

THETFORD ACADEMY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Monthly Board Meeting – January 11, 2024
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, Dana Grossman, Jeff Jamele, Marty Jacobs, Paul Mutone, Cara Ray, Katie Saunders, Darin Knaus, Sam Perry, Francine A’Ness, Marisa Donovan, Lucy Wagner (joined the meeting at 6:55 p.m.), Ashley Woo (joined the meeting at 7:19 p.m.)

Trustees absent: Harry Kinne, Sheilagh Smith, Erika Hoffman-Kiess, Erin Boyd

Others present: Carrie Brennan (TA Head of School), Ben Bailey (TA Director of Finance), Casey Huling (TA Teacher), Ehrin Lingeman (TA Teacher/Staff)

1. Welcome & President’s Report

Board President Donna Steinberg welcomed everyone in attendance. She mentioned the recent news of Dr. Deb Sanders-Dame’s impending retirement as Director of Special Education Services, after a 41-year career in education, by way of noting the powerful impact that longtime educators like Dr. Sanders-Dame have on the mission of the school and on students’ lives.

2. Public Comment

None.

3. Consent Agenda

- Approve meeting minutes — December 14, 2023

Motion: To approve the Consent Agenda.

Moved: Katie Saunders

Seconded: Marty Jacobs

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 review of the various ways TA students engage in culminating assessments and activities — not just taking tests, but also making presentations before live or virtual audiences, creating publications, participating in simulations, and more; all such activities have the goal of giving students a chance to show their understanding of the content they’ve learned and their ability to integrate and apply it.
- The decision by Thetford Elementary School (TES) to end the agreement for TA to provide TES with custodial services a year early, as of July 2024; the retirement of TES Principal Bernice Mills as of July 2024; and the appointment of Caitlin Toleno, TES’s current Social and Emotional Learning Coordinator, as the new Principal.

- The fact that second-semester enrollment at TA is up by six students — due to a combination of mid-year transfers and students returning after semester-away programs.
- The initiation of a slow and thoughtful process to develop an Indigenous Land Acknowledgement; that process will include a public event on January 30.
- An update on the campus master planning process, including the possibility that the school may be able to move ahead with one aspect of that plan: to add a lift to the southern annex to make the building accessible.

Discussion followed about the accessibility project. Carrie explained that currently, eight classrooms in the annex are completely inaccessible to anyone in a wheelchair. She said the architect's rough estimate for the lift in that building is \$290,000, and a donation to cover a substantial portion of it is in process. She asked the board for approval to get detailed renderings of it and put the project out to bid, while additional grants and gifts to fund it are sought, in the hope of possibly being able to accomplish the project over the summer of 2024.

Motion: To proceed with having detailed architectural drawings done for the annex lift project and putting the project out to bid.

Moved: Dana Grossman

Seconded: Katie Saunders

The motion passed unanimously.

5. Committee Reports

a. Personnel

Dana Grossman, chair of the Personnel Committee, shared the unfortunate news that the committee has reached impasse with the staff negotiators on a salary grid for staff employees for the 2023-24 school year. The parties have thus begun the process of proceeding to mediation. Dana noted that the committee is in sympathy with what the staff is asking for but that TA has already stretched to offer significant raises for staff, and given this year's budget shortfall feels simply unable to stretch further. She added, however, that the negotiations have remained collegial and respectful, which the committee hopes augurs well for a good resolution.

b. Advancement

Marisa Donovan, chair of the Advancement Committee, reported that the Annual Fund had raised \$27,791 to date from 75 donors, compared to \$16,347 from 81 donors at this time last year; the average gift has increased from \$201 to \$368. She said that total philanthropy in FY24, as of December 31, was \$72,298. Grants received in FY24 so far came from Vermont Farm to School (for integration of the garden program into the food service program), the Vermont Arts Council (for technology upgrades in the theater and audio equipment for an 8th grade podcasting unit), and the Byrne Foundation (for a poet-in-residence).

She also reported on the campaign planning process, noting that 10 stakeholder interviews have been conducted and about 15 more are in process.

In the communications arena, she noted that the weekly TA e-newsletter is sent to 2,195 individuals and has a 50% open rate; that TA has supplied three pages of content for the 2024 Thetford School District Annual Report; and that a new print piece promoting TOP (Thetford Outdoor Program) summer offerings will go out with report cards at the end of January.

c. Board Management

Katie Saunders, chair of the Board Management Committee, said several members of the board will be stepping down upon the conclusion of their terms in June, so the committee has been focusing on recruitment of new members to fill those seats, while also continuing to look at the possibility of adding a non-voting student member of the board and possibly a non-voting faculty member as well. In addition, she said, the committee has been working on standardization of board policies and hopes to have several policies to bring to the board for approval in February.

In discussion following her report, Marty Jacobs suggested also considering the addition of someone on the staff as a non-voting board member.

d. Resources

Paul Mutone, chair of the Resources Committee, reported that the school's endowment is up to \$5.24 million as of this month — a 9% increase over January of 2023 — and that \$204,000 was withdrawn from the endowment for the operating budget, as specified in the budget approved in January 2023 by the board. He added that the endowment is currently invested two-thirds in equities and one-third in fixed-income holdings and cash, which is right in line with the board's investment policy.

He said the development of the FY25 budget is proceeding. Challenges include rising interest rates on the school's long-term debt, the need to do a reduction in force on the Buildings & Grounds staff due to the conclusion of the custodial contract with TES, and the uncertainty over negotiations.

He also mentioned that recent communications with the school's auditing firm have been slow, and the committee is considering whether it may be time to put out an RFP for a new auditing firm.

6. Other Business / Future Board Meeting Agenda Items

None.

8. Adjournment

Motion: To adjourn.

Moved: Marty Jacobs

Seconded: Dana Grossman

The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 7:54 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Dana Grossman (Clerk)