

**Meeting Minutes
AF Hartford Academy
Board of Directors Meeting**

Venue: Virtual Meeting

Zoom: <https://achievementfirst.zoom.us/j/87197928604>

Thursday, October 12, 2023, 5:30-7:00 pm

I. Call to Order

Erwin Hurst, Sr. called the meeting to order at 5:35 pm.

Attendees:

The following board members, constituting a quorum, were in attendance:

Name	Present	Name	Present
Erwin Hurst, Sr.	Y	Alice Turner	Y
Lisa Tanen-LaFontaine	N	Francoise Deristel-Leger	Y
Surbhi Patel	N	Charon Smalls	Y

Also present:

AF Staff: Oraina Simmons, Raven Obas, Sueleidy Cruz, Lisa Margosian, Dumar Paden, Karolyn Belcher, Blakely Simoneau, Shannon Miller, Sulafa Bashir, Caleb Dolan, LaNelle Alexander, Neil Shah, Charmayne Joseph, and John Sharkey

Guests: Victor De La Paz

II. Public Comment

Victor De La Paz was present as a future board member. No other members of the public were present.

III. Discussion with Achievement First

C. Welcome (2 min)

Lisa Margosian welcomed everyone and expressed sadness at the recent passing of an Achievement First high school student.

D. Principals' Reports (10 min)

Principals Oraina Simmons, Raven Obas, and Sueleidy Cruz presented on the start of the school year and upcoming events.

E. Graduate Goals and Aims (25 min)

Dumar Paden presented on the Graduate Goals and Aims. He highlighted certain changes AF has already instituted, and some of the changes the board can expect to see moving forward. Mr. Paden reflected that these Goals & Aims are meant to answer the question of “why AF” and that these are meant to inform the next 20 years. He acknowledged that AF needs to come back to the board with ways that we will demonstrate that we are fulfilling these Goals and Aims. Mr. Paden presented some details about how AF would be moving forward this school year and the next school year.

Mr. Hurst asked how the board could get more involved, and Mr. Paden explained that AF is engaging multiple stakeholders and that this is what the board meeting is for. Ms. Deristel-Leger asked clarifying questions around credits. Mr. Smalls mentioned a potential partnership with a local college.

IV. Resolutions and Approvals Previous Meeting’s minutes, Leadership Slate, Committees, Interim Principals, Family Handbook (10 min)

The board returned to passing the resolutions. Erwin asked Victor De La Paz to introduce himself. Ms. Deristel-Leger welcomed Mr. De La Paz to the board. Ms. Deristel-Leger moved to approve the Consent Agenda, Mr. Charon Smalls seconded. All were in favor, none abstained.

Consent Agenda:

1. BE IT RESOLVED, the Achievement First Hartford Academy Board of Directors hereby approves the meeting minutes from June 20, 2023.
2. BE IT RESOLVED, that the Achievement First Hartford Academy Board of Directors elects Victor De La Paz to the Board for a 3-year term, ending June 30, 2026.
3. BE IT RESOLVED, that the Achievement First Hartford Academy Board of Directors hereby elects the following leadership slate for the 2023-2024 fiscal year:
 - a. Erwin Hurst, Sr, Chair
 - b. Francoise Deristel-Leger, Vice Chair
 - c. Victor De La Paz, Treasurer
 - d. Surbhi Patel, Secretary

4. BE IT RESOLVED, that the Achievement First Hartford Academy Board of Directors hereby appoints the following committee members:
 - Finance Committee: Victor De La Paz (Chair), Erwin Hurst, Sr., Lisa Tanen-LaFontaine
 - Personnel Committee: Erwin Hurst, Sr.(Chair), Francoise Deristel-Leger, Charon Smalls
 - AF Joint Hartford Committee: Erwin Hurst, Sr. (Chair), Alice Turner, Surbhi Patel
5. BE IT RESOLVED that the Achievement First Hartford Academy Board of Directors hereby approves the following individuals to serve as interim principal, as needed, for a period of time not to exceed sixteen weeks through June 30, 2024, based on the recommendations by Achievement First.
 - a. Elementary School: Heather Moran
 - b. Middle School: Jessica Alhasnawi
 - c. High School: Jahki Manley
6. BE IT RESOLVED, that the Achievement First Hartford Academy Board of Directors hereby approves the 2023-2024 AF Family Handbook.

C. Graduate Goals and Aims (25 min)

The board returned to the Graduate Goals and Aims. Mr. De La Paz offered some advice for future edits. Mr. Smalls thanked Mr. Paden for the work on this, and asked about college retention rates and alternative paths for students after graduation. Mr. Paden said they have a 59% persistence rate which is far higher than the national average. Mr. Smalls asked what they are doing in regards to being more intentional and more equitable around individual student needs when it comes to social emotional learning. Mr. Paden mentioned they are implementing social emotional learning curricula and expanding mental health partnerships in schools.

D. New Curriculum Implementation and Academic Goals (15 min)

Mr. Sharkey offered updates on academic performance and provided details on the adoption of the new curriculum. He emphasized the importance of clear academic goals for the current year and discusses what they'll be monitoring to achieve them. They acknowledge the need for ambitious goals and recognize the progress being

made towards those goals.

Mr. Sharkey highlighted the importance of benchmarking and measuring performance, utilizing four distinct categories to monitor progress. He shared the prioritized academic goals for elementary schools, emphasizing the need to evaluate and improve academic performance. They mention areas of strength and growth in ELA and math strategy access, but note that absolute proficiencies are low.

Mr. Sharkey discussed that the challenges faced in middle school academic performance include the long-term impact of disrupted instruction due to the pandemic. The middle school results are compared to both the host district and the state.

Mr. Sharkey mentions that the approach to setting academic goals in high school is different, focusing on continual growth over time. The need for stronger results and the implementation of high-quality instructional materials are discussed.

Karolyn Belcher added that they are worried about a recurring trend of struggling academic performance and difficulties in hiring an adequate number of staff. To address these issues, the district is allocating additional resources, including a quarter of a million dollars from the ESSR fund. However, she noted that solving the staffing challenge is not the only solution, and emphasized the commitment to providing extra support to address these challenges at these campuses.

Mr. Sharkey discussed efforts to enhance student achievement through curriculum improvements. He stressed the importance of using high-quality, grade-level aligned instructional materials, texts, and tasks to enhance student achievement. He stated that teacher training and support have been provided. The training has been well-received by educators, and a continuous improvement framework has been implemented to observe instruction, identify gaps, and plan for professional development. Mr. Sharkey said they are capturing data to track the impact of these initiatives and suggested that the story of improvement based on these changes will be shared in the coming year.

E. CAP Update (5 min)

Karolyn Belcher stated that they received a three-year charter renewal last year but

were placed under corrective action in three areas: teacher certification, chronic absenteeism, and academic outcomes. The corrective action plan was due to concerns about academic progress, especially in middle and high schools. Additional investments and support have been directed to these areas, including after-school sports and coaching activities. However, finding qualified teachers, particularly in high-need subject areas, remains a significant challenge.

Ms. Belcher stated that they previously had good attendance records, but are now facing high levels of chronic absenteeism due to factors like mental health issues and increased illness, likely related to the pandemic. The school is working to build an infrastructure to address this issue.

Ms. Belcher acknowledged the importance of teacher certification in the state of Connecticut and the need to meet these requirements. She provided details about the certification status of the school's teachers, including those with initial, provisional, professional credentials, charter school educator permits, and other types of certification. Some teachers are out of compliance, which is attributed to the state not responding to certification applications or teachers struggling to meet the requirements.

Ms. Belcher mentioned that there are challenges related to enrollment, especially in a competitive school choice marketplace. She mentioned that they encourage principals to admit students after the October 1st deadline for reimbursement purposes. Maintaining enrollment is essential for the long-term health of the charter, as being under-enrolled creates financial pressures. Larger class sizes and understaffing are among the challenges that the school is addressing.

Francoise Deristel Leger asked about teacher certification, and what is being done to recruit or to keep teachers. Ms. Belcher discussed the efforts and challenges related to teacher certification and recruitment including expediting and reviewing teacher certification applications. She said they have been actively working on compliance with teacher certification requirements. Despite their efforts, a significant percentage of their teachers still hold emergency credentials, which falls short of the state's expectations. They plan to highlight their recruitment efforts and future plans when presenting to the State Board next year.

Ms. Belcher mentioned that they have seen promising results from a pilot digital

marketing campaign for student enrollment in New York. They are considering expanding this approach for teacher recruitment in the coming year, with a more targeted effort.

Ms. Belcher said they recognize the need to build their own pipelines of teachers, particularly in math, science, and special education. They have a teachers and residents program but acknowledge the need for a more robust pipeline, potentially partnering with organizations like Relay to offer cost-effective teacher preparation programs.

Ms. Belcher stated that they are planning a full audit to explore cost reduction options for teacher certification. They are also exploring apprenticeship programs and other initiatives to address the challenges in teacher recruitment and certification. She said the focus is on improving compliance with teacher certification requirements, expanding recruitment efforts, and finding cost-effective solutions to build a robust teacher pipeline over the next year.

Mr. De La Paz asked if taking kids after October 1 was a departure from prior practice? Mr. Rabin said that historically, the enrollment cutoff date was October 1st, which was the deadline for sending enrollment numbers to the state for funding purposes. However, in the current environment, where recruitment and enrollment have become more challenging, they are looking to extend enrollment beyond October 1st to ensure the longevity of the charter schools. He recognized the difficulties schools face in enrolling students after the traditional cutoff date.

F. Teacher Recruitment Update (10 min)

Karolyn Belcher gave an update on teacher recruitment. She said the talent department is undergoing transitions, and efforts are being made to stabilize the team and ensure that the right individuals are in the appropriate roles. The organization plans to revisit school-based compensation to remain competitive in the job market. Ms. Belcher said that due to the pandemic, the teacher career ladder pipeline that was based on student results and performance had to be paused. They are now seeking to determine a career ladder tied to compensation that can be implemented for the next year.

Ms. Belcher discussed that efforts are underway to ensure certification and pipeline options in every state, especially in subjects like math, science, special education, and

bilingual education. She said that to handle downsizing and reflect efficiency, the organization is looking to better coordinate applicant tracking, HRIS, and payroll systems to reduce manual labor.

Ms. Belcher acknowledged that staffing challenges exist in several schools, particularly in Hartford Summer Summit and Hartford High School. The organization generally has a more generous staffing model compared to traditional public schools, which can present challenges in terms of flexibility.

G. Enrollment Update (5 min)

Michael Rabin gave an update on enrollment. The organization's charter in Hartford allows for 1,125 seats across three academies, and they can adjust the enrollment goals for each academy as needed. highlights that there has been a decline in enrollment, particularly in the elementary, middle, and high schools, compared to the previous year.

Mr. Rabin said that they had lost about 40 students between October and April during the 2022-2023 school year, which accounts for 4% of the student population. This attrition was significant and raised concerns. The matriculation rate from eighth to ninth grade for internal students was only about 60%, resulting in a smaller ninth-grade class than predicted.

Mr. Rabin acknowledged that the organization faces strong competition from magnet schools and other factors, and they need to improve their presence and visibility in the Hartford community. He spoke about strategies for recruitment in the next year to address enrollment challenges.

Mr. Rabin discussed the strategies for improving student recruitment and enrollment in Hartford. He emphasized the importance of increasing the charter's presence in the community, getting their name and value proposition out there, and building partnerships with local schools and organizations.

Mr. Rabin said they plan to use billboards at strategic locations, increase their presence at community events and festivals, and leverage social media campaigns to spotlight their schools, principals, leaders, students, and families. Additionally, they aim to enhance the matriculation process to attract more eighth to ninth-grade students,

improve relationships with organizations like Jumokee, and generate positive media exposure for their schools. iAF is committed to implementing these strategies and welcomes input and feedback from the board.

Mr. Hurst raised concerns about the way AF is portrayed in the media, with a focus on negative events and tragedies rather than highlighting the positive achievements of its students. He emphasized the need to shift the narrative and draw attention to the successes, such as students being accepted into prestigious colleges. He also stressed the importance of engaging with the community, parents, and other stakeholders to shape a more positive image for AF in Hartford. Mr. Hurst offered to collaborate with the community and suggested involving community members, parents, and school staff in strategy meetings to work on improving the charter's identity and reputation. Mr. Rabin agreed and said he would connect with Mr. Hurst to discuss further.

H. Finance Committee Report (10 min)

Mr. Shah presented the key financial highlights. He had three main points: fiscal net income from school operations was break-even as expected, end-of-year liabilities decreased compared to the prior year, and the financial position shows stability and the net asset trend is being monitored. Mr. Shah provided financial data and compared the audited figures from the previous year with unaudited figures for the current year, highlighting stability in revenue and a trend of decreasing net assets. He also outlined plans for future financial reporting, including analysis, budget considerations, and fiscal policy revisions.

V. Other Business

Mr. Hurst stated that Jessica Alhasnawi has resigned from the board. She served as the teacher rep and was also Vice Chair. He thanked her for her service and congratulated her on her promotion to Principal-in-Residence.

VI. Adjourn

Mr. Hurst adjourned the meeting at 7:24 pm.