

MINUTES
Excel Academy Massachusetts Board
Academic Oversight Committee Meeting
Monday, December 4, 2023 – 1:30 pm
Location: Zoom

Committee Members in Attendance: Steve Zrike, Bernabe Rodriguez, Traci Griffith Walker

Committee Members Not in Attendance: N/A

Staff Attending: Owen Stearns, Nina Keough, Ferny Reyes, Sarah Kantrowitz, Arthur Kaynor

Members of the Public Attending: Shirley Verónica Cardona

1. Call to Order & Welcome

Zrike called the meeting to order at 1:33pm and presided over the meeting. Kaynor kept the minutes. Zrike welcomed everyone to the second Academic Oversight Committee meeting of the new school year and facilitated brief introductions. Board members, staff, and members of the public introduced themselves. Griffith Walker is the newest member of this Committee. As a reminder, Verónica Cardona is a member of the Friends of Excel Academy Charter Schools Board, and is regularly participating in Academic Committee meetings and Board Academic updates in Massachusetts and Rhode Island throughout the year as a member of the public and then keeping the Friends Board up-to-date on academic outcomes and priorities in each region.

2. Approval of Minutes

Rodriguez motioned to approve the Academic Oversight Committee meeting minutes from 9.18.23, Zrike seconded, and the motion was approved unanimously.

All those in favor: Steve Zrike, Bernabe Rodriguez, Traci Griffith Walker

Opposed: None

Abstain: None

3. Update on Academics

Keough (Chief Schools Officer) welcomed the Committee and noted that we are still learning how to make the best use of our time together each quarter as a Committee, and invited the Committee to provide feedback or suggestions after this meeting as we plan ahead for the next meeting. Keough noted that Reyes (Director of Data & Assessment) will provide updates on academic data and how our program is doing this year and that Kantrowitz (Managing Director of Student Supports) is participating in this meeting due to a prior request of the Committee to look more closely at MLL student performance trends specifically and also general performance trending for students with IEPs and MLLs.

Reyes summarized highlights from the academic data and updates slides that were provided to the Committee in advance of this meeting, including the following:

- We are seeing improvements in attendance. More students are coming to school, and they are doing so more frequently.
- We are seeing higher performance on the first Interim Assessment than in SY22-23.
- More students than ever before are taking AP courses and are projected to pass the AP exam.
- We are projecting improved performance on MCAS based on MAP projections and internal indicators relative to SY22-23 across grade levels (see Slide 6).
- We are conducting interim staff and student surveys on 10 key indicators from the annual survey from the previous year.
- Suspension data is on track to be lower than last year, but likely higher than our network goal of 6%.

Keough provided an update on performance trending at our Excel Academy East Boston campus specifically and particular challenges on this campus. Our Deputy Chief Schools Officer is spending 2-3 days per week at this campus to provide targeted leadership support. Other members of the Network Team are also providing targeted support to the school-based team. The goals of this work are: (1) to help stabilize the school in areas of culture

and academic systems; and (2) ensuring that a strong team is in place for next school year.

Keough previewed academic data that will be available for review at our next Committee meeting in March 2024.

- MAP Winter Testing (Dec.)
- MS Practice MCAS (Jan.-early Mar.)
- HS Interim Assessment #2 (Jan.)
- Interim Survey #2 (Jan.)

Zrike asked a clarifying question about AP data and access to advanced coursework. Excel's advanced coursework is almost exclusively AP. Verónica Cardona asked if there is an understanding of the reason we're seeing a 38.5% increase in MLL participation in AP coursework. Kantrowitz noted that a possible reason is increased availability of course advising resources and relevant data for MLL students. Reyes shared additional reflections on efforts to improve academic advising resources and practices for MLL students.

Keough shared reasons for the success of our 8-Week Win structure in calibrating our schools effectively at the start of the school year. It helped to ensure consistent focus on academics and teaching rather than on administrative functions. This structure has also fostered a strong partnership between school-based and Network-based teams to kick off the year. We are now in the process of planning for this process again at the start of next school year and gathering feedback from stakeholders to inform the planning and how to codify and build upon what worked best. Keough also noted that these efforts have been helpful in being very clear about what we celebrate as an organization. We have done this more intentionally than ever before, over the course of this fall. This process also led to the launch of a leader newsletter that highlights areas of growth and best practices across the school-based and network teams that are engaged in this work. We also celebrated and gave awards to teachers who demonstrated tremendous growth through their first 8 weeks, as part of an ongoing effort to be very intentional about celebrating teachers who are leading from their work in the classroom.

Keough also previewed areas of focus for Trimester 2 to improve academic outcomes, including:

- Campuses are identifying academic outcomes that they are prioritizing to track and improve.
- Instructional leaders are focusing coaching on engagement strategies and academic ownership.
- We are addressing barriers that limit our use of data for coaching, including making our assessment systems more consistent.
- We are leaning in on NWEA/MAP for our middle school program with re-launch of its importance for both students and staff.

Kantrowitz provided further updates on efforts to support students with IEPs and MLLs specifically. We are observing differentials for these groups across the network. With respect to increasing visibility and ownership of MLL achievement, Kantrowitz highlighted the following:

- Tier I curriculum adoption and data infrastructure improvements
- Network and school leadership scorecards include subgroup differentials for every high stakes data point
- Teacher & MLL Specialist Inquiry Cycles are reviewed by Network Leadership to identify trends
- New MS English Language Development Curriculum in 2022-2023

Keough provided additional updates about demonstrated areas of strength on specific campuses:

- XLGW and XLHS are our most stable XLMA campuses currently, and this represents two years of hard work to get to this point. Both campuses are prepared for further growth.
- The NAT is supporting the growth of a strong adult culture at the XLC campus, which includes leadership development.
- As noted earlier, the NAT is leaning into co-managing the XLEB campus and has hired an experienced school leader to provide support.
- The XLRI school is off to an incredibly strong start and has been a source of many best practices that have been shared throughout the XLMA campuses.

Zrike mentioned that culture and leadership challenges are significant across the education sector, not just at Excel, and asked how we are thinking about setting up systems to bring the whole network to a broader place of stability with fewer emergency situations to respond to at a given time. Keough shared some improvements we

have been implementing to align vision and practices across the school and network leadership teams. That has been a major focus of the past two years and is an ongoing area of focus. We are also focused on strengthening succession planning and teacher coaching, so that we have a stronger pipeline for leadership roles. Griffith Walker and Zrike shared additional insights related to how best to orient new teachers and the importance of starting new staff off with a very clear understanding of the school's mission and brand, and then giving new teachers sufficient resources and coaching to hone their craft. They both noted that they are glad to be a part of this Board and Committee, to share best practices and learnings between their schools and Excel and cross-pollinate ideas to respond to challenges that the whole sector is experiencing.

Zrike asked for more information about what process we have for quarterly step-backs internally, to review academic data and inform potential mid-year improvements. Kough shared that the middle schools give shared unit assessments aligned to the curriculum and then step-back assessments with MAP three times per year and practice MCAS once per year. The Network Academic Team has been working to improve our systems to increase transparency of this data, so that we are consistently sharing it back with schools and using it to inform priorities for the network and each campus. We have also been organizing shared spaces for instructional leaders to come together regularly, review the data, and strategize together across teams and campuses. Other sources of data live primarily in one-on-one management settings with School Leaders and Deans of Culture or instructional leaders. The High School has a similar structure, but currently only for interim assessments. This is a work in progress, and there is a shared investment in this effort by schools and the Network Team.

Kaynor requested an example of a best practice from the Excel Academy Rhode Island campus that has benefited Excel campuses in Massachusetts. Kantrowitz noted that XLRI has done a stellar job of leaning into the use of MAP data, ensuring that teachers are on the same page in terms of testing environments, and also, notably, in utilizing strong individual relationships with families to empower students to feel more invested in their growth. The school held individualized meetings for every student and their parent or guardian to discuss the student's MAP goal and what they're doing to work toward that goal. Every parent or guardian and every student knows about their individual goal. Additionally, the school formed "MAP Packs," groups of students that are helping to hold each other accountable to MAP growth and to feel excited about and celebrate their progress together. This practice has been very successful in Rhode Island and is now being rolled out at a couple of our Massachusetts campuses, to help increase performance and build strong student and family investment in MAP growth. Keough added that this success highlights the strength of the Excel school leader community as a real bright spot this year. All five school leaders from MA and RI, along with Network leaders, meet regularly as an inter-school group to collaborate and actively share best practices across campuses and regions. We are grateful to the collaborative spirit and energy that our school leaders are consistently bringing to this work.

Stearns reiterated that we welcome feedback on ways we might be able to continue improving the structure of our Academic Committee moving forward. Kaynor reminded the Committee that the next Excel MA Academic Oversight Committee meetings and academic updates to the full Board are currently scheduled for:

- Mon., 3/11/24, 1:30-2:30pm via Zoom (Academic Committee)
- Fri., 3/15/24, 8:30-10am via Zoom (Academic Update to full Board)
- Mon., 6/10/24, 1:30-2:30pm via Zoom (Academic Committee)
- Fri., 6/14/24, 8:30-10am via Zoom (Academic Update to full Board)

4. Public Comment

None

5. Adjourn

Rodriguez moved to adjourn the meeting at 2:29pm, seconded by Griffith Walker, and the meeting was adjourned.

List of Documents Presented at the Meeting:

1. Agenda
2. Minutes from 9.18.23
3. Academic data dashboard
4. Academic update slides