Minutes for September 19, 2018 Board Meeting

**Place:** Administrative Offices of OnTECH Charter High School, 810 Willis Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13204

**Present:**

Ellen Eagen, Founder & President

Victoria Giarratano, Trustee

Bill Sanford, Trustee

Stephen Kimatian, Secretary/Treasurer

John Stegeman, Trustee/ Chairperson

Eskedar Getahun, via telepresence

Francis Coudriet, Administrator

**1. WELCOME**

Chairperson of the meeting, John Stegeman, called the meeting to order at 5:50 PM. He first welcomed David Frank, Director of the Charter School Office for the New York State Education Department, who was in attendance at the meeting. Prior to the meeting Mr. Frank had an opportunity to tour the school. Mr. Frank said he was glad to be able to attend. The Chairperson then asked the Trustees to introduce themselves with a short bio of their backgrounds. Given Mr. Frank was intending on returning to Albany this evening, the Chairperson offered to give him the floor for any comments.

Mr. Frank said he was glad to have this opportunity to speak with the Trustees, particularly since he did need to return to Albany. Mr. Frank then addressed the Trustees on a number of matters. Among them were the following.

1. He recognized the uniqueness of OnTECH in pursuing the agricultural connections. He recognized this fit with the Upstate economy and felt it provided a strong relationship into that industry for students. He said there were 356 charter schools in New York States, serving a variety of student and community needs. Some, he said were similar, such as Vertus in Rochester and New Dawn in Brooklyn, New York.

2. Mr. Frank said he believed in the autonomy of charters to chart their own course, to develop their programming in the best way they could foresee and to deliver instruction in a manner they felt connected best with the students in their region and their school. At the same time, he said, this autonomy came with the responsibility to produce results and be accountable to the Charter School Office in delivering the expectations required of a successful charter. He underscored that the Charter School Office was there to help the schools, provide guidance and answer any questions that might arise. He stressed that the Charter School Office would also be evaluating the schools on the set criteria and would make judgments in the best interest of the students and the mandate of the State with respect to charters. He said that Trustees should clearly understand their role and obligation to produce results. Although it is not something that the Charter School Office wants to do, he said that he wanted to clearly communicate that a school that was not producing would be closed.

3. He then spoke about the need for Board to be strong in its oversight. He pointed out three major areas to be addressed: namely, Fiscal, Operational and Legal considerations. The Board must make tough decisions if the school is not headed in the right direction. The Board needs to assess the data and results of the school’s curriculum and instruction and it if does not meet expectations, the Board must take action.

4. An essential part of the Board’s work, Mr. Frank explained, is to assess the school leadership. A successful charter needs strong leadership and Great Boards go hand in hand with Great School Leaders. To be a great board is hard work, he said, but that is what is expected of the charter schools under his responsibility.

5. Mr. Frank then spoke about how there is a great commonality among start-up charters. He said you should not be dissuaded if everything does not go as you predicted or as you want. That happens to every new charter. If you have a certain problem, you can probably bet that other charters had the same problem. It can be messy. It can require fixes. The important thing is to react to the issues. You can also learn from others he said. The Charter School Office is always there to help.

6. Mr. Frank pointed out how learning from what other charter have done can be helpful to OnTECH. He said you are fortunate in that Ellen has a great understanding of the charter world and knows many individuals who can be reached out to for assistance.

7. Mr. Frank then mentioned a number of charters which have had outstanding success in the different subject areas and different grade levels.

8. He pointed out that professional development can be a key way to insure that your faculty stays up to date. As you might expect, pay scales can also be a key driver for hiring talented staff as well as retention.

9. Exit interviews can also be very useful for identifying problems or catching issues before they become major problems.

10. Lastly, he said that he believed OnTECH has the potential for tremendous success. The main thing is to keep your eye on the ball, on the important job of being a board and don’t be afraid to ask questions of the Charter School Office. With that, Mr. Frank said he would be leaving shortly and thanked everyone for their attention.

**2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

The Chairperson then ask for a vote approving the September, 2018 meeting minutes. There being no additions, modifications or corrections, a motion was made by Trustee Sanford, seconded by Trustee Stegeman, and carried unanimously.

**3. FACILITIES / OPERATIONS**

The Chairperson called upon Trustee Kimatian to give the facilities report. Trustee Kimatian reported that the issue of meeting the fire code was following a procedure whereby the plans would first be given code approval from the city of Syracuse and the work would then be bid out and installation would be made. This would require at least six weeks to complete. He said laying the tile on the second floor and in the hallways was underway. The rectory would be receiving a metal roof as that turned out to be the least costly way to address the aging roof. The Church alarm system was being installed and the additional requirements of egress from the basement was being addressed. Trustee Sanford asked when the rectory space would be available to use. It would probably be Christmas before that space could be used as it is the last of the three buildings to be brought up to code.

Keil White, Director of Operations, spoke about the bus routes for transportation now being fixed with less issues for students getting to school. Trustee Eagen said it turned out that starting a day late actually turned out to be a positive, since the city schools started on that day as well and most parents did not object.

**4. ACADEMIC REPORT**

Josh Schneider, Academic Dean, was asked to give the report. Mr. Schneider said that a main focus was on developing the culture of the school. He said that students are participating in defining their own culture. One programmatic theme was to view the learning of math and history through the lens of food, its availability, its quality, its value, as well as the history of usage for different people. Mr. Schneider explained that the mission was not to directly tell the students what they should learn, but rather have them uncover the facts and ask the questions that will get them the answers. He said we want the students to embrace the ownership and authorship of the lessons. The goal is to have them embrace the culture of this new way of learning. Trustee Stegeman agreed that culture and learning should be tied together. Mr. Schneider stated that assessment of reading levels was key and steps were being taken to get a better understanding of each individual’s level. He said he would continue to update the Board on the progress.

Mr. Frank asked what interventions are being put into place with respect to expectations of the student, e.g., he said, how are you using data. Mr. Schneider said he agreed that gathering data was a critical aspect of being able to address the needs of the individual students. He said that the teachers were in the process of identifying the best tests for assessing the levels. Right now, the administering through computer aided tests was being considered.

Trustee Sanford asked whether the teachers had any issues with the facilities in getting their jobs done. Mr. Schneider said he felt that the teachers were able to accomplish what they wanted and that we benefited from having a small school at this point.

Mr. White said that from his perspective the teachers appreciate that we are starting something new. They see progress in the facilities improving and they are on board.

Trustee Sanford emphasized that communication between faculty administration was key.

Trustee Eagen said our goal is to build a professional community that has a clear focus of moving forward and that is consistently iterating to improve results.

**5. PERSONNEL**

Trustee Eagen reported that we had lost one teacher who felt OnTECH was not the best fit for her and left for personal reasons. Trustee Stegeman had a question on the when a Dean of Students and Culture would be hired. Trustee Eagen said we had some excellent candidates and would be interviewing them over the next week. She also said a new ELA teacher had been hired and would be starting after she provided the proper notice for her transition.

Trustee Eagen also stated that the school had reviewed different medical and dental plans and had concluded that the Excellus health care and dental plans would be made available to employees. To offset some of the Employee cost the school would provide $200 per month toward health and $20 / month toward dental insurance premiums for those who elected to participate in the Excellus plans. Toward that end, a motion was made by Trustee Kimatian to adopt the Excellus plans and for the school to contribute $200/ month toward health care and $20/ month toward dental insurance premiums for eligible employees who participate in the plans. The motion was seconded by Trustee Stegeman and upon vote of the Board was unanimously carried.

**6. FINANCE**

Trustee Kimatian gave the Treasurer’s report. He said we were on budget at this time and had sufficient funds to pay the due bills. Computers were being received and imaged and are scheduled to be used by the classes in the first two weeks of October. Submission for the next invoicing of the district will be done on October 1st. We also anticipate receipt of the CSP funds within the next month.

**7. GOVERNANCE**

Trustee Eagen stated that the configuration of the management structure of the school would go forward as approved by the Board at previous meetings, namely a tripartite senior management tier composed of the Dean of Academics, Dean of Students & Culture and Director of Operations. This was an intentional structure at the outset to insure that the execution of the school mission stayed true to the founding vision.

**8. ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to discuss, the Chairperson said he would entertain a motion to dismiss. A motion was made by Trustee Eagen, seconded by Trustee Sanford, and unanimously carried by vote.