

Visual & Performing Arts District Advisory Committee (VAPA DAC)

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 – 7 PM – in-person

Board Room, SMMUSD District Office, 1717 - 4th Street, Santa Monica 90401

MINUTES

Attendees

Appointed DAC members: Deborah Berek, Janis Gabbert, Jenna Guggenheim, Wendy Jaffa, Aimee Koeplin, Michael Mollo, Emily Senchuk, and Rebecca Terlizzi

District Staff: Dr. Ashley Benjamin, Director of Curriculum & Instruction; Dr. Stacy Williamson, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services; Dr. Jim Wang, VAPA Coordinator and DAC Administrative Co-Chair; music teachers Cecile Blanchard, Jessi Gravelle, and Angela Woo

Board Liaison: Maria Leon-Vazquez

Other attendees: Maggie Ackerson, Jason Axe, Ashley Buhler, Dika Chartoff, Grant Clark, Gina de Baca, Laura Kachergus, Sarah Murra, Anna Nitti, Kier Purdy, former VAPA Coordinator Tom Whaley, and Rachel Zucker

1. The meeting was called to order at 7:08 PM by Co-Chair Janis Gabbert.
2. Minutes from the February meeting were approved by unanimous consent.
3. The calendar review revealed that the scheduled May 20 DAC meeting conflicted with a student performance, so it was moved, seconded, and approved by unanimous consent to move the meeting to May 27.
4. Dr. Jim Wang, Dr. Ashley Benjamin, and JAMS instrumental teacher Angela Woo presented a PowerPoint about the school district's Elementary Music program, which included background, overall context, challenges and rationale around reflection, a draft proposal, benefits, and next steps, followed by dialogue and discourse.

After the presentation, DAC members asked questions and made comments, followed by Public Comment from the following music parents: Jason Axe (who described a petition signed by more than 500 parents), Dika Chartoff, Ashley Buhler, Anna Nitti, Rachel Zucker, Maggie Ackerson, and Sarah Murra.

Comments included not understanding why the focus is on changing the elementary music program based upon the few students who don't continue music in middle school rather than focusing on the many students who do continue; families that move to Santa Monica and/or bypass private schools because of the district's music program; that the problem is scheduling (i.e., only one elective in middle and high school); that expanding the program to lower grades should not include destroying the current 4th grade program; that selecting an instrument in 4th grade is a "rite of passage," that having 2 years of instrument classes in elementary school has left her 5th grader feeling "confident" about continuing in middle

school; and a suggestion to pilot the program at the elementary school that has the highest attrition rate.

Tom Whaley described the state of the Elementary Music program when he joined the district (only elective “pull-out” instrumental music in 4th and 5th grade), as well as the many improvements he instituted, with the goal of music for all.

Franklin classroom teacher, former music parent, and SMMCTA Treasurer Grant Clark noted the following: Elementary Music teachers, who meet weekly with Dr. Wang, were told in February that there would be sweeping changes to their program. Two months later, they were presented with a plan that they were told was non-negotiable. Article 17 of the union contract was ignored. He stated that there seems to be no emergency requiring sweeping changes, but rather a failure to follow the established process. He recommended the following:

- 1) pausing the plan and maintaining the current program in 2026-27, and
- 2) exploring a thoughtful solution to whatever problems exist, and using Prop 28 funds to hire additional music teachers.

He also noted that teachers need to be given their 2026-27 assignments by June 4.

5. Janis Gabbert distributed copies of a document entitled “Next Financial Oversight Committee.” One of the parents gave Janis handwritten letters from students, one to Dr. Shelton from Lincoln Middle School 7th grader Penelope Axe, and one from Franklin Elementary School 5th grader Sabina Axe. There were also 5 other notes from students.
6. As the hour was late, the rest of the agenda was tabled, and the meeting ended after 10 PM.

Respectfully submitted by Zina Josephs, DAC Secretary