

RISING TIDE CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL

Minutes

Board of Trustees Meeting

January 8, 2024

Open to the Public | In-Person and via Zoom

Narrative Mission Statement:

What is the purpose of the school?

“...The Rising Tide Charter School provides students with community-based education each day, using the Town of Plymouth as a local yet dynamic textbook which will provide fertile ground for the development of higher-order thinking skills.”

Leadership and Governance:

“In accordance with MA Charter School Law, the Board of Trustees is ultimately accountable for the school’s educational mission, performance and adherence to its Charter.”

CALL TO ORDER: Chris Schelleng, Sandy Kozlowsky, Sean Kelly, Laura Stearns-Flynn, John Polvere, and Dr. Ian Rivera. Also in attendance were Michael O’Keefe, Head of School; Zahra Williams, Interim Principal/Assistant Head of School; Eric Mello, Director of Finance, Facilities, and HR; and Maureen Herrmann, Assistant to the Head of School.

Absent: Amy Norris

GUESTS: Joshua Whelan, Dept. Chair, World Languages

HANDOUTS/ATTACHMENTS: January 8, 2024 Agenda; 2023 November Minutes; proposed AY Calendar for 2024-2025; DESE Chronic Absenteeism Campaign; Existing Rising Tide Attendance Policy; Proposed Student Attendance Policy; November 2023 financials

REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES:

The minutes of the November meeting were shared with the Board. Ian moved to accept the minutes as prepared; Laura seconded the motion. The Board unanimously approved the minutes.

PUBLIC COMMENT: There was no public comment from the two guests on the Zoom link.

SCHOOL REPORT:

Proposed Academic Calendar: Zhara walked the Board through the overview and detailed calendar for the 2024-2025 school year. She shared the plan to offer new staff three full days of orientation in August 2024, to get them to learn the Rising Tide philosophy and practice and to meet each other in a small setting prior to the full staff professional development the following week. T school would continue to offer half-day professional development each Wednesday during the school year as well as two full-day professional development opportunities in December and March. For 2024-2025, the December holiday break will be two weeks in length. Graduation will be June 6, 2025, and the tentative last day of school will be June 18, 2025.

In discussion, Ian asked what the feedback was from teachers on the half- and full-day professional development opportunities. Zhara shared that the feedback - anecdotal - was largely positive and that the sessions were really productive. Josh Whelan interjected that it was great to be given these opportunities to collaborate since time for collaboration is otherwise very limited.

Chris questioned if our schedule mirrors other districts and Michael explained that, although not all districts have approved AY25 calendars yet, the Rising Tide calendar is essentially aligned with other districts. He noted that we have the flexibility to set our own dates - and to call school for weather-related issues - but we do so with respect to families who may have children in other districts, as well.

Ian asked if there were any transportation issues given the school's unique calendar, and Eric assured the Board that we have worked closely with our transportation partners and have the flexibility to organize our calendar as we see fit while keeping those partners in the loop.

Sean moved to accept the academic calendar as presented; John seconded the motion. The Board unanimously approved the calendar as presented.

Seal of Biliteracy: Josh Whelan, Dept. Chair for World Languages, explained that the Seal of Biliteracy was first established by the state of California in 2008. It is now available in 49 states; those districts may decide whether or not to award them. Duxbury is one district in our service region that awards the Seal, as well as Sturgis Charter and South Shore Charter. The Seal of Biliteracy is an award given by a school in recognition of students who have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation. The Seal honors the skills a student demonstrates as a heritage language speaker or attains through study and is evidence of skills that are potentially attractive to college admissions offices and employers.

Rising Tide is opting to implement the Seal and a letter will be sent to all (Middle and Upper School) families to explain this option. This letter will be available translated for those who primarily speak a heritage language at home. For Rising Tide students, the Seal is earned if a student scores 472 or higher on the ELA MCAS and scores Intermediate-High to Advanced-Low on other language assessments such as STAMP or APPL. These assessment tools are paid by the school, so there is no cost to students.

Ian asked why Latin is offered at Rising Tide. Josh explained that seventh graders are introduced to Spanish, and eighth graders are introduced to Latin prior to being able to choose between the two during their high school years. The founders of the school believed Latin to be an important part of a rigorous program. Rising Tide offers both classical and modern World Languages.

Sandy questioned the distribution of students in the languages. Josh estimated that, based on the number of sections, about a third of Upper School students take Latin (the coding of language linguistics and rhetoric) while two-thirds enroll in Spanish (an evolving language with many dialects).

The Board enthusiastically supported this initiative.

DESE Chronic Absenteeism Campaign: Michael stated it is no surprise that COVID increased absenteeism. DESE has now launched an initiative to combat chronic absenteeism as students continue to be absent from school at “staggering” rates in MA. Michael’s handout highlighted the level of absenteeism in Massachusetts, for all grades, from 2019-2023 as well as attendance rates and average student absences at Rising Tide compared to the state. While Rising Tide rates are better than state rates, there is still much work to be done on attendance.

Sean asked if participation in extracurriculars such as sports or drama helps keep kids in school. Michael stated that the leadership team believes extracurriculars have a positive effect on school attendance and their sense of belonging. The school added a measure to the Accountability Plan with a goal to increase extracurricular participation.

Laura and Sean noted that, post-COVID, people are erring on the side of keeping their children home if they have a cough or sniffles. Michael agreed and noted that illness as well as social-emotional issues are increasing absences. Laura asked if we could differentiate trends, and Michael said that is something the school is tackling. He also noted a broader social trend of family vacations not coinciding with the school calendar.

Chris asked if DESE is coming out with a plan for this initiative and Michael replied that DESE has focused on engaging families and the public about this issue.

Update on partnerships for school-based counseling: Continuing with the theme of social-emotional well-being, Michael shared that the school piloted a partnership last year with a therapeutic counseling group that met with a select group of students to provide in-school counseling that was billed to the students’ insurance carriers. The school has continued conversations with other counseling groups who might be able to provide 50-minute, in-school sessions that are billed to insurance. The school has dedicated space which can be used for these therapy sessions. It is a win-win for the students and the counselors. The students gain access to the professional therapy which is very difficult to secure after school, and the therapists can fill their calendars during periods when they previously could not schedule young clients because they were in school.

Sandy noted this could help with the social-emotional absenteeism. Ian wondered if a virtual component could be available. Michael explained it has happened with some special circumstances, but in-person counseling was the preferred method.

NEW BUSINESS:

New Board members: The Board officially welcomed new members John Polvere and Dr. Ian Rivera. Though they joined the virtual November meeting as non-voting members, their membership was approved in time for the December meeting which was then cancelled due to our storm-related power outage. All were happy to meet them in-person.

Reconsideration of January and February Board meetings vis-à-vis the December cancellation due to power outage: Chris asked the members to reconsider the established January (22nd) and February (26th) meeting dates given the fact that we had to reschedule the December (18th) meeting to January 8th. Michael could not think of any pressing issue that

would need to be discussed by January 22nd, so the Board decided to cancel January 22nd and hold their next meeting, as scheduled, on February 26th, immediately after the February school break.

Sean moved to cancel the January 22nd meeting and hold the next meeting on February 26th; Laura seconded the motion. The Board unanimously voted to accept the amended meeting schedule.

Review proposed update to attendance policy: Michael shared the existing and proposed attendance policies for review and discussion. He highlighted that the proposed policy was drafted in keeping with updates from the state and with updated state law. The big shift was in making certain the school clarified what absences are excused and unexcused. Student absences will only be considered excused if a parent/guardian submits the appropriate documentation within three (3) day of a student's absence:

1. Note from a physician
2. A professional note verifying a medical, dental, or legal appointment
3. A note from a parent/guardian documenting a religious observance
4. A note from a parent/guardian regarding a bereavement
5. A note from a college or university documenting a student's visit (up to 2 visits per semester starting in spring of junior year)

If absences are not excused and are extensive, it makes it easier for staff to establish other supports for students. Zhara noted that that expectations are included in Google Classroom, so students can do more at home. It is critical that not too much time elapse when students do return to school to make up the work.

Zhara requested a change to a word in the policy. Rather than saying, "...the Principal or a designee will *request* a meeting...", she requested it read, "...will *schedule* a meeting...".

Michael said if the Board votes affirmatively to implement the policy, the school will share it with families and implement it at the start of the second semester.

Sean moved to accept the new attendance policy with the change of wording requested by Zhara; Laura seconded the motion. Board members voted unanimously to accept the new policy with the change of wording (*request* to *schedule*) requested by Zhara.

Head of School Annual Performance Review: As members of the Nominating and Governance Committee, Chris and Sean worked with Michael to set the annual goals for the Head of School based on the school's Key Design Elements, Charter public School Performance Criteria, DESE Standards for Effective Administrative Leadership, and the school's Five-Year Strategic Plan. They established a rubric (scale of 1 (low) to 4 (high)) for evaluating the four goals.

For Goal 1, *Build and align Rising Tide's long-term and short-term goals, priorities, and practices to build greater clarity, focus, transparency, and accountability*, Michael earned a score of 2.8.

For Goal 2, *Strengthen a culture of collaboration and support for our professional community*, Michael earned a score of 2.67.

For Goal 3, *Further develop a rigorous academic program with appropriate supports that leads to improvement in outcomes for all students*, Michael earned a score of 3.3.

For Goal 4, *Build increased capacity at Rising Tide to grow towards modeling Diversity, Belonging, Inclusion, and Equity as a school community*, Michael earned a score of 2.8

An overall score of 2.9/4.0 put Michael at the 83 percentile. With a top bonus of \$5,000, Michael qualifies for a \$4,150 payment which he has pledged, as in the past, to return to the school.

Michael questioned whether, moving forward, there may be other factors to consider for his performance assessment. Laura agreed that there are many clear-cut factors for assessment but also many intangibles. Sandy suggested someone with an educational background should contribute to the performance review and Sean agreed with this.

Eric questioned whether the bonus structure is even relevant anymore. It is a legacy decision that comes from a former board member who worked in finance. Eric noted that a bonus is not a motivational factor for Michael, who has returned his bonus to the school as soon as it is issued.

Financial Matters:

November Financials: Eric shared the financials noting a stable budget position but cautioned that our overall financial health is contingent on enrollment remaining stable at 620 and on final tuition reimbursement figures from the state - these will come at the end of the school year.

As of November's report, enrollment was 620 students with a projected reimbursement rate of \$18,303/pupil, an increase of 5.5% over 2023. Net income compared to budget was positive \$7,795.00.

Looking forward, Eric advised that debt financing is our biggest liability. While Rising Tide is fortunate to own the building at 59 Armstrong, we will need to renegotiate our Webster Bank loan in a few years (2028), which is currently at 3.71% for approximately \$10M. Additionally, there are two USDA loans amortized through 2056.

BOARD SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS

NOMINATING AND GOVERNANCE: Currently working on emergency and long-term succession plans. More to come in the next few months.

FINANCE AND AUDIT:

Sean stated that the group reviewed the November financials that Eric presented.

COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVOCACY: Advocacy for charter public schools is the big push with the Commonwealth's Advocacy Week set for the week of February 12-16. Michael noted the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association has operationalized a big push on having the legislature consider facilities funding for charter schools. This will require everyone to reach out to their legislators. They need to hear from real people in order to dispel the misconceptions of charter schools. This information will be

shared with our staff and families over the coming weeks.

OTHER BUSINESS NOT ANTICIPATED BY THE CHAIR 24 HOURS IN ADVANCE: None.

ADJOURN:

Sean moved to adjourn the meeting; Laura seconded the motion. All voted in favor of adjourning the meeting at 9:00 PM.

Prepared and submitted by: Maureen Herrmann, January 10, 2024