



Meeting of the Board of Directors

**Wednesday April 23, 2025
4:00 P.M.**

2424 West Peterson

Meeting Minutes

Members Present:

John Hrisney	X
Charles Hempfling	X
Michelle Cronin	X
Manuj Lal	Absent
Stephen Moy	Absent
Jyoti Nigam	X
Mark Hansen	X
Paula Cripps-Vallejo	X
Marcia Harris	X

Guests Present

Rebecca Creighton: Co-CEO
Chris Shue: Co-CEO
Eric Lindstrom: COO
Michael Stewart: Principal, Passages

1. Call to Order (M. Cronin)

Discussion: M. Cronin called the meeting to order at 4:10 p.m. and thanked Principal Stewart and the Team for their hard work as we close in on the end of the school year.

2. Public Comment

Discussion: There was no one present for Public Comment

3. Ed Council Report (M. Stewart/M. Hansen)

Discussion: Principal Stewart provided an update to the board on the work of the Education Council to date. The committee has been focused on removing barriers for multilingual learners, aligning with one of the organization's strategic priorities.

An initial assessment of current ELL programming and practices was conducted, which revealed the need for additional work to develop clear, actionable goals for ELL support. Principal Stewart emphasized the importance of setting intentional expectations across three key groups: students, teachers, and administrators.

The committee identified several areas of need, including:

- Timely distribution of curriculum materials
- Targeted professional development opportunities for teachers
- Increased clarity and support from administrators to aid classroom implementation

Principal Stewart also noted that the committee's ongoing work has informed broader conversations with the I&I team, particularly as ELL continues to be a domain in which the organization is meeting compliance

4. Principals Report (M. Stewart)

Discussion: Principal Stewart reported progress in academic programming. Spring assessments are nearly complete, with IAR testing successfully wrapped up and 360 assessments underway to measure student growth. Teacher evaluations are 95% complete, well ahead of the deadline, using the Danielson Framework as the evaluation tool.

Principal Stewart shared that Eighth-grade high school placement results are a point of pride, with 36% of students admitted to selective enrollment or college prep high schools including Northside College Prep, Latin School, and Westinghouse. Graduation events and celebrations are scheduled, noting the eighth-grade class's strong bond, not a lot of behavioral challenges, and a solid focus on academics, which reflects the benefits of smaller class sizes.

In the area of multilingual education, Principal Stewart emphasized the continued efforts to meet ELL compliance standards and increase program quality. The school has expanded its number of certified ESL and bilingual teachers from 3 to 12 over the past few years and continues to support staff in getting both ESL and Bi-lingual certifications. Challenges remain around compliance due to structural funding shortfalls and the diversity of home languages spoken by students, including Rohingya, Arabic, and Spanish. As was shared in the Ed Council report, the group is helping to shape goals, expectations, and support strategies across staff roles. The school has received positive acknowledgment from I&I and OMME for our proactive efforts and documentation practices, even though no clear state or local model schools exist for multilingual programs of this complexity. Recruitment, training partnerships, and leveraging paraprofessional talent are key areas of growth.

5. ECE Report (R.Creighton)

Discussion: R. Creighton provided a high-level overview of urgent funding issues impacting the ECE program. A special board meeting will be scheduled for the week of May 12 to review detailed scenarios related to federal Head Start funding, which is currently under threat of full elimination in the upcoming federal budget cycle. As Head Start comprises the majority of ECE funding, the uncertainty presents significant financial risk in planning for the next program year.

The Finance Committee has requested at least two viability scenarios from the executive team: one assuming funding through June 30 and potentially through December of 2025, and one assuming no funding beyond that point. Post-finance meeting, confirmation was received that funds have been obligated through June 30, avoiding immediate disruption. Start Early has requested that vouchering be



submitted early to support timely fund disbursement; the first early submission was approved without issue.

Looking ahead to September, projected funding includes only 51 Head Start slots, down from 85, at a 30% reduction per slot (if funded), no Early Head Start slots, we would have to right size Preschool for All (PFA) funding to 60 slots, down from 100 and maintain our 24 PI (Prevention Initiative) home-based slots. There is potential for an additional 16 PI center-based slots due to under-enrollment system-wide. However, even with these allocations, funding doesn't cover operational costs, with teacher salaries outpacing standard industry wages by about 40%, highlighting the structural imbalance between funding levels and program sustainability. With projected funding, the program would continue to run at a significant deficit.

The executive team will continue balancing long-term financial sustainability with our commitment to serving children and families with dignity. It will be important for the executive team to build in timing of notification and what a dignified transition to staff and families would look like in their scenarios. Board members were encouraged to engage in thoughtful, candid discussion as decisions are made under rapidly shifting funding conditions.

6. Executive Closed Session

Discussion: Motion to move into closed session at 4:55 made by C. Hempfling and seconded by M. Harris.

Motion was approved unanimously by M. Cronin, J. Hrisney, M. Hansen J. Nigam, P. Cripps-Vallejo

Motion to come out of closed session at 5:32 made by J. Hrisney and seconded by M.Harris.

Motion was approved unanimously by M. Cronin, C.Hempfling, M Hansen, J.Nigram, P. Cripps-Vallejo

7. Passages Budget/ Finances (C. Shue)

Discussion: C. Shue provided an overview of financial performance for both the Charter (K–8) and Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs.

C. Shue recognized effective cost management by Principal Stewart and all school leadership, while continuing to prioritize compliance and student outcomes. Enrollment declines have been noted, though these will impact future funding cycles rather than the current year. Facilities capital needs remain unfunded and present ongoing risk related to CPS compliance and classroom continuity. All categorical funding streams (e.g., Title, bilingual funds) are current, and monthly vouchering is being managed effectively to ensure proper spend down, particularly important in a charter renewal year.

The ECE program is currently operating at a significant \$500,000 cash loss through March, with projections reaching an \$800,000 deficit by fiscal year-end. The loss is primarily due to significant funding reductions, coupled with the high cost of personnel, which exceed typical early childhood salary norms by 40%. The ECE contract operates on a calendar year basis, ending December 31. Recent reductions have led to a \$300,000 shortfall in the current budget, contributing to a



\$375,000 variance overall. The team is actively working to offset this impact, though options are limited in the short term. Spend-down efforts have been accelerated to ensure all federal funds are used within the required timelines. In response to budget volatility, the executive team is preparing a detailed financial analysis to be presented at a special board meeting the week of May 12.

Final CPS funding allocations are expected by mid-May. In the meantime, the team is proceeding with conservative revenue assumptions in line with board guidance. Although formal confirmation is pending, it is expected that “hold harmless” enrollment protections at 380 students will continue based on past precedent. C. Shue closed by reaffirming the organization’s commitment to balancing long-term financial sustainability with its responsibility to students, families, and staff.

8. Passages Special Committee Report (R. Creighton)

Discussion: R. Creighton reported that Passages received a preliminary two-year charter renewal with conditions from CPS’s Office of Innovation and Incubation (I&I), consistent with over half of the current cohort of schools under review. I&I flagged ongoing challenges around serving the ELL population, which are tied directly to structural funding issues, high capital costs, and personnel expenses that outpace public funding. Although the Board of Education was expected to vote on the renewal tomorrow (April 24th) we’ve received unofficial word that CPS has once again delayed the vote, pushing it into May. R. Creighton also shared that there is a proposed board resolution that includes restrictive language on charter operations and increased oversight that has been withdrawn following a lot of pushback but is expected to be brought to floor in May. R. Creighton emphasized that the Trellus team remains actively engaged in strategy and transparent discussions with i&i to ensure we can be responsive to the changing environment.

R. Creighton presented four strategic sustainability scenarios under review by the Passages Special Committee: Each option is being evaluated for financial and legal feasibility, as well as managing the risk of potential disruption to students and families. The school continues to face challenges with limited funding despite high-needs enrollment, and unresolved capital improvement demands. Enrollment has declined citywide; student enrollment has recently increased at Passages. The challenge is over 70% of Passages’ population now qualifies as ELL, with no correlated increase in funding.

Given the broader instability in early childhood education and the unresolved status of Head Start funding, R. Creighton acknowledged the potential ripple effects on K–8 enrollment if the ECE program cannot continue. Up to 38 preschoolers would be eligible to transition into kindergarten next year. Board members raised concerns about staffing and enrollment forecasting. R. Creighton confirmed efforts are underway to meet with I&I leadership to advocate for sustainable solutions and to identify proactive transition plans, including exploring partnerships with community-based providers. She closed by emphasizing the urgency of aligning funding with need and reiterated the board’s commitment to act in the best interest of children, families, and staff in an increasingly volatile education landscape.

9. Consent Agenda

Discussion: Motion to move approve consent agenda made by M. Harris and seconded by C. Hempfling

Motion was: Approved- unanimously by M. Cronin, M. Hansen, J. Hrisney, J,Nigam, P. Cripps-Vallejo

- a. Approval of January 2025 Meeting Minutes

10. On the Horizon

Discussion: The following events and dates were shared with the Board.

- All School Meeting: April 25, 2025
- Student vs. Staff Basketball Game: May 23rd (Time TBD)
- 8th Grade Luncheon and Awards Ceremony: May 27th 11:00 at First Free Church
- 8th Grade Graduation: June 3rd 10:00 at the First Free Church

11. Adjourn

Discussion: Motion to move adjourn at 6:27 made by M. Harris and seconded by M. Hansen

Motion was: Approved- unanimously by M. Cronin, C. Hempfling, J. Hrisney, J,Nigam, P. Cripps-Vallejo