

Polaris Charter Academy	Scheduled Date:	Monday, August 26th, 2025
Board Meeting Minutes	Scheduled Time:	6:30pm (Via Zoom)
		• Approval of June Meeting Minutes • Governance Committee Update (Board Pipeline Development; Luis & Tom Erlach Candidates; Annual Training Requirements) • State of the School Presentation (100% Staff Retention; AI Integration Initiative; First Grade "Magnificent Things" Expedition; Academic Strategic Plan Continuity) • Enrollment Update (305 Students Enrolled; 28 in Pipeline; Budget Target 340) • Staffing Updates • Financial Challenges (Unforeseen Facility Expenses \$20K+; Health Insurance 24% Increase; Special Education Staffing Needs) • Community Outreach & Branding (Bloomwell Partnership; CSP Grant Website Overhaul; Marketing Material Standardization) • South by Southwest EDU Application (Panel Picker Voting Campaign) • Development Committee Update (Giving Crew Day September 26th - \$15K Goal; Arts/Music Program Focus; Creative Schools Fund Grant) • Finance Committee Update (Annual Audit Progress; CPS Funding Concerns)
	Start:	Tina Yarovsky, Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:34 PM CST.

ATTENDANCE CATEGORY	BOARD MEMBERS & FELLOWS	SCHOOL STAFF
Attending via Zoom	Yaa Boakye Roel Vivit Antonio Gonzalez Tina Yarovsky Ayanna Berry Bennett Brenton Mike Davison Wendy Silva	John Lydon Michelle Navarre Elizabeth Whiting Lissette Sanchez
Attending by In-Person		
Unable to Attend		Francesca Peck
EXPECTED GUESTS & VISITORS		
None/NA		

Approval of December Meeting Minutes

Discussion: The previous meeting minutes were circulated prior to the meeting. One correction was noted: Sam was listed as not attending but had joined for a partial meeting and subsequently emailed confirmation of his attendance.

Motion: Roel moved to approve the minutes with the correction to include Sam's partial attendance.

Second: Antonio seconded.

Vote:

- **In Favor:** Unanimous "Aye"
- **Opposed:** None

Motion carried, and minutes approved.

Public Comments

No public comments were presented.

Governance Committee Update

Presenter: Tina Yarovsky

(Note: Tina joined from the hospital where her mother was receiving care but reported her mother was stable)

Board Pipeline Development

Outreach Results: Tina conducted targeted outreach to Chicago legal associations, receiving six initial responses with interest in Polaris. After follow-up communications, three candidates remained engaged, leading to one-on-one calls with two prospects.

Primary Candidate - Luis:

- Attorney living in northwest proximity to Polaris
- Demonstrated genuine interest by conducting independent drive-by school visit
- Engaged in substantive conversation about school commitment and community involvement
- Responded same evening with resume and LinkedIn profile
- Successfully completed initial call with Roel Vivit

Luis - Board Member Assessment (Roel Vivit): Luis asked thoughtful questions about board onboarding requirements, charter school knowledge, and Polaris vision communication. He demonstrated strong interest in financial aspects including development-district funding percentages. His professional experience suggests capacity for meaningful board guidance.

Michelle's Follow-up: Michelle reached out via email to schedule connection with Luis but had not received response as of meeting date. Agreed to follow up by Wednesday if no response received.

Secondary Candidate: Initial conversation occurred but candidate showed less engagement and failed to respond to follow-up communications despite expressing interest. No further pursuit planned.

Additional Pipeline:

- **Tom Erlach** - Recommended by Francesca as potential board candidate
- Long-time Polaris supporter (annual Bears tickets donor)
- Identified strength: social networking and community connection capabilities
- Lives adjacent to Francesca, deeply committed to children's education
- Willing to engage in exploratory conversations
- Francesca to provide contact information to Tina for initial outreach

Annual Training Requirements

Training Format: Board decided to purchase access to recorded training library for all members rather than requiring live webinar attendance only.

Requirements:

- Two hours for continuing board members
- Four hours for new members (Wendy Silva)
- Remaining compliance items (FOIA/OMA training, conflict of interest forms) completed
- This represents final mandatory training for 2025

No motion required.

State of the School

Presenters: Michelle Navarre and Francesca Verdecchia

Academic Program Launch

Staff Retention Achievement: Polaris achieved unprecedented 100% staff retention with no new hires required - first time in recent organizational memory.

Professional Development Focus: With returning staff, PD Week concentrated on elevating curriculum implementation rather than basic onboarding:

- Emphasis on "expeditionizing" curriculum for authentic student connections
- Focus on high-quality work serving community purposes
- Return to expeditionary learning roots with immersive student experiences
- Integration of celebrations of learning, expert partnerships, and community-connected projects

Strong Academic Start: Fourth day of school exhibited characteristics typically seen later in academic year, indicating exceptional foundation and student engagement.

Student Success Example: New eighth-grade student entered school expressing anger about placement but concluded first day with visible enthusiasm and satisfaction.

Strategic Plan - Academic Priorities

Continuity Approach: Academic strategic priorities (Mastery of Knowledge & Skills, Character, High Quality Work) carried forward from previous year as multi-year implementation targets.

Implementation Analysis: Francesca's team conducted comprehensive analysis categorizing progress:

- **Green:** Solidified practices teachers confidently implement
- **Yellow:** Areas requiring additional support
- **Red:** Unaddressed priorities requiring focused attention

Current Year Focus: Deepening expedition quality, enhancing reflection practices, systematizing daily crew lesson planning, and elevating community-connected high-quality work.

AI Integration Initiative

Strategic Implementation: Introduction of AI tools to enhance rather than replace teaching capabilities, focusing on administrative efficiency to enable teacher focus on critical thinking and student-centered instruction.

Teacher Preparation Philosophy: Staff must become AI explorers before guiding students through technology integration. Current focus remains entirely on educator capability building.

Practical Application: Teachers utilizing ChatGPT for lesson planning enhancement, curriculum development, and partnership identification. Initial resistance evolving into engaged adoption with positive feedback on AI-generated suggestions.

Tool Selection: Currently using free ChatGPT accounts for most purposes. Michelle and John maintain ChatGPT Plus for grant writing requiring document upload capabilities. Evaluated but postponed Magic School adoption due to complexity and cost.

Environmental Consciousness: Emphasizing intentional, purpose-driven AI usage mindful of environmental impact considerations.

Enrollment and Recruitment

Current Status: 305 students enrolled in Aspen system with 28 additional students in enrollment pipeline (applications completed, working through final documentation/transfer processes).

Budget Target: 340 students budgeted; current trajectory suggests potential achievement of 333 students if pipeline converts successfully.

Enrollment Stability: No unexpected student transfers occurred on first day of school - typically problematic period for charter enrollment.

Recruitment Activities: Tammy's team conducted two back-to-school events over weekend, generating additional prospective family interest.

Community Outreach Strategy

Bloomwell Partnership: Entering third year of collaboration with increasingly realistic benchmark setting based on organizational cycle understanding.

Digital Marketing Evolution: CSP grant restrictions prevent direct digital advertising payment, but Bloomwell agreed to pay advertising costs and bill through contract structure, enabling CSP funding compliance.

Infrastructure Improvements:

- Playground installation delayed to mid-late September (tariff-related supply chain issues)
- Outdoor classroom development coordinated with playground installation

Branding Initiative: Comprehensive brand consistency project planned including:

- Uniform design updates (bold "Polaris Charter Academy" front, seal on back)
- Website overhaul funded through CSP grant
- Marketing material standardization (consistent colors, logos, fonts)
- Strategic brand recognition through community visibility

Brand Strategy Consultation (Ayanna Berry): Discussed successful educational brand examples (Ron Clark Academy), emphasizing short-form video content for contemporary engagement. Ayanna offered to provide strategic consultation including implementation planning and goal clarification beyond recruitment.

First Grade Expedition Highlight

"Magnificent Things" Expedition: First graders exploring magnificence through community lens, examining magnificent people and community contributors including potential board member interviews as expert resources.

Community Engagement Opportunities: Board members invited to serve as expedition experts and potentially host site work experiences at their businesses and organizations.

Development Committee Planning

Strategic Planning Approach: Michelle elected not to finalize development targets/benchmarks independently, preferring collaborative development committee input aligned with 20th day enrollment count and budget realities.

Grant Focus: Continuing programmatic product development with emphasis on South by Southwest EDU opportunity (detailed later in agenda).

Staffing Updates

Personnel Changes

Mathematics Teacher Recruitment: Active recruitment underway for seventh and eighth grade mathematics teacher position.

Interim Coverage Plan:

- Michelle providing temporary instruction Tuesday/Thursday/Friday
- Francesca covering Wednesday due to scheduling conflicts
- Zoe Walker (instructional guide) transitioning to mathematics classroom beginning following week

Additional Staffing Changes

Katie Saison Departure: Instructional guide for middle school literacy chose to leave organization. Position remaining vacant due to budget constraints.

Impact Assessment: Zoe Walker's temporary mathematics assignment creates gap in middle school ELA, Social Studies, and Science instructional support, increasing coaching load for Francesca.

Special Education Staffing Need: Current learning specialists exceeded capacity due to high-need student enrollment requiring additional service minutes.

Promising Candidate - Breé Connolly:

- Polaris graduate (Class of [not specified])
- Currently holds substitute certification and paraprofessional license
- Two courses remaining for degree completion (December graduation)
- Dual certification pathway: mathematics and special education
- Can begin as supervised special education teacher immediately
- Represents first Polaris graduate hired for full-time teaching position
- Strong leadership history during student years ("Mother Breé")
- Family connection: mother currently works in special education at Polaris

Financial Challenges and Facilities Issues

Budget Pressures

Enrollment Impact: Current 305 enrollment creates significant budget gap even if 340 target achieved.

Strategic Response: Michelle committed to presenting balanced budget and stopping financial losses through difficult decisions prioritizing minimal student impact.

Position Eliminations: Focus on non-student-facing positions while preserving direct instruction and student services.

Unforeseen Facility Expenses

Room 304 Lead Paint Issue:

- Slate chalkboard fell from wall during occupied class period (no student injuries)
- CPS inspection revealed lead paint contamination requiring professional mitigation
- Estimated cost: \$15,000
- CPS initially committed to funding but withdrew support citing budget crisis

Staff Bathroom Asbestos Discovery:

- Floor tiles contain asbestos-based adhesive requiring specialized remediation
- Combined facility remediation costs exceed \$20,000 (Lissette provided breakdown: \$8,000 + \$14,000)
- Essential for staff safety and regulatory compliance

CPS Responsibility Questions: Michelle expressed frustration with inconsistent CPS commitment to facility maintenance responsibilities under lease agreement terms.

Health Insurance Crisis

Budget vs. Reality: Budgeted 10% health insurance increase; actual increase proposal 24%.

Staff Retention Risk: Health insurance quality identified as key staff retention factor in exit interviews and surveys. No salary increases provided for current year, creating additional pressure against benefit reductions.

Decision Timeline: Resolution required by month-end to finalize coverage options and cost structures.

Temporary Instructional Coverage

Mathematics Instruction: Michelle acknowledged inability to provide long-term mathematics instruction beyond basic concepts, particularly advanced middle school topics like slope and linear algebra.

Certification Challenge: Zoe Walker lacks middle school mathematics certification, creating compliance issues for extended placement.

Staffing Impact: Mathematics teacher vacancy creates cascading instructional support gaps requiring systematic solution.

South by Southwest EDU Opportunity**Conference Application**

Session Proposal: "The Role of Reflection in the Age of AI" - focusing on deep critical thinking and humanity preservation through reflection practices in AI-integrated education.

Selection Process:

- 30% community voting through Panel Picker crowdsourcing platform
- 40% South by Southwest staff evaluation
- 30% additional criteria

Board Support Requested:

- Vote for proposal through provided Bitly link
- Social media promotion using provided materials
- Network outreach to expand voting base

Strategic Value: Premier education conference participation would enhance Polaris visibility and organizational reputation within national education community.

John Lydon provided technical voting instructions and social media promotion materials through chat function.

Development Committee Report

Presenter: Roel Vivit

Giving Crew Day Campaign

Event Date: September 26, 2025 (three weeks from meeting date) **Historical Context:** Commemorates Polaris's first day of school - September 4, 2007

Fundraising Goal: \$15,000 (ambitious target compared to historical \$5,000-\$10,000 range; previous year achieved \$7,500)

Focus Area: Arts and music programs supporting:

- Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra partnership
- United Voices Chicago collaboration
- Music and art teacher positions
- Instrument and art material resources
- High-quality student work showcased at spring benefit

Strategic Rationale: Arts programming represents distinctive Polaris characteristic requiring sustained investment for continued excellence and family attraction.

Board Support Strategy

Social Media Engagement: Follow Polaris accounts and share campaign posts **Personal Fundraising Pages:** Create individual social media fundraising features **Network Outreach:** \$25 average gift strategy targeting broad community engagement **Timeline:** Social media launch completed; email campaigns beginning current week

Grant Opportunity: Creative Schools Fund application in development for dance/art programming partnership with working artists (September deadline).

Development Committee Planning

Fall Event Discussion: Committee postponing October event decision pending enrollment clarity and goal setting completion.

Annual Targets: Approximately \$500,000 development goal for current year (increase from previous \$400,000 target; achieved \$350,000 last year representing \$20,000 growth).

Strategic Focus Areas: Corporate giving identified as significant opportunity area requiring targeted development work.

No motion required.

Finance Committee Report

Presenter: Lissette Sanchez (Michelle Navarre)

Annual Audit Update

Audit Status: Field work completed previous week with only three-day on-site requirement (reduced from typical week-long process).

Digital Transition Benefits: Mid-year transition to Ramp digital system streamlined documentation and receipt submission, facilitating more efficient audit process.

Preliminary Results: No issues identified; clean audit anticipated. Remaining work consists of back-end analysis conducted remotely.

Process Recognition: Auditors utilize Polaris as training site for new staff due to exceptional documentation quality and process cleanliness.

CPS Funding Concerns

Budget Uncertainty: Chicago Public Schools facing significant budget crisis with unclear gap-filling strategies.

Funding Reliability: Michelle expressed skepticism about projected funding levels based on historical experience with CPS budget adjustments and position eliminations.

Strategic Caution: Planning conservatively while monitoring CPS budget development and potential charter school funding impacts.

No motion required.

Action Items and Next Steps]

Immediate Priorities

- **Luis Board Candidate:** Tina to follow up on Michelle-Luis connection
- **Tom Erlach Contact:** Francesca to provide contact information to Tina
- **Giving Crew Day:** All board members vote and promote through networks
- **South by Southwest:** All board members vote through Panel Picker platform

Committee Meetings

- **Development Committee:** Schedule meeting for strategic plan support and event planning
- **Board Calendar:** Michelle to distribute proposed meeting dates for approval

Ongoing Monitoring

- **Enrollment Tracking:** 20th day count critical for budget adjustments
- **Mathematics Teacher Search:** Active recruitment for certified educator
- **Facility Remediation:** Coordinate lead paint and asbestos mitigation projects
- **Health Insurance:** Finalize coverage decisions by month-end

Adjournment

Motion: Ben moved to adjourn the meeting.

Second: [Multiple seconds provided]

Vote:

- **In Favor:** Unanimous "Aye"
- **Opposed:** None

Meeting adjourned at: 7:48 PM CST