we have not yet fully made up the gaps that developed during the course of the pandemic. There have been notable areas of progress. For example, high school SGP was the highest that it has been at the school since the pandemic started. But we would still like to see more growth, and there are some notable areas of concern that we need to focus on, such as high school Math achievement.

Keough outlined several key areas of focus this year at the school. The school is focused on addressing subgroup performance gaps for students with disabilities and multilingual learners. The school is also focused on ensuring consistent growth across all campuses and classrooms. Currently there is significant variation by campus and by teacher. Keough noted that there are pockets of excellence that we want to make more consistent across the whole school. Schools are focused on ensuring that staff learn how and are supported to provide a consistent level of excellent instruction. This is particularly important for the organization right now, in light of the influx of new and less experienced teaching staff post-pandemic. The school experienced the strongest start to a school year yet, with exceptionally well planned and executed New Staff Orientation and Summit. The All Means All leadership development program has contributed to this successful start. Universally we have been hearing this feedback at the high school in particular, and staff also created gratitude/appreciation videos for their students. The Excel community as a whole has worked hard to reflect on and better understand challenges experienced last year and to establish greater confidence about who we are and what we believe in. The new 8-Week Wins structure has helped to carry this momentum forward into the start of the school year. There is consistent sharing of academic outcomes and data across the Excel network and close partnership between the Network Team and schools to review the goals and outcomes and to strategize collaboratively on how to improve outcomes as a team and meet our goals. The school community is broadly aligned to the priority areas of focus mentioned previously – subgroup support and consistency.

Stolow commented on the theme of culture and buy-in. The biggest financial investment we've made as a Board is talent, teacher investment, and retaining and attracting excellent educators. Keough shared that the early indications suggest that we made a well placed investment in talent, and also a necessary one given the



increasingly challenging talent market. At least half of new teachers were 1st- or 2nd-year teachers. Investing more in compensation has been essential to our talent recruitment and retention goals. The recent influx of relatively inexperienced teaching staff has also amplified the importance of being extra clear about who we are and what we believe and what the expectations are of staff. Board members commended the team for their successful start to the year and for upholding academic excellence as the foundation of what Excel is here to do. Sachs offered that the Board is here to support the Academic Team in reinforcing and magnifying this messaging however the Board can contribute. The Board also discussed the importance of singularity of messaging and the power of repetition and reinforcement to sustain and build upon this strong start to the year and thanked the staff for all of their hard work.

Stearns let the Board know that Steve Zrike, the Academic Oversight Committee Chair, was unfortunately unable to attend due to a school emergency. Rodriguez provided an update on the recent Committee meeting, along with Cardona, a member of the Friends of Excel Academy Board who is participating regularly in Academic Committee meetings in MA and RI this year and keeping the Friends Board up-to-date on academic outcomes and priorities in each region. The Committee is very focused on the underperformance of MLLs as well as chronic absenteeism. Keough provided some additional context about approaches being taken in these areas, including utilizing intervention blocks more meaningfully, using MAP assessments effectively, and rigorously and frequently reviewing data and using this to better inform professional development strategies for teachers.

Kaynor reminded the Board about the new Academic Oversight Committee structure this year, with roughly quarterly Committee meetings followed by presentations to the full Board. Brumme also spoke to the critical importance of the Board's role in academic oversight. This is a primary responsibility of the Board, and the Board is here to support the school however it can.

4. Board Candidate Introductions & Votes

Klein and Stearns updated the Board on efforts to recruit new members and ongoing recruitment priorities for the Board. The Governance & Nominating Committee is also working to refresh and improve its new member orientation process and materials. Dave Sachs is leading this effort, with help from Stearns and Kaynor, as well as a representative from the Excel Academy Rhode Island Board.

Klein shared that there are two prospective new Board members to put forth for the Board's consideration today: Maher Colaylat, Traci Griffith Walker. Klein also thanked the Board for providing support in finding and interviewing prospective candidates in advance.

Colaylat presented his candidacy to the Board, including his background and experience and his interest and reason for wanting to join. Colaylat works on corporate governance matters at State Street currently and would be delighted to serve on the Governance & Nominating Committee. He is also a graduate of the Excel Academy middle school program, and then went on to Roxbury Prep. and Holy Cross. Colaylat shared that he is a lifelong resident of East Boston and cares deeply about the community and is invested in ensuring Excel's continued positive impact in the community. He also brings a varied perspective from many different types of educational environments. Lastly, he is thrilled about the opportunity to learn from the other Excel Board members.

Colaylat stepped out of the meeting temporarily while the Board deliberated.



The Board expressed enthusiasm about Colaylat's candidacy. The Board is keen to welcome additional alumni members and community stakeholders and also sees great value in bringing Colaylat's background and skill set to the Board's work, particularly at this stage in Excel's growth, as the organization navigates how to strengthen its governance practices as part of a now multi-state entity.

Stolow motioned to approve adding Colaylat to the Board, and Petersmeyer Johnson seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.

All those in favor: Caitlin Brumme, David Stolow, Pam Klein, Bernabe Rodriguez, Dave Sachs, Rob Lytle, Devon Petersmeyer Johnson, Nery Castro

Opposed: None

Abstain: None

Colaylat rejoined the meeting. Griffith Walker also joined the meeting.

Klein briefly introduced Traci Griffith Walker, an educator in the Boston Public Schools with extensive education experience. Griffith Walker shared that she is thrilled to be considered for the Board and was very impressed by Excel after speaking with Klein and Stearns, as well as with the previous Board Chair Ben Howe. She is all in with the future of education and keen to share her experiences and perspectives with a like-minded organization that shares her passion and commitment to a culture of service to kids and families and joy in learning. She also looks forward to bringing her learnings from Excel back to her work at BPS. Griffith Walker also shared that she would be delighted to serve on the Academic Oversight Committee, if approved to join the Board.

Colaylat and Griffith Walker stepped out of the meeting temporarily while the Board deliberated.

The Board expressed excitement about working with Griffith Walker, an experienced educator from the Boston Public School system – bringing the best of what's happening in her world and for her also to learn more about Excel in the process, to foster increased sharing of best practices and diversity of perspectives.

Rodriguez motioned to approve adding Griffith Walker to the Board, and Lytle seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.

All those in favor: Caitlin Brumme, David Stolow, Pam Klein, Bernabe Rodriguez, Dave Sachs, Rob Lytle, Devon Petersmeyer Johnson, Nery Castro

Opposed: None

Abstain: None

5. Team Builder

The Board decided not to do a team builder exercise due to time constraints.

6. Board Business, Governance Updates, and Strategic Plan

Lytle motioned to approve the 6.16.23 meeting minutes, and Stolow seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.

All those in favor: Caitlin Brumme, David Stolow, Pam Klein, Bernabe Rodriguez, Dave Sachs, Rob Lytle, Devon Petersmeyer Johnson, Nery Castro

Opposed: None

Abstain: None

Kaynor updated the Board on work to respond to feedback from DESE following the charter renewal process last



spring. Brumme noted that the Board is deeply focused this year on engagement on critical topics, such as academic oversight, as well as more shared ownership of priorities via Committee work. The Board has also intentionally recruited new members who are eager to serve on Committees that would benefit from additional Board member capacity and engagement. The Board reviewed the SY23-24 Committee Overview that was provided in advance of the meeting, and which includes adding Colaylat to the Governance & Nominating Committee and Griffith Walker to the Academic Oversight Committee.

Rodriguez motioned to approve the SY23-24 Committee assignments as presented, and Stolow seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.

All those in favor: Caitlin Brumme, David Stolow, Pam Klein, Bernabe Rodriguez, Dave Sachs, Rob Lytle, Devon Petersmeyer Johnson, Nery Castro

Opposed: None

Abstain: None

The Board discussed DESE's observation that it has not been maintaining an active Administrative Committee, which is indicated as a standing committee in the Board's by-laws. Historically the Board has not had a need for an Administrative Committee, because the Board has opted to take on the work directly that would otherwise have been delegated to an Administrative Committee.

Given the continued lack of need for a standing Administrative Committee, Rodriguez motioned to approve authorizing the Chair to submit an amendment request letter to update the Board's by-laws to remove the Administrative Committee as a standing committee. Stolow seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.

All those in favor: Caitlin Brumme, David Stolow, Pam Klein, Bernabe Rodriguez, Dave Sachs, Rob Lytle, Devon Petersmeyer Johnson, Nery Castro

Opposed: None

Abstain: None

Brumme updated the Board on the proposed two-year Strategic Plan that was provided to the Board in advance of the meeting and highlighted four overall priority areas: improving academic excellence, ensuring effective governance practices as part of a multi-state organization, strengthening the Board's role in building exceptional representation of the Excel Academy brand and mission, and thoroughly and thoughtfully evaluating the possibility of expansion to serve elementary grades.

The Board agreed to a few minor edits to the Strategic Plan, including updating the section related to fundraising to reflect the continued importance of the Board's role in financial oversight more broadly and to amplify the importance of the Board's role in supporting the fundraising needs of the organization, especially in light of the recent transition of several Board members who were very engaged in fundraising historically. The Board also agreed that it may continue to update the Strategic Plan as needed in the future.

Petersmeyer Johnson motioned to approve the SY23-25 Strategic Plan with the discussed edits, and Lytle seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.

All those in favor: Caitlin Brumme, David Stolow, Pam Klein, Bernabe Rodriguez, Dave Sachs, Rob Lytle, Devon Petersmeyer Johnson, Nery Castro

Opposed: None

Abstain: None

Kaynor provided an update on the process and timeline to establish a renewed CMO agreement to align with the school's next five-year charter term. As a reminder, the Friends and Excel MA Boards previously reached agreement on a final version of a new CMO agreement and an annual fee schedule for the five-year term in June



2023. The agreement was submitted to DESE for provisional approval, after which it can be fully executed and ratified, after incorporating any required edits. DESE's review process is still ongoing.

7. Chelsea Project Update

Stearns provided an update on the project to explore potential expansion to serve elementary grades in Chelsea, MA. The Board and staff agreed to wait to apply until Aug. 1, 2024, in order to have more time to engage in a thoughtful and comprehensive evaluation of the opportunity and to gather more stakeholder and community input. This will be a recurring topic at Board meetings throughout the year. We have also hired Jean Kim, the founding Dean of Operations of Excel's High School and a very experienced strategy and education consultant, to lead a thoughtful and strategic process this year for evaluating growth opportunities.

Rodriguez shared that he had volunteered at an open house at Excel Academy Chelsea that week, and there was a very strong showing of parents in attendance to support their kids. Rodriguez also observed enthusiasm among parents, students, and teachers about the possibility of elementary expansion in Chelsea in the future.

8. Adjourn

Brumme motioned to adjourn the meeting at 10:04 am, and the motion was seconded by Lytle, and the meeting was adjourned unanimously.

List of Documents Presented at the Meeting:

1. Agenda
2. Minutes from 6.16.23
3. Bios for prospective new members
4. SY23-24 Committee assignment overview
5. Draft SY23-25 Strategic Plan
6. Academic Update slides and data dashboard
7. Updated Action Plan to respond to DESE feedback from charter renewal process