



2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting Community Regional Charter School

On January 22, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting in-person and via Zoom at Community Regional Charter School (CRCS) with Stephanie Saltzman, Governing Board Member/Chair, Finance and Facilities Committee; Elizabeth Firnkes, Building Principal of Overman Academy; Susan Muzzy, Building Principal of Creative Children's Academy and Dimensions Academy; Jill Alves, Business Manager; Ashlee Savage, Administrative Assistant; and Travis Works, Executive Director. Topics covered included finances and facilities, academic proficiency and growth, student attendance, school climate, projected graduation rates, 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 CRCS reports that 44.6% of its students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 27.1% are “at or above state expectations” in Math. The ELA and Math results are both below the state average for at or above expectations (state average: ELA - 64.6%; math - 48.7%).

CRCS continues to use the NWEA MAP Assessment to measure growth for students in Grades K thru 11.

CRCS reports that 30 students will take the Accuplacer this year. Of those students who have already taken the Accuplacer, 74% are meeting the targeted reading score of 239 or higher and 79% are meeting the targeted math score of 226. The school is currently **approaching expectations** on the Performance Framework.

The board has an active Academic Excellence Committee that is “functioning very well” and meets on a monthly basis.

Student Attendance

Chronic absenteeism continues to be a concern. At the end of SY2022-23, the school-reported rate of chronic absenteeism was 38%. At the time of the mid-year meeting, CRCS reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 35% with the highest rates of absenteeism in grades 3, 10 and 12. If this trend continues, the school will **not meet expectations** on the Performance Framework.

The school reports that there is a group of students whose chronic absenteeism is improving. A new strategy that they are trying this year is recognition for Most Improved Attendance.

At Overman Academy, the building principal reports that there are several students who enrolled, but never - or very briefly - attended. In many cases, DHHS is contacted but “won’t touch it if the student is over 13 years old”.

The school has access to Tier 3 funding and has engaged the services of CountMEIn whose mission is “increasing student attendance through data-driven strategies so that every child is an engaged, successful learner”.

CRCS reports that there are 3 students (one in Kindergarten) who are currently truant.

As mentioned above, transportation is a barrier to getting students to school. For example:

- On Fridays when there is a ½ day of school, some students who drive may not attend school because of the cost of gas.
- If a bus driver shows up too early or too late to a bus stop, families will not be there.
- They have students who are now homeless and do not have access to transportation.

School Climate

Student results of the Spring 2023 Panorama School Climate Surveys were a surprise to school leadership and efforts have been made this year to improve those results. Efforts at Overman Academy include:

- Spirit Week;
- School “SWAG” (i.e., shirts, sweatshirts, and other clothing);
- Weekly assemblies; and
- Education about what a “neutral” response means relative to Panorama Survey results *and* preparing students to think about their responses based on the entire school year, not just a moment in time.

And at Dimensions Academy:

- Streamlining the process for reports of bullying; and
- Handling behaviors before they impact the classroom.

Families reported being happy with the school, but participation rates were low. The school is considering incentives for completing the survey (i.e., raffling off a sound bar). A survey coinciding with National School Choice Week was recently released to families and at the time of the mid-year meeting 55% of families had completed it, which the school sees as an encouraging sign for participation in the upcoming spring Panorama School Climate survey.

Overall, the results on the Panorama survey show that staff and teachers are happy at CRCS. Leadership is looking for ways to retain staff, such as a possible childcare option as a staff benefit. The forward-thinking discussions about staff satisfaction are in the early stages.

Projected Graduation Rates

CRCS graduated 92% of its seniors in SY2022-23, up from 80% in SY2021-22. At the mid-year meeting, the school estimated that 88%-92% of seniors are currently on track to graduate in 4-years. At the lower end of that estimation, the school would **meet expectations** on the Performance Framework and at the higher end would **exceed expectations**.

There are “a few” seniors that school leadership are concerned about for a variety of reasons. One student in particular is pregnant and has stopped answering text messages. This student has

been with CRCS “since the very beginning” and “has had excellent attendance” until recently. The baby is due next month and the school is unsure where she’s currently living.

The school graduated one student in December who is now enrolled full-time at SMMC.

Student Enrollment and Recruitment

The school reported that there are currently 362 students enrolled. The 10/1/23 certified student enrollment count was 381. Building principals report several reasons for the decline in enrollment – at Dimensions Academy the majority of the students who have left have done so because of transportation barriers and custody situations. Overman Academy has seen fewer students leaving the school this year. One chose homeschooling “thinking he’ll graduate faster than if he followed the programming at CRCS” and another left because of wanting to participate in sports programs that are not offered at the school.

The school has seen an increase in custody issues and homelessness this year, sharing that two staff members have become foster parents and “it’s not uncommon” for staff to pick up students who may be living in hotels.

CRCS reports that they “do very little advertising” and have current waitlist numbers as follows:

- 19 Pre-K students compared to “just under 10” at the same time last year;
- 19 students at Dimensions Academy; and
- 2 students at Overman Academy.

If the school were able to grow, their future target enrollment would be 700 students (50 students per grade level).

Finances

Based on FY24 QTR2 numbers, the school’s finances are **low to moderate risk** in all financial categories on the Performance Framework and the school reports no unexpected expenses to date other than property insurance rates that increased significantly since last year.

The school received its preliminary ED279 for SY2024-25 from the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) and is in the early stages of developing next year’s budget and updating their 3-year plan.

CRCS completed its financial audit for FY23 and copies have been provided to the MDOE and to their lender. CRCS has restated its audited balance sheet in 3 of the last 4 years, including from the most current audit. Our concerns about the restatements include:

- Evidence of restatement after CRCS had completed a state-required accounting corrective action;
- CRCS has been audited by the same auditor over the course of the restatements;
- CRCS has had the same internal accounting staff;
- Is an infrequent event for charters;
- The School did not give advance notice or explanation; and
- The School notified the state about possible restatements to already submitted reports only where expenses would have changed.

The board’s Finance and Facilities Committee Chairperson, who has experience in school finance, is aware of the restatements and will discuss with school leadership.

The Commission has recommended in the past that the school contract with a new auditing firm. The school reports that cost is the main barrier to doing so stating that the current audit costs \$10,000 while moving to a new auditor will cost \$30,000.

Maintaining three separate buildings continues to be a challenge both financially and logistically. Unexpected staff shortages impact programming and costs to “bring each building to where it needs to be” are comparable to the cost of one new facility. School leadership are in the early stages of talking with Highmark School Development – the nation’s leading developer of educational facilities - about building a new facility. The school team considers the location of a new facility will be key to attracting/retaining students and hiring staff who may be interested in the school’s mission and vision, but do not want to commute to Cornville and Skowhegan.

There is an outstanding extracurricular activity bill with RSU #54. School leadership met with Jon Moody, RSU #54 Superintendent to discuss and the CRCS governing board will form an ad-hoc committee to determine “the best path forward with finalizing the outstanding invoice”.

Transportation

Based on a recent analysis of transportation costs versus funds received from the state exclusively for transportation, it appears that the school spends more on transportation than they receive in funding. State law requires that a public charter school provide transportation within its defined catchment area and the school reports that “it’s a struggle” given the cost of diesel fuel. The school contracts with a local bus company to provide transportation, but has to pay for fuel costs separately. With buses getting 5 miles per gallon, the costs add up quickly.

The school feels that transportation is a barrier to attendance, which will be discussed separately in this report.

Governing Board

Stephanie Saltzman was the only member of the CRCS Governing Board who attended the meeting and she had to leave after the finance discussion. Commission staff were unable to ask Board Members the prepared questions. In the required pre-work, the board reported on the success of the Committee structure sharing that, “Committees are meeting regularly, engaged in their work, committed to school success, and reporting to the board on a monthly basis.”

They also reported an increased interaction between the board and the school sharing that regular presentations by staff and administration “help the current board members gain a better understanding of the school’s programming and achievements towards the mission/vision.”

The board identified a few areas of need - (1) having one or two additional board members, and (2) time for board members to learn more about the school’s programming.

Other

Heather King, Head of School at Maine Arts Academy, is evaluating Susan Muzzy this year. Susan reports that “this is going well” – the interaction has mostly been by phone, goals for this school year have been set, and Heather is planning an in-person visit in February. When a situation arises where a parent or other family member asks to speak with Susan’s supervisor, the situation dictates to whom the message is directed. Travis continues to evaluate Elizabeth Firnkes, and Travis is evaluated by the CRCS Governing Board.

Recommendations

- The school currently operates three separate campuses and has looked at operating expenses as a whole district, but has never done a comprehensive profit and loss exercise for each individual building and is encouraged to do so.
- Resolve outstanding extracurricular invoice with RSU #54.
- Secure a new auditor.

Next Steps

- The Board's Finance Committee should work with Jill to rectify the issues with audit restatements and present an explanation and corrective plan to the MCSC Executive Director.
- School leadership should keep the Commission informed regarding any decisions regarding a new building. This includes the timeline and possible locations.