

**THETFORD ACADEMY BOARD OF TRUSTEES**  
Monthly Board Meeting – November 9, 2023  
Hybrid (some attendees in person at TA, some via Zoom)

**MINUTES**

Donna Steinberg (Board President) called the meeting to order at 6:48 p.m. Attendance was as follows:

Trustees present: Donna Steinberg, Marisa Donovan, Dana Grossman, Jeff Jamele, Cara Ray, Ashley Woo, Erin Boyd, Paul Mutone, Darin Knaus, Marty Jacobs, Sheilagh Smith, Francine A’Ness (joined the meeting at 6:55 p.m.), Erika Hoffman-Kiess (joined the meeting at 7:27 p.m.)

Trustees absent: Harry Kinne, Katie Saunders, Sam Perry, Lucy Wagner

Others present: Carrie Brennan (TA Head of School), Siobhan Lopez (TA Dean of Students), Ben Bailey (TA Director of Finance), Patty McIlvaine (TA Director of Advancement), Stacy Barton (TA Teacher and Parent), Stephanie Joyce (TA Teacher), Tony Strat-Cortez (TA DEI Coordinator), Tippi Oshoniyi (TA Staff and Parent)

**1. Welcome & President’s Report**

Board President Donna Steinberg welcomed everyone in attendance. She noted three recent “appreciations” of TA that she’d experienced: an appreciative comment by her son about how much he enjoyed a presentation in his Spanish class by DEI Coordinator Tony Strat-Cortez; a constructive meeting with parents; and her own appreciation for the work of the board.

She also shared the news that Sarah Adams has resigned from her position as the Town of Strafford representative to the TA board, due to time pressures.

**2. Public Comment**

None.

**3. Consent Agenda**

- Approve meeting minutes — October 12, 2023

Motion: To approve the Consent Agenda.

Moved: Marty Jacobs

Seconded: Jeff Jamele

The motion passed unanimously.

**4. Head of School Report**

Head of School Carrie Brennan presented a slide show (archived separately); the topics she covered included:

- A lovely photo that’s generating considerable comment — taken by seventh-grader Connor Abraham of a campus sunrise during foliage season
- A snapshot of Q1 academic results, from 2019 through 2023 (with this year’s results showing the second-highest percentage of students earning honors or high honors and the second-lowest percentage receiving one or more D/F during the five-year period)

- The partnership with the Thetford Academy Education Association (TAEA), a chapter of the Vermont-NEA
- An update on enrollment and recruitment, including a recent successful open house with separate sessions for the middle school and the high school
- A review of the various ways parents have been surveyed over the years, and the administration's plan to return to doing an annual comprehensive survey of parents and to add a parallel survey of students
- An update on the school's accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, including the acceptance "without reservation" of TA's recent five-year progress report and Carrie's recent service as vice chair of Lyndon Institute's decennial review team (an obligation of being reviewed ourselves; our own decennial review will be in 2027-28)

## **5. DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) Report**

DEI Coordinator Tony Strat-Cortez introduced himself and asked Dean of Students Siobhan Lopez to review the history of DEI efforts at TA, leading up to Tony's hiring in 2022. Then Tony went on to explain what he does in the role, especially his focus on restorative justice. His goal is to foster a school culture that is well educated in the principles, language, and actions of anti-racism, including helping teachers and students learn to engage in difficult conversations.

He noted that recent DEI activities have included TA's participation in a statewide racism survey, the creation of an online bullying/harassment reporting form, the development of online DEI curriculum resources for teachers, presentations at assemblies and advisories, the creation of a student group called SARJ (Student Alliance for Racial Justice), SARJ's sponsorship of an anti-racism film series open to the public, his coordination with other DEI coordinators across the state (about 70 schools have one), and more.

His next steps are to work with the board and school leaders to help ensure that the board's policies are reviewed through an equity lens and to continue recruitment efforts to increase the representation of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) individuals on the faculty, staff, and board.

## **6. Committee Updates**

### **a. Personnel Committee**

Dana Grossman, chair of the Personnel Committee, noted that a new master agreement for faculty was signed in June, although two issues — a review of the faculty evaluation process and alignment of the fiscal year and payroll year calendars — still need to be finalized. The committee is now making progress on coming to agreement with the staff; in the meantime, staff are still being paid according to the 2022-23 salary grid, and the committee hopes they can agree on the 2023-24 grid soon so the raises can get in the hands of staff sooner rather than later.

She also mentioned a few big-picture aspects of the committee's work on employee negotiations: that being responsible for negotiating salaries and working conditions is difficult, as the committee members' high regard for the work that the school's faculty and staff do must be balanced against their role as fiduciaries for the school; that they always meet with the TAEA negotiators in person — a reflection of the accuracy of Carrie's use of the word "partnership" in her report; and that it's a privilege to have a reason to come onto the school campus regularly, while school is in session, so they get to experience the heartbeat of the institution.

b. Advancement Committee

Marisa Donovan, chair of the Advancement Committee, thanked those members of the board who had already made a donation or pledge to the annual fund and encouraged the rest of the board to make their commitment. She also shared some campaign planning updates, noting that a preliminary statement of needs has been drafted; that the consultant is beginning to conduct interviews with community members; and that TA is working with Banwell Architects to prepare draft renderings of projects on the capital needs list.

c. Board Management Committee

Erin Boyd, chair of the Board Management Committee, noted that they are continuing their work on reviewing and updating policies. They are also beginning to think about recruitment of new board members for 2024. A couple of possibilities they are discussing are to increase the number of town representatives from towns where there is recruitment potential and to add one or two student members to the board — as well as to try to increase the BIPOC representation on the board, as mentioned in the DEI presentation.

d. Resources Committee

Paul Mutone, chair of the Resources Committee, reviewed potential budget-to-actual variances for FY24, highlighting as major factors the enrollment shortfall, increased tech program participation (which has the effect of reducing tuition payments to TA), and compensation increases. The projected unfavorable variance could be as high as \$438,000. He said the leadership team is continuing to look at how to reduce expenses, and if it turns out near the end of the fiscal year that there will be a deficit, the board will need to decide how to cover it.

He also noted that the committee and the administration have gotten a start on putting together the FY25 budget. On the expense side, anticipated challenges include increases in healthcare costs, negotiated employee raises, general inflation, and a possible increase in the interest rate on the school's long-term debt for past capital projects. On the revenue side, the primary challenge is enrollment; the school's finances are very tuition-dependent and enrollment is not currently projected to increase significantly over the next few years.

**7. Other Business / Future Board Meeting Agenda Items**

None.

**8. Adjournment**

Motion: To adjourn.

Moved: Ashley Woo

Seconded: Dana Grossman

The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 8:39 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Dana Grossman (Clerk), with note-taking support from Erin Boyd