
Minutes
Mar. 18, 2021 Special Meeting
UChicago Charter School Board of Directors

Mar. 18, 2021, 5:01 to 6:08 p.m.
The University of Chicago Charter School

Via ZOOM

Attendees

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

Board of Directors Members absent: I. Samstein

Also in attendance were numerous UCCS Staff, UEI staff and Charter School parents. A total of 156 participants were noted on Zoom at 6:00 p.m.

I. Welcome and Purpose of the Meeting

President Abebe called the meeting to order on the Zoom platform at 5:01 p.m. He thanked everyone for attending, observing that there was a quorum with himself and Members Vasquez, Island Childress, and Ziegler present at that time. He noted Vice President Gorman-Smith and Member Callow-Wright were expected momentarily.

President Abebe noted that the purpose of the Special Meeting was to review for the Board's discussion the CEO's plans for Phase II of a phased return to in person learning at UCCS beginning April 12, 2021. President Abebe took time to acknowledge the shootings in Atlanta targeting persons of Asian descent which had occurred two days ago, and noted that the UChicago Charter School community, especially, decried this type of violence against people of color. He expressed solidarity with the suffering Atlanta community.

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

President Abebe called for any members of the public who wished to comment. Ms. Nowaczewski stated the Zoom link had been posted for a week and no one had registered to speak, but upon invitation from President Abebe, Cherise Wilson, Donoghue Office Administrator, asked to speak. Ms. Wilson stated it was a pleasure to serve at Donoghue and that she enjoyed every day at her work. She stated that the Donoghue team has been very collaborative, and everyone is striving to keep each other safe. Even so, Donoghue had a "COVID scare" with one quarantining incident in just the past week. Ms. Wilson stated that she and other staff at Donoghue feel some anxiety increasing campus attendance from 76 students in Phase I at Donoghue to 277 students in Phase II. She stated that there was concern if incidents like the first scare continued to arise at Donoghue with more students present. President Abebe thanked Ms. Wilson for her comments. He asked if others wished to speak, but no other participants came forward.

President Abebe noted that since the Meeting was a Special Meeting for a special purpose, the review of Meeting Minutes would be held over to the next Regular Meeting in May 2021.

IV. CEO's Report Regarding Update on Phase I and Plans for Phase II Return to In Person Learning (5:16 p.m.)

President Abebe asked CEO Island Childress to present an Update on Phase I and Plans for Phase II to the Board. CEO Island Childress thanked everyone for being present and, especially, all staff who were present for the incredible work they were doing on UCCS campuses in Phase I. The CEO then presented her report via a Power Point, which is attached hereto as Exhibit A.

First, the CEO previewed that in her presentation she would share the opt in numbers for both phase I and phase 2, along with potential hybrid educational plans for PreK -8 in phase II. She noted that she would also share preliminary thinking on the very new guidance from public sources shared this week, specifically regarding changing social distancing spacing and options for reopening high schools. She noted that as UCCS continued to plan for the Spring, UCCS would involve parents and staff in the process. She noted that current phase II hybrid potential models were created based on original guidance. The new guidance was released just a few days ago, and one day ago on the high schools.

The CEO noted that in Phase I, UCCS had targeted students with a GPA of below 2.0 and attendance below 90%. Of the number of students invited, 55% accepted the invitation at Donoghue, xx% at NKO and 29% at Woodlawn Middle, 6th grade.

In looking ahead to Phase II, where all students in grades PreK through 8th, the CEO noted that a survey had been sent to all families, offering in person instruction or an offer to remain remote for the rest of the year, which is June 18, 2021. Through the survey, 53% of students were planning to return in person at Donoghue, 57% at NKO and 44% at Woodlawn Middle. The CEO shared individual grade by grade return rates for each campus and reviewed the educational plan which is to prioritize Phase I students, who have a GPA below 2.0 and attendance less than 90%. These students will continue to attend in person 4 days a week. The new opt in Phase II students would attend in person for a minimum of an additional 2 days a week.

Before moving into the Phase II plans, the CEO asked Director Nowaczewski to provide some background on the COVID-19 "scare." Nowaczewski reviewed that in this case, a child had reported to school on Monday with symptoms and was sent home. The child did not return for the week, but on Wednesday, the mother reported that she was COVID positive. UCCS Donoghue staff worked with the University of Chicago Contact Tracing team, kept the class remote on Friday, and announced a quarantine for this class on Sunday. The class consists of 7 students, including the ill child, and 2 staff. Teaching and learning will continue remotely during quarantine. Nowaczewski emphasized that this occurrence modeled that protocols and mitigations in place at UCCS campuses were working well. The most important mitigation factor is to stay home if sick, so as to reduce any possible spread. Nowaczewski stated the Contact Tracing team was very responsive and calm to work with. They had just agreed to present to an

all-staff meeting the day before, attended by over 150 UCCS staff, so that the entire UCCS community would become familiar with contact tracing procedures.

CEO Island Childress asked Ms. Nowaczewski to also update the Board on the number of staff who had asked for reasonable accommodations under Phase I. Director Nowaczewski noted that there had been 19 requests for reasonable accommodations filed, and all had been granted, working in conjunction with the University's Office of Legal Counsel. All requests had been for the accommodation of teaching remotely for either all or a portion of the days and weeks in Phase I. Nowaczewski noted that this number of reasonable accommodation requests represented approximately 10% of all UCCS staff, and that she expected an approximately similar number of requests to be filed for Phase II in the next week, some of which would be new, and others of which would be for an extension of the Phase I accommodation.

The CEO then reviewed the educational plan as set forth in Exhibit A, noting that new planning for the High School would begin shortly, and involve families and staff, in light of the new guidance. She noted that more information on the daily learning plan of the students in Phase I were available on request. The CEO asked if there were questions from the Board.

Member Callow-Wright thanked the CEO for the informative presentation and asked whether before surveying UCCS families and staff about new social distance models, UCCS would provide information on the science and research backing these new recommendations. The CEO said that UCCS would endeavor to do that but noted that the school was often operating on two tracks, running Phase I and trying to plan Phase II, even while guidance was changing. The CEO said she welcomed support for providing more of this type of information to the UCCS community. Member Callow-Wright then asked a second question regarding whether more days of in person learning could be provided even with 6-foot social distancing. The CEO noted that because the response rate at the elementary level was over 50% the 2-day approach was necessary with current social distancing guidelines. She noted that UCCS was experiencing a much higher response rate than CPS, which was in the 30 to 35% rate for returning to in-person learning. She asked Chief Academic Officer Washington to confirm these statistics, and he did, also noting that the need for more information on the changes to social distancing was critical. The CAO reflected that for the past year, 6 feet had been ingrained in us as a society as the appropriate social distance. It would take a significant effort to change that perception among staff and families, and, with the limited and stretched UCCS staff, it would also take a significant effort to adapt to that functionality at each classroom on UCCS' campuses.

President Abebe asked about the proportionally smaller return to in person at the Middle School. Middle School Director Gordon noted that there were several reasons for those lower numbers. He did stress, first, however, that of the 24 6th graders who had come in in person for Phase I, their teachers were describing a 180 degree turn around in engagement. So, the effort to bring in those students who wanted to be back was worth it.

Director Gordon noted that some of the hesitancy for return in the Middle School could be accounted for due to a larger percentage of diverse learners, especially among 7th and 8th graders.

Director Gordon also noted that a significant proportion of his students have medical issues such as asthma, Chron's Disease, and that one student was in the hospital now with a heart condition. CAO Washington shared that many parents are more apprehensive about sending older, bigger students back to school as they have not been vaccinated. Based on science, parents understand that the younger smaller students will transmit or harbor COVID less than adults, but many middle schoolers are already growing into adult bodies. With parents not vaccinated and teens and pre-teens not vaccinated, but still leaving the house more than they do now, fears of transmission to the home remain. Director of Community Affairs Barnett shared that parents had asked if the University of Chicago Medicine could extend vaccines to families of students. He also noted that he and others were working on a "Vaccine Hesitancy" project in order to address concerns in communities of color about the efficacy and risks of the various COVID-19 vaccines. He noted both high school and college students were working together on this project.

Director Vasquez stated that the fact that UCCS families were showing a higher percentage of willingness to return in person than CPS families suggested that those same families had greater trust in UCCS than CPS parents had of CPS. She also noted that one strategy UCCS could use would be to ask the "early adopters," families who came back in Phase I, to speak directly to families invited in Phase II, to share their experiences of safety and risk mitigation in Phase I. CEO Island Childress agreed that trust is central to the UCCS mission. She said that trust is real, and that the leadership relies on that trust to establish for the family feeling at the core of UCCS. The CEO noted that the trust of staff was important, too, and staff's comfortability with proposed changes to the layers of safety mitigation would be an important consideration for UCCS leadership moving forward.

CEO Island Childress asked that each of the four Directors speak to how Phase I had been going and the outlook for Phase II. Director Gordon stated that trust is key among his families. He believes the success is based on the Middle School's two successful testing events in October and January, where, even in terrible weather, families trusted their students to come to the school for NWEA testing. Parents showed they believed in UCCS' protocols by sending the students and the students followed the protocols when they came to the Middle School.

Director Slack noted that the Donoghue parents know that the Donoghue teachers are exceptional, and that the entire staff at Donoghue has gone above and beyond to provide guidance as the campus community transitioned to in person learning.

Director Sergeant called out with pride her custodial staff, teachers aides, front office staff and every single member of the NKO team who had worked to make NKO as welcoming as possible for the 44 students who are attending in person in Phase I. Director Sergeant was grateful that no positive COVID tests had been reported from NKO staff or students. She said she would be remiss, however, if she did not note that anxiety exists when staff considers quadrupling the number of students present, from 44 to 200, with 100 being present on any given day. Director Sergeant noted just the past night a devoted parent from the FTCO had said to her, "I will be watching," and Director Sergeant took this burden to heart, in terms of strengthening all the mitigations that NKO has in place.

Director Dr. Adams noted her reality at the high school was in a very different place, given that no high school students had returned during Phase I except for office hour visits and special support sessions. She noted that while there had been several testing opportunities which students participated in at the high school level over the fall and winter, in three separate recent polls 80% of high school families have stated that they do not want students to return to high school this current school year, and that it appeared that the number of students not wanting to return was increasing. She said even of the other 20%, some were unsure, not definite in wanting to return. She noted that at the high school level, it would be very difficult to create the steady “pods” of students who spent the day together, (thus supporting quarantining, as described earlier), since high school students carried a load of 8 different classes per day.

Member Ziegler stated that as a Board Member, she had opted her daughter into in person learning in Phase II, as a matter of trust in the UCCS network. She also asked, however, whether the University would consider vaccinating all parent of UCCS students as a way to build further trust. CEO Island Childress noted that all UCCS staff had been offered the opportunity to be vaccinated beginning on Jan. 31 and concluding Feb. 28. Member Callow Wright stated that the second chance at vaccinations for UCCS staff would be offered to UCCS staff, as a 1b group, on March 29, but that beyond that, the University of Chicago Medical Center was unsure of the vaccine supply for distribution going into the spring months.

President Abebe asked if there were any final operational comments or questions about Phase I and II. COVID-19 Liaison Director Nowaczewski shared that as the Liaison, she had had a unique opportunity to drop into many classrooms during Phase I. She noted that the ability of the teachers, who had received no special training on the complicated procedure for teaching both students in person and remote were performing to the level of gold medalists. She described Mr. Conway’s classroom in the Middle School, where 6 students sat at desks surrounded by plastic shields, logging into their devices, while Mr. Conway stood at the side of the room connecting 12 other students who were remote to the large screen at the front of the classroom, engaging each student personally by name whether in person or remote. Nowaczewski likened it to Mission Control in Houston launching rockets at Cape Canaveral, but none of our teachers had trained to be rocket scientists. She noted she could not let the moment pass without praising the heroic performance of the UCCS teachers and their aides.

President Abebe informed the Board and the public, (38 participants at this time), that while the Board had voted on Plans at previous Board Meetings in August and January, going forward the Board would discuss the Plans as presented by UCCS leadership and express support or questions regarding the proposed Plan. The President began by asking Member Vasquez who stated that she approved the Plan. In turn, Members Ziegler, Gorman-Smith, Callow-Wright and Abebe each stated that they supported the Plan, and CEO Island Childress confirmed that she supported the plan. President Abebe asked that the minutes reflect that the Board expressed unanimous approval for the Plan. The President again thanked the CEO for her leadership, and noted that Member Ziegler’s decision to return her daughter, a student at Donoghue to in person learning in Phase II speaks volumes.

VI. Action Items – Data Breach Policy

President Abebe asked CEO Childress to speak to the Data Breach Policy, and the CEO asked Director Nowaczewski and Chief Technology Officer Pajakowski to describe the Policy. Nowaczewski noted that keeping data secure was a significant priority for the Charter School, particularly all staff-related data, and all student data, including IEPs, medical issues, academic matters, personal demographic information and the like. She noted that the Policy before the Board drilled down to a level of detail regarding agreements which needed to be made with Operators handling UCCS data, and descriptions of the types of Low and High Risk breaches which could be anticipated, with specifics on the Incident Response Team that the Charter School should create in anticipation of a breach. CTO Pajakowski added that the Policy had been created to comply with new laws coming into effect on July 1, 2021. He noted that there were a number of organizations and operators with which UCCS would begin to engage on data breach agreements prior to the July 1 effective date of the law. Member Callow Wright asked if UCCS used all available security perimeters. Pajakowski noted that UCCS did not use “2 factor authentication,” but that it did encrypt, for example, faculty laptops. Chief Operations Officer Epstein noted that the proposed Policy also fit in with the larger Data Policies being formulated at the University level, and that the Office of Legal Counsel had insured this coherence. President Abebe asked whether the Incident Response Team had yet been formed, and the COO noted that she and the CTO and the HR Director would form the Team, working with the Office of Legal Counsel, at the first instance, bringing in others in the UCCS community as needed, based on the breach at issue.

Member Vasquez moved that the Board adopt the Policy as proposed, and Vice President Dean Gorman-Smith seconded the Motion. On a voice vote, the motion carried unanimously with all six members present voting in favor.

President Abebe asked for any updates on the calendar, and Director Nowaczewski noted the next regular meeting was the Board’s Annual Meeting on May 19, when the Board’s slate of officers, Advisory Council Chairs and annual meeting schedule for the next year would be set.

VIII. Adjournment.

The President asked if there was any new business, and hearing none, called for a motion to adjourn. On a unanimous voice vote, all six members of the Board who were present voted to adjourn the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

FINAL APPROVED Minutes of Mar. 18, 2021 SPECIAL MEETING.