



An Environmentally Integrated K-8 A+ Charter School
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www.learninggate.org

"The First LEED Platinum Public
School in the Nation"



**Learning Gate Board Directors
Board of Directors Retreat
Thursday, May 25th, 2017**

Board Members Present: Stan Kroh, Jamie Meyer, Karen Ramlackhan, Debbi Stone, Jennifer Wolgemuth, John Zdanowicz, Jennifer Collins, Christina Goldstein, Christina Faudel

Foundation Members Present: Scott Nolan, Ossama (Sam) Jureyda

Board members absent: None

Staff in attendance: Michelle Mason, Kris Smith

Meeting called to order at 5:20 PM by Debbi Stone, Chairperson.

Priorities for Board Focus:

- Student recruitment is a big focus, it drives everything else
- Upgrading the facilities
- Identifying and understanding strengths and weaknesses using a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. Examples of opportunities include extending partnerships, threats are from regulation, competition, public perception of charter schools.
- Possibly having two Board retreats next school year.
- Branding and marketing are important. A flyer is needed to pass out for Board and Committee recruitment, as well as to interested parents.

Student Recruitment:

- **Emphasize features of the school:** Word of mouth worked well in the past when the school was small and there wasn't much competition, but now we need to compete with larger schools with management companies. Recruitment efforts should emphasize our focus on the whole child in an environmentally focused school. They should feature our garden, biome, involvement in EcoFest, Florida Virtual School, and integration of technology in all aspects of the curriculum.
- **Community involvement:** Discussed possibility of hosting and attending more events, in addition to Ecofest, in the community and make sure at all events we are communicating what we do. We could also place tents at other similar festivals and provide parents volunteer hours for manning the tent.
- **Social media** accounts need to be updated to communicate marketing messages and should have more than one person able to post.

- **Foundation involvement:** The Foundation may be able to assist with recruitment. They will discuss how they might support recruitment efforts at their next meeting.
- **Waitlist info:** The waitlist used to be hundreds per grade. With the addition of 2 Lutz K-8 charter schools in the past few years our waitlist is no longer that robust.
- **Lutz Lake Fern signage:** The website URL should be added to the middle school sign. The sign also has letters that need to be replaced. It may also be good to just replace the whole sign, possibly with a digital sign to make it easier to update. The current signage is not very visible. Discussed placing a banner somewhere on the side of a building; the pump house or a mural on the side of the church. The signage at both campuses should match. Will need to check Lutz regulations regarding signage.
- **Google maps** needs to be informed that the middle school campus doesn't show up. Kris has already done this.
- **Students involved in recruiting:** We should involve our students in recruitment efforts and provide them the opportunity to speak to the quality of the school. Also, it would be good to implement future alumni tracking that includes their destination schools and statistics. We can also gather testimonials from current alumni and their parents. We could get a few students each year who allow us to follow them for updates, maybe four or five.
 - **Alumni:** Discussed strategies for tracking and contacting alumni including creating a list going forward, creating a Facebook group. Might provide the opportunity for a middle school student to develop and run an unofficial alumni page on Facebook.
- We can reach out to USF and UT to produce some videos of the school for marketing.
- **Targeted marketing:** we need to know where to target our marketing.
- **Misperceptions of charter schools** in general: if the new charter schools don't do well, it will damage the general perception. If they succeed, then it will increase the competition. We need to be able to respond to either scenario.
- We need to add Board members with knowledge of technology, marketing, and public relations.
- **Technology:** We need to address the perception that we are not a technology based school. Perhaps emphasizing the availability of free play time and the focus on the whole child rather than solely on standardized testing will lure in parents and students.
- **Marketing at USF:** Many USF employees send their children here, maybe consider increased marketing at USF.
- **Marketing analysis:** We need to ask parents applying to the school how they heard about us, what attracted them, and what was the deciding factor. We need a compelling story that resonates with people. Common threads can illuminate strategies. We can use a thematic analysis of the results, perhaps partnering with USF. This can also help decide whether or not to focus development and marketing more heavily on technology, environment, or other features of the school. Density and demographic mapping should be performed to show where students are coming from. Perhaps a Marketing/Recruiting Committee should be formed. Use specific, targeted marketing to each zipcode. Can use geolocated marketing in apps.
- **Emphasize online courses:** Bigger focus on the link to the Florida Virtual Learning Community. STEM is important to parents as well.
- **Increase Ecofest presence:** We need more signage for Learning Gate at Ecofest. Maybe large banners, bags with the name of the school, a more centrally located booth. We can

also train students to work at the booth. Although Lowry Park is distant from the school, people in Tampa and Lutz know about Learning Gate, so it allows us to broaden the marketing further afield.

- **Develop message before marketing:** We need to focus on creating a coherent and consistent message before we actively market the school. It would include that the school focuses on the whole child, and that it is a non-traditional school. We can also focus on how we use technology differently from other schools. It should emphasize that despite our differences, we still meet standards and are an A+ school. Marketing only provides tools to tell a story. We create the story, and they find means of telling it.
- **Marketing interns:** Discussed hiring some marketing interns from USF for the summer. It would need to be outlined as a job, with clear goals. It could be work-from-home. Would need to establish a Notice of Understanding that we own all materials produced. In the future could consider offering credit for the internship, but this would require a much more structured plan that adheres to USF standards.
- **Marketing pushes:** Recruitment is year round, but we should formulate a calendar of dates to do big marketing pushes based on application deadlines and goals.
- **Lutz Lake Fern improvements:** John has an appointment with the HRC to remove the historical status of the sanctuary. Pending approval and permitting, the building could be changed or removed. Currently, it is being used as storage, and will need to be cleaned out. It is a big opportunity to do something that says "Learning Gate", such as a cabin, a garden, solar panels, or a green roof.
 - We need to find out the required number of parking spaces for the Lutz Lake Fern campus. It may be a good idea to turn the parking lot across the street into a garden. It would require an irrigation system, though. Also, it would require a cross-walk and traffic calming for children to cross the road.
 - The misperception of mold is still an issue at the Lutz Lake Fern campus. Since it is impossible to address in marketing without drawing attention, we should probably just ignore it. We could also take lots of mold-free photos, after making the campus more photogenic. There are already some videos of the campus, including some made using a drone.
- **Marketing Videos:** In addition to the campus videos, we could produce other videos featuring students and staff talking about the school to post on social media and our website. They should be no longer than 60 seconds. We should also have some that showcase athletics, as they are a major consideration for middle school selection. All students in videos would need a waiver for rights to use their likenesses. One is already on the school application, but it is best to get permission for each use. We could also allow the students to produce iMovie videos to showcase our technology.
- **Attrition:** We lose some students between 6th and 7th grade because the Lutz Lake Fern campus isn't as established as the Hanna Road campus. We need showpieces for the campus, including noting that it is lakefront property.
- **Advertising Channels:** Although Lee Spann from WFLA visits campus for stories from time to time, we may be able to increase our media presence. It may be too expensive for radio or TV advertising. However, we could make some press releases for events and accomplishments. They should include boilerplate language that describes who we are. We also need to make a contact list of reporters to send them to.
- **Hire a marketing person:** We could add a staff position for marketing. It falls under Michele Northrup's responsibilities, but she is very busy with other tasks, and may benefit from help. Barriers to hiring a new person include a lack of office space and

funding for a new position. It could be a work from home position, possibly someone who started as an intern.

- **Relationship with charter office:** The relationship with the charter office is consistently improving. The new Superintendent seems to like charter schools and is involved. The county needs charter schools, since they have no budget to increase capacity in line with growth without them. However, we receive many services from the county, such as psychological and social services. Those services are split between all charter schools, with new schools coming on board every year. We may need to contract these out ourselves to keep up with the workload. Michelle is working on a partner pool with other charter schools.
- **Develop marketing materials:** We need a one page flier with our mission and vision.

Long Term Planning:

- **Fundraising:** We have a well-established fundraising plan, but it is limited in scope. We bring in about \$120,000 per year, which is always just enough to cover emergencies. We need new means of fundraising going forward. Other schools have full time directors of development to raise money, and we will never get to comfortable levels of funding with only grass-roots campaigns.
 - **Donors:** We might attract donors with interest in funding environmental programs or with interests in the environment more broadly. We need a program for identifying and contacting potential donors. We may be able to link into other people's events for fundraising and marketing purposes. Each potential donor has their own priorities. We need individual strategies for individual donors.
 - **Messaging to parents:** We currently give donation suggestions to families, so it is rare for someone to donate more. Also, we need to stop telling parents that it doesn't matter how much they donate.
 - Both donations to the school and to the Foundation are tax deductible. It is just up to personal preference where people donate.

It has been reported to the school that parents don't like their children involved in fundraising, especially the practice of sending reminders as was done last year. It singles out children, and the special clips used caused controversy.
 - **Student funding gap:** There is a perception that since the school is tuition free, it is fully funded by the county. We should emphasize the gap in county funding and the cost of operating the school. We may want to emphasize to parents that it takes a specific amount (perhaps \$2000) per year in order to maintain the Learning Gate experience, and that the school serves the whole child.
 - **PTSA:** There may be a misperception that the PTSA gives all donations back to the school. In fact, they are mostly used for special project funding Or PTSA events. They have gifted things to the school such as a laminator and the drinking water stations that are fantastic additions to our school.
 - **Grants:** We have not had consistent success in applying for and receiving grants. Many grants are for high need schools. We generally do not meet the criteria. We could set up a grants committee. All USF faculty know how to write grants. Longer, more complex grants are more accessible, but very time consuming to write. Debbi can write them if they are also aquarium grants. We have recruited parents to write them in the past, with varying success.
 - **Parent education:** Parents, especially those new to Learning Gate, need to be better informed about Help the Heron. We need a plan to help communicate fundraising goals. Some parents would like to know where their donations are

going. We need visible representations of financing and results, including how close we are to achieving fundraising goals, and what is spent per child. Help the Heron is for meeting budgets, but parents want to know how it will benefit *their* student. We need to tell/show them what we provide that public schools don't to justify the expenses. We could try to inform parents about this before they enroll, but it could be a turn-off. However, another local charter school is expanding and they layout financial responsibilities from the beginning. Parents need to know differences between donations to the PTSA, the Foundation, and the school.

- **Goals:** We should plan out our fundraising goals in advance, and then publicize the target. Discussed the advantages and disadvantages of attaching funding targets to specific needs or projects. Maybe we can say that if class fundraising goals are met, any additional will go back to the classroom for something the teacher wants.
- Rather than forming a fundraising committee, the Resource Development committee should be refocused. Also, the Foundation will communicate with the PTSA to coordinate.
- **Communication:** We need to update the website and use social media for fundraising, including adding a "donate now" button. There is time this summer while students aren't there. We need a strategic plan for communication about what each person needs to do. John is meeting with Brand Buddha about the website next week, but he needs to know what to tell them we want (what is our "brand promise"), and how we want the website set up. We also need to add our wish list to our donation page, including priorities and emergency funds.
- **Adjacent property:** Discussed the price and possibility of purchasing the neighboring property. Would need to secure outside funding from a benefactor in order to purchase the property, we would not be able to purchase the property with a bank loan.
- **Charter Amendments:** Our charter is up for renewal in 2025. We could amend it beforehand should we want to expand the school, but this process could require us to meet new requirements. We need to conduct a risk-reward analysis.
- **School resource officer:** Discussed the advantages and disadvantages of hiring a school resource officer. It might assist with any conduct issues. However it might change the climate of the school and take away from the family atmosphere. To date, the staff has not had any problems handling discipline issues.

Hanna Road maintenance/upkeep plan

- The garden still needs an irrigation plan. We can either install a solar pump, or run electricity to the garden.
- We will need a new roof on the second part of the main building at the Lutz Lake Fern campus in the next 5 years.
- We have some bids for the A/C units in the green buildings, but we are still working on a solution.
- The facilities committee needs a priority list with timelines and a punch list from maintenance.
- There is concern about the aging campus and the lack of cash to deal with the inevitable problems. Perhaps we need a different maintenance fund to deal with upkeep and emergencies.

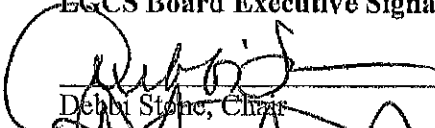

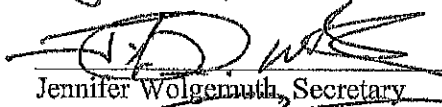
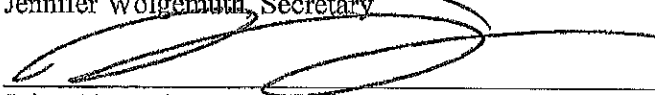
- Parents are more concerned with the appearance of the school (shabbiness) than larger structural issues, but we also need to stay in compliance with our sponsor's requirements to keep the buildings properly maintained. Screens and painting need to be done again.
- The Board could get involved with maintenance. In the past, clean-ups of campus were not well attended, although this could be due to notification issues.
- **School Clean-Ups:** It is possible, although maybe not desirable, to do a clean-up ahead of school starting. It is too busy at the end of the school year to complete a clean-up. We've tried corporate clean-ups in the past, but the volunteers had to be managed, and sometimes it led to more work for the staff. We could do a survey asking for help, but parents may not have time. Perhaps more hours from volunteer parents with supervisory experience, although it risks burning out the volunteers. We may need cleaning and painting supplies.
- The State of Florida has not finalized the budget yet, so the school's budget is also not finalized a preliminary budget has been approved, but will need to be amended when. It is possible there will be no state money in July if the budget is not passed in a timely manner. **PTSA :** The Foundation will meet with the PTSA to establish a dialogue. We like the PTSA to hold certain events, but they need to accept guidance from the school to avoid problems Maybe the Board could provide funding to the PTSA, so they only handle volunteers, not fundraising? The PTSA did not like this idea initially but maybe it could be revisited. Their concerns, are that school emergencies will usurp their portion of the budget.
- **Volunteer appreciation:** We could hold a volunteer appreciation event, possibly at the park, divided by grade level. The big biome celebration could serve a dual function to also honor parents, possibly with gifts from outside sponsors.

Teacher Survey Results:

- **Homework survey:** The majority of teachers want reading/studying nightly, but not necessarily written homework. There are too many extracurricular activities, so it could interfere with family time for students.
- Each year, changes are made to operations based on the results from the teacher surveys.

Minutes drafted by Leilani Paxton and edited and submitted by Jennifer Wolgemuth, Secretary of Learning Gate Community School Board.

LGCS Board Executive Signatures

	7-17-17
Debra Stone, Chair	Date
	7-17-17
Jennifer Collins, Vice Chair	Date
	7.17.2017
Jennifer Wolgemuth, Secretary	Date
	7-17-17
John Zdanowicz, Treasurer	Date