

MAINE

CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

Amendment Guide for Increasing Enrollment and/or Adding Grades Served

Charter District Information

Date of Request: January 31, 2024

Charter District Name: Ecology Learning Center

Mailing Address: 230 Main Street Unity, ME 04988

Contact Person: Lēza Packard, Head of School

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Please address all the following criteria in your request.

1. Describe how the amendment request is consistent with the school's mission and vision.

We started as the smallest public charter school in Maine and will remain the smallest public charter school even with an enrollment increase to 120 students. The mission and vision of the school demands a small student - teacher ratio. Adding 14 more students will maintain a small school feel and add the financial capacity to continue providing rich hands-on, place-based experiences true to our mission. With more students, we will have the economy of scale to sustain quality field trips, outdoor adventures, backpacking expeditions, and robust community service projects.

2. Describe the need to adjust enrollment and/or increase the grade span. How was that need determined? Demonstrate a compelling case that there is demand for the expansion.

Since the Ecology Learning Center opened in 2020, our enrollment has been on target or higher than our stated enrollment goal. In AY21 amidst the pandemic, our enrollment projection was 48 students for grades 9-10. We had 47 students on October 1, and concluded the year with 48. Even though we had one spot

available on October 1, 2020, we had filled available spaces for students coming from RSU3 and sustained a waitlist for RSU3 students that year.

In AY22, our enrollment projection was 72 students for grades 9-11 and we had 77 on October 1. In total, 113 students submitted an Intent to Enroll for AY22. While some of those 113 students were offered a spot and chose to not submit a commitment to enroll, the high number of Intent to Enroll forms indicated a growing interest in our school.

In AY23, our enrollment projection was 96 students for grades 9-12 and we had 102 on October 1. We ended the year with 106 students enrolled and a waitlist. 139 students submitted an Intent to Enroll for AY23. Several of the students who declined their spot in AY22 or AY23 ended up attending the next year.

In AY24, our enrollment projection was 96 students for grades 9-12 and we had 106 on October 1, the maximum allowed, and a waitlist of 8 students. Once again, exactly 139 students submitted an Intent to Enroll for AY24. We have a high retention rate and a positive reputation, despite having done very little advertising and depending on word of mouth.

For AY25, open enrollment began January 5, the same day as the last 3 years, and the numbers have been remarkably higher. As of January 14, 2024, 59 students enrolled for AY25 compared with only 26 on January 14, 2023 - more than double! The ELC Bridge Program (homeschool enrichment for grades 6-8) has grown from 12 students to 16 with a waitlist, and every 8th grader currently in Bridge plans to attend the ELC high school next year. The consistent growth in both our feeder program and the high school indicates a demand for expansion.

3. Provide evidence that the school has engaged and responded to community stakeholders, including families and school staff.

The school holds regular PTA meetings, called "Friends of Ecology Learning Center." Families who participate have expressed how much they love the school's model of outdoor adventures, place-based studies, and field trips. An increase in enrollment will sustain those co-curricular trips.

Family event attendance has increased. We grew from only 10 family members attending our 2023 Passion Project Expo to 30 family members attending the 2024 Expo.

Our growth over the past 3 ½ years has been incremental and consistent, and staff and families alike have responded favorably (we have a 92% staff retention rate). An increase of 14 more students would be consistent with our pattern of growth, and staff have already demonstrated that they can thrive with that level of growth.

4. Describe the desired results from an enrollment adjustment and/or increase in grade span.

An increase in enrollment will allow us to increase the teaching staff and expand our course offerings. We would like to add a Science elective, a Wellness course, and two Art electives to our course catalog. This course expansion will require the addition of two full-time teachers (2 FTEs). By increasing our enrollment by 14 students (one more class), we can afford to add teachers and thereby add courses. Many students and parents have expressed a desire for more elective course offerings.

5. Provide a table showing the historical distribution of enrolled students in the present grade span, and the projected distribution of students by grade if the amendment request is granted.

See attached tables: Enrollment Trends, Enrollment Distribution

6. Explain any unique circumstances related to the school's academic performance and academic growth, and corrective actions taken to address challenges in these areas of school performance.

Our NWEA test scores for Math in all grades decreased from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023. As a corrective action, we are providing targeted support to students, especially in Algebra and Geometry, led by our Math department head. Additionally, we made a major revision to our weekly schedule this year with focused, leveled Math instruction 4 days per week and the possibility for students to move up or down in Math level if needed without disrupting the rest of their schedule. We anticipate seeing a positive change in NWEA Math scores in the spring. Increasing our enrollment by 14 students will further support our capacity to offer a diversity of courses at different levels.

7. Provide an action plan for implementation. Include: a timeline, action(s) to be taken, designated point person, and start date and projected completion date.

Timeline / Action

February - recruit students by holding Open Houses; post job positions

March - Open Houses, concerts & performances in Unity Center for the Arts

- April - Open Houses, concerts & performances; schedule “step up days” for incoming 9th graders; interview staff & faculty candidates
- May - finalize contracts for returning and newly hired faculty
- June - finalize transportation routes; purchase additional van

Designated Point Person: Kayla Higgins, Dean of Students - student recruitment
Lēza Packard, Head of School - hiring
Jill Packard, Operations Manager - transportation

Start Date: February 2024

End Date: June 2024

8. Provide a staffing chart and narrative staffing plan to support the planning and implementation of the proposed increase in enrollment and/or grade span.

See attached Staffing Chart

The staffing plan to accommodate 14 additional students is to add the equivalent of 2 full time teachers (2 FTEs), 0.5 van driver, and 0.5 custodial / maintenance.

The increased time for instructional staff will be in the following subjects:

Math 0.3 (in response to our NWEA test scores),

Science 0.5 (in response to student & family requests for science electives)

English 0.3 (supports NWEA testing, SAT testing, and graduation)

Arts 0.7 (in response to new facility opportunity, to expand the arts)

World Languages 0.2 (in response to student & family requests for more rigor)

The Ecology Learning Center strives to create an interdependent team, in which content areas work collaboratively. The job postings will therefore offer flexibility as we seek the right mission-aligned person to join our team. The positions will be posted with the option to mix and match (Math + Art, or Science + World Languages) according to an applicant’s unique skill set and experience.

9. Describe the financial resources that are necessary to implement the school’s expansion, including the sources of revenue for the successful implementation of the proposed change. Describe contingency planning for potential challenges in cash flow or budget shortfalls.

The request to amend enrollment is aligned with and dependent upon the addition of a new facility. Our finance committee has created a 3-year Cash Flow Impact Analysis based upon 120 students and purchasing the Unity College Center for the Arts. The new facility will be gifted to the school. The long-term

costs of the new facility will be met by a capital campaign March through June 2024, and by the increase in per pupil allocation to be received starting in January of 2025. We also analyzed cash flow for 110 students and found that 120 students resulted in a more favorable cash flow projection over three years. We anticipate the addition of the Center for the Arts to attract new families to the school, which reinforces the need for an increase in enrollment.

10. Provide financial projections for the proposed expansion. Financial projections should reflect both immediate and long-term considerations that have been identified in implementation of the proposed amendment. Provide a detailed narrative explaining the financial forecasts, and the assumptions.
Please **see attached Cash Flow Impact Analysis**.

11. Indicate if the current facility will accommodate the expansion, or if additional space and/or renovations will be required.
The current facilities (230 Main Street and 5 Clifford Commons) will not accommodate 14 more students. The additional space provided by the Unity College Center for the Arts **will** accommodate the expansion. The new facility will provide more than 5000 square feet in classroom space so we can end our lease at 5 Clifford Commons. No additional space or renovations beyond the Center for the Arts will be needed.

12. If the school contracts with an ESP, describe how the ESP will support the planning and implementation of the proposed amendment.
N/A

In addition to the above, for Grade Span Change please also address the following:

1. Provide an overview of how the current educational program will be adapted to serve younger or older students, as applicable.
Not applicable; the increase of 14 students will only be for the grades currently offered, 9-12.

2. Indicate if the current assessment system used at the school will accommodate younger or older students, and any modifications required if the amendment request is granted.
The current assessment system will continue to serve additional students for the grades currently offered, 9-12.