

November 17, 2025

Dr. Robert K. Payne
St. Louis Voices Academy of Media Arts
1220 Olive Street
St. Louis, MO 63103

RE: Breach of Contract and Probation

Dear Dr. Payne:

By way of this letter, the Missouri Charter Public School Commission (Commission) is immediately placing St. Louis Voices Academy of Media Arts (SLVA) on probation. Significant concerns regarding SLVA's ability to provide students with a safe and appropriate learning environment, the lack of appropriately certified teachers and staff, and the board's noncompliance with statutory requirements for open meetings and its own policies require this drastic, immediate and warranted action. For the sake of your students and their parents, we hope you take this action as seriously as it is.

The Commission conducted a preliminary investigation of SLVA's safety procedures as soon as we were informed that a child had left the building without authorization or adult supervision on October 24, 2025. This preliminary investigation included conversations with board and school leadership, document review, and a site visit by Commission staff and experts.

The preliminary investigation uncovered a series of safety, staffing, governance, and academic concerns that warrant probation pursuant to law and [Commission Policy 3.02](#). These concerns are covered below. Because the stakes are so high, the Commission is taking an additional step by immediately assigning former St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson to conduct an independent investigation into what happened on October 24th, your safety procedures and protocols and whether you were following them at the time, what improvements you have made since, and whether your school is safe enough to remain open. His report will be an essential element of our decision making, and we expect you to cooperate with him fully and without prevarication.

Summary of Concerns

Safety and Security of Students

The preliminary investigation identified multiple concerns regarding the safety and security of students at SLVA. While an alarm sounds when a student sneaks or wanders out of the building, it does not appear that there is a protocol in place to ensure there will always be an adult to hear the alarm and intervene immediately. No clear procedures exist for hallway monitoring or student transitions, and responsibility for these checks is unclear. While students are escorted between classrooms, transitions lack consistent systems or protocols.

Emergency preparedness is also inadequate. Emergency procedures are not visibly posted or clearly defined in classrooms. It is unclear if stairways and emergency stairwells comply with safety and accessibility requirements. And emergency drills have not been conducted this school year, leaving teachers untrained to execute them. Although cameras are installed, visibility and monitoring remain limited.

Special Education

Significant concerns were identified in the school's special education practices. It was reported to Commission staff that multiple students with individualized education programs (IEPs) have wandered from (or "eloped" from) classrooms on their own. Several students were placed in self-contained settings without proper authorization by the IEP team and remained in these inappropriate placements for up to two months. Teachers reported a lack of clarity regarding referral procedures, missing or incomplete IEPs at the beginning of the year, and substantially increased caseloads without sufficient staffing. Many teachers were unsure which students had IEPs, and the school does not have enough certified staff or paraprofessionals to meet student needs. Additionally, evaluations requested by parents and teachers have not been completed in a timely manner, further impacting compliance and student support.

Academics

Instructional quality is inconsistent. A majority of teachers are either first-year teachers or substitutes. Teachers have a lack of instructional support and professional development to deliver high quality instruction. Additionally, time is not being maximized in most classrooms to ensure students are being provided adequate rigorous instruction to be able to meet grade level expectations.

Governance

The board's governance practices do not comply with statutory requirements. Violations of the Sunshine Law were observed, including failure to post some meetings and improper handling of closed meetings. Board materials are inconsistently posted or submitted, and the executive director has not been evaluated. Additionally, the board has vacancies which further undermine its capacity to act with a quorum and provide effective oversight.

Required Corrective Actions

Under [RSMo 160.405.8\(c\)\(2\)](#), the sponsor may place a charter school on probation to allow implementation of a remedial plan, which may include changes in methodology, leadership, or both. To address the issues prompting probation, the SLVA Board of Directors must demonstrate its ability to successfully serve students for the remainder of the 2025–2026 school year. If milestones are met, probation may be lifted; if not, the Commission may move to revoke SLVA's charter.

1. **Safety Plan:** Submit a comprehensive safety plan by 5:00 PM on Monday, November 24, 2025. The plan must detail how student and staff safety will be ensured; address updates to procedures, a communication plan, and how staff and students will be trained. Students will not be allowed to return on December 1 if the plan is not approved by the Commission.
2. **Special Education:** The Commission will be initiating a special education audit. School staff and board members are expected to participate fully in the requests of the auditor and implement the required corrective action to ensure SLVA becomes compliant with all special education requirements.
3. **Board Membership:** All vacant board seats must have replacements identified by Monday, December 1, 2025, and seated by December 31, 2025. To identify qualified candidates and complete this milestone, the Commission strongly urges the board to seek the advice and assistance of legal counsel and community organizations like The Opportunity Trust and the Missouri Charter Public School Association. All board members must meet the statutory requirements, including residency and background checks.
4. **Letter of Concern Compliance:** Complete all requirements outlined in the Commission's [Letter of Concern dated November 6, 2025](#), by December 1, 2025.
5. **Staffing and Instructional Support Plan:** Submit a plan by Monday, December 15, 2025, addressing limited staff capacity, high attrition, and support for new or uncertified teachers. This plan must include instructional leadership with a proven track record in supporting novice teachers, school turnaround, and building a positive staff culture.
6. **Board Training and Legal Review:** By December 31, 2025, all board members must complete training in Missouri Sunshine Laws conducted by the board's attorney. SLVA legal counsel must also review board meeting procedures, agendas, and minutes to ensure compliance with the Sunshine Law and SLVA's bylaws.
7. **Enrollment:** SLVA may not enroll any new students until probationary status is removed. Additionally, by December 31, 2025, the board must provide the Commission with an updated budget based on the current number of enrolled students.
8. **Board Meeting Notification:** Laurel Bounds (laurel.bounds@mcpssc.mo.gov) must be notified via email at least 24 hours prior to all board meetings for the remainder of the school year.

If the board believes it cannot meet these requirements, it may relinquish the charter

contract, prompting the Commission to initiate closure procedures while supporting student placement for the second semester. Alternatively, the board may create a plan to merge the LEA with another operator, allowing students and staff to remain together. The Commission must approve both the plan and the coordinator for this option. The decision to relinquish or merge must be made by December 5, 2025.

If continued operation presents a clear and immediate threat to the health and safety of students and/or if the above requirements are not met by the stated deadlines, the Commission may take additional actions, up to and including revocation of the charter, as authorized under [RSMo 160.405.8\(5\)](#).

Missouri law, Commission policies, and the performance contract between the Commission and SLVA require the Commission to take these actions to ensure students receive the education they deserve. The Commission remains committed to supporting the board and the school in meeting these requirements.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Martha McGeehon".

Martha McGeehon
Deputy Director

CC: Robbyn Wahby, MCPSC Executive Director
Hollie Russell- West, SLVA Executive Director
Members, SLVA Board of Directors
Members, Missouri Charter Public School Commission

ATTACHEMENT: Summary of November 12-13 Intervention Site Visit



ST. LOUIS VOICES ACADEMY
INTERVENTION SITE VISIT REPORT
NOVEMBER 12-13, 2025

Intervention Site Visit Process Overview

MCPSC initiated a preliminary investigation of SLVA's safety procedures after MCPSC staff were informed that a child had left the building without authorization or adult supervision on October 24, 2025. This preliminary investigation included conversations with board and school leadership and a thorough document review. This initial investigation uncovered additional concerns related to safety, staffing, instruction, leadership and governance. This information prompted MCPSC to conduct an intervention site visit.

The Intervention Site Visit team included Martha McGeehon, Deputy Director and Laurel Bounds, Accountability Specialist, both with the MO Charter Public School Commission and Marisol Rodriguez, from Insignia Partners. An additional visit was conducted by Martha McGeehon and Miranda Ming, representing MCPSA, for safety concerns. All Site Visit logistics were coordinated by Dr. Hollie Russell-West, Founder of Voices. The following is a list of all focus group and interview groups that participated in the intervention visit:

- Teachers
- A Board Member
- Director of Instruction
- Associate Director of Student Recruitment and Family Partnership
- A Special Education Contractor
- Principal in Residence
- Executive Director

Observational activities included reviews of safety systems, morning meeting structures, supervision routines, and building access. The visit focused on delivery of academic instruction, behavioral systems, safety, leadership effectiveness, and organizational operations.

The site visit was not intended to assess the academic quality of the school, or the actual performance of any group or individual. Rather, the Site Visit focused on gathering information around knowledge of the board and individuals at the school. The data gathered is primarily qualitative and reflective of the varied groups of individuals listed above.

Summary of Visit

The visit revealed substantial challenges across instructional quality, behavioral systems, safety, leadership capacity, communication, and special education compliance. The school is marked by instability, substantial staff turnover, and a lack of foundational systems. Teachers and administrators reported feeling unsupported and unclear on expectations. Serious safety concerns—including unsecured entry points, insufficient emergency training, and inadequate supervision systems—pose significant risks. Observed instruction was inconsistent with considerable time lost to transitions, behavior systems are ineffective, and continued staff turnover has disrupted core operations. Enrollment has declined sharply, and families have expressed concerns regarding communication and safety. Leadership tension and unclear roles have contributed to widespread operational breakdowns.

Domain 1: Instruction

The team observed arrival, breakfast, and morning meeting. Morning meeting included instruction on a core value; however, due to the setup of the space and limited control of student behavior, it was unclear how much students internalized. The instruction was duplicated for the first-grade class as they were distracted by an administrator who was collecting leftover breakfasts and cleaning up trash. Many children ended up sitting in the same space for an hour with nothing to do, contributing to many of the behavior issues observed.

SLVA staff reported that approximately "1.5 teachers" are delivering high-quality lessons. All teachers except one are either in their first year of teaching or substitutes, and those the team spoke with reported not having enough support, particularly around behaviors, to provide any type of high-quality instruction. Every teacher is new to Voices this year with zero retention from the previous year (year two of operation). The site visit team observed all classrooms, except pre-kindergarten) and witnessed only two classrooms engaged in academic content.

An administrator reported that there is no tier 1 phonics curriculum but rather, the intervention program SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) is being used for all students. Teachers noted they lack clarity regarding instructional expectations, priorities, and criteria for success.

Critical instructional time was lost to inefficient transitions. Students were frequently kept waiting in lines or common spaces instead of beginning learning promptly. Multiple classrooms experienced extended periods during which no instruction was occurring. The team witnessed one class standing outside the classroom for over 15 minutes while the teacher waited for them to be quiet before being allowed into the classroom following morning meeting. Another classroom took over five minutes ensuring everyone had a pencil, with one child slowly handing them out one by one even though three adults were in the room.

Domain 2: Students' Opportunity to Learn

Staff described behavioral systems as unclear, inconsistent, and ineffective. Extreme behaviors were reported. Referral processes are not followed consistently, and the reset room is overwhelmed. Students are often returned to class before they are ready, and teachers reported an absence of routines and foundational structures needed to maintain a stable learning environment. Teachers admitted to having few strategies and little training on behavior management.

Significant compliance concerns were identified with special education. Staff reported that at least three students were placed in self-contained settings without IEP authorization and remained in these inappropriate placements for up to two months. These students have recently been returned to the general education environment, but with no transition or support, and teachers are left overwhelmed, inexperienced, and under-supported in how best to integrate these students back into their classes. Teachers reported a lack of clarity on referral procedures. Missing or incomplete IEPs were discovered at the beginning of the year, and caseloads have increased substantially without sufficient staffing. Teachers also reported not knowing which students have IEPs. The school does not have enough certified staff or paraprofessionals to meet student needs.

Serious safety concerns were identified. Two of the site visit team members were able to enter the main entrance door without a code or approval allowing access to the pre-kindergarten classroom. Multiple storage rooms were found to be unsecured. Emergency procedures were only posted in one classroom, and several staff reported they had never received training in emergency protocols. Staff described an actual fire that triggered alarms in an adjacent apartment located in the same building as the school. Staff did not know the correct procedures to exit the building, leaving many students stuck in the basement. Additionally, the school was recently placed on a "soft lockdown"

due to a student elopement. Because teachers had not been trained, one teacher acted independently and had students shelter behind a bookshelf, potentially causing trauma for both students and teachers. One student was reported to have soiled themselves during the incident.

The school lacks a clear system for hallway supervision, and staff were unsure who is responsible for monitoring students during transitions. Windows in office and intervention rooms were covered, limiting visibility and creating additional safety risks.

Domain 3: Educators' Learning Supports

All but one teacher is new or novice and require substantial support. Teachers expressed a strong need for professional development focused on classroom management and behavior systems. Initial PD was insufficient to prepare teachers for the school environment or the specific needs of the student population. However, some quick “20 minute” coaching is happening, which teachers reported to be helpful; however, it is not sufficient given the gaps and needs.

Communication gaps were described as a major issue across the school. Staff shared examples of departures of both teachers and administrators and student suspensions not being communicated. Staff only found out about the departures and suspensions when they inquired about the absences. Additionally, suspended students were returned to the classroom without any communication or restorative conversation with teachers. Staff also reported that various new procedures were implemented without explanation.

Leadership transitions have created tension and uncertainty regarding responsibilities. Decision-making is perceived as top-down, with limited opportunities for staff input. A cohesive leadership team is not in place.

The current administrative structure has resulted in unclear lines of authority. Staff reported receiving conflicting directions from multiple administrators. Leaders described a lack of role clarity, limited onboarding, and no defined criteria for success. Several administrators noted that this is the most challenging school environment they have worked in. The leadership structure—composed of separate ELA, math/science, and culture, that lead without a single principal—was described as ineffective. Decision-making and daily operations lack clear systems and rely heavily on reactive management. Additionally, administrators reported that suggestions or changes based on prior experience were often dismissed by the Executive Director, leaving multiple systems underdeveloped.

Domain 4: Organizational Effectiveness and Sustainability

A board member raised concerns about school structures, reporting practices, and staff familiarity with policies. Additionally, allegations of prior personal relationships between the Executive Director and board members raised concerns about accountability.

The site visit team did not review finances and did not conduct a focus group with the full board during this visit. Thus, no additional observations can be made in this domain.

Domain 5: Faithfulness to Charter

Mission-aligned program elements, particularly consistent instruction and student storytelling or media experiences are not being implemented. Core components outlined in the mission and vision of the charter are not occurring in practice.

More than half of reenrolled families did not return after learning of significant staff turnover. Enrollment has decreased from approximately 250 students to about 190 since the beginning of the school year. Staff reported that families are leaving primarily due to safety concerns and poor communication.

Student data and performance was not discussed or shared with the site visit team. The only data discussed was benchmark data taken at the beginning of the year. Thus, it is unclear how students are performing academically.