

Champions For Learning Special Board Meeting

Retreat Summary Notes

April 22, 2025

8-11:30 AM

This summary represents key outcomes from the April 22 board retreat, which focused on establishing a clear strategic direction for Champions For Learning as a hybrid organization that provides both direct service and catalytic impact. The board unanimously endorsed a hybrid approach for Champions For Learning, balancing direct service with systemic change, and identified key criteria for the next CEO who will lead this strategic direction.

Key Strategic Direction: Hybrid Approach

The board unanimously endorsed a **hybrid approach** for Champions For Learning, balancing direct service with catalytic work. This strategic direction recognizes Champions' opportunity to both deliver high-quality programs and work to create broader educational impact across Collier County.

Strategic Rationale

The board identified several compelling reasons for the hybrid approach.

- Function as a “pendulum” that shifts weight and intensity between direct service and catalyst roles based on factors such as seasonal demands of the academic year, varying student needs for different intervention dosages, changing community priorities, and resource availability.
 - On this note: The Board emphasized that Champions' hybrid approach must thoughtfully balance immediate student impact with broader systemic change. Rather than viewing these as competing priorities, the Board sees them as complementary strategies that strengthen each other. Direct service programs like college coaching and mentoring create immediate, measurable differences in students' lives while also generating evidence and insights that inform systemic improvements. Simultaneously, system-level work—such as building school partnerships, steering the FAFSA Challenge, and strengthening community connections—creates the infrastructure that enables direct services to reach more students effectively. This balanced approach allows Champions to demonstrate concrete results for current students while building capacity for larger-scale impact.
- Volunteer engagement will be a critical component of Champions' hybrid strategic approach. The Board recognizes that rebuilding volunteer infrastructure must be a priority for the incoming CEO and recommends developing interim leadership for volunteer coordination while the search process gets underway.
 - Champions' volunteer strategy should reflect the Board's desire for a hybrid approach by enabling both direct student support (e.g. through mentoring) while also creating systemic change (e.g. through broader community investment in education, by supporting and growing an Alumni Council of former students as near-peer mentors, and by exploring innovative partnerships with corporations and community organizations).
- The Board identified Champions' independence and operational flexibility as distinctive assets; Champions can respond rapidly to emerging needs and test innovative approaches. This flexibility

allows Champions to address gaps that the district recognizes but cannot easily fill, such as transportation barriers to program access, college/career prep, and resource distribution inequities between schools.

- The Board specifically noted potential for Champions to pilot solutions in areas like postsecondary planning and teacher professional development. By maintaining close communication with CCPS leadership about real priorities (“Listen to CCPS for real priorities”) while leveraging its structure, Champions can serve as both implementation partner and innovation lab. This strategic advantage is particularly valuable in addressing time-sensitive needs and creating proof points for approaches that might eventually scale through districtwide systems, maximizing our catalytic impact while maintaining the ability to provide direct services where most needed.

Operational Implications

Moving forward, the hybrid model will require:

- Annual budgeting process that includes CCPS input on real priorities
- Addressing transportation barriers to program access, particularly for school-based services
- Connecting resources, training, and support across programs
- Renewing former plans to connect student data systems
- Activating the Alumni Council to expand impact and engagement

Leadership Profile for Next CEO

As Champions begins its search for new leadership, the board articulated clear preferences for qualities, experiences and a management approach that will be essential for implementing the hybrid strategic model.

Values & Qualities

- **Presence and visibility** in the office and the community
- **Effective communication style** that builds trust
- **Active listening skills** to understand stakeholder needs
- **Clarity and purpose** around mission, vision, and values to guide the organization
- **Transformational leadership style** that builds rather than disrupts

Experience & Abilities

- Capabilities across multiple areas, including programs (not just development)
- Strong background in community outreach and community building
- Ability to build a culture of evidence and data-informed decisions
- Willingness to “look under the hood” at operational realities

Management Approach

- CEO-level (or equivalent) management experience plus education background - someone who understands the education system is ideal
- More inclusive hiring philosophy (e.g. hiring committee, hiring panels, clear process for interviews and reference checks)
- Ability to engage with individual board members for input
- Willingness to connect with all principals and school leaders
- Commitment to implementing transparent governance structures

Organizational Assessment

The board acknowledged several challenges that must be addressed:

Governance & Management

- Previous lack of formal strategic planning process for board
- Previous disconnect between “catalyst” mission and operations
- Need for enhanced bylaws and committee structure (bylaws committee)
- Strong delineation between board (priorities & goals) and staff (execution)

Cultural Issues

- Development and programs divide
- Staff assessments and 360s were conducted but no action was taken
- Board allowed remote leadership and remote working without sufficient accountability
- “Secret squirrel” approach to governance that wasn’t inclusive

Resource Considerations

- Current financial position of approximately \$3.5M
- Need to balance program quality with fiscal responsibility
- Teacher training identified as example of growth area given anticipated state/federal funding declines
- Tiered service approach recommended from the audit

Next Steps

The board identified several immediate actions:

1. Clarify mission, vision, and values to guide CEO search
 - a. Focus on finding a transformational leader who can build on existing strengths
 - b. Require finalist candidates to present implementation plans based on the audit (90-day plans also mentioned)
2. Review previous strategic plans and connect with CCPS leadership to rebuild critical partnerships
3. Review bylaws in an effort to establish a proper governance structure, board decision-making processes, and more inclusive approach to information sharing

APPENDIX: AGENDA

Meeting Purpose: To establish a solid foundation for Champions For Learning’s strategic renewal by building shared understanding of governance roles, organizational context, and key strategic concepts before beginning a thoughtful sequence of strategic choices.

Time	Agenda Item	Description
8-8:30	<i>Arrival & Breakfast</i>	
8:30-9 a.m.	Welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CEO Resignation Updates and Next Steps ● Briefing on Internal Assessment Results ● Executive Session
9-10 a.m.	Setting the Foundation: Review of Key Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Organizational Assessment Overview ● Board Governance Framework ● Key Concepts & Definitions
10-11:15 a.m.	Strategic Choices Workshop <i>Strategic Choice Introduction & First Discussion</i>	<p>Introduction to Six Strategic Choices (from p. 82, Section 6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brief overview of all six areas ● Explanation of discussion process ● Connection to implementation roadmap <p>First Strategic Choice Discussion: Mission Alignment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Small group discussions ● Full board synthesis ● Documentation of initial perspectives
11:15-11:30 a.m.	Next Steps & Closing	<p>Series of Strategic Discussions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting 2 (Date TBD): Continuing strategic choices exploration ● Meeting 3 (Date TBD): Finalizing strategic direction and implementation approach
11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.	Lunch with Champions Staff	

APPENDIX - WORKSHEET 1: ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY & ROLE

Instructions: Discuss each question as a small group, capturing key points of agreement and differing perspectives. Prepare to share 2-3 main insights with the full board.

Should Champions operate primarily as a direct service provider or as a catalyst for systemic change?

Current Reality: Champions attempts to operate both as a direct service provider (233 students) and as an education foundation serving a 48,000-student district, creating tension in resource allocation and mission focus.

Direct Service Provider

Both/Hybrid

Catalyst for Systemic Change

Key Considerations:

1. Which approach best serves Collier County's educational needs?
2. Which approach best leverages Champions' unique position and assets?
3. What are the resource implications of each choice?
4. How would this choice affect our current programs, staff, and funding?

Your Recommendation: _____

Rationale: _____

Table Takeaways: