



Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

October 24, 2025 | 10:00 am – 12:00 pm

Board members present: Bob Buesing, Gege Kreischer, Rebecca Kapusta, Ted Granger, Claudia Davant

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

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

The board meeting began at approximately 10:03 am with Bob Buesing, board chair, confirming the agenda and inviting attendees to share anything they would like for the Mission Minute. Gege Kreisher shared insights from the third annual summit in Tampa, where 250 businesspeople attended, featuring a presentation by Dan Worley on "The Daycare Myth," emphasizing the importance of early education over daycare. Erin highlighted the need to balance workforce and educational aspects of early education programs, referencing her recent experience in DC. Gege recommended the book for its perspective on early education policy.

The board approved the previous meeting's minutes with Bob calling for a motion, Gege motioned, Ted seconded, all were in favor.

Bob and Erin shared that the Children's Forum has been sued by Jose Maria Vargas University over its requirement for regional accreditation of institutions for TEACH Scholarship programs, despite a federal change allowing national accreditation. Bob explained that Florida maintains its regional accreditation requirement and outlined their defense strategy, which includes a draft motion to dismiss. The group discussed how to handle the potential involvement of the Florida Department of Education in the lawsuit, with Bob suggesting they should be informed but not directly involved in the defense.

The board discussed a legal challenge regarding course credit transfers, with Erin proposing a meeting with Cari Miller, Chancellor of Early Learning, and the General

Counsel to seek clarity. Bob emphasized that the organization was following rules and noted past negative evaluations of similar programs by Florida's Department of Education. The board approved President and CEO travel expenses and reviewed FY2025 financial statements, which showed a net operating income of \$120,000 and growing assets. Lauren presented the budget for the upcoming year, highlighting changes in IT contracts and adjustments made due to ARPA funding cuts, including staff reassignment and program modifications. The call to motion for approval on the above forementioned items was from Bob, Ted motioned, Gege seconded, all were in favor.

The board reviewed the organization's financial status, with Lauren reporting a projected budget surplus of \$112,000 for the current year. Erin discussed a \$500,000 philanthropic seed grant from Bainum Foundation for a center project, with potential additional funding from the Kellogg Foundation, and shared that membership has grown to nearly 2,000 members with several new corporate members. The board approved the current year financials, Bob called for a motion, Gege motioned, Claudia seconded, all were in favor. It was noted that while expenses have increased by \$400,000-\$500,000 due to new hires and cost of living increases, revenue is expected to increase later in the year with several funding sources including a pending Cinnoti grant for autism screening services.

The Finance Committee discussed personnel changes, including a resignation due to operational issues, and approved a motion from Bob to move the Forum's retirement plan from Mutual of America to Voya, expected to save employees approximately \$40,000 annually. Claudia motioned, Ted seconded, all were in favor. Erin provided a legislative update, highlighting new relationships with New Mexico's early childhood education system and the Forum's growing influence in early intervention policy discussions. The Forum is working with New Mexico to support their development of infrastructure for universal childcare and maintaining relationships with state officials to support potential future initiatives.

The meeting covered several key topics, including legislative initiatives, Children's Week planning, and organizational transitions. Erin reported positive progress on legislative efforts, with Teach and the potential PD center receiving strong support from appropriations teams and stakeholders. The group discussed upcoming Children's Week, which will be held February 22nd and feature a keynote speaker from the Zach Brown Band, along with new partnerships and potential venue expansion. The conversation ended with the announcement of Denise's retirement and plans for organizational restructuring, including the promotion of Penny Norton and Laura Cain to Deputy Chiefs and the transition of programs under Lori's department.

Denise announced her departure from the Forum after 11 years, planning to continue as a part-time LENA coach and grandparent. Lori confirmed she would be leaving permanently, and the organization will not rehire Denise's position until after the session due to potential budget variables. David provided updates on IT initiatives, including SharePoint implementation across departments, plans for a new hardware firewall to improve remote work capabilities, and efforts to enhance disaster recovery planning. Ted suggested exploring SharePoint's potential for coordinating Help Me Grow program activities, which Erin acknowledged as a promising area for future development.

The meeting covered updates on TEACH program staffing, budget amendments, and changes to the book reimbursement process, moving to a stipend model. Erin discussed plans to restructure the organization by creating an Innovation Department with a Chief Innovation Officer role, potentially, to handle communications, project management, and external affairs. Bob raised concerns about implementing a grievance procedure, suggesting it should be brief to prevent abuse. The board expressed appreciation for Denise's service and discussed the strategic plan's progress.

The meeting ended at approximately 11:38 am and moved into closed executive session.

The next board meeting is scheduled for Friday, January 30, 2026 @ 9:00 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: _____