

**An External Review of the Maine Public Charter School
Performance and Annual Report Frameworks, and Student
Performance**

Part I

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Background

The following report describes the preliminary findings and recommendations from Part I of an external review of Maine's Public Charter School Performance and Annual Report Frameworks, and Student Performance. In August 2017, the Maine Charter School Commission ("Commission") requested an external analysis of the Commission's Academic and School Social and Climate Performance Framework ("Framework") and an analysis of charter school student performance. The Commission contracted with *Silver Analytics Consulting Services* to undertake a three part study: (1) a review of the Maine Charter School Academic and Social/Cultural performance framework, measures and prescribed metrics; (2) an analysis of the components to be included in a yearly annual assessment framework of charter schools; and (3) an analysis of charter school student performance. Based on these analyses and review, the Commission requested a series of recommendations for any suggested modifications in the performance and annual report frameworks, and the ongoing evaluation of student performance.

Part I of the three-part study has included a series of tasks: (a) a review of the Maine statutes related to the creation, monitoring and review of Maine's charter schools; (b) a review of the national literature on charter school performance frameworks and charter school assessments; (c) an analysis of yearly Maine charter school reports and other Commission documents; (d) a series of interviews with Commission members and Commission staff; and (e) site visits and interviews with school leaders at each of the nine public charter schools.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used in both the interviews with Commission members and Commission staff, and the interviews with charter school leaders. The guiding questions in the interview protocol included:

1. *How, and when, were the academic measures established for the individual schools?*
2. *Have they been reviewed and/or modified? If so, when and why?*
3. *Do you think the state assessments are an appropriate measure of their performance measures? Why or why not?*
4. *How are the state assessment results used in their work?*
5. *What training/professional development has the staff been given in interpreting and using assessment data?*

6. *How did the schools determine the school-selected assessments? Are they satisfied with these?*
7. *How do they use the school-selected assessments in their work?*
8. *Do they use other academic indicators as performance measures? If yes, how are they selected and used?*
9. *Are the reporting requirements of academic performance appropriate? Why or why not?*
10. *Who oversees the monitoring and reporting of academic performance? How much time over the course of the year does it take to collect and report on academic performance?*
11. *What one suggestion would you have for improving the application of the academic performance measures requirements?*
12. *How is the survey data used to document and understand social/cultural characteristics of the school?*
13. *Do the surveys help describe/document accurately the school climate?*
14. *What training/professional development has the staff been given in interpreting and using the survey data?*
15. *What one suggestion would you have for improving the application of the social/cultural performance measures?*

The following material provides a preliminary report on the results of the review and a set of recommendations based on the Part I work. Some modifications may be made in the future, based on the completion of Part II and Part III of the external review. Once all phases of the work are completed a final integrated report will be submitted to the Commission.

Based on the review, analyses and interviews, we have reached several findings and recommendations. But before we turn to these, we would like to commend the Commission for their work on developing and using the Performance Framework in the processes of approving, monitoring, and renewing charters. We believe the framework provides an excellent model for monitoring the charter schools and insuring that they are making good progress in providing their students a high quality education. Further, we believe the Framework provides an excellent model that should be implemented in all public schools in Maine to insure that all Maine's schools are held to high standards and accountable for educating Maine students.

The following reflects our major findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations:

- 1. Retain all the Performance Framework Data Elements currently listed in Title 20-A, Chapter 112 of Maine Revised Statutes.**

We believe the current Performance Framework Data Elements provided in Title 20-A, Chapter 112 are fair, reasonable, and realistic data elements for approving, monitoring and reviewing Maine's public charter schools. Accordingly, we believe the Commission should continue to require all

charter schools to document and report on all of the following elements each year:

- A. Student academic proficiency;
- B. Student academic growth;
- C. Achievement gaps in both proficiency and growth between major student subgroups;
- D. Attendance;
- E. Recurrent enrollment from year to year;
- F. With respect to high school, postsecondary readiness; and
- G. Parent and community engagement

We see no need at this time to modify these or to add other data elements. However, we do recommend some changes in the requirements and rules applicable to the collection and reporting of these data elements, and these are discussed below.

2. Retain the Maine Education Assessments (MEAs) in reading, mathematics, and science as a required indicator and measure of student academic proficiency.

One key measure of academic performance included in the Framework is the requirement that the charter schools document and report proficiency level student performance using the Maine Educational Assessments (MEAs), a series of statewide tests given annually to all Maine students in grades 3-8, and grade 11, and through the use of a school selected assessment. The school selected growth assessment is discussed in the next section, but in the case of the MEAs, we believe the MEAs should continue to be required to be used as an academic measure in all the charter schools, regardless of their academic missions and visions. The current MEAs provide an useful status measure of academic performance and proficiency (i.e., a measure of student performance at a particular point in time), and as such, provide the State an accountability measure of student and school-level performance. The MEA reports provide schools with an overall profile of student performance in four proficiency levels, and provide key subgroup analyses the charter schools may use in identifying gaps in performance.

The MEA reports also provide growth scores, and thus can provide an aggregate picture on student growth and provide the State and charter schools an overall accountability measure for demonstrating progress being made in helping students grow academically. However, the information provided on individual students, and the delayed time in reporting scores, limit the usefulness of this data to inform and guide instruction. Thus, we believe the MEAs should be used primary as a yearly status measure of proficiency.

3. Require all charter schools to use a common assessment to measure student academic growth.

A second key measure of academic performance included in the Framework is an indicator of student academic growth. The Framework requires that all the charter schools measure, document and report academic growth using two assessments: (1) the MEAs; and (2) a school selected assessment. As we stated above, we recognize that the MEA reporting includes a growth measure, but beyond its use for accountability purposes, we find the MEA growth measure of limited value to inform and guide instruction.

Currently, six of the nine charter schools use the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) assessments as their school-selected growth measure. While all the school-selected growth assessments used by the schools have merit, we believe that at present the NWEAs are a good, reliable measure of student academic growth.

In fact, we believe the NWEAs can serve multiple purposes. They not only: (1) provide a way to document student academic growth for accountability purposes; but they can also (2) provide an assessment that can be used to inform instruction; and (3) an assessment that may be used to guide individual student growth plans. Additionally, because they are what are called Adaptive Assessments, assessments that adjust test items to individual levels of proficiency, they may provide a more accurate measure of individual growth.

Accordingly, we recommend that all the charter schools be required to administer the NWEA at least twice each year (fall and spring).

Further, we recommend that the Commission pay for the fall and spring administrations of the NWEAs, and that the Commission provide school staff with professional development and technical assistance in interpreting and using the NWEA data.

We recommend that schools continue the practice of using additional school selected assessments (as many of them already do), as they deem appropriate, but in the interest of greater parsimony, that schools not be required, nor necessarily be encouraged, to report the results of these assessments as part of their annual reports to the Commission.

4. Require all charter schools to document and report on achievement gaps in both proficiency and growth between major student subgroups.

As part of the performance framework established by state law, charter schools are required to address achievement gaps for major student subgroups. However, we found little evidence through our analyses that this

was occurring on a consistent basis and in all the charter schools. There was scant evidence in the monitoring reports documenting gap analyses on the part of the charter schools, and too few explicit written comments in the yearly reports from the Commission addressing this deficiency. In our interviews, some charter school leaders made reference to attempts to address achievement gaps, but we uncovered very little evidence of this actually occurring. It is unclear why this is the case, but we believe this issue needs to be addressed. More specifically, and at a minimum, we recommend that all the charter schools be required to document on a yearly basis achievement gaps for subgroups of students based on student demographics, including by gender, economic advantaged status, and special needs.

We also recommend that the charter schools be required to report performance by subgroups based on MEA proficiency levels/performance and describe movement between levels each year.

Further, we recommend that baseline data on subgroup performance be used to establish yearly targets designed to close the achievement gaps over time.

5. Require each charter school to establish realistic proficiency and growth targets, based on prior student performance, and to establish target progression schemes and timelines in order to insure that all students in a cohort achieve proficiency.

Considerable time, effort, and expertise have been spent in establishing, revising, and reporting proficiency and growth target performance. We applaud this work, and we hope traditional Maine public schools learn from the charter school experience.

At the same time, we believe that some of the individual charter school performance targets are unrealistic, and thereby do not reflect well on individual student performance and may present a skewed assessment of school level performance. In many cases we found that the initial targets were unrealistic because they were established before the charter school even admitted their first class of students. We understand the reasons for this, but in many cases it resulted in schools setting unrealistic proficiency and growth targets.

We recommend that once a school charter is established, the incoming cohort of students be assessed and this information be used in setting academic targets. These should be rigorous, but achievable academic targets, and reflect different levels of prior achievement on the part of members of the cohort. This process should be repeated for each new cohort.

Even in some cases where schools have revised their original performance targets, they may not be realistic targets for all students in a given year. For

example, one school has set the target: "Percent of grade 3-8 students scoring proficient on the ELA portion of the Maine State Assessment *will meet or exceed the state average* (italics added)." As mentioned above, this is a very laudable goal, but may be an unrealistic one for some students to reach in one year. We believe it would be more appropriate to set yearly targets based on the subgroup proficiency analysis mentioned above.

We also found through our review that while all the charter schools have yearly proficiency targets, most do not have a set of progressive improvement targets for cohorts of students over multiple years. For example, one charter school set as a target that "60% of 8th graders will demonstrate proficiency." Another set a target as the "Percent of students at proficiency level will increase every year by at least 2% over the prior year". We believe both types of targets are problematic. In the case of the first example, there is no new, higher target set for this cohort in subsequent years. In theory, only 60% of the cohort may ever demonstrate proficiency. In the second example, there is a set of progressive growth targets, but the targets do not necessary apply to the same cohort of students and are too low to insure all students will achieve proficiency in a reasonable time period.

We recommend that academic targets should include a progression for demonstrating improved performance and deadlines for all students in a cohort to achieve proficiency. An example might look something like this: For those students in any given cohort demonstrating Level 2 achievement, "Below State Expectations", 50% of the students in the cohort will achieve proficiency in Year 1, an additional 25% will achieve proficiency in Year 2, and the final 25% will achieve proficiency in Year 3. The progression targets should be based on the different proficiency levels of an incoming cohort of students, but should be both realistic and rigorous. We firmly believe that all students should be held to the same high academic standards, but that the timeline for individual students to achieve proficiency in the standards should be more reflective of individual student learning curves, and not seat time nor on the same timeline for all students.

6. Continue the requirement of social/culture surveys of parent, students and staff, but explore alternative options for the makeup and administration timelines of the surveys.

Although not part of the Performance Framework Data Elements in Maine statute, the Commission requires that each charter school have at least two measures of School Social and Academic Climate: (1) a measure of instances of bullying, harassment, or other abusive practices; and (2) confidential survey of parent, staff, and students. We believe that both of these measures are appropriate and important measures of charter school success, as well as being appropriate and important measures of success for all Maine schools.

We see no need for modifications in the first measure, but would like to offer some thoughts for consideration on the second measure.

We applaud the effort on the part of the Commission to support the charter schools in documenting parent, student, and staff perceptions and funding the annual survey process. The survey program selected for use in the charter schools, Panorama Education, is sound and includes documented valid and reliable survey studies. However, we heard mixed views about the set of surveys. Some school leaders found the surveys and reports useful. Several charter school administrators indicated that the Panorama Education surveys provided them interesting, and in many cases, useful information, and provided a way for them to compare themselves to other Maine charter schools and to national samples. However, other school leaders thought that survey questions were sometimes confusing, too complex, and that the surveys were too long. Still others commented that while they thought the standard surveys provided important information, they did not always match the information needs of particular charter schools.

Accordingly, we recommend that the Commission review the survey program in light of the concerns raised by charter schools leaders. More specifically, we recommend the Commission consider developing a set of surveys that address the Commission's areas of interest and that will provide for cross-case (charter school) data by means of a set of common survey items, and at the same time provide each charter school the opportunity to address their particular areas of interest by means of a unique set of items designed specifically for and by each charter school.

We recognize that making any substantial changes in the surveys would not be easy, and would raise issues surrounding the validity and reliability of the instruments, and for the administration, management, and reporting of survey results. But we think it may be timely to step back and consider if the Panorama Education set of surveys are meeting the needs of both the Commission and the individual charter schools.

Whatever the decision about the makeup of the surveys, we think that in some cases, the yearly administration of all three surveys provides too little time for schools to: (1) identify concerns and issues; (2) design programs or activities to address these concerns and issues; (3) implement these programs and activities; and (4) document observable results, which in many cases may require multiple years of intervention before results are observable. Thus, we recommend that consideration be given to staggering the administration of the surveys, depending upon the particular issues the schools identify through the surveys, and the plans they develop for addressing specific concerns or issues.

7. Consider alternative models for calculating daily attendance rates.

Another measure in the Framework is the monitoring of student attendance by having the charter schools report average daily attendance rates each school year. Historically, attendance in school was basically a prerequisite for insuring that students had opportunities to learn. And even today attendance is still used as a barometer for measuring the availability of learning opportunities.

The charter schools enrolling secondary students are all using an academic proficiency based model to earn graduation credit, yet they are reporting their daily attendance rate using state guidelines that defines a school “day” using hours of “seat time” in a day or week as the measure. As Maine implements a proficiency-based diploma program, daily class attendance will become less important than students having opportunities to learn in multiple ways, in multiple settings and on multiple timelines. Seat time in attending a traditional school will no longer be a prerequisite for accessing and demonstrating learning. We are not at that point yet, but as charter schools (in fact, all Maine schools) demonstrate that students are achieving proficiency and meeting high standards, less emphasis should be placed on achieving an arbitrary level of average daily attendance. Accordingly, we urge the Commission to consider alternative proposals for documenting attendance, pilot one or more proposals with selected charter schools, and monitor the impact of these proposals. This strategy will not only reflect more closely the individual missions and visions of Maine’s charter schools, but also provide models that could be adopted or adapted in Maine’s more traditional schools.

8. Expand the categories for reporting student retention, dropout and transfer data, including by major subgroup.

Maintaining data on year-to-year student retention rates is an important measure for assessing a charter school’s effectiveness in providing high satisfaction among parents and students for both academic and social/cultural goal achievement. However, using a single statistic, based on an individual student’s contiguous enrollment on the two state benchmark dates in October and April could be misleading, especially in schools with relatively small overall enrollments. Several schools reported that students entered late or exited early for a variety of reasons, including family relocations to a different area, the desire to avoid a particular grade level in an otherwise satisfactory local school, participation in an extra curricular program open only to regular district students, or recovery from an illness or accident that had precluded attendance at a regular public school.

Thus, it is also important to both the schools and the Commission that documenting retention by major subgroups be required of all the charter schools.

We recommend that the Commission work with the charter schools to develop a small number of standard categories listing reasons why students leave the school, as well as listing retention rates by subgroup populations such as special education or economic advantage level. The overall year-to-year retention rate will still be measured, but the documenting of dropout and transfer numbers by sub-categories would provide important additional information.

9. Clarify the guidelines on reporting post-secondary readiness.

Our review of the annual reports from those schools enrolling secondary school students shows a great deal of variation in the data reported from school to school. Some report graduation statistics for those students listed as enrolled seniors the previous June, and others report those listed as seniors as of October 1. Some schools report the number of graduates who have earned college credits from dual enrollment programs, and others do not. Some report the number or percentage of students who have matriculated in a post-secondary program as of eight months following the school's graduation date, others do not. We encourage the Commission to work with the schools to clarify what the school should be required to report, and encourage schools to report all other post-secondary readiness information that they deem relevant to their mission in an appendix in their annual reports.

10. Continue and refine parent and community engagement requirements.

We found a wide variation in schools' annual reports on parent and community engagement. How parents engage with individual teachers and the school as a whole obviously will vary depending on whether the school enrolls students at the elementary, middle or high school level, whether it has a student boarding option, and whether it primarily offers a virtual learning environment. We recommend that the Commission work with the schools to offer a few required categories for parent-school contact. This might include the number and percentage of parents who have at least one face-to-face or a synchronous virtual meeting with a teacher during the year. The Panorama Education survey provides additional data on parents' perceptions about parent-school communication and engagement. However, because the overall parental return and/or response rate is often not reported, it is difficult both for the school and the Commission to develop useful conclusions from the data.

Similarly, there is an absence of data about community engagement or involvement in most of the schools' reports. All of the schools have, to one degree or another, listed such engagement as a goal for the school, and that community resources are used as part of students' learning experiences. The Commission should work with the schools and decide on one or more measures that can be defined broadly enough to work across all the schools and would also assure the Commission that such engagement is present. Again, those schools who have included specific community-based or public performance goals as part of their mission should be encouraged to add such data in an appendix in their annual reports.

11. Develop a standardized form for the yearly reporting on the academic and social/cultural performance framework by the charter schools.

As we reviewed the yearly reports we were impressed by the wealth of information provided by the charter schools for their various constituencies and stakeholders. At the same time, it was sometimes difficult to understand and interpret the results and difficult to look across the charter schools for consistent data and trends.

Therefore, we recommend that a standardized form be developed and that all the charter schools be required to use this form in reporting their yearly progress in reaching the targets and benchmarks included in the Framework. This form should require consistent information across all the charter schools. Charter schools may be given the option of submitting additional information if they wish in appendices to the standardized form.

12. Modify the yearly reports to more specifically address the academic and social/cultural performance of the charter schools.

In the interviews with charter school administrators we learned of many examples where the Commission members or Commission staff had met with the schools to address specific questions and concerns related to the charter school's performance. And in all cases the administrators reported that these meetings were useful. However, in reviewing the yearly reports we found little evidence where these questions or concerns were raised by the Commission and documented in the report.

Thus, we recommend a two-step process be used in producing the yearly reports. As we described above, we think that each charter school should be required to submit evidence through a standardized reporting form. Secondly, we recommend that the Commission staff review these reports and issue a separate report (or addendum) listing specific commendations for the charter school and the specific areas of concern that they wish to address with the charter school. We believe this two-step process will improve the transparency of reporting the charter school evidence and performance, and

provide the charter schools with clearer evidence of the areas of concern and the areas that need to be addressed by the charter school.

13. Revise the timelines for the submission of reports, and the number of reports, to more closely reflect the realities of running schools and the availability of data.

The review of the timelines established by the Commission for reports from the charter schools revealed that some reports are due before data is available (e.g., MEA assessment data). In addition, through our interviews we documented many requests from the Commission or Commission staff to the charter schools for what might be best described ad hoc reports.

We recognize that sometimes there is a specific need for some of these ad hoc reports, but we believe that if not monitored closely, these ad hoc requests for data can over time result in what might be called “information creep”; that is, the continued expansion of the collection of information which may have limited value or limited shelf life. Thus, we recommend that the Commission and Commission staff periodically review the number, substance, and timelines for requested reports, both regular and ad hoc reports, and determine how the efficiency of data collection and timeliness of reports may be improved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe the Commission should be commended for their continuous work on creating and implementing a Framework for reporting the academic performance and the social/cultural development of Maine’s charter schools and their students. We believe the current Framework, as described in state statute and in the Performance Measures Guidance document, provides a good framework for monitoring the development and performance of the charter schools. And after analyzing the Framework and how the Commission, Commission staff, and the charter schools use it, we reached a set of findings and recommendations that have been described above.

Part II of the external review will entail conducting a review and analysis of existing charter school annual performance assessment frameworks used in other states to assess and report on the performance of their charter schools. We believe that Maine should develop such a framework in order to, in the words of the 2017 National Association of Charter School Authorizers Report on Maine,

Develop a public annual report of school performance to present to the public the status of charter school academic progress in Maine and to support accountability decision-making, transparency, and access to quality school option for parents (p.8).

Further we believe the annual report of academic performance should include a weighting system to indicate the value placed on each of the major academic measures in the Framework used by the Commission to assess annually the performance of Maine's charter schools.

Part II of the external review will be designed to provide the Commission with examples of public charter school performance reports, as well as options for weighting measures, and assessments of strengths and shortcomings of various reports and weighting systems.

References

2017 NASCA Authorizer Evaluation Report. National Association of Charter School Authorizers, Chicago, IL.

Biographic Sketches of the Authors

Silver Analytics Consulting Services is a Maine-based firm of professional consultants with over 50+ years combined expertise and experience in education policy, practice, and technical experience. Sketches of the authors of this report are presented below.

Dr. Richard E. Barnes is professor emeritus of Educational Leadership at the University of Southern Maine. While at USM, he served as dean of the former College of Education for ten years, and for nine years taught courses in educational leadership and served as project director on several long-term projects to enhance leadership skills for teachers and administrators. Prior to his work at USM, Barnes was a teacher, principal and superintendent of schools in central and southern Maine in addition to earlier work as a teacher in Boston and Philadelphia. Since retiring from USM, Barnes has been a senior research associate for two long-term policy research and evaluation projects at USM's Center for Applied Research and Evaluation (CEPARE), and a consultant to several small rural schools. Along with his research work, he was a facilitator for the UM and USM faculty planning committee for the University of Maine Center for Graduate Education, and served as a founding member of the Maine Charter School Commission for its first three years. In addition to being a contributing author to CEPARE policy reports, Barnes published several articles and book chapters on school-university collaboration for school renewal and teacher leadership through the National Network for Educational Renewal and the late John Goodlad.

Dr. David L. Silvernail is adjunct research professor and professor emeritus at the University of Southern Maine. He was the founder and director of the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research and Evaluation (CEPARE) at the University of Southern Maine, and a founder and co-director of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI), a non-partisan research institute of the Maine Legislature and the University of Maine System. For the past 20+ years Dr. Silvernail has been conducting policy research and analysis, and providing technical assistance to the Maine Legislature, Maine State Board of Education, Maine Department of Education, Maine State Planning Office, and other state and regional education agencies. He has published over 40 journal articles, monographs and book chapters, and prepared over 50 research reports and briefing papers for agencies and states on a variety of topics including school funding, school district reorganization, student assessment systems, student equity, poverty and achievement, higher performing, more efficient schools, and higher education participation and performance. Additionally Dr. Silvernail has provided research and evaluation assistance for over 60 school districts in Maine and across the nation, and he started his professional education career as a middle and high school mathematics and political science teacher.