

## MINUTES

### Joint Meeting of Achievement First (AF) Connecticut Boards

Amistad Academy, Bridgeport Academy

Elm City College Preparatory, Hartford Academy

Tuesday, August 23, 2022, 4:00 pm

Venue: Omni Hotel, New Haven

Zoom: <https://achievementfirst.zoom.us/j/8959180848>

**Board Members in Attendance:** Lorraine Gibbons, Jennifer Alexander, Ethan Tyminski, Gayatri Mehta, Dick Ferguson, Laura Saverin, Stephanie Ma, Patric Gregory, Prish Pierce. LaVonte Bryant, Erica Demond, Dick Kalt, Rajeev Lakra, Marlene Macaуда, Ruben Felipe, Erwin Hurst, Sr., Jessica Glover, Lisa Tanen-LaFontaine, Alice Turner, Fracoise Deristel-Leger,

**Staff in Attendance:** Lisa Margosian, Beth Cocuzza, Isabel Tañedo, Neil Shah, Xanthe Jory,, Christina Braganza, John Sharkey, Rod Bowen, Jesse Balis-Haris, Charmayne Joseph, Ken Paul, Charisse Terry, Nakia Hall, Patricia Granda-Malaver, Sultana Salma, Linda Darkwah

**Guests in Attendance:** Charon Smalls, Surbhi Patel

Patricia Granda-Malaver recorded the minutes.

#### I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:19 PM by Dick Ferguson, Chair of Elm City College Preparatory Board. Mr. Ferguson encouraged Achievement First staff to introduce themselves to the board members.

#### II. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

#### III. Presentation by Achievement First

##### A. AF Strategic Initiatives

Ms. Lisa Margosian, Interim Chief Executive Officer, kicked off the meeting presenting 4 strategic imperatives - multi-year initiatives that will direct Achievement First's focus and efforts in service of scholars and teachers.

Ms. Margosian then provided a brief overview of each strategic imperative for this coming school year:

1. Ensure that our schools deliver on their promise to our scholars, including summer readiness and a strong start to the school year.
2. Focus on our culture, ensuring a clear sense of direction, transparency in decision making, predictable communication, and a willingness to engage with all stakeholders.
3. Improve our systems and structures that support the quality performance and scaling of the network.
4. Attract and retain quality talent to deliver on our commitment to support the excellence of our schools.

Following this, AF leadership talked through each imperative in more detail.

Mr. John Sharkey, Interim Chief Academic Officer, explained that the first strategic imperative prioritizes the critical work of delivering on our promise to scholars, through our academic and instructional offerings, our social-emotional supports, and ensuring that students feel safe and welcome at school. He reminded the board that this school year AF is focused on reading in particular, as well as on student investment and continued reduction of exclusionary discipline practices. Mr. Sharkey also highlighted the fundamental summer professional development teachers recently completed which provides teachers the preparation to start off the year in a great spot. Before continuing, Ms. Lisa Tanen asked about the bullet point pertaining to physical safety on campuses and the role school-based staff have when threats occur. Ms. Margosian answered that there will be continual reporting on this topic in the dashboards, and Mr. Sharkey suggested a potential deep dive on safety threats during an upcoming fall meeting.

Ms. Beth Cocuzza, Chief of Staff, explained the second strategic imperative which focuses on workplace culture. She noted that this year AF plans to focus on bringing back a strong performance culture for both Network Support employees and principals while leadership strategizes a long-term plan for teachers and other school based staff.

Mr. Neil Shah, Chief Financial Officer, then transitioned to the third strategic imperative and explained that it seeks to improve AF's systems and structures. He listed out some ways that we are already working on this goal such as investing in finance and human resources improvements. For instance, centralizing employee relations by automating

systems like payroll will ultimately lessen the load on school-based DSOs in the long run.

Lastly, Ms. Cocuzza presented the final strategic imperative that focuses on retaining and hiring school-based and Network Support staff members to deliver on our mission. She noted the nationwide teacher shortage crisis that has impacted the teaching profession nationwide which is why talent is a primary focus this coming school year.

Ms. Margosian then opened the floor to questions. Trustees and staff engaged in conversation on topics such as efforts to maintain the quality of teacher talent, the future of signing and retention bonuses, and best practices to elevate the innovative experience of Achievement First teachers during recruitment.

## **B. SY 2021-2022 report and reflections**

### **1. Scholars**

The next meeting topic focused on AF scholar data across academies this past school year. Mr. Sharkey expressed the tremendous progress in school academics and cultures that have brought us closer to pre-pandemic standards while also acknowledging that there is still work to be done to close pre-pandemic gaps, particularly in math.

Mr. Jesse Balis-Harris, Chief of Elementary Schools, continued the conversation with data on Connecticut elementary schools, reporting that the school year ended with strong adult and scholar culture that has created an imperative foundation for continual academic achievement. He shared state assessment results to express that students were not where they needed to be on reading and math proficiency. In order to increase levels to our goals, Mr. Balis-Harris explained that we will be implementing curriculum changes, intentional professional development in the science of reading, and upgraded coaching/training. Mr. Balis-Harris then entertained questions from the Board on AF assessment results in comparison to host district and state levels, class cohorts rebounding differently depending on age, and the need to eventually surpass pre-pandemic levels.

Ms. Charmayne Joseph, Interim Chief of Middle Schools, began by reporting on student experience at Connecticut middle schools which had mixed results for this year. For instance, academies met student experience survey goals yet there are needed improvements in attendance and suspension rates which are largely due to the ramification of the pandemic. As for academics, Ms. Joseph focused on reading, science, ELA and math results, and ultimately confirmed that middle school scholars have improved from 2020-2021 but are generally performing below pre-pandemic levels. She supported these findings by offering a range of data including internal

assessments and state testing results. Ms. Joseph also provided insight on changes that have fueled growth such as science growth due to improvement in our curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Rod Bowen, Chief of High Schools, presented the academic state of Connecticut high schools. Although more scholars passed all of their courses this school year than last, student performance differed. For example, state testing data was not up to par with course passing rates. Mr. Bowen then turned to school culture for high schools which has experienced improvements Student Belonging and Valuing School according to survey data but other aspects like suspension rates are actively being worked on by investing in inclusive practices. Board members voiced interest in more information on where students are going to school post-graduation and discussed social work at schools to provide mental health support.

Ms. Xanthe Jory, Chief Operating Officer, presented updates on scholar enrollment and recruitment efforts in Connecticut. She reported that three of four CT charters are fully enrolled and we expect them to be fully enrolled next school year as well. She explained the effective recruitment methods we are using such as in-person outreach strategies, phone banking, digital marketing, and building data capacity. Ms. Jory then entertained questions from board members about reasons for the current trends in kindergarten enrollment and the specifics of improvements to our digital advertisements.

## **2. Staff**

Ms. Cocuzza transitioned the conversation to staff updates. She explained the bi-annual organizational health survey AF releases and the metrics used to predict retention, and presented results from staff at each academy level. Where there was low employee satisfaction, Ms. Cocuzza noted that the root causes were tied to teacher shortage and staffing challenges. These survey conclusions also helped instructional leadership to build more intentional alignment and more effective principal development with regional superintendents.

Mr. Michael Rabin, Deputy Chief of Staff, continued with the current state of recruitment and retention. He noted that Connecticut's difficult certification requirements have taken a toll on the teaching profession at large. Mr. Rabin highlighted our talent efforts like salary and retention bonuses, prioritization of schools with most openings, increased marketing efforts, and streamlining application process. He concluded with brief updates on hiring goals versus progress made to date. Mr. Sharkey followed up with strategies leadership will implement proactively in the coming school year to mitigate the issues we have identified this past year. The board will hear

more updates on the progress of these efforts in fall meetings. Mr. Sharkey entertained questions from the Board on emphasizing specialized teacher coaching at AF.

Ms. Christina Braganza, Chief Program Officer, reported on the investment of staff summer training series for AF's school-based teams. Ms. Braganza highlighted New Team member taxonomy training which gives new teachers the opportunity to practice building a strong classroom environment by rehearsing lessons and roleplaying. She shared the excitement of summer training being back in-person, with over 95% of participants agreeing/strongly agreeing that summer training is of high quality and high impact. Mr. Sharkey added that the goal of summer professional development is to present a series of connected training and experiences that support our visions across academies. He explained that we employed a logic model to identify specific inputs, activities and outputs needed for each session to lead us to the intended mission. In other words, we no longer look at summer training as individual sessions but rather as a collective story that will accelerate the recovery of students. Board members inquired on how summer training effectiveness is being tracked and whether individual boards can thank teachers and staff through appreciation events or additional support.

### **3. Operations**

Ms. Jory said that with the lessons we learned last year, we have implemented COVID safety guidelines in schools which include:

- Aligning guidelines with district policies and CDC guidance to simplify the decision-making process
- Evolving approaches as policies change and pandemic progresses
- Continuing asymptomatic testing this fall
- Requiring staff to receive booster shots

She continued with insight on school response to both imminent and non-imminent threats to the school community. Ms. Jory explained that we have revised and clarified protocols covering a range of threat responses that align with state guidance as well as adjusted preparedness and prevention protocols. Board members asked questions about potential simulations that can help improve our response.

Lastly, Mr. Rabin covered charter renewals as all 4 charters are up for renewal this year. He explained that we are targeting 5 year renewals, and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) will be evaluating us on various components. Mr. Rabin provided an outline of the renewal process, and noted that we are currently at the formal renewal application stage. Board members will get this document as signatures will need to be obtained before moving forward with site visits. Overall, Mr. Rabin pointed out that leadership is working hard to fortify the relationship that AF has

with CSDE. During discussion, Mr. Rabin answered a question regarding any stumbling blocks in past renewals.

#### **IV. Adjourn**

The meeting was adjourned at 6:04 PM by Dick Ferguson.

Motion by Dick Kalt

Seconded by Raj Lakra

All in favor