

**Minutes of the Regular Meeting of  
STATEWIDE CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD  
OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER  
800 NAZIH ZUHDI DR.  
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK  
January 12, 2026**

The Statewide Charter School Board met in regular session at 1:02 p.m. on Monday, January 12, 2026, at the Oklahoma History Center at 800 Nazih Zuhdi Dr., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Members of the Statewide Charter School Board Present:

Brian Shellem  
Bill Pearson  
Damon Gardenhire  
Jared Buswell  
Britni Tomcho  
Kitty Campbell, designee for State Auditor and Inspector, Cindy Byrd  
Courtney Anderson, designee for State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Lindel Fields  
Amber Hidy  
David Rutkauskas

Others in Attendance:

Rebecca Wilkinson, Executive Director  
Skyler Lusnia, Director of School Performance  
Merin Gracey, Interim Secretary to the Board  
Lecrecia Schmidt, Operations Officer  
Shelly Hickman, Communications Director  
Ellie Rivas, Financial Compliance Officer  
Jaycie Smith, Academic Compliance Officer  
Lisa Daniels, Director of Horizon: Digitally Enhanced Campus  
Thomas Schneider, Deputy General Counsel

Other general public:

|                                     |                                   |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Leticia Sanchez, OYACS              | Dawn Bowles, PTPLA                |
| Samaya Williams, Visionary Pathways | Melissa Gregory, OKCA             |
| Angie Ritter, Southwest Academy     | Emre Ozturk, Dove Virtual         |
| Jennifer Palmer, Oklahoma Watch     | Kevin Eagleson                    |
| Julie Ramsey, Oklahoma Watch        | Barry Wise                        |
| Audra Plummer, OVCA                 | Barry Schmeltzenbach, OPCSA       |
| Trevor Hammonds, EPIC Board         | Kendra Cope, OYACS                |
| Tom Pickens, Retired Professor      | Jeanene Barnett, CCOSA            |
| Lance Seewright, LeMonde            | Jason Mack, OKCPS                 |
| Melissa Snipes, OYACS               | Nathan Jossell, PTPLA             |
| Marva Williamson, PTPLA             | LaTonia Moore, Visionary Pathways |
| Deborah Helms, Tempo Montessori     | S.E. Puett, Visionary Pathways    |
| Brandon Webb, EPIC                  | Wendy Pratt, Radio Oklahoma News  |
| Milo Vic, EPIC                      | Ben Kincaid, Carr, Riggs, Ingram  |
| Sharri Coleman, PTPLA               | Peter Deutsch, Ben Gamla          |

Brett Farley, Ben Gamla  
Charlesetta Jossell, PTPLA  
Erin Hatfield, EPIC  
Sara Johnson, Becket  
Eric Baxter, Becket  
Nuria Martinez-Keel, Oklahoma Voice

Justin Hunt, EPIC  
Shaun Ross, EPIC  
Lauren Bame, EPIC  
Tina Aker, EPIC  
Hayley Hetrick, News9  
Mustafa Ekizoglu, Dove Virtual

**1. Call to Order and Roll Call**

Brian Shellem – Present  
Bill Pearson – Present  
Amber Hidy - Present  
Jared Buswell – Present  
Britni Tomcho – Present  
David Rutkauskas – Present  
Damon Gardenhire – Present  
Kitty Campbell - Present, designee for State Auditor and Inspector, Cindy Byrd  
Courtney Anderson - Present, designee for State Dept of Education Superintendent, Lindel Fields

**2. Invocation, Pledge of Allegiance, Salute to the Oklahoma State Flag, and Moment of Silence**

**3. (Action) Discussion and possible action regarding the minutes of the December 8, 2025, Regular Board Meeting**

Jared Buswell made a motion to approve the minutes of the December 8, 2025, regular board meeting. Bill Pearson seconded the motion. The motion carried with the following votes:

Kitty Campbell – Yes  
Bill Pearson – Yes  
Courtney Anderson – Yes  
Damon Gardenhire – Yes  
Amber Hidy - Yes  
Brian Shellem – Yes  
Britni Tomcho – Yes  
Jared Buswell – Yes  
David Rutkauskas – Yes

**4. Chairman’s Opening Comments**

Brian Shellem noted that the new year presents an opportunity for new beginnings and expressed his sincere appreciation for the members' dedicated hard work and diligence throughout their service on the Board.

**5. Public Comment**

*The Statewide Charter School Board shall hear public comment on any action item listed on the current board meeting agenda. Public comments will be limited to only those subject matters covered in the current meeting agenda. Public comment will not be taken on issues relating to: (1) pending litigation against SCSB or agency employees; (2) a pending grievance; (3) an employee complaint; (4) complaints against SCSB employees; (5) disciplinary action, suspension, or termination of an SCSB employee; or (6) any administrative proceeding initiated by the Board*

*pursuant to the provisions of the Administrative Procedures Act. A sign-up sheet will be posted at least fifteen (15) minutes prior to the scheduled start time of the Board Meeting. Sign up must be completed prior to the scheduled start time of the meeting. Only individuals who have signed up to speak will be recognized during the Public Comment period and will be recognized in the order in which they have signed in. Each speaker will be allocated three (3) minutes for presentation. The Board Chairperson may interrupt and/or terminate any presentation during public comment which does not conform to the procedures outlined under this Section. The Board Chairperson reserves and retains the right to interrupt, terminate, or postpone public comment as necessary to effectuate the management of the public meeting.*

Sean Cummings signed up to address the Board. Mr. Cummings cautioned that approving the Ben Gamla Jewish Charter School application would set a precedent allowing any religious institution to operate a publicly funded virtual charter school. He stated his opposition to public funding of all religious schools, framing the issue as church–state separation, but also used arguably discriminatory rhetoric about multiple religions.

**6. Board Spotlight – National School Choice Week January 25-31 with multiple opportunities for celebration including the Oklahoma City Charter School Application Portal, January 22 Lunch and Learn with Dr. James Goenner, and local event at Dove South Middle-High School intended to highlight educational opportunities available to families**

Shelly Hickman provided updates on upcoming charter school–related events. National School Choice Week will take place January 25–31, including an Oklahoma City School Choice Expo on January 29 at Dove Science Academy High School. She highlighted the launch of Enroll OKC, a unified, free charter school application portal for Oklahoma City charter schools, with a priority application deadline of February 13 and a unified lottery on February 20.

Ms. Hickman also noted that January is National School Board Month and announced upcoming free monthly “Lunch and Learn” training sessions for charter school board members. Sessions include presentations in January on charter school governance, February on facilities and financing, and March on charter school board best practices.

Dr. Wilkinson provided additional details on the January “Lunch and Learn” session featuring Dr. James Goenner on Governing for Greatness. The session will include a companion book outlining twelve essential questions governing board members should ask school leadership to ensure effective oversight and discussion of key issues.

**7. Presentation and possible discussion regarding the Statewide Charter School Board Working Group reports: Budget, Communications, Governance, and Horizon: Digitally Enhanced Campus**

Jared Buswell, Chair of the Budget Working Group, noted that agency staff will present the Agency budget request to the Senate January 13, 2026, at noon and to the House on January 22, 2026, at 1:00 pm. Both presentations are open to the public and available online. Damon Gardenhire, Chair of the Communications Committee, had no updates this month. David Rutkauskas, Chair of the Governance Committee, stated while there were no updates this month, with the legislative session approaching, additional information is expected to be available for the next board meeting. Mr. Shellem noted a strong sense of urgency at the Governor’s office and the Capitol regarding improvements in education outcomes and is optimistic for significant progress and positive legislative reception. Brittney Tomcho, Chair of the Horizon: Digitally Enhanced Campus Working Group, reported a committee has now been formed with members who have agreed to serve. The group will meet soon to begin work.

## 8. Administration

- a. (Action) Presentation, discussion, and possible action regarding the Epic Charter School Investigative Report conducted and presented by Carr, Riggs, and Ingram, L.L.C. (CRI)

Ben Kincaid of Carr, Riggs & Ingram (CRI) presented a summary of CRI's forensic investigation of Epic Charter Schools. The investigation was initiated in response to irregular fiscal issues during FY 2025 following projected enrollment growth that did not materialize.

CRI reviewed financial records, budgets, payroll, and conducted approximately 20 interviews with current and former Epic personnel. CRI identified weaknesses in budgeting practices, documentation, internal controls, and board oversight, including the use of a department-level budget not approved by the board and repeated reliance on overstated enrollment and carryover projections. Staffing increases and site expansions did not align with actual enrollment or were supported by sufficient cost-benefit analysis.

Mr. Kincaid reported that Epic implemented reductions in force and other cost-saving measures during FY 2025, but those adjustments were insufficient to address budget shortfalls. CRI found no evidence of misappropriation of funds. The investigation resulted in 15 findings: four completed, eight in progress, and three unresolved corrective actions remain: lack of documented budget change approvals, absence of an internal audit function, and insufficient board policies on consent agendas.

Mr. Shellem thanked Mr. Kincaid for the thorough report and raised concerns about the projected enrollment growth from 27,000 to 33,000 students. He noted that enrollment often fluctuates significantly throughout the year and emphasized that state funding is determined by a weighted average enrollment figure, which is adjusted at regular intervals. Mr. Kincaid acknowledged that the earlier projections were based on an internal model (the Carver governance model) that proved to be flawed and insufficiently validated. He confirmed that Epic has replaced it with an improved model.

Mr. Kincaid reported the former Certified Financial Officer (CFO), employed from 2022 to 2025, was not a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) and lacked formal accounting certifications. CRI could not verify her projection of a \$60 million fund balance, which was found to be overstated. The former superintendent was engaged somewhat but did not provide adequate financial oversight. Technology issues were not found to be a factor in the fiscal shortfall.

Mr. Shellem emphasized the Board's commitment to corrective actions and best practices to prevent future issues and thanked Mr. Kincaid for his presentation. He then invited Dr. Shaun Ross, the new Superintendent of Epic Charter Schools, to speak. Dr. Ross thanked CRI and the Board, acknowledged the report's findings, and affirmed a commitment to transparency, corrective actions, and strengthened policies and controls to better serve Epic's approximately 31,000 students and families.

Mr. Shellem stated that a motion would be entertained to accept the report as presented, or with any proposed amendments. Jared Buswell made a motion to accept the report as presented. Damon Gardenhire seconded the motion.

The motion carried with the following votes:

Bill Pearson – Yes  
Kitty Campbell – Yes  
Courtney Anderson – Yes  
Jared Buswell – Yes  
Brian Shellem – Yes  
Britni Tomcho – Yes  
David Rutkauskas – Yes  
Amber Hidy - Yes  
Damon Gardenhire – Yes

- b. Presentation and possible discussion regarding the Visionary Pathways Schools, Inc. Application for Initial Authorization

LaTonia Moore and Samaya Williams presented their proposal for Visionary Pathways School, a new career and technical charter high school planned for Southwest Oklahoma City, specifically targeting students in zip codes 73108 and 73119. The founders aim to create a school that combines strong academics with intensive career training. The school's mission is to prepare underserved students for high-demand careers by equipping them with both academic skills and real-world readiness.

Board members asked questions regarding securing enough paid internships, maintaining academic rigor with reduced core class time, student transportation, and the founding team's limited administrative experience. Ms. Moore responded by outlining plans to build strong business partnerships, partner with community organizations (such as OU's tutoring program), provide transportation support, and offer intensive advisory interventions. The school intends to launch with 9th grade in the 2027–2028 school year and expand one grade per year.

- c. Presentation and possible discussion regarding the National Ben Gamla Jewish Charter School Foundation, Inc. Application for Initial Authorization

Peter Deutsch presented the application for a statewide virtual charter school serving grades K–12, submitted by the Ben Gamla Jewish Charter School Foundation, Inc.

Mr. Deutsch provided background on the Ben Gamla Charter School system, which has operated for approximately 19 years in the state of Florida and currently operates four schools. The schools offer instruction in Hebrew language, history, and culture. Mr. Deutsch explained the mission of the organization, emphasizing a community-based approach to universal education. The school's mission is to holistically educate each child's soul, heart, intellect, and body via individualized, interactive curriculum rooted in virtue, rigor, and innovation. Focus is on academic excellence for lifelong learning and global opportunities.

Mr. Deutsch highlighted Ben Gamla's academic performance, noting that the school system has consistently ranked in the top 5–10% of public schools in Florida and has been among the highest-performing schools statewide. He cited research from Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes, which ranked the Ben Gamla system among the top charter school systems nationally within the hybrid model.

Mr. Deutsch referred to demand for the schools, including significant waitlists, and outlined his experience in curriculum development, budgeting, and regulatory compliance with local and state education authorities. He stated that Oklahoma has limited access to Jewish education and that a virtual model would allow broader statewide access, particularly in underserved or underperforming areas. Mr. Deutsch concluded by asserting that Ben Gamla has a long-standing record of academic success and ethical instruction and requested that the Board approve the application at a future meeting.

Jared Buswell asked Mr. Deutsch about governance and operations in Oklahoma. Mr. Deutsch stated that the Oklahoma entity would be legally separate from the Florida schools, with no shared governance or finances, and that he would serve in an unpaid leadership role. David Rutkauskas asked whether all schools were currently located in Florida and how long Mr. Deutsch had been planning to start a school in Oklahoma. Mr. Deutsch explained that all existing schools operate in Florida, that he has explored opportunities in Oklahoma for several years, and that a virtual model is more viable than a brick-and-mortar school.

Damon Gardenhire asked about the demand and educational value of this type of model. Mr. Deutsch asserted there is demonstrated demand for a faith-informed, academically rigorous virtual option, that the program could operate with modest enrollment, and that it would offer curricular content—such as Hebrew language, Jewish history, and culture. Mr. Shellem emphasized the Board’s focus is on academic excellence and indicated the application would be reviewed.

- d. (Action) Presentation, discussion, and possible action regarding approval or rejection of the Tempo Montessori Charter School Application for Initial Authorization

Skyler Lusnia presented the Tempo Monastery School charter application, noting a thorough review of the application and a positive capacity interview. Strengths included a year-round calendar exceeding statutory instructional time, strong governance and board development plans, a research-based Montessori model aligned to Oklahoma standards, robust teacher training and professional development, and planned parent involvement. Mr. Lusnia noted that, if approved, Tempo would provide the only public Montessori middle school in the Tulsa area, with strong demonstrated parent interest.

Concerns included the limited pipeline of Montessori-certified teachers, the potential use of apprentices during certification, and higher instructional supply costs. A minor organizational chart issue was identified and promptly corrected.

Mr. Lusina recommended approval. The Board discussed the phased grade rollout (pre-K–8 by year six), potential future expansion, and the founder’s prior experience with Tulsa-area Montessori schools. Jared Buswell made a motion to approve. Damon Gardenhire seconded the motion.

The motion carried with the following votes:

David Rutkauskas – Yes  
Brian Shellem – Yes  
Courtney Anderson – Yes  
Bill Pearson – Yes  
Kitty Campbell – Yes  
Jared Buswell – Yes

Britni Tomcho – Yes  
Amber Hidy - Yes  
Damon Gardenhire – Yes

- e. (Action) Presentation, discussion, and possible action regarding approval or rejection of the Southwest Academy Charter School Application for Initial Authorization

Skyler Lusnia presented the Southwest Academy Charter School application, which proposes opening an elementary charter school in Moore, Oklahoma. Strengths included a classical, humanities-based instructional model with a spiraling curriculum aligned to Oklahoma academic standards, an integrated cross-curricular approach, and a strong focus on literacy through a daily uninterrupted 90-minute reading block supported by all staff. Additional supports include a student mentoring program providing weekly academic and social-emotional guidance and a financially favorable facility lease during the first two years.

Mr. Lusnia concluded with a few concerns including a board by-law requiring financial contributions from board members, which may limit board recruitment and raise legal questions. The applicant indicated willingness to amend the bylaws to remove this requirement. Mr. Lusnia also noted earlier uncertainty regarding the school's location and a relatively weak facility contingency plan, though the applicant has committed to Moore.

Overall, SCSB staff found the application thorough and well developed and Mr. Lusnia recommended approval contingent upon amendment of the board bylaws to remove the financial contribution requirement. Britni Tomcho asked about the first-year enrollment projections, and Angie Ritter from Southwest Academy responded with 160 students. Damon Gardenhire made a motion to approve. David Rutkauskas seconded the motion.

The motion carried with the following votes:

Kitty Campbell – Yes  
Jared Buswell – Yes  
Bill Pearson – Yes  
Courtney Anderson – Yes  
Damon Gardenhire – Yes  
Brian Shellem – Yes  
Amber Hidy – Yes  
Britni Tomcho – Yes  
David Rutkauskas – Yes

- f. Presentation and possible discussion regarding the Curriculum Reviews for the following charter and virtual charter schools:
- Epic Charter Schools
  - Le Monde International School
  - Oklahoma Connections Academy
  - Oklahoma Youth Academy

Jaycie Smith presented highlights from four recent academic program reviews. Reviews consisted of a document review and on-site interviews, focusing on governing board oversight,

use of student achievement data, and curriculum alignment with Oklahoma academic standards.

Epic Charter Schools academic performance framework score - 44.7%: the school exhibited strong board involvement, effective data-driven interventions for high-need students, and new programs in core curriculum, literacy, career tech, and esports.

Le Monde International School academic performance framework score - 75%: the school exhibited active board oversight, regular reporting, IB curriculum aligned with state standards, improved attendance/discipline, and expanded literacy supports.

Oklahoma Connections Academy academic performance framework score - 50%: the school exhibited structured data reviews, focus on literacy/math/graduation, enhanced special education, and new offerings in pre-K, AP, STEM, personalized learning, and summer school.

Oklahoma Youth Academy Charter School: No academic performance framework score given due to transient population: the school exhibited individualized plans, flexible instruction, targeted interventions, career readiness programs, and tutoring support.

- g. (Action) Presentation, discussion, and possible action regarding the school oversight probationary status of Proud to Partner Leadership Academy

Rebecca Wilkinson opened the discussion by referencing a comment from the previous Board meeting in which a Proud to Partner Leadership Academy (PTPLA) board member asked, "How did we get here?" She then provided an overview of ongoing concerns identified since PTPLA's authorization, including special education noncompliance, student safety and disciplinary issues, low academic performance, staffing instability, financial mismanagement and deficit spending, missed reporting deadlines, insufficient student engagement, and broader operational weaknesses.

Dr. Wilkinson further stated the Board reviewed the school's history of oversight, including probationary status, a required corrective action plan, repeated monitoring, site visits, and ongoing technical assistance. Despite these interventions, many deficiencies remained unresolved, and some concerns had worsened over time.

Skyler Lusnia reported that since the December 8 Board meeting, SCSB staff conducted site visits and reviews of PTPLA. A December 11 visit identified serious issues with the online-only program, including inconsistent enrollment eligibility, incomplete transcripts, and weak attendance and engagement tracking. The PTPLA school board subsequently voted to suspend the online-only program.

Financial reviews revealed continued weaknesses, including unclear revenue assumptions, unresolved deficit coverage, outdated encumbrance records, and incomplete purchase documentation. Although a new treasurer has begun making improvements, significant issues remain.

Dr. Wilkinson and Dr. Smith conducted a site visit on January 8 and observed 42 students in attendance out of approximately 100 enrolled. Instruction was taking place; however, staffing capacity was limited. Ongoing special education noncompliance was identified, including undocumented changes to compensatory services, at least one noncompliant IEP, and inadequate progress monitoring. Additional concerns related to FERPA and child nutrition compliance were also noted.

Overall, despite cooperation from the school, Mr. Lusnia reported that concerns persist, and asked Thomas Schneider to advise the Board on next steps. Mr. Schneider outlined actions the Board has already taken to date and discussed potential legal actions moving forward. Board discussion focused on the school's capacity to address these issues, the impact on students, and the risks associated with continued operation.

Damon Gardenhire expressed concern that prior opportunities for correction had not resulted in sustained improvement.

Britni Tomcho identified numerous deficiencies across multiple operational areas, including instructional capacity, student services, discipline, budgeting, staffing, and compliance. She felt the concerns were widespread rather than isolated, and current resources were insufficient to both address the issues and adequately educate students.

Damon Gardenhire made a motion to terminate authorization. Bill Pearson seconded the motion.

The motion carried with the following votes:

Kitty Campbell – Yes  
Jared Buswell – Abstain  
Bill Pearson – Yes  
Courtney Anderson – Yes  
Damon Gardenhire – Yes  
Brian Shellem – Yes  
Amber Hidy – Yes  
Britni Tomcho – Yes  
David Rutkauskas – Abstain

- h. (Action) Presentation, discussion, and possible action regarding the Statewide Charter School Board public comment policy for open board meetings

Mr. Shellem proposed revising the board's public comment policy for open meetings to promote greater accessibility and engagement. The objective is to establish a more welcoming framework for public participation, particularly from stakeholders offering substantive insights into the charter school sector. The existing policy was critiqued for its somewhat exclusionary nature, discouraging broader input. Recent public comments, including written submissions from the December meeting, add value to the Board and stakeholders. The proposal encourages relevant engagement while restricting comments to matters directly pertaining to charter schools, excluding unrelated topics.

The revised policy maintains the three-minute time limit per individual speaker, a duration Bill Pearson endorsed notwithstanding criticisms in certain Oklahoma quarters that it is inadequate. Bill Pearson made a motion to approve. Damon Gardenhire seconded the motion.

The motion carried with the following votes:

David Rutkauskas – Yes  
Brian Shellem – Yes  
Courtney Anderson – Yes  
Bill Pearson – Yes

Kitty Campbell – Yes  
Jared Buswell – Yes  
Britni Tomcho – Yes  
Amber Hidy – Yes  
Damon Gardenhire – Yes

**9. New Business**

*Discussion and possible action of any item that could not have been known or reasonably foreseen prior to time of posting agenda (As defined in Oklahoma Statutes Title 25, Section 311 (A)(9)).*

There was no new business.

**10. Adjournment**

Damon Gardenhire made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Jared Buswell seconded the motion. The motion carried with the following votes:

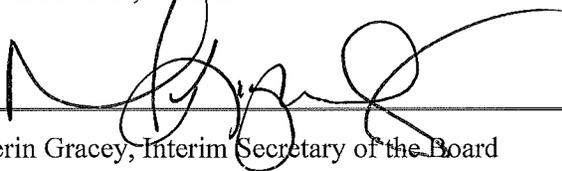
Amber Hidy - Yes  
Britni Tomcho – Yes  
Bill Pearson – Yes  
Courtney Anderson – Yes  
Damon Gardenhire – Yes  
Brian Shellem – Yes  
Kitty Campbell – Yes  
Jared Buswell – Yes  
David Rutkauskas – Yes

**The meeting was adjourned at 4:26 p.m.**



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Brian Shellem, Chairman of the Board



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Merin Gracey, Interim Secretary of the Board