



2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting Maine Academy of Natural Sciences

On January 22, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting in-person and via Zoom at Maine Academy of Natural Sciences (MeANS) with Mike Muir, Governing Board Chair; Matt Newberg, Head of School; Patrick Henyan, Assistant Head of School; Evan Coleman, Director of Curriculum and Instruction; and Ashley Hyde, Business Manager. 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 MeANS reports that 74% of its students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 34% are “at or above state expectations” in Math. ELA results are above the state average, while the Math results are below. The state average for at or above expectations are 64.6% for ELA and 48.7% for Math.

Based on participation data from the Maine Department of Education (MDOE), 80% of MeANS students participated in the spring Through-Year Assessment. There continues to be a disconnect between school-reported data and state-reported data and the school is “taking a deeper dive” into their Student Information System (SIS) to make sure it matches the state’s system (Synergy). School records show a 90% participation rate, with participation rates increasing to 98% in the fall.

Juniors and seniors are currently taking the Accuplacer and the school reports **approaching expectations** on the Performance Framework. Students who did not meet the targets will be reassessed this winter as a spring reassessment “feels too late”. MeANS reports very few discrepancies in the results from Threshold students versus Campus students and evidence suggests that Threshold students are outperforming at this time. Leadership is “not surprised with the Threshold performance” reporting a number of students who will graduate early and who are performing well at the local community college.

Evan Coleman, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, has recently taken on the additional role of Assessment Coordinator and shared that “there is no correlation between Through-Year Assessment results and Accuplacer results” and hopes for a more consistent model going forward. Evan reports that they have three (3) years of assessment data for juniors and “none of the data correlates with growth data for students”.

The school reports no concerns with subgroup results.

At the time of the meeting, MeANS was preparing for the 1st Semester Project Showcase and reports continually seeking better ways to show student success. Matt Newberg, Head of School, reports that the “academic program at the school has improved dramatically over the past couple of years” and shares that when he first joined the school “good things were happening” (i.e., SEL and social service work), but “school wasn’t always happening”.

The school’s current customized targets on the Performance Framework are attendance and engagement related and leadership is interested in revising the targets “to be more in line with what we do as a school”.

Student Attendance

The school has improved its chronic absenteeism rates significantly over the last several years, but the rate remains high. At the time of the mid-year meeting, MeANS reported that 34% of students were chronically absent – with the highest rates of absenteeism in grade 12 and the lowest in grade 11. If this trend continues, the school will **not meet expectations** on the Performance Framework.

MeANS cites several examples of situations that affect their chronic absenteeism data:

- A student enrolled at MeANS, spent 22 days at the school, and became chronically absent during that time. The student has since moved on to two different schools, but MeANS will continue to carry the absences throughout the year. This is true of 6-8 students.
- There were a “few students we took a chance on” who reportedly had rough attendance at their previous school. 45 days into the school year, they missed 45 days of school.
- Data shows “a tale of two classes” with one being students who miss 30+ days and the other being students who miss less than 2 days.

The school has formed an Attendance Task Force that will examine the many reasons why a student might be absent and what they might be able to do to mitigate those reasons. For example, there are students who “are nervous about showing up to school because they don’t have the clothes and/or equipment needed for a field trip” or students who are missing school because of COVID, but feel fine. Leadership feels that the mindset around attendance is being changed, but winter “is just brutal”.

Staff is interested in showcasing student engagement at MeANS. They know they have a large population of students who were chronically absent at their previous school, are still considered chronically absent but are attending school more frequently and are more engaged than before.

As with other data points reported by the MDOE, school-reported data and state-reported data don’t seem to align (likely because of MeANS’ extended school year). The school continues to work with the Data Team to find a resolution to this ongoing issue.

School Climate

Results from the spring administration of the Panorama School Climate survey show that students and families are happy with MeANS with both groups **exceeding expectations** on the Performance Framework. The school **did not meet expectations** for teacher/staff results in SY2022-23. School Leadership and School Climate are two areas where MeANS scored well, while falling below expectations on Professional Learning and Feedback and Coaching.

MeANS hopes to improve the School Leadership responses from 56% to 67% and has a plan in place to do so. When asked about thoughts on raising the scores in the other categories, Leadership shared the following:

- Evan meets one-on-one with every teacher bi-weekly and offers to sit in classrooms to help support teachers where needed sharing, “I’m here to help you figure this out”.
- The school holds two robust staff meetings weekly – one on Tuesday morning and the other on Friday morning.
- There are ten (10) “well planned” in-service days with PD built in.
- Pat is working closely with staff around behavior supports and interventions and with the implementation of BARR and MTSS this year it appears that staff are feeling more connected than in previous years.
- The school is holding more “all faculty events” including a barbeque at the beginning of the school year.
- Teachers appear to feel comfortable reaching out to school leadership.
- The “faculty culture feels very different this year”.

Projected Graduation Rates

MeANS graduated 88% of its seniors in SY2022-23, up from 59% in SY2021-22. At the mid-year meeting, the school estimated that 97% of seniors are currently on track to graduate in 4-years which exceeds the state’s annual target of 87% and would **exceed expectations** on the Performance Framework.

Student Enrollment and Recruitment

The school reported that there are currently 188 students enrolled. The 10/1/23 certified student enrollment count was 194 reporting that two (2) students left because “it wasn’t a great fit”, one (1) dropped out of school to attend Adult Ed, and (1) left because parents wanted them closer to another school. One of the students who left citing “it wasn’t a great fit”, enrolled in another school and unenrolled there because it also wasn’t the right fit and has since been incarcerated.

While still aspirational, the school plans to open with 200 students next fall (120 on Campus and 80 in Threshold).

Finances

For the past year or so MeANS has been working toward decreasing dependence on Good Will-Hinckley. In SY2022-23 MeANS brought their finance/business office functions in house, hired a new Business Manager, and tackled new accounting software. Their Business Manager left part way through the SY2022-23 school year and MeANS was unable to fill the position until this past summer. Fortunately they were able to fill the position with Ashley Hyde, who has worked tirelessly to get caught up and all reports indicate that the FY24 QTR2 financial submissions will be on time.

Due to the turnover in the Business Office, invoicing for grant revenues had not been done for some time. Ashley is working on getting that caught up and the revenue from that invoicing is “becoming clearer”. Ashley reports that cash is “healthy” and is being replenished by subsidy while waiting for grant income to be received.

Year-end financials were recently presented to the board and show a \$96,000 loss rather than the \$200,000+ that was anticipated.

Several years ago, MeANS received a financial gift from the Fifield endowment that is specifically earmarked for the Threshold program. The board chair reports that the funds are “doing well” in the current investment situation and that the board is looking at ways to build the endowment with more traditional fundraising.

The school has received its preliminary ED279 from the MDOE and has begun working on the FY25 budget and revised 3-year financial plan. Matt reports anticipated revenue as being “a bit under where they thought they’d be” so will have to plan for that. It’s possible that they might have to cut a teaching position in order to “make things align for next year”. Their budget is based on 200 students so there “is no wiggle room”.

When asked about the riskiest parts of the 3-year plan, the following was identified:

- The time it takes to manage grant expenses and getting those expenses reimbursed.
- Enrollment and recruitment.
- The challenge of fundraising to make up the difference between what they receive from the state and what actual expenses look like.
- The relationship with Good Will-Hinckley has changed so any of those expenses are “a bit of a wildcard”. Leadership noted that “it would not be a surprise” if GWH were to raise the rent on the building next year.
- Currently they are contracted with a Special Education Director on a part-time basis, but as needs increase, the hours needed for the position will increase.
- Staff compensation.
- Increased insurance rates.

MeANS recognizes the need for an experienced grant writer and has a person on staff doing the work. The RREV Grant is coming to a close and there are learning grants available in the state. They report needing to increase bandwidth to pursue those dollars.

The school reports no compliance issues.

Governing Board

The board currently has 11 members with a few open seats that they would like to fill. Recruiting for certain skill sets has been challenging as “board members are a bit shy to ask others to be board members”. Names of potential board members have been shared with the board, but have not been pursued to gauge interest.

The board reports programming as the school’s biggest strength while enrollment, finances, and attendance issues were noted as perceived weaknesses.

The board reports being “really happy with Matt’s work” and reportedly makes sure that he knows how they feel about his performance. They haven’t thought specifically about the individual supports that he might need in order to be successful. Mike shared that “MeANS has a top notch leadership team”.

The HR Committee is looking to refine the school leader evaluation tool to reflect what it is the board would like the school leader to do.

Mike reports that “the board’s vision is the school’s vision” – focused on hands-on work and agriculture and attracting students who are excited about those things.

They are currently engaged in a strategic planning process which is helping to ground goals for the future and hope to have the work finalized in the next few months.

Recommendations

- Continue to look at the financial models around the Campus and Threshold programs. Is one subsidizing the other?
- Think about goals for board member engagement (i.e., volunteerism - come to the building and volunteer two hours per month to work with a teacher, in the office, etc.).
- Think about succession planning for when Mike's term as Board Chair ends.