

November 25, 2025

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

RE: Notice of School Closure Due to Safety Until Further Notice

Dear Dr. Payne:

The Commission has carefully listened to and read a summary of the findings by our independent safety consultant, former St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson. Mr. Dotson read all of St. Louis Voices Academy's (SLVA) safety and security documents, visited the school on November 21st, and interviewed SLVA staff. The proposed safety plan provided by SLVA on November 24 was also reviewed by Commission staff and Mr. Dotson. Based primarily on Mr. Dotson's expert opinion, we have determined, as noted in the attached security assessment, that SLVA "faces persistent safety and security risks that warrant corrective action, potentially exceeding what can be addressed while the school operates in its current manner. Deficiencies span emergency preparedness, physical security, supervision protocols, incident response, staff training, and institutional accountability."

Because of this conclusion, the school is closed to in person classroom instruction until further notice by the Commission. The school cannot reopen after the Thanksgiving holiday, although you can temporarily hold virtual classes. The Commission is very aware of how drastic this is and what it means for families. But we cannot put young children in a school where their safety and security are not guaranteed. This determination is supported by state law, Commission regulations, the performance contract between the Commission and SLVA, and the exercise of good conscience.

Mr. Dotson was retained to give the commission a clear, independent, and expert view of the following: what happened on October 24th, why it happened, and if the school is secure enough to keep students safe. Attached to this letter is a summary of Mr. Dotson's findings and conclusions. The deficiencies he identified must be corrected to the Commission's satisfaction before the school can reopen. The corrective actions specified in letters sent from the Commission to SLVA on November 6 and November 17 must also be met.

If the security deficiencies are not corrected and the corrective actions are not met, the Commission will initiate closure procedures pursuant to RSMo 160.405.8(5) which allows for permanent closure prior to the end of the school year if "continued operation of the school presents a clear and immediate threat to the health and safety of children."

As part of the immediate closure, the Commission requires SLVA to do the following:

- You must confirm your board of directors will keep the school closed and will work with the Commission to ensure students who wish to transfer to another school immediately may do so without delay. This should be certified via a Reportwell submission within 24 hours of receipt of this letter.
- Determine if SLVA will temporarily use its Alternative Methods of Instruction (AMI) plan and provide virtual instruction on December 1. As you know, state regulation only allows up to 36 hours of instruction to be completed using AMI.
- Inform the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Commission of SLVA's plans to utilize an AMI plan. This evidence should be uploaded to Reportwell by the end of the day Wednesday November 26, 2025.
- Notify each parent or guardian that SLVA is closed, if you plan to use AMI days, and there will be no in person instruction until further notice. Please attempt to confirm that each parent or guardian has received your notification. If after using your best efforts, you cannot reach someone, please provide us with their names and we will attempt to contact them.
- Per the above, provide the Commission with evidence of your efforts to reach each student's family. This evidence should be uploaded to Reportwell by end of day Wednesday November 26, 2025.
- Post notice of closure on the home page of the school's website by the end of the day Wednesday November 26, 2025.
- Notify SLVA staff that no in person instruction will take place until further notice.
- Provide the Commission evidence that each staff member has been made aware that the school is closed until further notice. This evidence should be uploaded to Reportwell by the end of the day Wednesday November 26, 2025.

As part of the notification process, you must also inform your parents, guardians and heads of household of the following information to help them find a new school for their children if they so choose.

The Commission has already formed a team to immediately assist families who wish to find an alternative school for their student(s). Families can receive support on transitioning their students by calling (314) 776-3551 or emailing schoolsupport@mocharterschools.org for additional information. SLVA must include this information in communication to families regarding the closure of the school. SLVA is expected to work seamlessly with the transition team and provide families with the needed records to transfer schools if families choose to do so.

If the board believes it cannot meet these requirements or chooses not to, it may relinquish the charter contract. If that happens, the Commission will initiate closure procedures while supporting student placement.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



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
Shanika Williams, Director, Charter Schools, DESE
Jocelyn Strand, Improvement and Accountability Administrator, DESE

ATTACHEMENT: DSD & Associates, LLC Security Assessment



DSD & ASSOCIATES, LLC
CONSULTING FIRM

DSD and Associates, LLC

November 24, 2025

Missouri Charter Public School Commission
20 S. Sarah Street
St. Louis, MO 63108

Re: Transmittal of School Safety Review – St. Louis Voices Academy of Media Arts

The enclosed review of St. Louis Voices Academy of Media Arts has been completed pursuant to our agreement for this engagement. This report is intended to support the Commission's oversight responsibilities and includes analysis of a recent critical incident involving student safety.

In preparing this assessment, I reviewed incident documentation, relevant school and board policies, and Commission materials; conducted an on-site review of physical security; and held conversations with school leadership and staff. The work was performed within the scope outlined: (1) policy and procedure review, (2) physical security review, and (3) critical incident review.

This report provides an independent, fact-based assessment of the school's safety posture, with particular attention to policy implementation, adequacy of supervision and emergency procedures, and the school's response to the incident. The findings and conclusions reflect my professional judgment, based on the information made available during the review period. This assessment does not constitute legal advice and is provided exclusively for the Commission's use in fulfilling its oversight responsibilities. It should not be relied upon for purposes outside the scope of this engagement, nor distributed beyond the Commission without authorization.

I remain available to the Commission to discuss the report in more detail or support follow-up work within the scope of our agreement.

Thank you for the opportunity to support the Commission's work to ensure the safety and well-being of Missouri's charter school students.

Sincerely,

D. Samuel Dotson

DSD and Associates, LLC

ST. LOUIS VOICES ACADEMY OF MEDIA ARTS
SITE VISIT SUMMARY – NOVEMBER 21, 2025
Security Assessment

The Missouri Charter Public School Commission engaged DSD & Associates, LLC to review safety and security at St. Louis Voices Academy of Media Arts following an October 2025 incident where a student left the building undetected. This assessment included review of safety policies and procedures, staff interviews regarding training and implementation, physical site inspection of access controls and security systems, and detailed incident review. This report provides an independent assessment of the school's safety posture to support Commission oversight.

DSD & Associates, LLC

DSD & Associates, LLC is a security and public safety consultancy focused on practical solutions for mission-driven organizations. This report was prepared by D. Samuel Dotson, Principal Consultant, a former St. Louis Chief of Police with three decades of experience in law enforcement, security, and emergency management. His work combines operational experience, policy expertise, and focus on governance, accountability, and practical risk reduction.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On November 21, 2025, a site visit was conducted at St. Louis Voices Academy of Media Arts (SLVA) following an October 24, 2025, incident in which a student with documented elopement behaviors left the building undetected and remained unsupervised for at least one hour before being located by non-school personnel. The school, in its third year serving 174 students (PreK-3), operates in a mixed-use residential building with substantial security challenges.

The assessment revealed significant deficiencies from the beginning of this school year. The school had conducted no emergency drills in the 2025-2026 school year prior to the incident. Staff had not received emergency procedures at year start. Door alarms were not present on all exterior doors. Cameras were inadequate and unmonitored, failing to capture the elopement. A student with documented elopement history was placed with a substitute teacher who received little to no information about the student's behavioral profile or school safety procedures.

The school's remediation efforts reflect reactive adjustments to the October 24 event rather than broader comprehensive systemic reform. Some enhancements were implemented, but significant gaps remain in policy implementation, staff preparedness, and organizational accountability. Staff interviews revealed concerns about leadership communication and the dismissal of safety concerns, contributing to resignations of personnel including an incident witness.

Leadership has failed to establish adequate security frameworks suited to their mixed-use facility and vulnerable student population. The depth of deficiencies may require resources exceeding what can be accomplished while maintaining operations.

INCIDENT OVERVIEW

On October 24, 2025, a student with documented elopement history walked away from SLVA and was unsupervised for at least one hour until located by non-school personnel. The student exited a self-contained classroom, walked through multiple spaces, downstairs from the second to the first floor, through a café area, and out of the building without staff detection. The school only learned of the elopement when an external witness called the school to report the incident.

The incident was foreseeable. One faculty member described the student as a "frequent wanderer" who had previously wandered to the café and had elopement history at a previous school. Staff had reported previously finding the student "in the admin wing walking around..." Despite this pattern, the student was placed under the supervision of a substitute teacher who had little to no information about the student's behaviors or school procedures. Although given a radio (walkie-talkie), the substitute did not report the student leaving class, later explaining to staff, she believed "someone came over the radio and said they had the student."

Timeline shows significant delays and gaps. The student was last accounted for around 12:45 PM. At approximately 1:10 PM, the school received a call reporting a child walking toward Tucker Boulevard – this was the first time the school had any knowledge that a student had eloped. Police and parents were contacted around 1:17 PM. The student was located around 2:00 PM.

The school cannot establish a definitive timeline—there were no cameras covering relevant spaces, no staff witnessed the elopement, and the school did not debrief the substitute teacher immediately after the incident - there was no formal interview of the substitute teacher shared by administrators. The front desk employee who received the initial call has since resigned, with staff indicating his departure was in part because of safety concerns he reported to the school. The school's internal review was incomplete with key witnesses not interviewed and critical facts and timelines left undetermined.

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES AND TRAINING

SLVA conducted no emergency drills during 2025-2026 school year prior to October 24—no fire drills, lockdown drills, or evacuation procedures. When asked about procedures, one faculty stated, "we have plans – they do not include elopement because, we have never encountered that," indicating reactive rather than proactive planning, despite the student being documented as a "frequent wanderer."

Multiple staff confirmed requesting safety and security procedures at year start and not receiving them. Another stated: "No, we asked for [policies] multiple times and did not get them." Other staff members said this year was different than last, indicating a more formal and structured approach to the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year when policies were shared and drills did occur at the start of school. One Director, hired October 15, 2025, reported: "I did not have an experience where someone sat down and went over everything. Even the operations plan, I just saw it recently and I didn't know I was in this plan." The Director indicated the plan appeared to focus mostly on complying with regulations.

During the October 24 incident, staff reported uncertainty about protocols—who was to call the police, how to coordinate searches, and what communication protocols to follow. One faculty called the non-emergency police number multiple times without reaching anyone, while other staff searched outside unaware of the calls despite repeatedly asking if the police had been contacted. One staff member reported never hearing a message that the school was being placed into a "soft lockdown", while others did acknowledge the notification, although the school had no written policy for what to do during a soft lockdown.

Emergency training for staff was conducted November 21, 2025—the day of this site visit, four weeks after the incident. No formal acknowledgment system existed to document staff receipt and understanding of procedures. No competency assessment confirms staff ability to execute

protocols. The training (as of the date of this report) was a single event, the date of student drills to be performed was not shared during the on-site visit.

PHYSICAL SECURITY INFRASTRUCTURE

On October 24, the student walked through multiple spaces, downstairs from the second to first floor, through a café, and out of the building without triggering an alarm or appearing on monitored camera feed. No door alarms existed on café egress points. Camera coverage of hallways and transitional spaces was inconsistent and unmonitored.

Staff identified multiple gaps during interviews: "I noticed there was no security or hall monitors... Concerned about all the glass in event of an intruder. Saw excessive amount of 'wondering' from students. There is no locking system from the inside or outside of classrooms. Doors we transition through there was no alarm to them."

The building presents substantial challenges. The school shares building space with residential tenants. Glass classroom walls create vulnerabilities. Staff indicated that no traditional intercom system exists, due to radio station interference, forcing reliance on walkie-talkies and on-line group chats. The current building owner reported many camera feeds were non-functional under previous ownership.

Recent enhancements include motion detectors in stairwells alerting administrative phones (no video), child safety locks that students "have already figured out," and café door closure during school hours. Camera installations remain "in progress" a month later. Security gates for stairwells awaited board approval at \$30,000.

Days before this site visit, contractors entered the school space without checking in and were unknown to staff. On November 19, 2025, a homeless individual walked into the PreK classroom, the locking mechanism on a door malfunctioned. The malfunction had been reported to the school's Executive Director by a member of the Commission staff days earlier (11/13) yet remained unaddressed.

SUPERVISION PROTOCOLS

The October 24 elopement involved a student with documented elopement history placed with a substitute teacher in a self-contained special education classroom. The substitute received no information about student behavioral needs, no building orientation, no emergency training, and limited supervision guidance.

The substitute was given a radio and told to use it if students left the classroom. She had no behavioral intervention plan for the student, no building layout description, no information about egress points. When the student left, the substitute teacher believed she heard radio traffic indicating someone else had the student, so took no action. A faculty member got this information from the substitute teacher through independent outreach—if a formal interview was performed with the substitute teacher, results of that interview were not shared.

The same staff member described broader gaps: "No visibility on children who leave classroom because no one is monitoring hallways. It depends on someone having a walkie on them or expecting people to view a group chat." On the morning of October 24, a faculty member reported at 11:24 AM being in the cafeteria with five classes including "two high needs students who were in the cafeteria without adult escort." There was no record of a response to the request for help and support.

The staff reported observing "excessive amount of eloping from all children not just special education students" within days of the start of the school year. The faculty confirmed students leaving classrooms and wandering hallways was routine: "I have even caught them in the admin wing walking around by themselves," one teacher shared.

INCIDENT RESPONSE AND INVESTIGATION

The school's response reveals an organization without established incident command, clear communication protocols, or coordinated emergency management. The response was improvised with uncertainty about who calls police, who notifies parents, what constitutes lockdown, and who coordinates response.

On October 24, at approximately 1:10 PM, the front desk employee received a call that a student had been seen leaving the school. The employee "was not comfortable" calling police without direction. The Director of Business Operations called police at approximately 1:17 PM. Multiple staff asked in group chat whether police had been called without receiving a response. The soft lockdown was not communicated consistently—one director "did not ever hear a message about a lock down" despite being actively involved.

The post-incident investigation excluded key witnesses. The substitute teacher was not included in the debrief the day of the elopement. Staff contacted her independently. The front desk employee was also not included, despite being the first point of contact. He subsequently resigned. The investigation did not establish a complete timeline—the school cannot state precisely when the student left, how long they were AWOL before being reported, or what specific radio communications occurred.

Organizational culture issues emerged from interviews. Multiple personnel independently confirmed that executive leadership routinely completes planning and documentation without stakeholder engagement, creating an information vacuum at operational levels. Several staff reported they are "not planning on returning" suggesting retention challenges related to incident handling.

STAFFING AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The school has experienced resignations of personnel, the organizational culture indicates challenges with communication, decision-making inclusion, and responsiveness to staff input.

The substitute teacher contracting process includes no school-based training before classroom placement. Faculty stated: "Best case scenario we have people who come back but this person was a new sub." The substitute training program is "being developed" rather than implemented.

BUILDING ENVIRONMENT

The school's location in a mixed-use residential building presents substantial challenges, the staff noted: "The location is a challenge, I get the innovativeness, but this is not meant to be a school." Glass classroom walls present vulnerabilities multiple staff identified. The absence of a traditional intercom system due to radio station interference means reliance on walkie-talkies and on-line group chats.

The building owner, who purchased the property eighteen days before the October 24th incident, has been responsive and reported spending two million dollars with security as top priority. Documented incidents indicate the building environment requires constant vigilance and sophisticated protocols.

INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The Executive Director's response when asked about commitment to addressing the incident, she stated: "Any indication that I am not taking this seriously is disrespectful – I have a grandchild that goes to school here." Despite the Executive Director's statement that she takes the incident seriously, there have been no emergency drills since the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year.

The SLVA Board's conclusion of "...no evidence of staff negligence or misconduct" appears inconsistent with evidence documenting multiple gaps in supervision, training, and emergency response.

CORRECTIVE ACTIONS IMPLEMENTED

Security enhancements implemented since October 24, 2025, address some specific circumstances of the elopement but do not represent comprehensive reform. Physical security consists of motion detector alarms (no video) alerting administrative phones, temporary child locks, that some students have learned to circumvent, and cafeteria door closure during school hours. Camera installations remain "in progress." Security gates awaited board approval.

Policy updates include emergency procedures distributed November 21 (four weeks post-incident, day of this site visit). No formal acknowledgment system documents staff receipt and understanding. No competency testing confirms proper execution capability. The training was a single event, not sustained preparedness, and student drills are yet to be conducted.

Challenges persisted even while the school expanded its enrollment and its operations across multiple floors this school year. The October 24 incident stemmed from foundational failures present since the school year began—failures that remain unaddressed by current remediation efforts. The school's remediation to date emphasizes event-specific responses rather than confronting the systemic problems that enabled the incident.

CONCLUSION

Based on site observations, stakeholder interviews, and policy analysis, St. Louis Voices Academy of Media Arts faces persistent safety and security risks that warrant corrective action, potentially exceeding what can be addressed while the school operates in its current manner. Deficiencies span emergency preparedness, physical security, supervision protocols, incident response, staff training, and institutional accountability

The October 24, 2025, incident does not represent the school's only security shortcoming. The student's documented elopement history, absence of emergency drills and procedures, lack of security infrastructure, placement of an untrained substitute in a special education classroom, and incomplete post-incident investigation indicate systemic failures. Corrective measures address some specific tactical concerns but do not remedy the depth of institutional deficiencies. The intrusion into a PreK classroom on November 19th, by an apparent unhoused individual, further highlights those challenges - nearly one month after the elopement, security continues to challenge the school.

Corrective measures to date are limited in scope and effectiveness. Door alarms and temporary child locks address specific elopement pathways but do not address hallway supervision, substitute training, organizational culture, or comprehensive emergency preparedness. Emergency training conducted the day of this site visit, four weeks after the incident, raises questions about whether improvements are driven by genuine recognition of deficiencies or anticipated regulatory scrutiny.

The events of October 24, 2025, stemmed from the absence of foundational measures—such as regular emergency drills, adequate security systems, and comprehensive supervision practices. The lack of serious injury to the student should be viewed as good fortune, not evidence of an effective safety program.

This report has been prepared by DSD & Associates, LLC for the sole use and benefit of the Missouri Charter Public School Commission in connection with its oversight role and is not intended to be relied upon by any other person or entity as the sole source of information without the Consultant's prior written consent.

The descriptions, timelines, analyses, and conclusions are professional opinions and judgments based on information available as of the date of writing, including documents provided by the Commission and school, personal interviews, site observations, and subject-matter expertise. The Consultant has relied on accuracy and completeness of information provided by others and on individuals' recollections; the Consultant has not independently verified every statement and has not conducted forensic or legal investigation. All statements should be understood as good-faith professional opinions rather than sworn testimony, findings of fact, or legal conclusions.

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