



2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting Fiddlehead School of Arts & Sciences

On February 6, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting in-person and via Zoom at Fiddlehead School of Arts & Sciences (FSAS) with Bill Doughty, Governing Board Chair; Jacinda Cotton-Castro, Executive Director; Jason Manjourides, Principal; and Jenn Merrill, RTI 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 FSAS reports that 74% of its students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 42% are “at or above state expectations” in Math. ELA results exceed state averages, and Math results do not. (Note - state reported data shows that 64.6% of students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 48.7% are “at or above state expectations in Math).

FSAS reports that “while state proficiency scores were where they expected them to be, the percentage of students meeting growth scores were a little low”. Scores on the fall state assessment were higher than the spring scores and they plan to administer the winter NWEA assessment which will give them fall to winter growth data.

Based on summer training, strong new hires, a new block schedule with more time devoted to academics, more student support, and a new principal, Fiddlehead expects to see improved growth in both ELA and Math.

At the time of the mid-year meeting, 10 out of 15 third grade students were reading on grade level. FSAS begins to teach reading in the first grade, but teachers start with younger students who are showing interest in reading. The school is currently exploring a literacy grant for grades K-2.

There are no reported concerns with subgroup results and it’s worth noting that ELA scores are “strong, despite having one of the highest special education populations in the state”.

FSAS has three staff providing RTI for grades 1 thru 8, with one devoted exclusively to grades 5-8. They recognize that math appears to be the biggest need and students are pulled out for math during scheduled literacy time.

Staff continue to focus on what mastery of the Maine Learning Results looks like at Fiddlehead. They are working on creating a comprehensive scope and sequence document for each grade

level, identifying gaps and filling them. They note that this work has been “challenging” as staff have taken knowledge with them when they have left.

Student Attendance

Chronic absenteeism continues to be a concern. At the time of the mid-year meeting, the school reported that 33% of their students are chronically absent with the highest absenteeism in grades 3 and 8, and the lowest in KG. Their 3rd grade class is small “so one student can skew the data”.

While this is slightly lower than SY2022-23, it still is **not meeting expectations** on the Performance Framework. It’s possible that the percentage may be slightly higher than reported as there were six students who have left Fiddlehead but were chronically absent while attending. These students were not included in the original numbers provided.

Leadership noted that absenteeism may be high because the messaging since COVID has been “if you’re sick, stay home and take care of yourself”. The school reported challenges with families who take their student(s) out of school to vacation.

They are actively looking at their attendance policies to see if changes to the policies could help improve their numbers.

School Climate

There were mixed results from the Spring 2023 Panorama School Climate Survey. Families reported being happy with the school, while student results varied depending on the age group. Students in Grades 3-5 ranked in the 10th percentile of like schools nationally, while students in Grade 6 ranked in the 50th percentile.

Overall, the results show that teachers and staff are dissatisfied. Leadership attributes some of that to not being able to find substitutes when needed and staff being asked to do more as a result. Planned budget cuts were especially hard, but Jason reports that staff satisfaction is “high right now” and Jacinda feels that having Jason in place will be a “huge boost to the satisfaction”.

It is unclear what the school is doing to improve student satisfaction results. Bill reminded us that Panorama (as well as NWEA) results were “normed” pre-pandemic and “have very poor validity because of that”.

Student Enrollment and Recruitment

The school reported that there are currently 187 students enrolled. The 10/1/23 certified student enrollment count was 197. A few students/families left because of health-related issues in the family, and others “left on good terms”.

They have made a conscious decision not to back-fill this year in grades 6 to 8 “because of the pressure it puts on teachers and classrooms”, but will do so judiciously in the o

Fiddlehead will hold Open Houses in February and March and will move the lottery out one week later than in years past to allow more time for marketing efforts. Last year they had their best year with 155 applications for admission received and they anticipate similar numbers this year.

Finances

At the mid-year point, Fiddlehead “is looking good financially” and will reportedly end the year \$120,000 net positive. On 10/1, they had a higher number of 8th grade students than estimated and have been informed by the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) that they will receive the additional state subsidy this year instead of having to wait.

Special Education costs are high. As mentioned previously, per the MDOE Fiddlehead is in the top 10 schools who serve the highest percentages of students with disabilities across the state. Some classrooms have as many as 40% of students with an IEP and at least three new students have come in requiring 1:1 support.

They have had a hard time finding special education staff (ideally they’d have one TA per grade level) and are currently working to be in compliance with state special education rules. They are in constant communication with families about services they are unable to provide and although families “aren’t happy, they’re sticking with us”. The school has set aside funding in case a student needs to be moved to an out-placement facility with high costs.

Fiddlehead used COVID money to replace windows and to upgrade the ventilation system in the existing building and may qualify for a \$105,000 rebate from Efficiency Maine for roof/heating projects/repairs.

The board is concerned about the implications of a proposed \$50,000 minimum teacher salary proposal and the effect that will have on the budget.

Transportation

Fiddlehead has one school bus that is owned by the school. It makes three bus stops daily - with the majority of students coming from the Lewiston-Auburn area. This bus is also used for field trips and transporting students to off-site locations.

They bought the bus five years ago and own it outright. Other than routine maintenance their costs are fairly low.

The school doesn’t feel that transportation is a barrier to attendance.

Governing Board

Bill reports that Fiddleheads greatest strengths are the people and the care they have for the students. He is “pleased” with the focused work in Math, the RTI program, and school leadership.

When asked about concerns, he shared the following:

- The roof and the cost of replacing it; and
- Staff turnover “We need to do more things to encourage people to stay.”

They recently added two new members bringing the number of board members to 7 which Bill says “feels like the right number”. They will lose three members at the end of the year and are actively recruiting to replace them.

The board is engaged in succession planning and talks regularly about how roles would be restructured if their current Executive Director were to leave.

Other

Fiddlehead is working through a 4-month revisioning process and has contracted with a consultant to help guide them. The revisioning will involve all stakeholders and will:

1. Help determine who the school is now.
2. What do children/students need?
3. How do we get there?

Jacinda describes this work as “critical” stating that what the school needed in its first 5 years is different from what they need now. Fiddlehead just celebrated its 11th birthday and Jacinda hopes that the school’s birthday is something that can be celebrated annually.

The school will hire a new Special Education Director. LeeAnn Arnold has held the position for the past five years, but is moving on to pursue other interests.

They are “always thinking about different revenue streams” (i.e., a private Pre-K program, the return of summer programming, etc.) and are beginning to think about what benefits to retain staff.

Recommendation(s)

- The school should think about budgeting its depreciation expenses.