

# STAMFORD

229 North Street, Stamford, CT 06901



# ACADEMY

Ph: (203) 324-6300 Fx: (203) 324-6310

## **Draft Minutes — Special Meeting (June 26, 2020 at 3:00PM):**

**The Special Meeting was called to order at 3:00PM by Rick D’Avino.**

### **1. Re-Elected Beth Gosk as a Director of Stamford Academy:**

**Moved — Rick D’Avino; Seconded — Mike Schlessinger**

**Voted in Favor: D’Avino, Schlessinger and Noah Lapine**

### **2. Discussed Noah Lapine’s email correspondence with Lisa Lamenzo, Bureau Chief, Connecticut State Department of Education, and Rick D’Avino’s email response:**

**Following a full discussion, no formal action was taken.**

### **3. Accepted Noah Lapine’s resignation as a Director of Stamford Academy, with deep appreciation for his 16 years of dedicated service as a Director and Former Chair:**

**Moved — Rick D’Avino; Seconded — Mike Schlessinger**

**Voted in Favor: D’Avino, Schlessinger and Gosk.**

**Adjourned: 3:45PM**

## Stamford Academy Board Meeting

Submitted for the public record on June 26, 2020 by Noah Lapine

I want to be clear, the absurdity of this very discussion and “emergency board meeting” does not merit the time or actions we are all taking today. As has always been the case, if I am not wanted or, more importantly, no longer needed on this board, I will step away. I have never volunteered in this role to serve my ego, only to help serve a cause I passionately believe in.

While I don’t have a law degree, and I don’t lead by out-talking, out-yelling, or amplifying and glorifying my involvement, I will stick to the facts, which I regret require me to respond to Rick D’Avino’s very lengthy and disparaging email.

Rick’s email was not only sent to the six (6) members of the Connecticut State Department of Education Charter Management Team I sent my email to, he included the one other remaining SA board member, four members of our charter management company, Domus, a service provider to Stamford Academy, seven (7) former SA board members, all resigned as of last week but somehow now copied back into this email chain although they have no official or functional role whatsoever in the organization, and two board members of Domus who are the primary funders of SA. This itself was an act of petty aggression and a lack of good judgment.

On his numbered points of “disappointment and provocation,” I will address them:

1. *No collaboration*

I am entitled to send this communication to whomever I choose, stating my point of view. Rick has sent many communications to these individuals that I don’t agree with and they are not always shared for input or approval. He is welcomed to state his objecting opinion if he chooses. However, he labels my email “factually inaccurate” which it isn’t. It may not align with Rick’s interpretation of the facts, but there’s nothing inaccurate about it as I will share.

2. Rick labels my “Critical Factual Misstatements” of which he says there are 3 such false assertions.

*(a) devoted significant and productive effort to helping Stamford Academy succeed and to a person... thus guaranteeing ~\$2,000,000 of annual Federal and State funding for Stamford Academy for this just-completed academic year and next academic year;*

*(b) have all — since I was elected to chair the Stamford Academy Board in June 2018 —worked tirelessly and collaboratively with Andrea Weller, Stamford Academy’s principal, and Craig Baker, Domus’ Chief Education Officer, both copied above, as well as with me, to help Stamford Academy overcome the three critical flaws that led to it being placed on probation in May 2018: excessive chronic absenteeism, a high rate of disciplinary suspensions and subpar academic achievement*

*(c) played absolutely NO role, let alone an “active” one, in closing Stamford Academy.*

So, let's start with some facts:

Connecticut's charter law is among the most outdated and lowest rated in the U.S., ranking 31st out of 43 states that have charter laws. Connecticut is one of only two states where charter schools are funded through a separate item in the state budget that must be approved every year.

This group of individuals from the DOE Charter Management Team, while they are not the drafters of the state's charter laws, they are the primary state agency that informs them, shapes policy, and carries out their rules, often vague and ever-changing based on their interpretation, as they see fit. Their efforts have been deliberate and consistent in undermining the success of all of the state's charter schools for the last decade.

Over the past six years they have suppressed the growth of charter schools in the state, and since 2016 the number of charter schools has been further reduced from 24 to 22. So during this team's guidance and oversight, they have reduced the charters and charter seats in the state—that is not an accident and this group has facilitated that effort.

State charter schools receive \$11,250 per student from the state which is nearly \$4,000 less per student than their host districts, even though they educate students with similar levels of need and, in our case, far more intensive needs. As Dacia Toll, the co-CEO of the charter school organization Achievement First said last November, "They are literally starving us. We should be getting \$15,000 or \$16,000." Thus, I find their financial commitment to us, which Rick chooses to praise, inadequate and unfair.

Their "devotion of time" is focused on their interpretation of school success metrics which they have pushed down SA's throat for over a decade, forcing us to reallocate already scarce resources to placate state officials and create vanity metrics instead of serving the SA students as the school's leadership team would otherwise see fit. The energy is on optics rather than outcomes. The three "critical flaws" they identified as the reason for being placed on probation are a charade and here's why:

1. To measure "subpar academic achievement" the state uses grade level test scores and SAT scores as a performance metric of success for SA students. This is, and has always been, misguided and unfair. It is a distraction from the school's core efforts to try and close the gaps in math and reading these students enter with. The individuals I addressed have unwaveringly stood behind a grade level and SAT testing assessment even when education professionals that have assessed our population and the work we do have explained and demonstrated to no avail that this is not the proper metric.

Chronic absenteeism: 100% of the SA population is chronically absent upon entry and, in most cases, they've been chronically absent most or all of their educational careers. SA improved those metrics with astounding success, moving students up in percentage attendance 20-50% year over year. Yet, the state solely focused on the same chronic

absenteeism metric. And after all of the efforts, time and money spent to have the state impart their supposed expertise on improving this, the numbers haven't altered the fact that we are working with a population where chronic absenteeism by state standards is a persistent and unrelenting reality.

And the high rate of disciplinary suspensions is laughable for the state to call out. The city's alternative ed programs have no restorative justice approach, no expulsion restriction, and no metrics to mitigate out of school suspensions. In fact, their numbers improve when their most challenged students drop out of their schools and into our program. It perversely incentivizes and helps the local high schools with state and local funding to get these "worst cases" out so they don't drag down their performance stats.

None of these alternative programs supported and fully funded to the maximum state level per student are evaluated on any of the 4 performance standards that SA is being held to. Their kids don't even have to attend for a full school day. None get reviewed for approval to continue operating and none, therefore, get publicly called out annually as "failing schools." Every year of SA's existence, this team elected to enforce an evaluation system that publicly proclaimed us a "failing school" and Stamford's worst. This led to an even greater challenge raising vital public funds to supplement the state's under-funding, and eroded the support of city voters, board of ed members, and Stamford school and city officials. **Thus, all six of these individuals have played a very direct and damaging role in SA's demise.**

The 2016 Parthenon Report by Ernst & Young does a beautiful job laying all of this out in black and white. It highlights Domus and Stamford Academy as an exemplary standard of programming, metrics, and a holistic philosophy for helping disengaged and disconnected youth. The situation has actually worsened since the report's publishing and that report was a black eye for the Connecticut Department of Education that, almost immediately, aimed their ire at the very school the report praises.

When the vote for SA's probation went through in Hartford, supported by the same people Rick goes out of his way to defend in his email, Robert Kelly, the state's Charter Schools Program Manager and one of the recipients of my email, commented in the hallway after the hearing was that he was "glad to finally see us held accountable." This from a man and his team whom, in the three years prior to recommending SA be put on probation, only reached out or visited once and that was when there was a scheduled renewal interview. They never came to offer support, understand the model, speak with the various national leading education consulting companies that helped form the academic and student support framework of Stamford Academy, or advocated for our existence. They handed us a bucket after they ripped a hole in the bottom of our ship and now we are to thank them for their efforts and generosity? In short: appalling.

On to Rick's third point or commentary which is simply a condescending attempt to insult and discredit me. Rick writes:

3. ***Your Lack of Recent Involvement or Support.*** *I have used above the neutral term "factual misstatements" to describe the errors in your email, because I assume you just don't know*

*nor understand the facts. In my view, however, your lack of knowledge of the underlying facts is not surprising.*

Here are the facts:

Rick's recounting of my two year board attendance is correct. Those who want to judge or admonish me for that are free to do so. It should be understood though that when I transitioned out of my role as chair, I met with Rick on several occasions leading up to that hand-off, offered my services and input at any time, and always made myself available when asked. Having run the board and every board meeting for 14 years- which by the way took place 12 times a year by charter mandate for the first 12 years of service- to question my understanding of the facts or my commitment to the organization is deeply offensive.

Over SA's 16 year history, I started the board with Mike D and Mike M and then chaired it for the next 14 years. I oversaw 5 charter renewal cycles, 3 school leadership changes, attended countless city and state hearings, meetings with the people I sent my email to, with the governor, state and city board officials. We increased our state approved seat allotment, effectively managed our budget, brought in Teach for America teachers, increased metrics and reporting, and the school remained open and operating that entire time. We adapted to the constantly changing state rules of engagement when they instructed us to bring Domus closer in, then push them farther out, then separate formally- all administrative and financial burdens placed on the school and board. It also very deliberately restricted any Domus employee- that includes Mike D, Mike M, Craig, and Julie- from speaking at the state hearing on Domus' behalf.

Despite Rick's derogatory comments about my engagement, I remain an active and regular advocate and advisor to Domus's and SA's leadership teams. Over the last two years, I have been kept up to date with all board materials, and remain an informed and engaged participant in the Stamford Public Schools, Domus, and SA. I also asked Mike and Craig from the outset of the transition in 2018 if they would prefer I stay on the board or step away and told them I would do whatever they felt was in the best interest of the school. They asked that I stay on but we all agreed that it would be best to step back and allow Rick to lead the way, which I did. Again, if that bothers Rick, he is entitled to his opinion. To smear me in an email that he chose to send to 20 people is immature and blatantly disrespectful, but sadly, not surprising.

4. Rick's final point is around "**The Facts Are Missing From Your Narrative**"

To be 100% clear, my 250 word email to the state officials is not a narrative. I understand Dr. Lucero's role, the Stamford board of ed's role, Domus' role, and the long list of facts that all played a part in the closing of SA. I have had my exchanges with all of those people and they continue. Rick is correct, there is plenty of blame to go around. But his self-labeled "5 step factual narrative" fails to address the multitude of aggressions, barriers, obstacles, and very direct and damaging role these members of the state's Department of Education have played and continue to play in restricting and reducing the success of charters in our state.

I think it's important that our board recognize that even as we deprive future Stamford and Bridgeport students of the services that they so desperately needed from SA, there are over 6,000 students on waiting lists to get into the dwindling charter schools in our state that only are allowed to serve 9,300 students in total. Just 3 years ago, 3,000 were on the waitlists. The people my email was sent to have now made it less likely for these kids to get a seat and their parents to have a choice in their student's education. That may not be a big deal for those of us who have the option to pay for private schools, tutors, SAT prep classes, and countless other enrichment programs for our children, but it is literally robbing these families of a fair shot at success. Thus, the factual statement in my email: this group from the state that you are so eager to defend "has played an active role in making [access to an excellent education for every student in our state] even less attainable."

I also think it's ironic and sadly telling that the outrage that has led to this emergency meeting comes from my email directed at a deeply flawed and failed state charter school management team that our board chair vociferously lauds and defends, rather than their damaging actions and efforts I've recounted above. The only apology due anyone is to the families and students of Stamford Academy that we failed.

Despite the snarky attempt to enlighten me with the dictionary definition of travesty, I still stand by my words and am certain that the state's actors I directed my email to have conducted themselves in a "false, absurd, and distorted" manner under the guise of "helping" our state's charters. All they have done is starve them of their necessary funding, further reduce access, and undermine the noble efforts of Stamford Academy. They have, and they continue, to fail the children of this state and it will continue until people stand up and call them out for what they are. It is, indeed, a travesty.

Please enter that into the public record. Thank you.