



2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting Ecology Learning Center

On January 25, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting via Zoom with Ecology Learning Center (ELC) with Chris Lewis, Board Treasurer; Carol McGovern, Board Secretary; Leza Packard, Head of School; and Kayla Higgins, Dean of Students & Guidance Counselor. 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 ELC reports that 55% of its students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 39% are “at or above state expectations” in Math. Both are below the state average for at or above expectations (state average: ELA - 64.6%; math - 48.7%).

One third of ELC’s students were homeschooled before enrolling in the school. Their reading scores tend to be higher due to the independent nature of homeschooling, but math is challenging across the board. Students missed critical math skills due to the learning disruptions of COVID and were not receiving the direct instruction in math - particularly algebra - that you would typically see in a middle school student. This is particularly evident with the current group of 10th graders.

ELC continues to use the NWEA MAP Assessment to measure growth for students in Grades 9, 11, and 12.

The school has not yet assessed the Accuplacer, but has plans to do so in April. They report a large population of students interested in taking the SAT.

ELC continues to invest in “Wellness and Work Wednesdays” and recently engaged with a facilitator from Harvard. Leza shared the following story from a recent wellness class that she is teaching:

She took several bottles out of the recycling bin (Pepsi, Mountain Dew, etc.), covered up the nutrition labels and asked students to guess the number of calories in each soft drink. When she returned to the recycling bin a second time to gather more bottles for class, she saw evidence that students were choosing more nutritious alternatives.

Leadership reports “leaning on” department heads more this year than in years past and voices the importance of NWEA data and how it’s used. Kate Coseo, Science & Math Teacher, recently

gave a “well received” NWEA results presentation to the Board and is available to support peers as needed.

Subgroup growth is “really high” particularly for students with disabilities. The school has two (2) half-time special education teachers which is double what they’ve had in the past. They have also employed two (2) additional full time ed techs who are available for students as needed.

Four post-secondary sessions have been held with seniors, including a session focusing on FAFSA support and FAME and students are using Google Classroom to keep track of scholarships. They are beginning this work with juniors who will learn about internships, mock interviews, and writing polished resumes. Growth is being recognized through “soft skills”.

Student Attendance

Chronic absenteeism continues to be a concern although the school reports marked improvement from the end of SY2022-23 where 49.48% of students were chronically absent. At the time of the mid-year meeting, 27% were chronically absent with the highest absenteeism in grade 10 and the lowest in grade 12. If this trend continues, the school will **not meet expectations** on the Performance Framework.

ELC changed their chronic absenteeism letter to families to have a “softer tone” and to come across as “less punitive”; however, several families are experiencing hardships that can be perceived as “embarrassing” and the school is providing “what we can, when we can”. They report instances of adult mental health that is “getting in the way of students coming to school”.

Transportation appears to be a significant barrier to getting students to school. Kayla reports receiving emails from students who want to be at school but can’t get there because they do not have transportation. The school has purchased additional vans, but currently have “just enough” and have to scramble if one goes down. The vans are costly. Students, particularly in the Bangor area, would not come to school if they were not picked up at home as traveling to a hub five miles from home is challenging. The school is accommodating, but is not compensated for the extra effort, which is a strain on the budget.

The school engaged with Character Strong at the beginning of the school year. Character Strong provides research-based curricula and training that increase belonging, well-being, and engagement for students and staff. They learned that conducting home visits to prospective students before they enroll is a great way to get to know their families. The hope is that families are comfortable enough with staff to ask for help when they need it (i.e., a gas card to help with the cost of fuel).

School Climate

ELC had strong results on the Spring 2023 Panorama School Climate Surveys, but had low participation rates (families and teachers/staff) which put them in the “does not meet” category on the Performance Framework.

Time has been spent during staff meetings discussing participation and Leza reports “enthusiastic” ideas on how to increase participation rates this spring.

Projected Graduation Rates

ELC graduated 100% of its seniors in SY2022-23, and are on track to do so again this year.

The school reports two (2) students have an IEP that includes a 5-6 year graduation plan and one student was on track to graduate in 4 years, but picked up Adult Education classes in order to graduate in 3 years to care for their siblings.

Student Enrollment and Recruitment

ELC certified 107 students on 10/1 and has lost 1 student so far this year.

Enrollment for SY2024-25 opened on January 5th and will close on March 20th with a lottery scheduled for March 21st. New enrollment is more than double from last year (59 students currently enrolled for SY2024-25 versus 26 in January 2023).

ELC was approved by the Commission to increase their contracted enrollment to 120 students for SY2024-25.

Finances

At the time of the midyear meeting, ELC was in talks to acquire an additional facility, but details could not be made public. Chris created a comprehensive pro-forma that takes the school through June 30, 2024 and cites cash flow as the biggest challenge. They report that “financially, this has been a harder year than the three previous years” and will be looking at areas of the budget where they can save money for the remainder of the year. They are concerned about fundraising and will embark on a “tight, exciting, and intense” capital campaign beginning on Valentine’s Day.

There is “a lot of effort at the board level” to get fundraising back on track and they have identified three potential candidates who have experience in fundraising.

There is a possibility that they might fall below the recommended 30 days cash on hand. Current cash on hand is in the **moderate risk** category, similar to numbers reported last year.

ELC switched to a new auditor this year and hoped to have the audit complete by the end of the calendar year, but has had to ask for an extension to the end of February which Leza describes as “frustrating”. ELC anticipates “no big surprises” when the final audit findings are presented.

ELC reports no plans to sell their current facility, nor take on any new debt. They are in a 3-year lease agreement with “the Annex”.

The school reports no compliance issues with the MDOE or its lenders.

Transportation

Transportation costs are “extremely high” and ELC is currently over budget. Leza reports that transportation costs for FY24 QTR1 were not reported with QTR1 expenses due to late billing from RSU 3. The true costs will be reflected in QTR2 numbers.

Governing Board

The board elected Beth Alma as its new chair back in December and is currently seeking additional board members. They have six (6) members, but feel that “8 or 9 is the sweet spot”. Before a candidate is considered, he/she must attend two board meetings.

Carol’s term ends this summer and they’d like to find someone with an educational background to replace her. Folks with fundraising and finance experience are also identified needs of the board.

Board members report “addressing facility needs and the financial piece that comes with it” as key priorities. They remain true to their mission, holding a “mission moment” at the beginning of each board meeting.

They focus on the needs of school leadership and talk regularly about succession planning.

Other

ELC updated its organization chart this year to include an Operations Manager and rearranged the daily schedule to include more professional development for staff. Students meet for 50 minutes, 4 days per week for both reading and math and for 85 minutes twice a week for humanities.

The school has forged a relationship with a local LCSW who is working directly with students at the school. Many of these students were on waitlists for counseling, but are now seen immediately.

Recommendations

- Make arrangements to administer the Accuplacer in the fall as a baseline. If there are students who are not meeting the targets, they can retake the assessment in the winter and/or the spring.
- When submitting quarterly financials to the Commission, be sure to include a balance sheet.