

The Sojourner Truth Public Charter School  
Board of Trustees meeting  
August 28, 2021. 10:00 a.m. By video conference.

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Board members on call:

Wendy Pugh  
Kiva Zytnick  
Richard Pohlman  
John Kenchelian  
Jonathan O'Connell  
Atalie Jacobs  
Laura Masimini  
Caroline Hill  
Donice Leak

Board members absent:

Marlena McWilliams

Staff on call:

Justin Lessek

The meeting started at 10 a.m. with an icebreaker.

**Orders of Business**

**1. Approval of minutes from June 26 meeting**

Wendy made a motion to approve minutes. Rich seconded. Minutes were approved unanimously.

**2. General updates from Justin**

- a. Overview of Truth School at beginning of Year 2  
Staff enjoyed retreat and have returned to the building to prepare classrooms. Last year Truth had 93 students. Presently it is 155. Twenty percent of students have Montessori experience, which is lower than last year. The student body has a similar racial and geographic makeup as last year. Truth has been approved for at-risk preference in lottery for next year, which opens in December.
- b. Staff  
Truth retained all but one of its staff from last year and made new hires. Truth has about 35 staff members presently.

c. Covid

Truth is using D.C. Health requirements as a baseline and sometimes adding more stringent requirements. Guidance has changed drastically since the spring, particularly on distance between students and quarantines. Not all Truth students are old enough to be vaccinated. Truth will ask that students wear masks even outside in most cases. All students and staff have been asked to be vaccinated. Vaccines have not been mandated. All students and staff are going to test every other week.

Rich asked how engaged staff has been in deciding Covid protocol. Justin said protocols were shared with staff earlier in August and Truth held an optional focus group and invited staff to join Covid safety team. Some changes have been made in response to staff suggestions, such as the type of masks required.

Kiva asked what Truth is doing to encourage vaccines. Justin said Truth is considering discussions or forums among students and staff once schools starts.

Truth has not had any positive cases yet. Justin said the biggest challenge may be how to absorb absences when staff are absent for Covid reasons.

d. Year 2 goals

Justin shared testing data. One area of concern is that Black students' growth has not kept up with Latin and White students' growth. Truth is also trying to lease satellite space in the neighborhood to enable expansion.

### **3. Problem of practice #1 for discussion**

Justin sought support from the board to require vaccines for all staff as needed. A handful of staff remain unvaccinated, mostly newly hired staff. There is a concern that immediately requiring new staff to get vaccinated would be uncomfortable. Justin has had one-on-one conversations with unvaccinated staff and shared the expectation that staff be vaccinated with all staff members.

Kiva said she feels strongly that all staff be vaccinated because they are putting students and their families at risk. Rich said Justin does not need board approval to institute a mandate and suggested Truth counsel review any proposed rule. Kiva said Truth should prepare for the possibility that parents or students may learn there are unvaccinated students. Caroline asked if unvaccinated staff could teach virtually from home. Justin said that's not presently possible but could be depending on circumstances. Justin said he is moving toward a mandate for all staff as well as contractors who work in the school and visiting parents need to be masked and keep distance.

### **4. Committee Break-outs.**

Board members separated into different groups to discuss their committees.

a. Finance & Audit

John said the committee plans to meet monthly with exceptions when there is no new information to consider. The audit process is beginning, which the committee has oversight of. Facilities decisions will have an impact on budget this year and in future years.

- b. Development  
Laura said the committee wants to create a shared document to identify family fundraising goals and board fundraising goals.
- c. Academic Achievement  
Justin said this could be a good year to have a rhythm of school visits and walk-throughs to bring in new views and ideas. He said Donice said operations will be different with students attending in person.
- d. Governance  
Atalie said the committee is hoping to have a regular meeting cycle rather than being reactive. Committee will focus on recruitment, evaluation and training.

## **5. Reflection on Strategic Plan**

- a. Update  
Justin provided an update. The 2021-2022 strategic plan is being drafted. Staff is aware of the plan but staff and families and students have not seen it yet. Justin said he would like to finalize a plan in coming months.  
  
Atalie and Caroline suggested Truth needs to manage expectations for staff, parents and students about how much their input will be reflected.
- b. Feedback  
Justin sought feedback from the board on the plan. Board members plan to review sections of the plan: Learning, Attendance, Engagement, Retention & Planning, Financials and Risk Management/Compliance.
- c. Problem of Practice #2  
Justin asked that board members consider whether and how covid protocols should be incorporated into the plan.

## **6. Committee Updates**

- a. Finance & Audit  
John provided an update. Truth is in a healthy financial position. Days cash on hand are well above the recommended level. Open question going forward is how much the facilities will cost. Jonathan asked whether staff is more expensive to hire this year than last year. Justin said Truth is paying higher salaries for the core instructional team, but there are some positions where Truth is finding younger staff.
- b. Facilities  
Jonathan provided an update. Truth is considering both short and long-term options, including leasing some extra space. Wendy asked whether more space could be found on Truth's existing campus. Jonathan and Justin said that doesn't look likely right now but that it depends on what Perry Street Prep and LAMB do next school year.
- c. Academic Achievement  
Justin provided an update. Committee is looking in particular at Black students and 7th and 8th grade students compared with their 6th grade peers.

- d. Governance  
Atalie provided an update. The committee is working on an officer succession plan and a way of managing documents. Also thinking of recruiting board members for long-term pipeline. Planning on mid-year executive director evaluation. Atalie also reviewed committee assignments. Justin said there may need to be an ad hoc committee for high school prep.
- e. Development  
Kiva provided a brief update. The committee needs to create goals and guidance documents.

## **7. Next steps**

- a. Justin will share information on the strategic plan so that the board can provide feedback by Sept. 7.
- b. Committee leaders and board members need to contact Wendy about any changes to committee assignments. Wendy will contact board members about participation on the Student Academic Achievement Committee.
- c. Board members interested in training should contact Wendy or Rich about opportunities.

### **Materials:**

[General update slide deck](#)

### **Closing**

Wendy motioned to adjourn. John seconded. Motion passed. Meeting adjourned at 12:23 p.m.