



2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting Baxter Academy for Technology and Science

On January 31, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting in-person and via Zoom at Baxter Academy for Technology and Science (Baxter) with Thorn Dickinson, Governing Board Chair; Ruth Dean, Governing Board, Vice Chair; Anna Klein-Christie, Executive Director; and Cicy Po, Principal. Topics covered included finances and facilities, academic proficiency and growth, student attendance, school climate, projected graduation rates, and student enrollment and recruitment.

Academics

While preparing for the mid-year meeting, Commission staff discovered that Baxter did not administer the Through-Year Assessment in Spring 2023. When asked why, Cicy shared that “she read somewhere that the assessments weren’t required last year, but would be this year”.

Baxter reports that “Our trademark program - Flex Friday - has become more rigorous and more relevant to the use of STEM in addressing real-world problems. The new SIS capacity has made tracking outcomes more consistent across the entire student body. The ninth-grade students were focused on a Lego-robotics project in one semester, giving them a consistent project management education and access to beginner robotics technology. This provides a stable footing for their more sophisticated projects and development of their presentation skills.”

The whole school GPA is 3.37, a 0.05 rise from last year.

It is unclear from the mid-year meeting what Baxter’s plans are for administering a post-secondary assessment (i.e., Accuplacer or SAT). Cicy shared that they are “working hard on being compliant, but have a lot of families opting out of assessments”. Thorn recognizes the value of the additional assessments and wants to have further discussions around what Baxter can be/should be doing.

Baxter administers the IXL to incoming students to gauge their academic baseline.

Over the past three years, Baxter has focused on its role as a member of the Portland community and not being geographically located in the city of Portland. The school is working with resources in the Portland school district to provide support for the new American populations that are growing due to the most recent refugee resettlements. This past summer, they hosted an English Immersion Program for students who were living at the Portland Expo and now have students from Angola enrolled at the school. They are using Title I/IV funds to support language, transportation, and supplemental technology.

The new American students have a 100% success rate in passing classes with a GPA average of 3.3 for the fall semester.

Baxter recognizes the "societal pressures" as a STEM school to take a critical look at providing access to STEM success for all of its students, specifically focused on young women. 37% of students and 27% of teachers identify as female and the school is analyzing what it is like to be a young woman student at Baxter.

Their first priority is addressing gender inclusion in STEM across all departments. Faculty developed a Fabric Design Course in the Design department and Intro to Design is required of all 9th grade students. A Baxter Academy student was recently named by the Society of Women Engineers as one of five outstanding students in 2024 and the science program has grown as a place where female students can thrive.

Leadership shared that "Baxter's greatest asset is our teachers" and recognized the strength of their many external partnerships who serve as program sponsors, mentors, internship hosts, and educational leaders.

Student Attendance

At the time of the mid-year meeting, Baxter reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 22% with the highest rate of absenteeism in the 11th grade. If this trend continues they'll **approach expectations** on the Performance Framework. This is an improvement from SY2022-23 where 36.21% of students were chronically absent.

Some of the improvement in attendance can be attributed to better recordkeeping. The way they communicate with students regarding absences has shifted. Instead of robocalls for absent students, teachers reach out personally by phone to say, "Hey, we really missed you in school today."

School Climate

The results of the Spring 2023 administration of the Panorama School Climate survey were mixed from families, teachers and staff. Families ranked School Climate and School Fit favorably, but had concerns about School Safety. Teachers and Staff appear satisfied, but expressed concern with Feedback and Coaching. Teacher/staff participation was 71.1% which automatically gave them a **does not meet expectations** on the Performance Framework.

Student results were extremely low. In response to the results, the school set a goal to increase positive feelings of energy throughout the school (i.e., supporting extracurricular activities and clubs, and working with students to support other students).

The school dealt with a challenging expulsion last year and feel that the situation may have contributed to the survey results.

Projected Graduation Rates

The school is tracking to graduate 98% of its 12th graders which would **exceed expectations** on the Performance Framework. This is an improvement from the 96.7% that graduated last year.

They have a Care Team that meets weekly and are currently watching two students who are "vulnerable in fulfilling their graduation requirements".

Student Enrollment and Recruitment

Baxter certified 373 students on 10/1, the highest enrollment they've had in several years. The Class of 2027 was as high as it has been since 2018.

Despite the constraints of deep cuts in the operations/outreach budget, outreach has been "creative and robust" and has included collaborative programming focused on Minecraft, Drones, Chess, and STEM/language immersion.

Baxter hosted a well-attended Prospective Student Day hosted by student Ambassadors and there has been investment in advertising in local newspapers, which has reportedly been effective in connecting the school to local families.

Finances

Based on FY24 QTR2 numbers, the school's finances are **low to moderate risk** in all financial categories on the Performance Framework.

They started the year "knowing it was going to be a really tough year financially" and were transparent with staff about the financial challenges of low enrollment, etc. They have experienced unexpected costs for transportation (\$80,000) and interpreters for deaf students (\$60,000 per student in addition to mileage to bring interpreters to Baxter). The state only reimburses \$10,000 of those costs as they "don't meet the threshold for hardship".

Baxter is constantly looking for sponsorships and other grant opportunities and recognizes the need to "invest heavily" in equipment for the classrooms – "we should have the finest science and technology equipment in the state".

Their business manager left during the school year last year and they have had a consultant cover the financial accounting until a replacement could be found. The consultant discovered that there were a quarter of a million dollars in outstanding grant revenues that had not been invoiced. This has been taken care of and the "cash flow is getting better".

The FY23 financial audit is not complete and an extension has been granted by the MDOE to the end of February.

Baxter will refinance their current debt and "is excited about the new interest rate" which is reportedly a percent lower than the current rate. They have partnered with Pierce-Atwood for help navigating the complexities of the refinance and Thorn shared that the financing will be "simpler than last time".

They continue to look at their 3-year financial plan and make updates as needed to show the current forecast and "are always keeping an eye on those future years". The board complies with the Commission's requirement to submit their 3-year plan, and "tweaks" the plan internally to make sure that the projections are as accurate as possible.

The school reports no compliance issues.

Competitive salaries for teaching staff continues to be a challenge as Baxter's teachers are paid 10-15% less than teachers in other Portland-area schools. They are in the process of negotiating a

new Union contract and feel that the conversations around salaries will be “easier because of the budget transparency that the board has adopted”.

Transportation

Based on a recent analysis of transportation costs versus funds received from the state exclusively for transportation, it appears that Baxter is paying approximately \$100 more per student for transportation than what they receive in state subsidy.

Safe, reliable transportation is a challenge. A student recently moved to Lewiston and does not have transportation to get to a bus stop and another has moved and the walk to the bus stop is “very dangerous”.

Governing Board

Thorn and Ruth shared that the first year (last year) with Anna as the Executive Director was “unique” because of the many challenges that had presented themselves within the school community. It was “an all hands on deck” to support her in her new role. Things have settled down this year and rather than meeting weekly, it’s on an ad-hoc basis.

The board reports the need to get back to a formal evaluation process “looking at the big picture criteria” – i.e., teacher relationships/satisfaction and overall compliance.

A key priority of the board is making sure that the administrative team is getting the professional development they need, noting that “we need to keep good people engaged and happy”.

When asked about the required board training, neither Thorn nor Ruth felt it was heavy lift. They surveyed other board members who described it as “not arduous”. Overall they enjoy the PD that the Commission has offered and enjoys the opportunities to connect with board members from the other public charter schools.

The board is “incredibly proud of what the school has accomplished in the last year and a half” and noted that “they are on the right trajectory” and are anxious for the day when they have the challenge of a long waitlist.

Current concerns named include:

- Finances
- Legislative concerns
- Compliance
- The optimum number of students that can fit in the current building.
- Unfunded mandates

The board is actively working to recruit for two vacancies and have a few prospects. They discuss recruitment at every meeting. They shared that board members do not typically leave the board because they are unhappy. Typically vacancies happen because of term outs or because “life gets in the way and they no longer have time to serve on a volunteer board”.

Recommendations

- Reach out to CountMEIn regarding chronic absenteeism. Because Baxter is located in Cumberland County there are free services of which they can take advantage.

- Baxter writes their attendance policies. Be aware of unintended consequences, and get creative.

Next Steps (completed)

- Baxter to reach out proactively to the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) to discuss the ramifications, if any, of next having administered the required Through-Year Assessment and report back findings to the Commission.