



The Ecology Learning Center

230 Main Street, Unity, ME 04988

the Ecology
Learning
Center

ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT 2020-21
October 2021



Mission

The mission of the Ecology Learning Center is to deeply root students in Maine’s ecological and cultural landscapes, foster authentic real-world learning through mentorship and craft, and cultivate compassionate and resilient leaders prepared to engage in the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Vision

Our vision is to inspire high school students from Waldo County and beyond to roll up their sleeves and engage in their local communities through service-learning and apprenticeships. Guided by the unifying theme of “ecology” (the study of the relations between organisms and their environment), students will enact and embody ecological principles by making meaningful connections between school and community. We will help students develop the knowledge, skills, and commitment to work collaboratively to address important local challenges. Students will take active roles in every aspect of their education, always with the support and guidance of teachers and local experts.

Governing Board

Robin Huntley, Board Chair
Laura Graham, Vice Chair
Mark Ostroff, Board Treasurer
Carol McGovern, Board Secretary

Leon Garnett, Board Member
Jamie Francomano, Board Member
Najeaan Shedyak, Board Member
Josh Snyder, Board Member

Leadership Team

Leza Packard, Head of School
Kayla Higgins, Dean of Students

Michele Horn, Special Education Director
Kathrine Gaillard, Community Coordinator

School Profile

Year Opened	Years in Operation	Grades served
2020	2	9 – 12
Number of Sending Districts*	Current Enrollment*	Students on Waiting List*
8 (as of October 2021, Certified Student Enrollment Date)	77 (as of October 2021, Certified Student Enrollment Date)	7 (as of October 2020, Certified Student Enrollment Date)

School Year 2020 – 2021 Demographic Table			
Grade Level Enrollment			
	9	27	57%
	10	20	43%
Gender			
	Female	26	55%
	Male	21	45%
Race/Ethnicity			
	White	43	91%
	Asian/PI	1	2%
	BAA	1	2%
	Latino/Hispanic	1	2%
	Two or more races	1	2%
Special Education			
	Students with IEPs	12	26%
	General education students	35	74%
Economically Disadvantaged			
	Yes	22	47%
	No	25	53%

The Maine Charter School Commission is the Authorizer of 10 charter districts. Each charter district holds a contract with the Commission containing a Performance Framework of indicators and targets the district shall meet. The charter districts are evaluated and reported on annually as required by law.

District data are gathered through the Maine Department of Education, Charter Districts, and Site Visits, as applicable.

The Maine Charter School Commission has established a monitoring visit table for visit frequency and intensity. A copy of the Site Visit Manual can be found [here](#). The Ecology Learning Center was on cycle to have a Site Visit at the end of the 2020-21 school year and the Site Visit Report can be found on page 13.

Key documents and other information reviewed to determine progress on the charter district’s performance framework and alignment with its mission are as follows:

- School calendar
- Current enrollment and demographics
- Staff roster
- Current organizational chart
- Board meeting minutes
- Board member meeting attendance
- School’s strategic plan [as applicable]
- Current Education Service Provider contract [as applicable]
- Professional Development calendar and agendas [as applicable]
- Staff evaluation tool
- Administrator evaluation tool used by governing board
- Panorama school climate survey results
- School’s self-assessment
- Previous year’s monitoring report [as applicable]
- School’s performance framework
- Copies of current recruitment materials
- Student enrollment application

The Ecology Learning Center had success with student enrollment throughout the school year, student re-enrollment from one year to the next, and closing academic achievement gaps among major student subgroups.

Document review is a major component of the Maine Charter School Commission’s monitoring process, which happens throughout the year. Charter districts are required to submit reports and data for review. The table below summarizes the charter district’s report and data submission completion throughout the 2020-2021 school year.



As a result of the 2020-2021 monitoring process, the charter district is encouraged to consider the following:

GOVERNING PRACTICES

- The governing board needs to develop a process for long-term strategic and financial planning so that it is a consistent agenda item at board meetings and focuses the board's attention to long-term sustainability and excellence.
- A facilities and operations subcommittee on the governing board can support the development of a capital improvement plan, better positioning the organization for long-term sustainability.

FINANCIAL PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Both the school and the MCSC would benefit from improved timeliness of reporting.
- School and Board should review how FY21 COVID relief funding was spent and be sure that FY22 budgets do not rely on a repeat of this funding.

STUDENT ATTENDANCE AND ENROLLMENT

- School leaders need an enrollment plan that includes student recruitment and persistence, prospective family engagement and community partnerships so that the school has a sustainable and predictable enrollment.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND GROWTH

- Given the impact of the pandemic and lower academic growth than in previous years, the charter organization should develop clear and specific strategies for closing learning gaps to ensure students are prepared for rigorous academic work.

SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

- School leaders need to develop systems and processes that will ensure there is a high level of engagement and communication with families and that families can consistently rely on communication with and from the school, including responding to families in an appropriate timeline.

School performance should be considered in the context of a global health crisis, which schools were battling throughout the 2020 - 2021 school year. Students and families grappled with job loss, health concerns and insecurities, and anxiety related to the pandemic. Schools continued to serve students and families despite the COVID-19 crisis. That service often meant that schools focused on the basic needs of students like social-emotional well-being and psychological health while also managing a rigorous academic program. Because of the operational challenges that the pandemic caused, the school likely saw less growth in student achievement than they otherwise might in a pandemic-free environment. All schools faced similar challenges which is why there is a broad focus on learning loss in the educational ecosystem and media. The Charter Commission is closely monitoring academic progress throughout the school year. The Charter Commission applauds the effort of the school to ensure a safe environment for students in which their basic needs were met during the 2020 - 2021 school year.

In the 2020-2021 school year, the Maine Department of Education adopted the NWEA MAP test as the “state assessment.” The MDOE did not assign targets or expectations related to assessment results. The Maine Charter School Commission amended the Performance Framework to require schools to submit results along with analysis. The MDOE has not released MAP data for traditional schools, which precludes the ability of the public to compare performance between charter schools and their traditional counterparts. Given the trajectory of the school’s performance over the last several years, the Charter Commission remains confident in the ability of the school to serve its students and families in accordance with the contract between the parties.

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR SUMMARY TABLE		
Indicator	Details	Performance
Academic Proficiency		
Proficiency on state assessment in reading	The school will collect baseline data on the ELA MAP test and will provide school wide results as well as results at each grade level assessed.	School collected baseline data on the NWEA MAP test for ELA and provided school wide results as well as results at each grade level
Proficiency on state assessment in math	The school will collect baseline data on the Math MAP test for math and will provide school wide results as well as results at each grade level assessed.	School collected baseline data on the NWEA MAP test for math and provided school wide results as well as results at each grade level
Academic Growth		

ELA MAP growth	Students will show progress in their learning through growth in their MAP RIT ¹ scores from fall to spring of each school year.	12%
Math MAP growth	Students will show progress in their learning through growth in their NWEA RIT scores from fall to spring of each school year.	16%
Growth on MAP ² assessment	70% of eligible ³ students meeting their projected growth on MAP ELA reading and language by the end of school year 20XX-XX (to be determined).	11% (Baseline established)
Growth on MAP assessment	70% of eligible ⁴ students meeting their projected growth on MAP math by the end of school year 20XX-XX (to be determined).	14% (Baseline established)
Achievement Gaps		
Achievement gaps in proficiency between major subgroups on the Maine State Assessments.	The school will provide evidence of closing identified achievement gaps of major subgroups (English learner, special education, gender, economically disadvantaged, 504, ethnic and racial minorities)	Meets Expectation: Subgroups are performing similarly to comparison groups
Achievement gaps in proficiency between major subgroups on the NWEA.	The school will provide evidence of closing identified achievement gaps of major subgroups (English learner, special education, gender, economically disadvantaged, 504, ethnic and racial minorities)	Meets Expectation: Subgroups are performing similarly to comparison groups
Student Attendance		
Chronic absenteeism rate	10% or fewer students classified as chronically absent on the last day of school ⁵	6.1% Exceeds Expectation: Less than 7%
Average Daily Attendance Rate	Schools will have an average daily attendance rate in grades 9-12 of 91% or higher	96.7% Exceeds Expectation: 95% or higher
Student Enrollment		
Enrollment throughout the school year	85% or more of eligible students enrolled on the last day of school will be the same students who were enrolled on State Student Count Day ⁶ .	98% Exceeds Expectation: 90% or more
Recurrent enrollment from one year to the next	85% or more of eligible students enrolled on the <u>last day</u> of school will have completed an Intent to Reenroll form for the next year.	98% Exceeds Expectation: 90% or more
Post-Secondary Readiness		
4 year high school graduation rate (current cohort)	Schools will meet Maine DOE annual goals: 2020=87.74%	Not applicable. School did not have a graduating cohort in 2021.
5 and 6 year average high school graduation rate (previous 2 years' cohorts averaged)	Schools will meet Maine DOE annual goals: 2020=89.74%	Not applicable. School did not have a graduating cohort in 2021.
Of students in their graduating year, percent participation in post-secondary readiness opportunities	At the end of their graduating year, 70% of each schools' eligible ⁷ students will have participated in at least one post-secondary activity such as (<u>and not limited to</u>) college course, Advanced Placement course, certificate program or internship.	Not Applicable The Ecology Learning Center did not have 12 th grade in school year 2020-2021.

¹ The RIT score represents a student's achievement level at any given moment and helps measure their academic growth over time. The RIT scale is a stable scale, like feet or inches, that accurately measures student performance, regardless of age, grades, or grade level.

² MAP® Growth™ measures what students know and informs what they're ready to learn next. By dynamically adjusting to each student's responses, MAP (measures of academic progress) Growth creates a personalized assessment experience that accurately measures performance.

³ Eligible is defined as having both a fall and spring score for students in grades K-10.

⁴ Eligible is defined as having both a fall and spring score for students in grades K-10.

⁵ Chronically absent is defined as missing 10% or more of school days.

⁶ State Student Count Day is October 1.

⁷ Students not excluded via IEP or other individual plan

Success rate of students participating in post-secondary readiness opportunities	70% of the school's students <u>who participated in at least one post-secondary activity such as (and not limited to)</u> college course, Advanced Placement course, certificate program, or internship will complete it successfully ⁸ .	<u>Not Applicable</u> The Ecology Learning Center did not have 12 th grade in school year 2020-2021.
Financial Performance and Stability		
Near Term Measures a) Current Ratio b) Unrestricted Days Cash on Hand	School evaluates its Near-Term Financial Health using the Financial Performance and Sustainability outline provided by the Commission.	Pending Audit
Sustainability Measures a) Total Margin b) Debt to asset ratio	School evaluates its Financial Sustainability using the Financial Performance and Sustainability outline provided by the Commission.	Pending Audit
The school has an annual financial audit conducted. Audit and management letter are submitted to the Commission. Audit has no material findings or misstatements.	Unmodified opinion on [consolidated] financial statements; no material weaknesses, significant deficiencies or reportable instances of noncompliance and other matters identified in the other information accompanying the auditor's report on financial statements or in the auditor's report on internal control over financial reporting and on compliance and other matters.	Pending Audit
Board Governance and Stewardship		
Public Accountability: Transparent, responsive, and legally compliant Board operation.	The Governing Board will hold a minimum of 6 meetings per school year ⁹ .	12 meetings held Exceeds Expectation: 11 or more meetings
	Timely ¹⁰ publication of Board meeting agenda and minutes upon approval.	Partially Meets Expectation: 1-2 items not posted timely
Facilities Management		
Meet Local and State requirements	The school certifies that its facility (or facilities) meet all local and state requirements for public school facilities.	Certified as required
Capital Improvement Plan	The school has a current Capital Improvement Plan approved by its governing board	School does not have approved Capital Improvement Plan
School culture and climate		
Reporting of behavior incidents	The school will follow the Maine DOE required reporting for incidents of behavior.	Reported as required
Panorama Survey-Family Participation	40% of families will participate in the Panorama survey.	27% Does Not Meet Expectation: Less than 30%
Panorama Survey-Student Participation	65% of eligible students will participate in the Panorama survey ¹¹ .	85% Exceeds Expectation: 75% or more
Panorama Survey-Teacher/Staff Participation	70% of teachers/staff will participate in the Panorama survey.	43% Does Not Meet Expectation: Less than 60%
Panorama Survey	Annually, the school will review its Panorama Education results and develop an action plan to address areas for continued improvement. Plan and outcome will be submitted to the Commission.	The Ecology Learning Center was not open in 2019-20

Reports will be updated once pending data is received.

⁸ Successful is defined as a passing grade, meeting appropriate standards, or other clearly defined measure of success

⁹ A school year is July 1 – June 30

¹⁰ Timely is defined as posting agenda a minimum of 5 days before the meeting and for minutes, posting within 5 days of approval.

¹¹ Students in grades 3 and up are eligible to participate in the Panorama Education surveys.

Site Visit Report

Monitoring Site Visits are based on both the criteria set forth in the school's performance framework and the school's alignment with its mission. The categories in the performance framework are student achievement, school climate and family engagement, governance, and finance.

The monitoring site visits were conducted on May 25 and May 27, 2021 via Zoom. Team members used the Site Visit Manual to plan for and conduct the visit. Prior to the site visit, team members reviewed documents and other information related to the school's mission and performance framework.

The following participants from the Maine Charter School Commission conducted the monitoring site visit:

- Jeremy Jones, Executive Director, Maine Charter School Commission
- Gina Post, Chief Program Officer, Maine Charter School Commission
- Amy Allen, Operations Director, Maine Charter School Commission
- Joe Drago, CPA Consultant, Maine Charter School Commission
- Dr. Joe Mattos, Program Consultant, Maine Charter School Commission
- Colette Sullivan, Maine Department of Education, Special Services

Focus group interviews were held with groups at the school. Groups were asked a standard set of questions as well as school specific questions created for this visit. Focus group interviews held by the team:

- Governing Board: David Balicki, Board Chair and Carol McGovern, Board Member
- School leaders/administrators: Leza Packard, Executive Director and Kayla Higgins, Dean of Students
- Six students (five 10th grade, one 9th grade)
- Seven parents (representing 6 students in grade 9, one student in grade 10)
- Six teachers (representing all subjects and grade levels)

Mission Alignment

Overall, Ecology Learning Center demonstrated that the school is upholding the mission outlined in its charter. This was evidenced by interviews with Governing Board representatives, the Administrative team, students, parents, and teachers.

Governing Board

Governing Board members reported that the school embraces its mission through experience-based learning. Students participate regularly in activities and projects. At Ecology Learning Center learning can happen anyplace, anywhere.

Administrative Team

The Administrative team at Ecology Learning Center described how the school year began with skits, activities, and team building, introducing students to the mission of the school. Now teachers are encouraged to reflect on how they are implementing the mission in the classroom.

The administrative team described cultivating compassionate and resilient leaders, respecting the diverse student population, utilizing Restorative Justice Practices, and teaching students how to communicate effectively and become problem solvers.

Students

Students in the focus group reported wanting to attend Ecology Learning Center for hands-on learning, wanting to try something new, and because a previous school didn't feel like a good environment.

They said their teachers and principal are understanding of student differences, they know where help is needed the most, and they want students to be successful and have the skills they'll need in the future.

Students gave examples of learning activities they had completed during the school year. Some of them were:

- Passion Project where students decided what they wanted to complete for a project based on their individual interests.
- Using water balloons in math class (for calculating distance, etc.)
- CMP Corridor debate
- Photography studies

Students also reported getting involved in the community and enjoying Fun Fridays when they participated in activities such as cross-country skiing, biking in Belfast, hiking in Camden Hills, and visiting Acadia National Park.

Parents

Parents in the focus group reported sending their students to Ecology Learning Center for reasons such as continuing with similar learning after the Bridge Program (an ecology-based program for homeschool students), trying something new, the opportunity for students to work at their own level, the ecology theme and being outdoors.

Teachers

Teachers in the focus group were asked about their role in implementing the school's mission and vision. One teacher reported they are exposing students to citizen science and analysis tools and designs curriculum with those goals in mind. Another teacher is emphasizing the natural systems around students. A third teacher reported rooting students in real world issues, citing an example of a unit on the CMP Corridor.

Student Achievement

Overall, Ecology Learning Center demonstrated that the school is working to use MAP assessment data and school-based assessments to determine student needs. Curricula are being developed by teachers, who are designing both traditional and more hands-on learning experiences.

Governing Board

The Governing Board representatives said they are working on a tool for reporting the different components of the Performance Framework to the board. As a new board, they are starting to create committees to handle different types of issues and tasks. A priority is academics.

Administrative Team

The administrative team talked about using NWEA MAP assessment to inform instructional goals. They are using data to determine student abilities and needs and are and sharing this information with students and parents. Additionally, an intervention block has been created at the end of the day for all students who are missing work.

Parents

Overall, parents were pleased with their student's academic progress. Parents heard from their students how school was going. Reports that were sent home mid-year were informative. One parent indicated that their child was behind in math at the start of the school year, and was now exceling in math, largely due to the attention the teachers give students.

Teachers

Teachers in the focus group were asked how curricula were developed. Teachers said they use EmPower (a tool for designing, creating, and assigning standards-based curriculum) as the skeleton. They make sure they are meeting the required standards. They enjoy the challenge and joy of taking standards and linking them to project-based and meaningful learning experiences in addition to using traditional resources. Some assessments are performance-based and others are more traditional. The school also administers the NWEA MAP, which teachers reported relying on heavily after participating in training.

School Climate and Family Engagement

The site visit showed evidence that Ecology Learning Center is prioritizing a healthy school climate, as indicated by student interviews and training on/implementation of restorative justice practices. Families voiced inconsistent experiences around communication from the school, indicating an opportunity for growth.

Administrative Team

The Administrative team talked about training for all staff in Restorative Justice, and training on racial injustice for staff and students. Anecdotal evidence indicates restorative justice is working, and racial injustice training has been effective.

Students

Students were asked how they get along with each other at Ecology Learning Center. There was agreement that there “really isn’t any bullying here.” They reported doing well getting along with each other and that a Restorative Justice Circle is initiated if something goes wrong so students understand the issue. Students also reported that when a conflict comes up, the school counselor takes time out of their day to make sure the conflict doesn’t just go away but is resolved. The students appreciate the systems that are set up to let students solve problems. They feel that they “come from different backgrounds” and are “accepted here.”

Parents

Parents in the focus group were asked how they found communication from the school. The parent of a student who was learning remotely due to the pandemic reported feeling they didn’t know what was going on. They also found that despite attempting to make contact, they often didn’t get a response.

Other parents had conflicting experiences. While one parent said administrative communications are terrible, another reported receiving a couple emails per week from the school’s executive director letting them know what was going on at school. One parent reported receiving many communications from teachers, while others said that they initiate communication and get an “enthusiastic” response.

Parents of students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for special education and students with a Section 504 plan for accommodations agreed that communication is an area the school needs to improve.

Parents shared that overall, they feel students are safe at school. Some students experienced bullying at the beginning of the year. It was also reported that there were racial tensions in the school. One parent said their student noticed the bullying and racial tensions and it made them uncomfortable. The student now says the approach of Restorative Circles has made a difference over the year.

Staff

Staff reported that staff meetings are a safe space to talk about situations and topics, going beyond academics.

Classroom observations have been done by the administration and some teachers have received feedback and have had discussions as follow up to the observations. Other teachers are hopeful to have the same experience next year. They would also like more opportunities for peer observations.

Governance

Governing Board representatives indicated a board retreat has been discussed and the board agreed it is probably the most important next step, including a board evaluation and goal setting. The board has had some turnover and has had change in officer positions. At this time, it would like to add a board member who is a CPA.

The Governing Board recently started strategic planning. It has taken the indicators of the Performance Framework and matched it up to Marzano evaluation model. The board plans to use this as a self-reflective tool with data points and goals for the Executive Director. A timeframe being built into the form so the Board will get regular updates.

Finance

Ecology Learning Center has implemented sound financial practices in its first year and is encouraged to continue these practices as the school continues to grow.

Governing Board

The Governing Board representatives indicated the need for more office support at the school. The position that began as six hours per week is .7 FTE for the 2021-2022 school year.

The Board is aware that the facility feels small for the number of students coming in for the 2021-2022 school year. They are confident that at this time next year the school will “be in a better place.”

Administrative Team

The administration reported the school has continued to contract bookkeeping services with Community Regional Charter School. In addition, Ecology Learning Center started its own spreadsheet to track revenue and expenses.

The school received two substantial donations in the 2020-2021 school year of \$75,000 and \$15,000. At the time of this meeting, it was expected the school would close the year with a surplus. A financial audit has been scheduled and a timeline is being established.

In terms of the facility, the Administrative team indicated the need for more “elbow space.” There have been conversations about buying land or a facility. A few rooms in the school that were being rented out during the 2020-2021 school year will be used by the school in SY 2021. The Administration said there will be a lot of retrofitting that needs to be done to get 72 kids to fit comfortably. The board’s Facilities Committee is looking at what capital improvements might be needed.

Students

When students were asked what one thing they would change at the school, they identified the following: more space, resource room, more staff, more equipment (such as microscopes), and a cafeteria with a better place for students to cook.

Parents

Some parents indicated that transportation, particularly for those living outside of Unity, is a challenge and that a more robust transportation system would be an improvement.

Teachers

Teachers expressed the need for resources such as outdoor learning spaces, science lab equipment, and woodworking tools. They also identified the need for more staff, including a secretary for the executive director.