

THETFORD ACADEMY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Monthly Board Meeting – May 9, 2024
Hybrid (some attendees in person at TA, some via Zoom)

MINUTES

Donna Steinberg (Board President) called the meeting to order at 6:49 p.m. Attendance was as follows:

Trustees present: Donna Steinberg, Dana Grossman, Paul Mutone, Marty Jacobs, Darin Knaus, Lucy Wagner, Erin Boyd, Ashley Woo, Francine A’Ness, Harry Kinne, Sheilagh Smith, Marisa Donovan, Cara Ray (left the meeting at 7:02 p.m.)

Trustees absent: Katie Saunders, Jeff Jamele, Erika Hoffman-Kiess, Sam Perry

Others present: Carrie Brennan (TA Head of School), Ben Bailey (TA Director of Finance), John Picuch, Chris Leitao, Sue Kruse, Peter Blodgett, Casey Huling, Stephanie Joyce, Betsy Pond, Ehrin Lingeman, Lisa Harmon

1. Welcome & President’s Report

Board President Donna Steinberg welcomed everyone in attendance. She pointed out that this is Teacher Appreciation Week and commented on the array of ways the school community had shown all week how much it values TA’s teachers, administrators, and staff members—including with food, flowers, and messages of support from both students and parents.

2. Public Comment

Casey Huling requested that in the future, when members of the TA faculty or staff attend board meetings not as a representative of the school but in their role as a citizen, parent, or alum, that they not be identified in the minutes as an employee. Donna Steinberg responded that the board would be glad to honor the request.

3. Consent Agenda

- Approve meeting minutes — April 11, 2024
- Approve Policy B01 — Substitute Teachers
- Approve Policy B03 — Alcohol and Drug-Free Workplace
- Approve Policy D03 — Responsible Computer, Network & Internet Use

Motion: To approve the Consent Agenda.

Moved: Ashley Woo

Seconded: Marty Jacobs

The motion passed unanimously, with one abstention.

4. Meet the trustee candidates

Erin Boyd, chair of the Board Management Committee, said the BMC had overseen the recruitment of five candidates for new positions on the board of trustees and that four of the five were present at the meeting; she invited them to share a bit about their interest in serving (note that only four of the five candidates were listed on the published agenda).

The five candidates present at the meeting were:

- Sue Kruse, who lives in North Thetford and recently retired from a career as a teacher and administrator at the Mountain School in Vershire, where she met (and was impressed by) many TA students who spent a semester there;
- John Picuch, who lives in East Thetford, works in marketing and public relations for a financial services company, and has a daughter in the 7th grade at TA;
- Peter Blodgett, who lives in Thetford Hill, taught English at TA in the '70s and was director of adult education in the '80s, was director of Thetford's Latham and Peabody Libraries from 1986 until his retirement in 2021, and is an avid user of the TA trails;
- Chris Leitao, who lives in Post Mills, is a civil engineer who's overseen major commercial and institutional construction projects, and has two children currently in 1st and 5th grade at Thetford Elementary School.

Erin then read a statement from the fifth candidate, who was unable to be at the meeting:

- Karen McPhee, who lives in North Thetford, is a manager at Dartmouth's Baker-Berry Library, and has two children, one a TA graduate now at the University of Southern Maine and one in 9th grade at TA.

Erin reminded the board that voting on the candidates would occur at the June board meeting.

5. Select Committee Reports

a. Personnel Committee

Dana Grossman, chair of the Personnel Committee, shared the good news that agreement has been reached with the staff cohort of the union on a salary grid for 2023-24. She explained that it had taken a while to reach agreement, but that the committee was very pleased with the outcome, saying they went into the negotiations realizing that the staff pay scale needed to be raised quite significantly and that the agreed-upon grid reflects increases ranging from almost 30% (for the lowest-paid categories of staff, the rate for some of which had previously been just over minimum wage) to 5.5% for the higher-paid categories.

She added that the next task for the committee is to start work on staff salary grids for the 2024-25 and 2025-26 fiscal years.

b. Board Management Committee

Erin Boyd, chair of the Board Management Committee, said recruitment had been a big focus for the committee in the past month, and that they had also started work on planning the annual board retreat and on conducting the evaluation of the Head of School. The latter effort, she said, would be overseen by a subcommittee made up of herself, Donna Steinberg, Ashley Woo, and Katie Saunders; would include a self-evaluation by Carrie Brennan, a survey of trustees, and a survey of employees; and is scheduled to be completed by the end of June.

She noted the committee had also begun to weigh the pros and cons of changing the trustee term from four years to three years, in the hope of making service for two terms the norm.

She asked trustees to be sure the date of the retreat—Thursday, August 29, from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.— is on their calendar. And she reminded them that if at all possible, trustees should

attend the June board meeting in person and come 20 minutes early (at about 6:25 p.m.) for a farewell to the outgoing trustees.

Carrie added that in addition to the surveys Erin had mentioned as part of the Head of School evaluation process, the school is just about to conduct a “school climate survey” of both parents and students.

c. Advancement Committee

Marisa Donovan, chair of the Advancement Committee, asked trustees to be sure to get back to her in response to her recent email asking if they are interested in participating in a final discussion about the details of the capital campaign planning study, before the board votes on whether to proceed with a campaign.

She also asked trustees to be on the lookout for another email from her, about TA’s Day of Giving—encouraging them both to spread the word on their social networks and among family and friends and also to make a gift themselves. She noted that TA had received a challenge grant of \$25,000 from the Byrne Foundation, if 50 community members and 50 alums make donations in response to the Day of Giving ask.

6. Head of School Report

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

- The fact that her monthly reports only scratch the surface of what goes on at the school; recent or upcoming events have included the Honors Celebration, Operation Days Work (which raises money for an international nonprofit), the robotics program’s return visit to the world championship; and the return of a middle school overnight trip.
- Planning efforts underway for 2024-25, including middle school programming, revisions to cell phone policies and practices, orientation for new students, and assessment and data-sharing processes.
- The active support from parent volunteers for all the various Teacher Appreciation Week activities.
- The fact that enrollment projections for the fall are slightly above the target in the budget.
- The fact that students are starting to sign up for their courses for next year.
- Several upcoming events, including the spring musical—*Mamma Mia!*—and the Arts Expo. She noted that participation in the musical is so robust—with 60 students involved either onstage or backstage (an impressive 20% of the entire student body)—that there will be two full casts performing four shows and that one of the shows was already sold out.

Brief discussion followed about the status of the enrollment coordinator position; Carrie noted that despite several strong candidates, they were unable to fill the role in the past year, largely because it was a half-time position, so the recruitment functions were spread among several current employees. She said the position is funded in the 2024-25 budget at a higher FTE, and she hopes very much it can be filled, as tuition income is crucial to a balanced budget.

7. Action Item: FY 2024-25 Budget Presentation/Discussion

Paul Mutone, chair of the Resources Committee, shared highlights of a proposed \$8.8 million budget for 2024-25, which he said was unanimously endorsed by the committee at their most recent meeting. He noted that achieving a balanced budget had been difficult this year, and the result was a credit to the administration. Among the key challenges were increases in compensation and benefits, including a double-digit rise in health insurance premiums; a loss of revenue due to Thetford Elementary School's withdrawal from the shared janitorial services agreement; inflationary pressures; and the need to reprice the school's long-term debt.

The balancing of the budget despite those factors was achieved by a net reduction of five FTEs; several strategic shifts in expenditures (for example, leasing a school van rather than purchasing a new one, and paying for the Annex lift project with donor funds rather than operating funds); and the postponement of some long-term maintenance expenditures.

Brief discussion followed about the amount of the school's long-term debt (about \$5 million, was the response); whether the postponement of maintenance would have a detrimental impact (not in the short term); and what the fallback plan is should expenditures exceed the budget (the possible sources that could be tapped in such a case are quasi-endowment funds, two bank lines of credit, and operating cash). Paul concluded by saying that diversifying the school's revenue, so it is not quite so heavily tuition-dependent, would be in its long-term interest.

Carrie added that although the reduction in staffing was a necessary component of the budget-balancing effort, it was a very hard decision; she emphasized that she realizes such actions have an effect on individuals, not just institutions.

Motion: To approve the 2024-25 budget as presented.

Moved: Dana Grossman

Seconded: Marty Jacobs

The motion passed unanimously.

8. Other Business / Future Board Meeting Agenda Items

The board was reminded that the June meeting will be a week earlier than usual—the first Thursday of the month, rather than the second Thursday—so the board can vote on the conferring of diplomas at graduation, which is always held the second week of June.

9. Adjournment

Motion: To adjourn.

Moved: Francine A'Ness

Seconded: Harry Kinne

The motion passed unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 8:42 p.m.

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