

Ecology Learning Center

90-Day Visit Report

December 16, 2020

Introduction

On December 16, 2020, Maine Charter School Commission staff and school liaison met with representatives from Ecology Learning Center via Zoom for a 90-day visit to discuss the school's opening months.

Ecology Learning Center:

- Robin Chernow, board chair
- Leon Garnet, board member
- David Balicki, board member
- Leza Packard, Head of School

Maine Charter School Commission:

- Nichi Farnham, Maine Charter School Commission Liaison
- Bob Kautz, Maine Charter School Commission staff
- Gina Post, Maine Charter School Commission staff

Enrollment

There are 47 students enrolled at Ecology Learning Center. The enrollment by grade is as follows:

- Grade 9: 28
- Grade 10: 19

Enrollment is evenly split with female and male students (23 and 24). Four of the 47 students have chosen to attend remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All students are remote on Fridays.

The school has four students on a wait list. Because the law limits the number of students that can attend a charter school from a given district and grade level in its first three years of operation, there are students from RSU 3 on the waitlist even though the school could enroll more students.

Planning for the 2021-2022 school year has already begun. A group of 8th grade students from the Mill School located in Freedom recently attended an Ecology Learning Center open house. Both schools attract families with a homeschool background and are forming a partnership.

Ecology Learning Center continues to build relationships with local homeschool families and continues its outreach within that community.

Transportation

Transportation is contracted through RSU 3. 21 students use the bus and 22 are driven by family or are carpooling with other families. The school works with RSU 3 and families to assure student access to transportation. It was reported that the bussing with RSU 3 is positive and works well, despite some students being on the bus for long rides.

Special Education

The school has 12 students with an IEP (32%). The school has contracted with RSU 3 for a special education director. The school employs a half-time special education teacher, a full-time ed. tech., and recently added an additional part time ed. tech.

The school has a Response to Intervention model in place to monitor the progress of students who are having difficulty and to address their needs before determining if a referral to special education is appropriate.

Teachers and Staff

In addition to the Head of School, the school employs seven full-time and seven part-time staff. Three of the part-time staff were recently added to meet the needs of the students and the school.

Teachers have participated in Restorative Justice training and will be participating in Racial Equity training during the month of December.

Food Service

Breakfast and lunch are provided at the school. Lunch is picked up from The Maine Meal two times per week and the other two days the food is prepared locally at the Unity Barn Raisers' facility by a culinary arts teacher and Ecology Learning Center students. The Barn Raisers facility is a short walk from the school and has kitchen space and equipment that the school is lacking. The school has been able to use the Barn Raisers kitchen in return for community service projects (shoveling, gardening, etc.).

It was reported at the meeting that the students enjoy participating in the preparation of meals and look forward to their turn. Some students bring recipes or suggestions of foods and meals that have meaning to them, such as a food from their native country or family heritage.

Breakfast is set up by students. Each of the four advisory groups has duties it carries out to support the school and its operations, one of them is responsible for breakfast.

Facility

Since the opening of the school several projects have been completed including an outhouse with a composting toilet, a storage shed built with students, installation of lockers, outdoor storage cupboards built with students (in progress) and more.

The school is cleaned and maintained by a custodian who works three days per week. Students support the school's operations and maintenance with advisory groups participating in four different areas of support – Land (shovel, sweep), Water (water plants, fill sink stations), Food (empty dishwasher, breakfast setup), and Waste (recycling and compost).

One facility need is for more infrastructure for food service, specifically a large sink. Options for the immediate future are being explored, with more elaborate plans for the future to potentially follow.

In classes, students are being involved in thinking of ways to improve the school facility and how to minimize its carbon footprint. One example given at the meeting was of students looking at the electric bill and coming up with ways to decrease electricity consumption.

In addition to the updates provided regarding the topics above, time was also spent at the meeting reviewing the school's performance framework and ensuring the school's team was aware of the data that needs to be collected and reported to the Commission.

A list of pre-opening items that remain outstanding was reviewed and the school will aim to submit all items to the Commission by the turn of the year. The Head of School has been focused on teaching and learning and has not been able to complete some of these administrative tasks. The Maine Charter School Commission team suggested that the school would benefit from additional administrative support moving forward.

The Commission's team was pleased with the reports shared by Ecology Learning Center regarding its first three months of operation. The school appears to be prepared to fulfill the requirements set forth in its charter contract.