

Maine Virtual Academy
90 Day review
December 14, 2015

The Maine Charter School Commission review team met with the Maine Virtual Academy for its 90 day evaluation on December 2, 2015 at the school site. The team consisted of Michael Wilhelm (Chair), Laurie Pendelton and Ande Smith. Bob Kautz and Gina Post were also in attendance for the Commission. Beth Lorrigan, MVA CEO, Program Manager Jesse Thoman, and Accountant Jennifer Hight represented the school staff. Peter Mills, Ginny Smith and Amy Carlisle represented the School Board.

The review schedule offered of a tour of the school, interviews with Board members, administration, a student, a parent and the guidance counselor, as well as a view of a class in process.

Discussion with Administration and Board

When asked to describe the challenges faced during the first 3 months, the administration and board noted the steep learning curve that accompanied the start up of a new school and understanding the specifics of virtual learning. They described the challenges of working initially in one small space while waiting for the school facility to be completed. They explained that their charter school contract stipulations were somewhat new to the education service provider, creating additional challenges. Technical issues were experienced when setting up accounts and logging in.

Both, however, felt that the school was “finally on top of things.” The staff had become a “community of learners” in order to meet the many unanticipated challenges it faced during the initial weeks, and was enthusiastic and committed to the school. The budget was predicted to be adequate. The school accountant described a positive working relationship with David Jenkins, K12 Financial Liaison and an understanding that MVA will negotiate fees and question charges. Field trips were already in the works.

As of the review date the student population was 265 students. 76 students had withdrawn since enrolling and this was described as concerning. Truancy was also an issue. A four-tier approach was described to address student academic engagement, which included additional student-teacher contact, greater support for the family, and administrative action when all else failed. It was also noted that many students enrolled lacking the minimum amount of course credits for their grade and that there was a need to provide them with options for credit recovery.

The Board of Directors described itself as highly engaged in the school start-up, providing support for the administration and teachers. It meets once a month and has adopted requisite policies. It did note that there was a need for an additional member. It feels fortunate to have found excellent teachers. It wants to encourage

parent and public awareness in Board decisions and will consider providing greater access to the public for input at board meetings by phone, and to Board minutes on its website. It also expressed the need to improve the effectiveness of the school website as a communication tool for school and Board.

Per its contract with the Charter School Commission the school is required to provide the Commission with a plan for parent engagement and conferences by December 1. It was noted that the school's experiences with student withdrawal and truancy require greater engagement with parents and students prior to student enrollment. K12 has provided the school with a family support liaison at no cost whose responsibility is to support the students and family. This service along with out reach by the school guidance counselor and CEO will serve to address this need. At this writing it is assumed that these elements will be incorporated in the above noted protocol for parent engagement.

Also, the school's contract with MCSC requires it to provide by January 15 a protocol for fulfilling its assessment plan. Ms. Lorigan noted that the school was concerned by the poor turnout for the fall NWEA testing (139 of 230 students tested, 69%). Since this test is critical to establishing the baseline for assessing student growth and school academic performance, a more robust attendance is critical. The school offered a second opportunity to test. It understands that a different approach will be necessary for future testing that will include more testing sites and greater outreach to ensure student participation fall and spring. As of this writing it is assumed that this will be articulated in the expected protocol.

In conclusion, the review team was satisfied that the school was fully operational and either meeting or in the process of meeting its obligations under the contract. Administration and Board were reflective and proactive, well aware of all aspects of its operation and actively engaged in addressing the issues related to student withdrawal and truancy, assessment and communication. The review team was pleased with the fiduciary relationship between the school and K12, the positive professional climate, and the analytical approach taken by the board, administration, teachers to address the challenges associated with the start of this new school.