

Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Date: January 14th, 2026

Time: 6:12 p.m.

Location: Erie Elementary Charter School

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at **6:12 p.m.**

2. Introductions

Introductions were proposed by **Mary Boehler**. Attendees introduced themselves as follows:

- **Keith Ellett** – Third year on the Board; Trader with Optiver; Chair, Finance Committee
- **Ricardo Villalobos** – New Board member; 30 years of experience in nonprofit leadership; Executive Director, Evanston Latinos
- **Sy Nelson** – Founding Board member; Finance Committee
- **Melanie Madigan** – Founding Board member; Private practice psychologist
- **Karem Gomez** – Directora; Fourth year
- **Sarah Airola** – Board President; Founder and Director, The Grace Network
- **Jeanne Perkins Varwig** – Prospective Board member
- **Mary Boehler** – Board member; Finance and Academic Committees
- **Vivek Sadanand** – Trader
- **Tony Sutton** – Fifth year on the Board; Educator; Education leadership
- **Lorene Strasser** – Prospective Board member; background in advertising, media, and nonprofit mentoring (26 years)
- **Leslie Pigozzi** – Teacher Board member; 12 years
- **Gina Vega** – Registrar and Enrollment Manager

3. Approval of Minutes

The minutes from the **October 29** meeting were reviewed.

- **Motion:** Melanie Madigan
- **Second:** Mary Boehler
- **Vote:** 5 in favor
- **Result:** Motion carried

4. Public Comment

No public comments were presented.

5. Board Development

Mary Boehler presented background on **Jeanne Perkins Varwig**, highlighting her extensive experience in financial services, senior banking leadership, wealth strategy, and long-standing volunteer service. Jeanne and her family have been long-time supporters of Erie.

Melanie Madigan presented background on **Lorene Strasser**, noting her extensive nonprofit experience and expertise in partnerships. Lorene was referred by Kenny at an entertainment company and was interviewed by Melanie Madigan and Keith Ellett. Strong enthusiasm was expressed for her potential contribution to the Board.

- **Motion to nominate Jeanne Perkins Varwig and Lorene Strasser to the Board:**
 - **Motion:** Tony Sutton
 - **Second:** Melanie Madigan
 - **Vote:** 5 in favor
 - **Result:** Motion carried

Sy Nelson inquired about the current number of Board members. Sarah Airola reported that there are **13 current Board members**.

6. Academic Report

An update on the **Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP)** was provided. The school remains in compliance with all requirements from **ISBE and CPS**. CPS continues to provide support through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), rigor walks, and Instruction & Innovation collaboration. Additional clarity on the CIWP process was provided to the Board.

Karem Gomez discussed interventions addressing low test scores among special education students, including:

- Individualized learning through the iReady platform
- Capacity building for diverse learner teachers
- Increased data collection and analysis requirements for special education teachers

The primary academic metric was reviewed:

- Students earning **3 or 4** on standards-based grades are considered *meeting or proficient*
- Students earning a **2** are considered *approaching* (scale of 1–4)

Board Discussion:

- Tony Sutton emphasized the importance of identifying specific instructional shifts being prioritized, beyond data tracking. Push-in services and increased collaboration between teachers were identified as key priorities.
- Vivek Sadanand asked whether monthly or cumulative data was more effective for monitoring progress and requested clarification on the types of data analysis being conducted.
- Staff explained the use of structured data protocols to guide teachers in analyzing data and making instructional decisions.
- Leslie Pigozzi requested clarification on special education licensure distinctions between teachers and Diverse Learner Instructional Assistants.
- Tony Sutton shared reflections on leadership preparedness and its impact on teacher readiness and buy-in.

Karem Gomez also described the **Accelerate** initiative and the strategic planning process, summarizing **Big Rocks 1, 2, and 3** for the Semester 2 Strategic Plan.

Attendance and chronic truancy were discussed. Lorene Strasser and Melanie Madigan expressed interest in serving on a committee related to the **Student Nutrition Program (SNP)**.

7. Development and Grants Update

Sarah Airola provided updates on grant activity, including:

- Frye Foundation
- Craig Foundation
- Wells Fargo
- Field Trip Grant
- Invitations to reapply for funding through **Costco** and the **Cudahy Fund**

Erie was invited to submit another application to **Invest for Kids**, having reached the final round the previous year. Board members were encouraged to support networking efforts and connections with potential funders.

8. Financial Report

The Finance Committee reported:

- Coding discrepancies in several line items were identified and resolved
- RSM provided detailed descriptions of each line item
- The committee requested clearer visibility into significant variances
- No staffing cuts or position eliminations were made
- Budget tightening across departments addressed a deficit related to changes in CPS funding
- A small surplus was identified by the Finance Committee
- The organization is projected to end the fiscal year with a surplus
- Formatting issues were noted and are being addressed

- Budget planning remains conservative in anticipation of federal education funding reductions

9. New Business

Sarah Airola asked for new business.

Tony Sutton requested to revisit the issue of chronic absenteeism and committed to providing relevant data to Sarah Airola & Karem Gomez

10. Adjournment

- **Motion:** Mary Boehler
- **Second:** Keith Ellett
- **Vote:** 10 in favor
- **Result:** Motion carried

The meeting was adjourned.