



## Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Friday, January 30, 2026 | 9:00 am – 11:00 am

**Board members present:** Allison Davis, Kyle Baltuch, Bob Buesing, Chris Card, Claudia Davant, Eddie Gonzalez-Loumiet, Ted Granger, Gege Kreischer

\*\*The number of board members present met the requirements for a quorum.

**Board members absent:** Rebecca Kapusta, Shawna Pointville, Christian Winterbottom

**Staff members present:** Jessica Cherry, Melissa Clements, Erin Smeltzer, Lindsey Smith, Lori Stegmeyer, Lauren Wofford, David Zimmer

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The Children's Forum board meeting covered several key updates and discussions. Erin provided a comprehensive overview of the organization's current initiatives, including the search for a new accreditation body to better align with the Forum's growing size and scope. The team discussed upcoming changes to board structure and processes, with Bob and Erin agreeing to further explore how to adapt the organization's governance to meet its evolving needs. Financial updates were shared by Lauren, highlighting a healthy financial position despite ongoing revenue changes. The board also discussed the success of recent legislative efforts and the potential for future funding opportunities. Additionally, David shared updates on technological improvements and infrastructure upgrades that will enhance the Forum's capacity for future growth. The conversation ended with a discussion about the potential benefits of holding an in-person board retreat to address strategic planning and governance matters.

The meeting formally started at approximately 9:04 am with Bob noting Denise Bishop's retirement and inviting personal notes of thanks to her. The board approved the October 2025 meeting minutes with Kyle presenting a motion to approve, Ted seconded, and all were in favor. The group also discussed the mission minute, though no specific mission-related updates were shared.

Kyle shared his observations about increased momentum in children's advocacy work in Tallahassee during the legislative session, particularly highlighting the Children's Forum's efforts. Bob discussed a six-county early childhood study conducted by a Hillsborough County foundation, where Erin played a key role in assisting the consultant. Bob also shared an update on an experimental project placing private pre-K and VPK classrooms in public schools, noting that while progress has been slow due to COVID and capacity constraints, they have found a new partner in the Diocese of St. Petersburg for expanding early childhood programming in Catholic schools.

The group discussed the need for longitudinal data tracking in Florida's education system, with Erin explaining that while VPK data now follows students through 10th grade, the assessments are currently limited to literacy and math. Kyle shared that an amendment to legislation is being considered to create an office that would analyze educational data from early learning through post-secondary education, though this is not expected to happen this year. Bob provided an update on a lawsuit filed against Children's Forum by Jose Maria Vargas University regarding TEACH scholarships and wage INCENTIVES programs, noting that while the insurance company is covering defense costs, the plaintiffs are seeking changes to terminology and participation eligibility rather than monetary compensation. They discussed the case involving accreditation status and their desire to be included in the college-university system. Erin explained that the university is nationally accredited, but the Forum had been following guidance to only accept regional accreditation, leading to a dispute over their eligibility. The group discussed adjusting their approach to accommodate the university while standing by their original position.

Lauren presented updated budget figures, including new funding from Bainum seed money, additional Forum board members, and a new Osceola Incentive\$ contract. The financial update showed the organization was on track for an unexpended revenue amount of \$113,000 at the end of the year.

The finance committee reviewed the organization's financial status, noting a significant increase in assets to \$20 million compared to \$17 million last year, largely due to new partnerships. They discussed the upcoming transition of Florida After School to become an independent 501c3 organization, which will result in a shift of their \$325,000 and related liabilities, but their \$75,000 Mott grant would stay housed at the Forum. The committee approved the current financials; Ted motioned for approval, Eddie seconded, and all were in favor. Eddie commended the finance team for their oversight and responsibility. The CEO expense report was approved by Gege motioning, Kyle seconded, and all were in favor.

Lauren provided updates on two ongoing audits: the DEL monitoring, which is in its final stages, and the single audit, which is being conducted by Carr Riggs Ingram. Erin highlighted Lauren's efforts in managing the audits and mentioned the possibility of achieving a clean audit, which would be celebrated if confirmed. Erin also discussed the organization's need to switch from Nonprofits First accreditation to a more nationally recognized one due to the expiration of their Palm Beach contract, and she invited feedback on potential alternatives. Finally, Erin shared updates on recent national conferences attended by staff, and the expansion of Children's Week with new agencies and speakers.

Erin provided updates on several legislative initiatives, including the potential for the Early Childhood Professional Recognition Center that was in HB 765/SB 1690. She also discussed challenges with CLASS assessment protocol changes from the Florida Department of Education, but a resolution was reached after leadership intervention. Erin also reviewed various legislative bills and amendments related to early learning and child care, noting that funding for the TEACH program and a center initiative was included in the House budget. She expressed optimism about the center's funding prospects, as both the Senate and House staff were supportive, and she planned to discuss recurring funding with the House Chair.

Erin discussed the addition of \$200,000 in local match funding for Help Me Grow and the potential for a \$44 million federal pot to cover the new Center work and coalition requests. She noted that while some non-recurring dollars may need to be backfilled for recurring expenses, there is a commitment to funding in general. Erin also mentioned ongoing efforts to balance funding requests and partnerships, including a potential collaboration with DOE for Preschool Development Grant work. Lori provided updates on

organizational changes, including moving Help Me Grow and Child Care Evaluation Services under a general programs department, and shared progress on various initiatives like the Osceola contract and upcoming events.

The team discussed several operational updates, including Lori's potential last day in late July and Jessica's successful transition of the retirement plan to Voya. David shared progress on infrastructure improvements, including the arrival of 25 new donated, surplus laptops and ongoing projects for a new firewall and virtual environment hardware upgrade. Erin addressed concerns about capacity for new state contracts, noting that the C-Suite has conducted planning meetings and mapped staff capacity for growth, with specific focus on Florida operations. The conversation ended with a discussion about cybersecurity plans and infrastructure preparedness.

The meeting focused on security measures and staff training. David explained that security is an ongoing project, emphasizing the importance of staff education to prevent human errors. He outlined plans to implement a VPN, use Intune for endpoint management, and prepare for SOC 2 compliance. The group discussed phishing attempts and the effectiveness of their current security measures.

Erin suggested organizing a board retreat to review infrastructure, handbook policies, and audit requirements, which was met with interest from the group. The group discussed the format and purpose, Erin proposed either a 2-hour virtual meeting or a longer in-person session to cover strategic plan updates, training, and administrative tasks. Kyle emphasized that the meeting should only be held if it provides true value to the organization, not just to please board members. Lindsey explained that new board members currently receive a handbook orientation, but a more comprehensive board-specific manual is needed to address varying audit requirements. The group agreed that an in-person meeting would be preferable for detailed discussions, though the exact format and timing remain to be determined.

The board discussed several key topics including accreditation changes, board structure, and upcoming Children's Week events. Erin and Bob agreed to research new accreditation options and audit requirements before the next board meeting on April 30th. The board is considering whether to expand its size or add new members as the organization grows, with Ted suggesting they might need additional perspectives given the organization's expanded reach. The group also reviewed plans for Children's Week, including a keynote speaker from the Zac Brown Band and various events planned throughout the week. The meeting adjourned at 10:48 am.

Respectfully submitted,

Christian Winterbottom  
Secretary

Lindsey Smith  
Recording

Minutes Approved on: \_\_\_\_\_ << to be submitted for approval at the next meeting >>

Signature of Secretary: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Chair: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_