



2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting Maine Arts Academy

On January 25, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting via Zoom with Maine Arts Academy (MeAA) with Sherry Gilbert, Governing Board President; Tim Rector, Board Member and Chair of the Finance Committee; Heather King, Head of School; Rachel Roberge, Principal; and Jasen Richardson, Dean of Students and Chair of Academics. 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 Maine Arts Academy reports that 78% of its students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 31% are “at or above state expectations” in Math. The ELA results are higher than the state average of 64.6%, while the Math results are lower than the state average of 48.7%.

MeAA describes their reading scores as “solid” and attributes the high student proficiency to being an art school noting “students have a creative background”. They acknowledge the struggles in math and are doing the following:

- Have two full-time math teachers (one who is a “very seasoned”)
- Have four transitional or Title I math classes where students are moved around on a weekly basis and placed as needed.
- Are in Week #2 of a new tutoring program using extra COVID relief funds.

MeAA recently completed the Accuplacer assessment with 95% of 12th graders meeting performance targets in both reading and math which is **exceeding expectations** on the Performance Framework.

Student Attendance

At the time of the mid-year meeting, Maine Arts Academy reported that 12.1% of their students were chronically absent which would **meet expectations** on the Performance Framework.

Leadership shared that keeping the absenteeism rate low is a full team effort. The attendance coordinator is “on top of absences and makes calls to families every day” and staff “are picking up kids and going door-to-door to get kids out of bed and into school”.

School Climate

Results from the Spring 2023 administration of the Panorama School Climate surveys showed that families, teachers, and staff are happy with the school. Student results were “somewhat of a

surprise” and could be attributed to some staffing issues that plagued the school last year. Effort is being made to talk with students prior to the administration of the surveys this spring to gauge overall satisfaction. New this year is the “Green Team” which recognizes students for being positive role models and a student-led club just finished painting a wall with things that they like about the school.

Projected Graduation Rates

MeAA reports that they will graduate 100% of seniors this year, an increase from 98% in SY2022-23. These numbers **exceed expectations** on the Performance Framework and when asked about the “secret sauce”, leadership attributes their success to arts programming and note that graduates leave the school with marketable skills.

11th graders are all on track to graduate in 4 years, but there are a few 10th graders who are currently truant and at risk of dropping out. Leadership reports “doing all we can” to re-engage these students.

There are two students who have requested early graduation with the intent of going on to continue their education.

Student Enrollment and Recruitment

The school certified 237 students on 10/1 and as of the mid-year meeting had 230 students enrolled. They have been able to backfill open seats with students from the waitlist. Many of the students who have left are involved in DHHS situations and “school is the last thing on their minds”. There are some “frequent fliers” with behavioral issues that have moved around to all the schools in the area, never settling in one place and there were a few students who left to return to their resident district high school “due to a break up” and the school “was sad to see them go”.

Their projected enrollment for SY2024-25 is 265 students. They plan to market the school using Spotify for advertisements and to run a full page advertisement for two consecutive Sundays in the local newspaper.

School leadership maintains their interest in expanding to include middle school students.

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.

The board reports that purchasing a new building with unknown costs was “frightening” but “things have gone well”. They were able to “guesstimate” costs based on spending by the previous owner and have been able to cover those costs, finishing the calendar year “with money in the bank and at least 30 days of cash on hand”.

Leadership shared that their planned construction - adding a dance studio and enlarging classrooms - “hasn’t started yet”. They accepted a bid from a contractor who was supposed to begin the work just after the holidays. Their current loan structure has them paying interest-only on the construction loan until the construction begins.

The Finance Committee reviewed an energy efficient proposal to redo the lighting in the hallways. The cost of this project is approximately \$118,000 and will seek funding to complete the project.

They received a \$100,000 safety grant in November and are working on signage, outdoor lighting, safety film for the windows, and training for staff.

MeAA continues to look at their 3-year budget with the requirement to put money into a rural development account front and center. This money is earmarked for building emergencies (i.e., the furnace goes out, etc.). They have \$113,000 set aside currently with \$50,000 slated to go in next year.

The FY23 audit was completed on time with no significant findings.

The school reports no compliance issues.

Transportation

Maine Arts Academy contracts with the same bus company as Community Regional Charter School and “pays double” for the same services. Heather has reached out to bus companies that are more local to the school, but they are unable to assist because they do not have drivers.

The school owns a mini bus and has explored the possibility of hiring a bus driver.

Their contract with the bus company does not include fuel which is a separate expense. It is estimated that they are spending approximately \$140,000 more than what they receive from the state for the cost of transporting students.

Governing Board

There are no open seats on the board. They currently have 6 members, with their bylaws stating they can have as few as 3 or as many as 16. Sherry reports that the current members have a wide variety of talent – legislative, legal, development, special education, etc.

The board reports that their ideal size would be 8 members and are looking for arts and education backgrounds specifically.

Sherry’s term as Board President will be up later this year and succession planning is happening.

When asked what the board does to support Heather and school leadership, Sherry responded that “Heather doesn’t need a lot of help from the board”. She feels that the board is both supportive and encouraging of the work that Heather does and shared that they have just completed her annual evaluation but have not presented it to her yet.

Sherry cites increasing finances and the needed renovations as the key priorities for the board. She is thankful for the administrators and wants to keep them long term.

The board is supportive of expanding the school to include middle school students.

Other

The staffing challenges from last year appear to have improved. They report no current vacancies, but know of a few teachers that are not planning to return next year.

They report “desperately needing a ½ time special education position” but funds aren’t available to hire. They’ve had to restructure classrooms to ensure coverage for students with behavioral challenges.

The administrative team is “pretty settled” in their roles at this point. Jasen has had to wear many different hats (handling the 504s, mentorship/coaching, and teaching) and will primarily focus on teaching next year. Rachel will focus on student behavior. Teacher evaluations are currently on schedule with Rachel doing the coaching and writing the evaluations.

Leadership continues to foster community partnerships including the Colonial Theater, Healthy Community Augusta, UMA, Colby, the Viles Arboretum, and Stained Glass Express. Heather has forged a relationship with the Augusta’s school board chair and continues to work with Wendy Betts on financing, grants, and compliance.

Recommendations

- Engage the services of a new auditor.
- With the delay in construction, it may be worth reaching out to Kennebec Savings to see if they are willing to offer any relief until the construction begins.

Next Steps

- If the board wishes to pursue the proposal to redo the lighting in the hallways, Maine Arts Academy will be required to complete the Request to Incur Debt form and get Commission approval before proceeding.