



Higher Ground Academy

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING MINUTES

Zoom and Conference Room, July 21, 2026 @ 8:00 a.m.

Meeting called to order 8:02 am

Roll call: Dan McGrath (Zoom), Samuel Yigzaw (In Person), Brian Swerine (Zoom), Liban Ahmed (Zoom), Abdi Guled (Zoom), and Denise Toussaint (Zoom), Shannon Tanghe (Absent), Mary Tate (Absent),

Adoption of Agenda

Dan McGrath asked for motion to approve the agenda. Motion to approve the agenda was made by Abdi and seconded by Brian Swerine. Motion carried unanimously.

Adoption of Minutes

Dan McGrath asked for motion to approve the minutes from June. Motion to approve the minutes was made by Brian and seconded by Liban Ahmed. Motion carried unanimously.

Executive Director's Report – Environmental education

Environmental Education Goals Progress Report

Samuel reported that all environmental education goals were met across different grade levels, with participation and proficiency rates exceeding the required 70% threshold in each domain. The assessment covered five domains:

Awareness:

Goal: 70% of Students at Higher Ground Academy have the awareness, or are increasing their awareness, of the relationship between the environment and human life as measured by curriculum-based measures across the contract period.



Result:

Grade 4: 97 % (91 out of 94) of the students participated in the action. 94% (88/94) of the students completed the activity and scored 60% or better on the checklist.

Rating: Goal Met

Grade 5: 94% (101/107) of students completed the journaling assignments. 90% (96/107) of students scored 60% or better on the checklist.

Rating: Goal Met

Grade 7- 89% (95/107) of students completed the journaling assignments. 83% (89/107) of the students scored 60% or better on the checklist.

Rating: Goal Met

Result: Grade 8- 100% (64/64) of students completed the journaling assignments.
91% (58/64) of students scored 60% or better on the checklist for the presentation.

Rating: Goal Met

Result: Grade 3 - 100% (93/93) of students participated in the written assessment. 94% (87/93) of students scored 60% or better on the knowledge test.

Rating: Goal Met

Knowledge

Goal: 70% of Students at Higher Ground Academy have the knowledge, or are increasing their knowledge, of human and natural systems and processes as measured by curriculum-based measures across the contract period.

Result:

Result: Grade 3 - 100% (93/93) of students participated in the written assessment. 94% (87/93) of students scored 60% or better on the knowledge test.

Rating: Goal Met

Result: Grade 6- 97% (88/91) of students participated in Clean Up-Drive.
95% (86/91) of students scored 60% or better on the EE ELP grade 6 knowledge assessment.

Rating: Goal Met

Grade 10- 98.8% (84/85) of students participated and completed research for the environmental posters 88.2% (75/85) Completed the poster on time 84% (63 /75) of students scored 60% or better on the poster assessment.

Rating: Goal Met



Attitude

Goal: 70% of Students at Higher Ground Academy have an attitude, or are increasing their attitude of, appreciation and concern for the environment as measured by curriculum-based measures across the contract period.

Result:

Grade 2 - 89% (80/90) of the students participated in the environmental stewardship survey questions. 76% (68/90) of students scored 60% or better and showed an increased attitude of appreciation and concern for the environment.

Rating: Goal Met

Grade 8 – 78% (64/82) of the students participated. 91% (58/64) scored 60% or better and showed an increased attitude of appreciation.

Rating: Goal Met

Skills

Goal: 70% of Students at Higher Ground Academy have or are increasing their problem solving and critical thinking skills as it relates to the environment and human life as measured by curriculum-based measures across the contract period.

Result

Grade 11- 100% (79/79) took part in at least two EE projects above and completed the activities.

Rating: Goal Met

95% (75/79) of the students scored 60% or better on the checklist.

Grade 12- 96% (44/46) students participated and in and completed the activities. 95.5% (42/44) students scored 60% or better on the checklist.

Rating: Goal Met

Action

Goal: 70% of students at Higher Ground Academy demonstrate the capacity, or are increasing their capacity, to work individually and collectively toward sustaining a healthy natural environment as measured by curriculum-based measures across the contract period.

Result

Grade 7- 86% (92/107) of students participated in the action.

86% (92/107) students scored 60% or higher on the Earth Day Clean-up Journal checklist for action.

Rating: Goal Met



Grade 9- 100% (97/97) of enrolled students participated in the action of creating the podcasts.

Rating: Goal Met

All ratings were provided by Osprey Wilds. Samuel noted this represents significant progress in the team understanding environmental education expectations.

Extended Year program - Samuel noted that the Extended Year program had lower participation than expected, with approximately 150 students (just over 50%) out of the expected 300, primarily from new immigrant groups. Samuel proposed adding more engaging activities like field trips and tournaments to improve attendance for next year, as both the Extended Day and the Extended Year programs showed weak participation and attendance from students who have been in the country longer.

Upcoming school year - Samuel provided updates on the upcoming school year timeline: administration returns August 04, 2026, new and second-year teachers begin a workshop on August 10, 2026, all staff participate in a four-day workshop starting August 17, 2026 (with open house on the final day of the week of August 17), and students return August 24, 2026. Enrollment appears strong with over 1,300 students enrolled and a robust wait list. Staffing also looks positive with no last-minute resignations expected.

Board Officer Election

The board discussed officer elections and decided to postpone the election until August due to low attendance and missing board members. They agreed to keep current officers in their roles pending a vote at the next meeting, with Dan proposing this approach and receiving support from Samuel, Brian, Abdiweli, and Liban. Samuel noted that officer elections had been postponed multiple times in the past, and Osprey Wilds had flagged this as a requirement in the school's evaluation. To satisfy the authorizer's documentation requirements while addressing low attendance, the board passed a formal motion to maintain the current officer slate (Dan as Chair, Denise as Vice Chair and Treasurer, Brian as Secretary) pending a formal election vote at the August meeting when more board members would be present. Motion to adopt the proposed approach was made by Brian and seconded by Abdi. Motion carried unanimously.

AI Policy and Procurement Updates

The board approved a new AI policy that encourages ethical AI use while prohibiting inappropriate uses. Samuel explained the policy was developed based on learnings from a June workshop hosted by Volunteers of America (an authorizer), where AI emerged as the hottest topic. While MDE does not yet have a statute requiring AI policies, many schools are adopting them for the upcoming year.

Key Policy Components:

Acceptable Student Uses: Brainstorming, generating study guides, receiving writing feedback/editing, practicing language skills, supporting research and learning

Prohibited Student Uses: Completing assignments, generating essays, cheating on assessments, creating harmful/inappropriate/discriminatory content, accessing or sharing confidential student information



Disclosure Requirement: Students must disclose whenever AI is used for acceptable purposes (e.g., "I used AI to edit my assignment" or "I used AI to obtain data on this subject")

Acceptable Staff Uses: Drafting lessons, creating rubrics, generating parent communication, analyzing non-confidential data, developing intervention materials

Staff Responsibilities: Review all AI-generated content for accuracy, ensure curriculum alignment, protect student privacy, avoid bias and discrimination

Data Privacy: Strict protection of student names, educational records, IEP information, medical information, and personal records—staff are personally responsible if this information is shared with AI

Brian raised an important implementation concern: the school uses Turnitin software (costing approximately \$3,000/year) to detect AI-generated content, but teachers must actively submit work for checking. He recommended making proper use of Turnitin a topic in the August teacher training to ensure the policy is enforced effectively. Samuel agreed to include this in the training.

Dan asked about the software's capabilities. Liban explained that Turnitin provides probability scores rather than definitive answers, making it a "delicate balance" when evaluating student work. The board agreed the policy provides a necessary starting point and framework, especially since students could challenge disciplinary actions without a clear policy in place.

Abdi made motion to approve the AI policy and Brian seconded it. Motion was approved by a unanimous vote.

Procurement Policy and Job Descriptions

The board discussed and approved revisions to the procurement policy, with Samuel explaining that projects over \$175,000 must follow the sealed bid process. He also noted that the threshold for micro-purchase threshold has changed to \$15,000. The figure was \$10,000 in the old policy.

Motion to adopt the revised Procurement and Purchasing policy was made by Liban and seconded by Brian. Motion passed unanimously.

Executive Director's Job Description and Goals for School Year 2026 - 27

The board reviewed Samuel's job description and approved his goals for the new school year.

Transportation Contract Details:

Nine companies submitted bids in response to public advertisements on the school website and Pioneer Press. A selection committee consisting of board member Liban, transportation consultant Kerry Johnson, Samuel, and the chief of operations interviewed all companies. All companies passed background checks and met state and federal compliance requirements.

The board approved contracts with four companies:



Board Motion — Higher Ground Academy Transportation Contracts (FY27 & FY28)

Samuel asked the board to approve a two-year transportation contract term covering FY27 (SY 26–27) and FY28 (SY 27–28) with the following providers.

1. Mid West Transport — school bus service at \$335 per bus per day (primary provider).
2. Dayib Transport — school bus service at \$340 per bus per day (backup provider, used if Mid West cannot supply sufficient buses).
3. Dire Dawa Transport — 6-passenger van service for regular education at \$145 per van per day.
4. Dire Dawa Transport — 10-passenger van service for regular education at \$220 per van per day.
5. SAA Transport — 6-passenger van service for special education at \$145 per van per day.

Samuel explained the pricing structure: \$335-340/day/bus rates apply when buses serve Higher Ground Academy then continue to another school. If the school requires a dedicated bus (no subsequent routes), the rate is \$400/day/bus. The selected van companies offered significantly lower rates (\$145/day) compared to Midwest's van rate of \$235/day.

Dan inquired about driver safety and compliance. Samuel confirmed that the consultant conducted background checks on all companies, and that annual on-site inspections of buses and vans will be conducted to verify that records remain current and that companies maintain compliance with DMV, State Patrol, and federal/state requirements.

Motion to approve the transportation contract was made by Brian and seconded by Abdi. Motion passed unanimously.

Outstanding Needs for 26-27 School Year:

Samuel identified three priority areas requiring board monitoring throughout the year:

Student Attendance: Currently at around 75%, target is 90%. This is a national post-pandemic issue, but Higher Ground's pre-pandemic attendance was much stronger and needs to return to those levels.

Transportation: Measures have been taken including hiring a consultant and changing bus companies. The board must demand regular progress reports.

Food Service: Previous participation was very low due to student disinterest in the food. The school is hiring a chef to prepare food on-site, which is expected to significantly improve participation.

Samuel noted this review is required by the authorizer, and the board has a responsibility to monitor and demand regular reports on progress in these areas throughout the school year.

Samuel announced he would be on vacation for 10 days starting immediately after the meeting, with Liban and other colleagues managing operations during his absence.



New Business

None

Adjournment

Dan McGrath asked for motion to adjourn the board meeting. Motion to adjourn was made by Liban and seconded by Abdi. Motion carried unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 8:55 a.m.