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**Minutes**  
**Dec. 3, 2020 Meeting**  
**UChicago Charter School Board of Directors**

Dec. 3, 2020, 5:00 to 6:10 p.m.

The University of Chicago Charter School

Via ZOOM

**Attendees**

Board of Directors Members in attendance: D. Abebe (presiding); D. Gorman-Smith; I. Samstein; T. Island; S. Vasquez; K. Callow-Wright

Board of Directors Members absent: None

Also in attendance: UEI/UCCS Staff: D. Adams; C. Epstein; U. Mardyla; J. Washington; T. Barnett; A. Hull; J. Nowaczewski

**I. Welcome and Review of Advisory Council Meeting**

President Abebe called the meeting to order on the Zoom platform at 5:00 p.m. He thanked everyone for attending, observing that there was a quorum. President Abebe noted that since the Board had last met in October, the country had passed through certain events wherein it appeared that the foundations of American democracy are intact, for which so many are grateful.

President Abebe asked Vice President Dean Gorman-Smith to review the Advisory Council Meeting of Nov. 12, 2020. Vice President Dean Gorman-Smith opened by noting that, as President Zimmer often remarks, sometimes with the COVID-19 pandemic, it takes an extra effort to remember the work that is right in front of us, and what the long term vision is for executing on the mission of both the University and the Charter School. In that context, Dean Gorman-Smith shared with the Board that Tanika and members of the Dr. Adams leadership team at the Woodlawn High School had made several inspiring presentations at the Council Meeting.

In particular, Dean Gorman-Smith read from the draft minutes of the Council Meeting regarding CEO Island Childress's presentation on the Charter School's approach to teaching social justice issues: "UCCS was deeply intentional about selecting its school leaders so that they are a reflection of the UCCS students. She emphasized that UCCS' goal was to liberate black young people from any sense that they were "less than" and to believing instead that "blackness is an asset." She reaffirmed the school's commitment to a standard of "black excellence."

Dean Gorman-Smith also praised Dr. Adams' presentation on the High School, noting that under Dr. Adams' leadership, she had increased the number of AP courses, and was upholding a Senior Seminar on Black Thought for all seniors, which included a 25page thesis. She noted Dr. Adams had instituted dual credit courses as an opportunity for UCCS students to earn college credit, and that one senior had already been accepted to the University of Chicago on a full-ride scholarship. Both the CEO and Dr. Adams thanked Dean Gorman-Smith for these remarks. President Abebe added his appreciation for the work that was being done. Dean Gorman-Smith asked that the

CEO send to all Board Members both presentations that she and Dr. Adams had given to the Council.

President Abebe updated the Board on the process for appointing a Parent to the Charter School Board, as required by Illinois law. He reviewed the efforts of the UCCS leadership team to review, interview and recommend two candidates to the President and Vice President, both of whom were found to be excellent. He noted that he and the Vice President asked leadership for their final, single recommendation, who, ultimately, he and the Vice President interviewed and found very committed to the work of the Charter School. President Abebe shared that the recommendation to President Zimmer to appoint this proposed representative, parent Patrice Ziegler, was currently pending. He concluded that she will be introduced to the Board at the next meeting and will clearly be an asset to the Board.

### **III. Public Comment (5:10 p.m.)**

President Abebe called for any members of the public who wished to comment. The Zoom link had been posted on the UCCS public website. No member of the public entered the Zoom meeting for purposes of making public comments.

### **II. Minutes (5:11 p.m.)**

Vice President Gorman-Smith made a motion to approve as written the draft Minutes of the October 8, 2020 Board Meeting included in the Board Book. Member Vasquez seconded the motion, and on a unanimous voice vote, the minutes for Oct. 8, 2020 were approved as final.

### **IV. CEO's Report (5:12 p.m.)**

CEO Island Childress opened by noting that she wanted to “engage in a conversation” with the Board regarding plans for when UCCS would consider re-opening to in-person learning. She stated that not 20 minutes before, the UCCS leadership team had just been part of an epi-team meeting for 30 minutes with University epidemiologists and learned some new information. The CEO stated that the UChicago Charter Schools had been in 100% remote learning since the Board voted to support that decision on August 7, 2020, and that, as she had reported at the October 8, 2020 Board Meeting, that Remote Learning at UCCS was going well, with high 94-96% participation rates even in the lower grades. She noted that the present approved plan had UChicago Charter in 100% Remote Learning until the end of second semester, Feb. 8, 2021.

The CEO noted that nationally and in Chicago, the coronavirus was surging. She noted that America had had its worst day ever in terms of deaths just the day before: 2,706 deaths. She compared the Chicago positivity rate of 11.6% to the New York City rate of 5% in its Focus Zones. She noted that the COVID-19 virus was impacting the communities that UChicago Charter served more than other communities: in May 2020, the Chicago African-American population, which is only 30% of Chicago, had experienced 60% of Chicago's COVID-19 deaths.

The CEO stated that in light of this data, and with a desire to be transparent, UChicago Charter was considering recommending that Charter Campuses remain in 100% Remote Learning until

April 9, 2020, which would be two more months past the end of the First Semester, the months of February and March, 2021. She noted that there was “light at the end of the tunnel” and that knowing that, the leadership of UChicago Charter desired to follow its principles, announced at the July Board Meeting and “prioritize the health, safety and well-being of the entire UCCS community.” She emphasized that “we miss our students, and we want them to have the benefits of in-person learning, but at this point, the risks of resuming in February are significant.”

She noted that other Charter Schools in Chicago had recently announced their plans: Noble Street was staying remote through April 9, 2021; LEARN had been in-person for some classes, and pulled back to remote learning with plans to stay remote through the winter; Perspectives Charter School also planned to stay remote till spring. The CEO noted that while CPS was announcing plans to resume a hybrid operation with some grades returning in January, CPS was facing sharp scrutiny from the CTU. She noted that in the Epi Team meeting just held, the paradigm of creating a “Transmission Free Zone,” had been presented. She noted that the Charter Leadership team would be considering this and was going to continue to collect information and data to bring to the Board.

The CEO shared that, unlike other possible settings in CPS and elsewhere, the students at UChicago Charter Schools have been doing well in Remote Learning. She receives daily metrics and both participation and learning achievements are ;above 90%, even in the lower grades.

The CEO emphasized that not a single parent had asked for in-person learning to resume at this time. Again, unlike other possible comparisons, UChicago Charter was not receiving parent pressure to return to the classroom. The CEO stated that in the last survey in August, parents had expressed at the 70% rate of above the desire to engage in remote learning, and her perception and that of the Directors of the four campuses was that this feeling was the same or stronger. She noted that new data would be collected however, and that a survey was planned for Monday to ask Parents and Staff regarding their current willingness or desire to return to in-person learning. The CEO stated that other plans for data collection were also underway, and that she wanted to share that with the Board.

Board Member Callow-Wright expressed concern with the plan to remain remote through April given that, per the Epidemiological Team meeting, schools should be able to open with sufficient safeguards to prevent transmission in the school. She asked the CEO to consider this information more closely.

Board Member Samstein mentioned that in his recent studies of the K-12 schooling, he understood there were concerns about child abuse in the homes of public school students. He noted he was not an expert in child development, but asked if the Charter School was maintaining data comparing the rates of child abuse reports to DCFS during in-person learning vs during remote learning, to attempt to assess whether children were at risk in their homes during the remote learning period. Board Vice President Gorman-Smith acknowledged that the these were issues in the field of child development.

Board Member Callow-Wright asked how UChicago Charter was measuring whether its students were faring as well in remote as in person, and that that data should be collected.

The CEO stated that, first, this was a open discussion of the issues, which she welcomed, and that UChicago Charter was in the middle of gathering data to bring to the Board, which the leadership planned to do soon for Board review. The CEO, addressing Member Samstein's questions noted that UChicago Charter social workers, special education teachers, and guidance counselors were staying deeply connected with the students via remote means. She noted ongoing efforts to bring in a small number of special needs students for carefully protected in person testing in December.

In further response, the CEO noted that concerns remained regarding the cleanliness of buildings when students and teachers returned, especially buildings owned and cleaned by CPS and also buildings which UChicago Charter shares with another CPS school.

Member Vasquez expressed that surveying the parents was a good idea, and that the survey should include multiple options, such as a variety of choices for dates to return, and questions regarding what grades or ages of children should return. The CEO stated that could be done.

Chief Academic Officer Washington entered the discussion to observe that staff's willingness to return was critical to the success of in-person education. He noted that the last survey showed deep reservations among staff to return, due not only to their own possible underlying health concerns, but to underlying health issues in their families. He noted that "call-offs" was one of the reasons other charters had made the decision to remain remote. He noted that if staff did return, and then became ill, obtaining substitutes would be difficult in the current environment. The CEO noted that even returning at a hybrid operation would present these problems of staffing, as well as the problem of providing a hybrid operation for the first time.

Member Samstein expressed that he worried most about the "most vulnerable," and that the studies he has read show that risks of abuse in remote learning were higher for students who qualified for free and reduced lunch. He also raised the issue of nutrition and the fact that many students depended on school lunch and breakfast programs for sustenance support. The CEO noted that it was true that remote learning could replicate this aspect, but that there UChicago Charter's families were connected to CPS' food distribution networks and had been since the beginning of the pandemic, with one site located at the NKO building. She mentioned that she "welcomed the engagement" of the Board Members, and wanted to continue to dive into these issues at this meeting and future meetings. She stated that everyone "cared deeply" about the students and their families.

Member Samstein expressed that he understood this was a "deeply complicated" situation, and that anyone who was raising children at this time understood that. He said that some kids are alright at home, and some are not, and he expressed concern and worry for those students who were not "alright" at home and who wanted to return to in-person school.

Director of Family, Community and Partnerships Barnett suggested that he and his team had been in contact with families, and offering help, including recently resolving situations where several families did not have heat in their homes. Director Barnett stated what had been helpful was that the students and families of the charter were being treated similarly with the University's communities, and that if differences were to occur in that treatment, such as the Charter School opening in-person while the University did not, that would be concerning to explain to families.

Member Callow-Wright expressed that there were differences between college age students, considered adults, and students at the elementary grade levels. She stated that an important issue would be for the Charter School to examine the "execution risks." She asked the Charter School to identify "what would it take" to open safely, given special concerns identified, and that if Charter made those requests, the Board would try to "advocate" for support to "make it happen."

HR Director Nowaczewski relayed that, in response to the CAO's note on staffing, only 17% of staff had been using the campus buildings when they could do so before the Mayor's Advisory, and that the expectation of needing substitute teachers for call-offs was high. She noted that the CEO and she had toured the Lab school's in person schooling recently. She noted that only 600 of Lab's students were in-person, while 1,500 were still remote in grades 3-12. She noted that Lab had been able to "spread the students" widely across its campuses. President Abebe reflected that in his review of Lab's plan, the students had not occupied all of Lab's facilities. Director Nowaczewski noted, in response to Member Callow-Wright's questions, that for example, Lab had hired 10 additional substitute teachers, and more classroom aides to support the grades that were back in person, so that that was a potential measure of what might be needed.

President Abebe noted that the discussion had been useful, and that it was likely another meeting would need to be set to consider the issues reviewed. The CEP noted that it was UCCS leadership's plan to continue to collect data regarding the option of extending remote learning past February and into April, and that it would be important to present this data and the options available, including the parent and staff surveys. President Abebe suggested that since Dec. 3 was, as had been noted, one of the worst days of the pandemic for America, possibly delaying the surveys to parents and staff past next week would be something to consider. Vice President Gorman-Smith suggested as well that considering the timing of surveys was important. President Abebe again thanked everyone for the discussion of these issues, and suggested, due to time, to move to the next Agenda item in the CEO's Report.

**IV.b. CEO's Report: Quarterly Budget Report FY21 (5:47 p.m.)**

CFO Mardyla opened by noting that there were both positive and negative changes in the UCCS budget for this quarter. First, on the revenue side, UCCS received approximately \$300,000 from the Chicago Public Schools to support "re-opening" the schools. These are local unrestricted funds, which were distributed between the campuses. Conversely, \$270,000 has been removed from the revenue for Pre-K due to the changes on the City's and CPS' funding structures for Pre-K classes. Additionally, CFO Mardyla noted that income from campus fees were decreased to \$440,000 due to, especially, the loss of after school programming at NKO, for example.

Additionally, some UCCS parents had shared that they are in economic distress due to job losses or other pandemic-related stress. The CFO noted that the campuses were reaching out to families to discuss the collection of school fees, and that more adjustments might be forthcoming later.

The CFO noted that enrollment adjustments had not yet been made, but were looking positive, given that the High School had increased enrollment by 28 students even though Donoghue had dropped by 5 students. She noted that overall school expenses were down, in large part due to pandemic conditions. She noted payroll was consistent, and that most positions were filled, and few were leaving. Because Chromebooks and other technology had been purchased late in the last school year, this added to the savings. The CFO noted that changes to a Hybrid return structure mid-school year could add to additional learning expenses not currently reflected in the budget. She noted there could be payroll expenses as well as other expenses, and that these were currently under review.

The Board discussed the Pre-K funding, noting that the current Pre-K is being funded by an endowment from the Crown Family Foundation, given that UCCS did not receive funding from the City through the universal Pre-K funding program. Dean Gorman-Smith noted that this was a significant budgetary matter. The CEO noted that UCCS was again applying for Pre-K funding for next year and investigating Head Start funding options, noting that the deadline for holding a Pre-K lottery was in the Spring, February-March 2021. She emphasized that the Pre-K was the primary “feeder” into UCCS’ kindergarten classes, sometimes yielding 90% of UCCS students in that entry level grade.

**V.a. Discussion Item: Athletic Field (5:58 p.m.)**

Vice President Dean Gorman-Smith reviewed that the proposed Athletic Field adjacent to the Woodlawn Campus had originally featured a football field, and a walking track, which would be open to the Woodlawn community. The groundbreaking for this project had originally been set, in plans with the City, for Feb. 1, 2021, but an extension was currently being pursued, given the pandemic. In the course of these discussions, Dean Gorman-Smith shared that another proposal had come forward and was now under consideration, which was both more expensive, in the approximate amount of \$500,000, but more inclusive, in that it proposed the creation of a building and an athletic facility which could be used for other sports in addition to football. Chief Operations Officer for UEI Epstein shared that a significant portion of the budget for the entire program was the remediation of the land, including grading and drainage. Board members acknowledged that issues of financial cost also needed to be considered with issues of community expectations for access to an athletic-related resource. Member Callow-Wright asked about materials which described the new proposal to be shared with potential funders and supporters, and Dean Gorman-Smith noted that such materials were under development. The Board agreed that the new proposal had many exciting elements which could be inspiring to potential supporters of the Charter School and its students, families and community members.

**VI. a Action Item: Amend Bylaws (6:04 p.m.)**

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President Abebe reviewed the proposed amendments to the Bylaws, which had been included in the Board Book. He noted that the amendments were primarily for the purpose of updating the bylaws to conform to the new Illinois law requiring the appointment of a Parent Representative to the Board. Dean Gorman-Smith advised the Board that the provisions of the Bylaws relating to the Advisory Council reviewing the Charter School's budget, and requiring a budget committee, had also been amended, as that fiduciary duty lies with the Board, not the Council. A fundraising committee replaces the budget committee on the Council, pursuant to the Bylaws. Member Callow-Wright made a motion to approve the Bylaws as amended, and Member Samstein seconded the motion. On a voice vote and show of hands via Zoom, all members of the Board unanimously voted in favor of the amendments, effective immediately.

**VII. a. Update: Mandated Board Training (6:08 p.m.)**

President Abebe asked HR Director Nowaczewski to review the materials on Board training. Director Nowaczewski recalled for the Board that per new Illinois law, each Board member was required to complete four hours of Board Training by Dec. 31, 2020, and that the Board had purchased on-line modules which allowed for individual completion of the training anytime at Board members' convenience. Member Samstein inquired about certificates for the training he had completed, and Ms. Nowaczewski informed him that the Illinois Network of Charter Schools had promised the certificates were forthcoming.

**VII. b. Update: Roster of Members and Annual Meeting Schedule (6:09)**

At the President's request, Director Nowaczewski shared that the Board's next meeting was scheduled for Feb. 25, 2021, per the enclosed Annual Meeting Schedule. President Abebe noted it was likely another meeting would be needed before that date, given pending matters, and that further communications on any future meeting would be forthcoming.

**VIII. Adjournment.**

The Chair called for a motion to adjourn. On a unanimous voice vote, all six members present voted to adjourn the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

**FINAL APPROVED Minutes of Dec. 3, 2020 Meeting FINAL APPROVED.**