



## 2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting ACADIA Academy

*On February 6, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting in-person and via Zoom at ACADIA Academy (ACADIA) with Amy Dieterich, Governing Board President; Casey Baugher, Executive Director; and Heather Bucklin, Curriculum Coordinator. Topics covered included finances and facilities, academic proficiency and growth, student attendance, school climate, and student enrollment and recruitment.*

### Academics

Results from the Spring 2023 state assessment (Through-Year) were not available when reporting outcomes for SY2022-23. Schools were recently provided access to those results and ACADIA reports that 72.3% of its students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 50.5% are “at or above state expectations” in Math. The ELA and Math results are both above the state average for at or above expectations (state average: ELA - 64.6%; math - 48.7%). These results would be **exceeding expectations** (ELA) and **meeting expectations** (math) on the Performance Framework.

ACADIA Academy serves students Pre-K through 6th grade. The 6th grade scores in math are lower than the other grades. When asked how long these students had been with the school, the answer was “most for a long time”. Leadership offered some explanations for the lower scores:

- The school switched math resources when the current 6th graders were 3rd graders.
- This group has had inconsistent math teachers while at ACADIA – “It’s harder to keep math teachers”.
- The pandemic affected math (splinter skills).

ACADIA received a waiver for assessing the NWEA MAP, noting that “they are not a school that prioritizes standardized assessments” so current growth data is not currently available. They acknowledge the unreliability of the state data, but would choose to receive future waivers for NWEA testing if offered by the Commission due to the double-testing impact on students.

Supporting students to read on grade level has been a priority this year. The school uses Fountas and Pinnell for benchmarks and additional assessments throughout the year to determine students' reading levels. Students are grouped and regrouped by results so they are receiving the required differentiated instruction. The school reports that 60% of third grade students are currently reading on grade level.

ACADIA implemented the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) framework this year and reports that it “has been a success”. The BARR system uses eight interlocking strategies that build intentional relationships (staff to staff, staff to student, and student to student) and utilizes real-time data to enable schools to achieve concrete academic, social, and emotional outcomes for every student.

## Student Attendance

At the time of the mid-year meeting, ACADIA reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 14% which is **meeting expectations** on the Performance Framework.

The rate is slightly higher than the end of SY2022-23. Although the numbers are still good, leadership reports that “we have been a really sick school this year”. The school reports that “more students are missing days that did not miss in the past” and that “we have a lot of families that attend, so if one sibling gets sick, the others get sick, and they are all out of school at the same time”.

## School Climate

Student results and Teacher/Staff results on the Spring 2023 Panorama School Climate Survey were low and **did not meet expectations** on the Performance Framework. It should be noted that Teacher/Staff participation was low with only 49.1% of teachers and other staff completing the survey.

Leadership feels that the questions on the survey “may have been confusing” to the younger grades and that there “were many challenges with the 6th grade group so the results aren’t that surprising”.

Families reported being happy with the school, but participation rates were low which leadership describes as “puzzling” as families were provided many opportunities for participation. The team noted that the survey window was at the same time the school was sending “lots of correspondence” home regarding the split from their longtime partnership with John F. Murphy Homes (JFM) which may have caused the lower participation rates and “certainly” had an impact on overall scores.

Based on the survey results, ACADIA set the following goal - “We will expand our coaching and observation model reflecting best practices and increased administrative and behavioral support. 50% of staff will respond positively to the cumulative *Feedback and Coaching* questions during next year’s survey up from 25% in 2022-2023.” When asked if they were meeting that goal, Casey reports that leadership meets with teachers three times each year (none of which was in place in previous years) and that “a tremendous amount of time has been dedicated to this [focus] this year”. He also reports that there is more collaboration in the school – “this year we’re more one team, before it was more segregated”.

The leadership/administrative team met to review the results, but they were not shared with the entire staff.

## Student Enrollment and Recruitment

The school reported that there are currently 248 students enrolled – an increase of 2 students since the 10/1 student enrollment count was certified. ACADIA will continue to enroll students, but noted the high needs of students enrolled midyear. The cost of out-of-district placements for a few students has had a significant impact on the budget, which will be discussed later in this report.

Projected enrollment for SY2024-25 is 250-255 (contracted enrollment is 272 students with a +/- 10% enrollment variance). Casey reports that “enrollment remains very strong” and believes there are only 3 students who are not planning to return to ACADIA next year. They held an enrollment

lottery last year (using the Commission-provided platform, Lotterease) and believe they will do so again this year and report feeling “confident that a waitlist will be needed in several grade levels”. They remain committed to no more than 17 students in a classroom as they “want to remain faithful to the small classroom size that families expect”.

Their PreK program has a capacity of 32 students. With 16 spots being filled with siblings of older students the school noted that it is a challenge to increase student diversity.

This year’s 6th graders are the first group who have been with the school since PreK.

## **Finances**

ACADIA Academy has faced several financial challenges this year, but Casey reports that “the school is making gains financially”. A hurdle to overcome was the invoicing of several grant revenues (i.e., ESSERF funds) that had not been done in some time. They are starting to see the revenues from the invoicing work that has been done, reporting that each “pocket is approximately \$70,000”.

The biggest financial challenge is out-of-district placements for special education students. The school has 5 students that are currently placed out-of-district and these placements carry a price tag of \$6,000 per month, per student.

The recent line of credit they received from a lender will be paid in full within the agreed-upon 6-month timeframe and Casey “doesn’t feel that there will be a need to extend”.

The FY23 financial audit has not yet been completed. They asked the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) for an extension to March 31st, which was granted. As of the mid-year meeting there is no reason to believe that the school will not meet that deadline. The software that they were using from JFM was “antiquated” and they have since migrated to Quickbooks. Migrating all of the data into one place has “been challenging” but they are able to generate needed financial reports from Quickbooks “within minutes” where the old software could take “hours, sometimes days”.

ACADIA reports no compliance issues with the MDOE or its lenders.

They have begun the budgeting process for FY25 noting that it “should be easier after having created a 3-year plan”. They report having to make “tough, reorganizational changes next year” as funding is coming to an end that is currently being used for Teaching Assistants and Ed Tech IIIs. They are focused on answer the questions:

- How do we retain staff?
- How do we bring the out-of-district placements back in-house?

The school facility is currently at capacity, and the school leadership team and board have discussed potential expansion solutions. There is a 2-acre plot of land adjacent to the building that might become available. Leadership has had initial conversations with the property owner, but nothing has been formalized. They are aware of funding that is available for PreK expansion and have 40-60 students on the waitlist, but do not currently have the space to take advantage of the opportunity.

The board reports being asked to expand to grades 7 and 8. It’s something they have considered but space in their current location is a barrier. They have discussed moving their entire facility, but

are concerned about finding a buyer for their existing facility. With the closure of Harpswell Coastal Academy, there is no charter middle school available (other than the two virtual schools) for 6th grade students after they finish at ACADIA so most return to their sending districts (primary Lewiston Middle School or Auburn Middle School).

The school reports that the transition away from JFM “was chaotic at first, but is going OK”. The relationship was described as “an able partner, but not a willing partner”.

ACADIA contracts with Northeast Charter for their transportation needs. “The service is great, but expensive” (current costs are \$15,000-\$17,000 per month). Casey has looked into other options, but there “just aren’t any”.

## **Governing Board**

Amy reports that this is the first year since the school opened that they have a strong Administrative Team and they are starting to see the Curriculum Coordinator role “paying dividends”. Amy also shared that the board is now in a place where they can focus on the curriculum because “there are no other fires that we have to put out”.

When asked about concerns, Amy reported the following:

- Money (“salaries are commensurate with local districts, but the benefits are not as good so it can be hard to retain staff”);
- Summer programming and how that impacts staff retention (“the board has heard [the concern from staff] and is trying to make changes that are palatable”);
- Lack of a strong fundraising plan;
- Application and maintenance of grants “is difficult”;
- Space

The board is considering a succession plan. Amy is in her second to last year on the board (and in her last as board president). They are focused on transitioning officer positions to “the next generation”. They have two vice chairs this year with the hope that one will be chair when Amy’s term expires.

The board currently has eleven members, comprised of a mix of different professional backgrounds and members of the community who have children at the school and some who do not (one member of the board was the Executive Director of a charter school in Boston). The maximum number of board members is capped at twelve, and the board is open to filling the last remaining spot with someone that is the right fit, but is not actively recruiting.

Amy reports that the administration team “really backs each other up”. She checks in with Casey regularly to see what his needs are.

## **Other**

Casey is “anxious to see what the changes will be to the Performance Framework” and reports being supportive of the changes that were previewed at the last School Leaders’ Meeting. They have created new custom framework targets that are in effect this year and they think they will “really like” them.

ACADIA will be in their renewal year during SY2024-25. Amy asked if there were any planned changes to the process.

## **Recommendation(s)**

- Consider sharing the results - and leadership's response - from the Spring 2023 Panorama School Climate Survey with the entire staff.