

SOUTHWEST CHARTER SCHOOL

2014 SITE VISIT REPORT



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Oregon Department of Education, Office of Learning

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Introduction

Site visits to the State Sponsored Charter Schools are a regular and systemic examination of a charter school's administration and implementation of the charter agreement. They are one of the essential functions of the Oregon Department of Education, Office of Learning, as delegated by the State Board of Education (SBE), consistent with ORS 338.095 (2), "The sponsor or sponsor's designee at least annually shall visit the public charter school site and review the public charter school's compliance with the terms and provisions of the charter."

The mission of the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) is to "...foster excellence for every learner through innovation, collaboration, leadership and service to our education partners." With the mission and statute in mind, a Site Visit Protocol was developed to establish a framework and focus for the annual site visit to State Sponsored Charter Schools.

The purpose of the annual site visit is to gather and document evidence about the school's performance, implementation of the education and organizational program outlined in its charter, and compliance with law and regulations. The documents and observations gathered will assist in assessing the extent to which the State Sponsored Charter School is faithful to the terms of its charter, educationally and fiscally sound and organizationally viable.

Data Collection Process and Methodology

The 2013-14 Site Visit to this State Sponsored Charter School was conducted by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) with the assistance of a contracted retired educator, two State Board members, the executive officer of the State Board, and a principal from another Oregon State Sponsored Charter School. The members of the Review Team were familiar with the 2013-2014 Site Visit Protocol document used to guide the site visit. Prior to the site visit a Site Visit Protocol was given and emailed to each charter school director. In conducting the site visit, the team:

- Reviewing key background documents provided by ODE, including the current charter agreement and the 2012-13 Annual Report.
- Researching other available information about the state sponsored charter schools, including relevant statutes, report and evaluations, newspaper articles and other data.
- Reviewing documentation provided by the state sponsored charter school prior to the visit.
- Arranging the site visit in coordination with State Sponsored Charter School, including identifying participants for the focus groups.
- Collecting evidence of the school's compliance or performance with respect to its charter contract during the site visit.

The site visit occurred November 18, 2013 at Southwest Charter School, located in an urban/industrial setting in southwest Portland near I-5 and the Willamette River. The building was formerly a warehouse converted into classrooms, multi-purpose room and offices. In addition to touring the facility, the Review Team devoted nine hours to interviews with

representatives of Southwest Charter School parents, staff, students, school leaders, and the Charter School Board. The remaining portion of the visit was devoted to observing students in their classrooms. At the conclusion of the site visit, the team members met with the leadership team and staff members and shared the team's initial observations and follow-up questions.

The school is organized with one education director, a part-time business manager, a part-time accounting manager, a full time health/information/property manager, nine teachers, an after school enrichment coordinator and educational assistant, a before school enrichment coordinator and educational assistant, a part-time physical education teacher, and a long-term substitute. There is no receptionist. There are nine classrooms on the main floor, in addition to the offices for administration and other office staff located upstairs in a separate space. A large multi-purpose room is on the main floor and one room in the basement is used for technology, storage and some food preparation. The parking situation for the school is challenging as the charter school moved its parking spaces to accommodate a play area. The new parking area has limited spaces and some teachers park at a nearby restaurant; each week at least three staff members have to park on the street. The teachers get reimbursed from the charter school for their parking costs.

During the day-long visit, nine classrooms were visited, five focus groups were held (school leaders, Charter Board members, parents, staff and students), informal conversations were held between the team and various members at the school, and a debrief with staff at the end of the day.

The nine-hour visit was roughly divided into hour-long segments to meet with various focus groups or to visit classrooms. The Review Team met first with the School Leader Focus Group and asked questions following the Site Visit Protocol. Then the team visited a number of classrooms, changing rooms about every 15 minutes. Later in the day, team members met with the Parent Focus Group while the other team member met with the Student Focus Group. All the team members met with the Charter Board Focus Group. In the afternoon, the team continued to visit different classrooms. The team divided the teachers into two groups for the Teacher Focus Group. Finally, the Review Team met with the school leaders and staff to share general observations of the day.

This report presents data and information gathered prior and during the site visit to the school. It also provides the Review Team's observations and conclusions about the school's compliance and performance as a State Sponsored Charter School.

Background

The history of Southwest Charter began in February 2005 when Portland Public Schools voted to close Smith Elementary School. A group of parents met and pursued a charter by securing a federal planning grant via the Oregon Department of Education in May 2005. Concurrently, the parent group submitted a charter school proposal to Portland Public Schools. In July 2005, PPS denied the Southwest Charter School proposal, which they appealed and in December 2005 it was denied a second time.

In April 2006, Southwest Charter submitted an appeal of the district denial to ODE. The charter school was approved by the State Board of Education for sponsorship in April 2007. In September, 2007, the school opened its doors on SW Hood Ave.. in Portland as a K-6 school with 29 children and 3 teachers; by the end of the year it had 45 students.

For the 2008-2009 school year, there were 60 students and a fourth classroom was added. During that school year, a building search led to another facility (at 0690 Bancroft, Portland); however, even after spending \$50,000 for permits and required tests, the Portland City Council rejected the school's plan to move into the facility.

In September 2009, Southwest Charter was using two locations about 2 miles apart with approximately 120 students. In May 2010, an intent to lease on the Bancroft facility was signed. The students, however, started the 2010 school year at Congregation Neveh Shalom near Hillsdale with 150 students due to remodeling at the Bancroft site.

Finally, in March 2011 students and staff moved into the Bancroft facility with 195 students, almost full capacity (with 250 students on the wait list) and a lease was signed February 2011.

Currently, the school is in the third year of a ten-year lease. The school is concerned about escalating costs when they have to renew the lease. They do report a good relationship with the storage area next door as they worked together on the trash enclosure, for instance. The fire inspector recently requested they add sprinklers; the school is checking with the building's landlord about this issue.

The site visit confirmed a stable governing board and qualified administrator are in place. The school continues to enroll close to 200 students; as of December 11, 2013 the actual enrollment was 194 students.

In 2013-14 Southwest serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Comment

A part titled *Comment* is at the end of each section for consideration and possible action.

Mission and Vision

The Southwest Charter School mission and vision statements in its 2012-2013 Annual Report:

Mission

Southwest Charter School's mission is to provide a creative learning environment where students develop a sense of place and become stewards of the natural world and active citizens within our community.

Vision

Our vision is to look beyond classroom walls. We believe that healthy communities are created by engaged, informed and compassionate citizens. Through service, integrated curriculum and experiential learning, we provide opportunities for our students to actively build relationships locally, inspiring them to become catalysts of change in a global community.

The mission and vision of the school were apparent within the school as evidenced through conversations with the various focus groups. The groups (staff, leadership, students, Charter Board members, and parents) related how the school has established a creative, place-based learning environment with a close connection to community and has integrated curriculum to provide a variety of opportunities.

The school's mission and vision holds the school as a leader in the community with a priority of community projects "beyond classroom walls" which connect children to the real world. The Review Team heard numerous references to student experiences outside of the classroom supporting the community and implementing school curriculum. Experiences included the long-standing partnership with Portland Parks and Recreation Cottonwood Bay and Willamette Parks, two sites near the school on the Willamette River, and a stewardship project at Johnson Creek allowing students various projects. In addition, the kindergarten students are working with Zenger Farm to learn about agriculture but also to provide community service, such as pulling weeds and working with chickens. SWCS students also meet four times a year at the Oregon Food Bank to volunteer as a service learning project.

School leadership believes that the mission is also to help develop students into adults as active learners, to see themselves in the broader community, to care about their place in the community, and to become skilled as leaders. When asked about the mission of the school, the staff reported that the placed-based connection to the community (i.e., testing water quality, working at the Zinger Farm) is a strength of the program.

Parents reported that the school's mission is being accomplished because students are involved in the community with a project-based approach. The social and emotional life of the student is prioritized and the small classroom size supports that goal. Parents believe the students are receiving positive discipline. Students are also being taught to be autonomous learners with problem solving, such as acting as a scientist.

The charter board members noted that the mission of the school is actualized by the creative teaching because staff has more leeway than in a public school and, more importantly, students feel they "have a place" in a positive school environment.

Enrollment and Attendance

Ethnicity and Race

Southwest Charter School ethnicity and race enrollment data are as of October 2012. The source is the ODE's Student Enrollment Reports for 2012-2013 at <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?=3225>. For the purposes of this report, Southwest's enrollment data are compared to Portland Public Schools (PPS) because Southwest is located in that district.

GROUP	SOUTHWEST		PPS	
Total Enrollment	197	100%	46,581	100%
Female	79	40%	22848	49%
Male	118	60%	23733	51%
American Indian/Alaskan N	0	0%	540	1%
Asian	2	1%	3738	8%
Pacific Islander	1	1%	417	1%
Black/African American	4	2%	5258	11%
Hispanic/Latino	13	7%	7333	16%
White	166	84%	26196	56%
Multiracial	11	6%	3099	7%

Comment

Southwest ethnicity and race enrollment data provide Southwest the opportunity to consider whether its enrollment reflects the surrounding area. During the site visit, it was apparent the board members and the administration were aware of a disparity of male/female and students of color between Southwest and PPS.

English Language Learners

Southwest staff reported no students are identified English Language Learners. PPS District Report Card shows its ELL enrollment is Grades 3-5 at 16%; Grades 4-5 at 16%; and Grades 6-8 at 17%.

Comment

Southwest may need to monitor and adjust its marketing and outreach to area minority communities.

Special Education

The 2012-13 Annual Report cited 15.4% of Southwest’s students were eligible for services and/or speech/language support from Portland Public Schools. Of those 30 students, SWCD worked to identify seven of them during the 2011-2012 school year. Eight students had 504 plans; four of these students were identified during 2012-2013. PPS District Report Card shows its special education enrollment is K-3 at 13%; Grades 4-5 at 18%; and Grades 6-8 at 18%.

Teachers reported the PPS staff person who is providing services to special education students reports she is not able to accomplish everything that needs to be done in the time allotted. IEP meeting are occurring and the teachers are involved, but teachers report that students are not receiving the services specified in their IEPs. Teachers noted that last year, for example, the PPS staff person started with the older kids and was then working “her way down” to students at lower grades.

Teachers described the process for identifying a child who may need special education services as working informally with parents as teachers sees a child struggle after trying

different strategies, meeting with Anne to discuss the child who then contacts the parents. An initial evaluation happens then and if the parent agrees, the student is tested. Teachers reported this step can take months due to the limited PPS-assigned Special Education staff. Following the testing, the team gathers to review the results and make decision about the best course of action.

Demographics

As reported in the 2012-2013 Annual Report, 88% of students were residents of the Portland Public School District, an increase of 8% over 2011-2012. Twelve percent resided in other districts, including: Tigard/Tualatin, Parkrose, Hillsboro, North Clackamas, Columbia, David Douglas, Gresham/Barlow, Beaverton, Hillsboro and Lake Oswego. Eleven percent of Southwest Charter students qualified for free-and-reduced lunch, a slight decrease from 12% the previous year.

Other Special Populations

The 2012-2013 Annual Report stated that SWCS has a higher proportion of students who are male at 61% compared with 51% in the PPS district. The annual report makes note of academic literature about “seat work” not being conducive to boys and their style of learning. The school believes that parents are choosing SWCS because of a project-based and active curriculum that appeals to active boys.

Curriculum

Background

Each year the school focuses on a revolving three-year theme of either “sky”, “water” or “earth”; this year “water” is the theme. Teachers noted the curriculum is developed by aligning Common Core and integrating curriculum to meet the needs of the students and the year’s overall theme. A whole school focus of the “water” theme was apparent to the Review Team, as well as how teachers work together to have a broader curriculum within a place-based philosophy. Teachers reported they are also creating assessments, using many rubrics, built directly in with their designed curriculum to use standards. Teachers noted that they are refocusing efforts this year even more to teach place-based instruction as an academic priority.

This theme of water was apparent in the classrooms visited when the Review Team saw one classroom of first/second grade students illustrating salmon on pre-made clay pieces, part of the class' exploration of fish hatcheries in the gorge. The kindergarten classroom had an extensive wall visual of a farm and corresponding vocabulary words, part of their agricultural project with Zenger Farm. In a fifth/sixth grade classroom, students were developing their own projects such as one student creating a board game and another showing how electricity works. The third/fourth grade students were actively designing water project books with drawings and using water-related vocabulary that was available on the classroom walls. The seventh/eighth grade classroom is involved in a boat building exercise that demonstrates

math principles and design as part of their water project.

Each day, usually in the morning, a consistent schedule of about 60 to 90 minutes (depending on the grade level) is organized to accommodate instruction in specific subjects, e.g. math and English/Language Arts. In the upper grade levels, the structure of literacy and math is organized by teacher strengths; they explained they divide the grade level with one teacher responsible for literacy and the other teacher responsible for math. Staff records indicated both teachers had the appropriate licensure for these subjects. School leaders said “math seems to stand alone,” and as a priority subject, it was important students have direct instruction. In the afternoon, students are in their original classroom for projects and additional curriculum instruction. In a focus group, school leaders pointed out science, art, and civics are “the lenses” through which most of the curriculum is taught.

During the staff focus group, the new K-8 math curriculum, *Singapore Math*, was discussed. Teachers noted that the previous math curriculum, *Bridges*, was not developing good math students and was not a K-8 math curriculum. Teachers believe *Singapore* is more rigorous and see students feeling the change, especially at the upper grades. The teachers noted they are implementing *Singapore Math* with aggressive fidelity. Teachers noted that *Singapore* can be “sort of dry” so they have to be creative to teach the math curriculum. The fourth grade teacher reported using the third grade *Singapore* book because students had not seen some of the concepts before. Teachers have also heard that parents are positive about the new math program and additional math homework; an after school math club was implemented to help students as well. The leadership explained that *Singapore* was selected as part a group decision by staff last year and the outcome has been positive. Staff realized that some grade levels were more behind in math than others so this year the schedule, per grade level, has been adjusted to give certain grades more time; for instance, third grade scored poorly last year and that grade level has been a particular focus.

Observations

The Review Team viewed students both in the morning and in the afternoon, engaged in projects and classroom instruction. During the day, the team saw students working in groups, pairs, individually, or directly with the teacher or classroom aide and/or classroom volunteers. Students were participating by answering questions, using workbooks, helping one another with questions and answers, interacting with one another, engaging with materials around the room (i.e., vocabulary walls, research resources, a publishing center, charts, graphs, student displays).

The Review Team also noted the easy rapport the students have with teachers and/or other adults, including when a Review Team member asked a question. Problem solving between students was also viewed as students helped “their neighbors.” In math this was apparent as students were discovering the variety of ways they could solve the same problem. It was also apparent to a Review Team member that students are respectful of one another and their teacher as they do not interrupt one another.

Each member of the Review Team was also able to attend classrooms during the “Class Meeting” part of the day. This occurs throughout the school at the same time every day. The

Review Team reported that the meetings are well organized as students, who sit in a circle, are all given a chance to share thoughts (several rooms pass a baton), resolve conflicts (primary students often discuss playing tag, being excluded), and offer other suggestions/solutions. The Review Team saw students giving compliments to one another and recognizing other students' creativity. While the teachers appear to manage the meeting, the students are often in charge of determining the agenda, at least in the upper grades.

During the student focus meeting, they reported instructional and/or other support in a variety of ways:

- teachers share their emails,
- students can email questions on the weekend and get a response,
- help from teachers who are not necessarily their own teacher,
- projects posted around the room help them understand the concepts,
- “community day” on Friday allows students to work with all levels of grades so they know and help one another more,
- feel they are treated like adults at upper grades,
- regular class meetings are helpful.

The Review Team felt their observations aligned what students reported during their focus interview. Teachers are supportive of students as are students with one another. There is instruction, leadership development, and personal support occurring throughout the program.

Instruction and Professional Development

ODE Site Visits are Not for Teacher or Administrator Evaluations

The site visit and report are not intended to be and should not be interpreted to be evaluations of individual teachers or their instruction or an evaluation of the school administrator. Those are the responsibilities of the Southwest administrator and board.

Southwest Charter School's Processes for Teacher and Administrator Evaluations

The effectiveness of instruction is evaluated through formal evaluations and peer observations. The teachers clearly described the new process the director is using this year: setting goals to student performance, formal and informal observations and time at the end of the year to discuss their evaluations. Teachers reported they also completed a self-evaluation in areas of curriculum, collegial work, and data analysis (especially math scores).

The Charter Board members reported the board has implemented a more formal evaluation for the director than in the past. They used another school's evaluation plan and hope to improve on their own evaluation in the future. They meet with the director every other week and have been setting short-term goals. They believe the director can prioritize, communicate and the board president said the director is “low maintenance.” They believe what “she brings to the table” is an important asset. They also said they support the director

and she supports them in return. The board members wish they had the funds for a vice principal as they see how much the director has to do on her own; teachers also commented that they wish they had more time with the director.

Federal Law and Highly Qualified to Teach

Southwest provides verification that 100% of its teachers are highly qualified for their teaching assignments consistent with state and federal standards. At the site visit, 100% of Southwest's teachers were highly qualified.

Staff Licensure Years of Experience

The 2012-2013 Annual Report shows nine out of ten staff members hold a Master's Degree or higher; one staff member has a Bachelor's of Arts and Education. Upon review of Southwest's teacher and administrator licensure, at least 80% of the teaching and administrative staff hold a teaching license issued by Teacher Standards and Practice. Two teachers are Registered.

Professional Development (PD) and Other Supports

The professional development this year has focused on the new math curriculum, *Singapore*. Staff received two days of training in the new program before school started. This investment has been positive as teachers and parents feel the curriculum is meeting the needs of the students better. Teachers also have received some professional development in organizing and facilitating class meetings. Staff is also conscious of aligning curriculum with Common Core. The 2012-2013 Annual Report listed professional opportunities for staff such as the National Social Science Teachers' Conference in Seattle, Story Workshop at Opal Charter School, and Positive Discipline training with Jo Sigmund, one of the founding teachers of Emerson Charter School.

Teachers reported they have had opportunities to observe in other schools. SWCS calls this the "School Visit Day," which is a no-student day intentionally planned for a low-cost method of visiting other schools. In the 2012-2013 Annual Report, five schools were listed (Maplewood Elementary School, Emerson Charter, Springwater Charter, Sunnyside Chart, Corbett Charter). The school director has also visited other charter schools as part of her professional development.

Student Performance Data

Participation in State Assessments

Southwest's State School Report Card shows 100% of Southwest's students participated in the 2012-2013 Oregon Assessments of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS).

State School Report Card – 2012/2013

The Southwest Charter School’s 2012-2013 OAKS testing results and the Oregon Report Card, revealed an overall rating, compared to all schools statewide, of “Level 4,” which means the school falls between 44% and 90% of schools. The Oregon Report Card, comparing SWCS to elementary schools with similar student demographics, rated the school “Below Average” which means it is in the bottom third of comparison schools.

**2012-13 Southwest Charter School Student Achievement:
Percentage of Students “Met” or Exceeded” State Standards
compared to other State Sponsored Charter Schools,
Portland Public School and the State Average**

Subject	Southwest Charter	Portland Public Schools	State
Reading (grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)	72.6	74.6	70
Math (grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)	55.6	67.3	62.1
Science (grades 5, 8)	77.5	Grd. 5: 72.9 Grd. 8: 64.4	67.6

See Southwest Charter School Oregon Report Card for Disaggregated Data.

Northwest Evaluation Association: Methods of Academic Progress

For the second year, SWCS has tested students using the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Methods of Academic Progress (MAP) which were administered in September 2012 and February-March 2013. All students in grades 3-8 were tested; younger students, grades K-2, were only tested on reading and math (kindergarten scores are not reported here as they are specific to early learning skills), as reported in the 2012-2013 Annual Report. The testing situation was similar to OAKS testing with the computer lab being used.

**2012-13 Southwest Charter School Student Achievement:
Summary of SWCS Reading Student Performance, Fall to Spring,
Compared to NWEA Normed Averages from 2011**

Grade	SWCS Average	Norm Group Average
1st Grade		
Fall	160.4	160.3
Spring	168.3	177
Growth	7.9	16.7
2nd Grade		
Fall	176.6	175.9
Spring	182.4	190
Growth	5.8	14.1
3rd Grade		
Fall	190	189.9
Spring	197.4	199
Growth	7.4	9.1
4th Grade		
Fall	206.1	199.8
Spring	206.2	207
Growth	0.1	7.2
5th Grade		
Fall	211.3	207.1
Spring	217.4	212
Growth	6.1	4.9
6th Grade		
Fall	225.1	212.3
Spring	228.3	216
Growth	3.4	3.7
7th Grade		
Fall	223.8	216.3
Spring	228.3	220
Growth	4.5	3.7
8th Grade		
Fall	230.2	219.3
Spring	233.8	222
Growth	3.6	2.7

**2012-13 Southwest Charter School Student Achievement:
Summary of SWCS Math Student Performance, Fall to Spring,
Compared to NWEA Normed Averages from 2011**

Grade	SWCS Average	Norm Group Average
1st Grade		
Fall	159.9	162.8
Spring	179.4	179
Growth	19.5	16.2
2nd Grade		
Fall	182.4	178.2
Spring	184.7	191
Growth	2.3	12.8
3rd Grade		
Fall	187.1	192.1
Spring	192.8	203
Growth	5.7	10.9
4th Grade		
Fall	200.8	203.8
Spring	208.4	212
Growth	7.6	8.2
5th Grade		
Fall	207.2	212.9
Spring	215.4	221
Growth	8.2	8.1
6th Grade		
Fall	229.3	219.6
Spring	235.1	226
Growth	5.8	6.4
7th Grade		
Fall	227.2	225.6
Spring	234.3	230
Growth	7.1	4.4
8th Grade		
Fall	228.4	230.2
Spring	240.1	234
Growth	11.7	3.8

**2012-13 Southwest Charter School Student Achievement:
Summary of SWCS Language Student Performance, Fall to Spring,
Compared to NWEA Normed Averages from 2011**

Grade	SWCS Average	Norm Group Average
3rd Grade		
Fall	189.1	191.1
Spring	195.9	200
Growth	6.8	8.9
4th Grade		
Fall	201.8	200.9
Spring	205.4	207
Growth	3.6	6.1
5th Grade		
Fall	205.6	208
Spring	214.7	213
Growth	9.1	5
6th Grade		
Fall	221.4	212.3
Spring	222.4	216
Growth	1	3.7
7th Grade		
Fall	219.8	215.8
Spring	225.1	219
Growth	5.3	3.2
8th Grade		
Fall	224.3	218.7
Spring	229.8	221
Growth	5.5	2.3

**Areas where SWCS 2012-2013 Scores were
Higher Compared with Scores from
Portland Public Schools and the State**

Areas Where SWCS Scores Higher than PPS	Areas where SWCS Scores Higher than State
5 th science	5 th science
6 th reading	6 th reading
6 th math	6 th math
7 th reading	7 th reading
8 th reading	7 th math
8 th science	8 th science
Overall science	8 th science
	Overall reading
	Overall science

**Areas where SWCS Students' Average
2012-2013 Score were
Above NWEA's 2011 Norm Group Scores**

Grade Level	Reading Fall	Reading Spring	Math Fall	Math Spring	Language Fall	Language Spring
1 st Grade		Yes	Yes	Yes	n/a	n/a
2 nd Grade	Yes		Yes		n/a	n/a
3 rd Grade	Yes					
4 th Grade	Yes				Yes	
5 th Grade	Yes	Yes				Yes
6 th Grade	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7 th Grade	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8 th Grade	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes

Comment

Especially at upper grades, students are scoring above national NWEA norms. Students are also showing higher scores in seven NWEA areas compared to Portland Public Schools and nine NWEA areas compared to State scores. Southwest is in the first year of its new contract with explicit targets for student performance to be reviewed for the first time in June 2014.

School Improvement

The 2012-2013 Southwest Annual Report included progress on previous goals and established new goals for 2013-14 school year.

The 2012-2013 Annual Report identified a number of areas where the school has made progress. Some of these include:

- Improvement in the South Waterfront location included a cover on the play area which serves as a protected seating area for small groups of students; video monitoring for doors and front area; document cameras and projectors for every classrooms; improved IT system for the school, including needed computers for teachers; improved storage in common areas and some classrooms.
- Completed a comprehensive review of Oregon law by updating school policies with the help of OSBA.
- Improved school fundraising efforts showed a growth from \$7000 in 2011-2013 to over \$15,000 in 2012-2013. This funding allowed expansion in the art offerings for students.
- Staff “tackled” the task of ranking SWCS on seven of the Education for the Future Guidelines continua and five of the National Green Schools Guidelines continua to help focus their strategic planning process.
- Teacher evaluations improved by increasing the number of observations, setting goals, peer-to-peer observations and making time for individual reflection. The school also developed a new framework for teacher evaluation.
- Positive Discipline system had a “marked effect on our school.”

Goals for 2013-2014, identified in the 2012-2013 Annual Report, include:

- Increase academic rigor.
- Increase communication with parents about student performance and ways to support student work.
- Increase respect between students.
- Improve recognition of staff.
- Increase partnerships with community partners to further our place-based mission.
- Continue a strategic planning process that guides SWCS's growth and development in the coming years.
- Increase public awareness and community visibility of Southwest Charter School, particularly with diverse groups.
- Increase enrollment for 2012-2013 to fill the new facility.

It was apparent to the Review Team that the staff and school leadership continue to plan and use strategies to improve instruction, to offer opportunities for students, and to communicate openly with parents. The annual report noted some goals were not accomplished but the school will continue to make progress on areas such as increasing enrollment and improving OAKS test results. NWEA MAP test is also showing students are generally scoring above the norm group scores and also showing growth during the school year.

School Effectiveness

The School leader shared one way she evaluates the effectiveness of the school is through staff, parents and student survey results. The Charter Board reported it evaluates the success of the school by listening to parents, comparing SWCS students' scores with other schools' performance, enrollment, and listening to what teachers need.

The 2012-2013 Annual Report analyzed staff responses, ranking some of the top scoring comments as:

- I believe student achievement can increase through:
 - close personal relationships between students and teachers,
 - addressing student learning styles,
 - providing a threat-free environment,
 - effective professional development related to our vision.
- I feel that learning can be fun.
- My administrator treats me with respect.
- I have the opportunity to think for myself, not just carry out instructions.

The lowest scoring staff comments included:

- I believe student achievement can increase through:
 - teaching to the state standards,
 - the use of computers,
 - the use of varied technologies.
- My administrator is an effective instructional leader.
- I feel that others are clear about what my job is at this school.
- I feel recognized for good work.

Student results to the survey were reported in the 2012-2013 Annual Report as “universally agreed or strongly agreed with all the survey statements.” Only three responses were below the 4-point line:

- When I am at school:
 - I feel I have choice in what I can learn.
 - I am challenged by the work my teacher asks me to do
 - students at my school treat me with respect.

Parent results to the survey were reported in the 2012-2013 Annual Report. Highly ranked comments were not included, just areas of concern. Only those responses were below the 4-point line were included:

- I know what my child's teacher expects of my child.
- Students show respect for other students.
- The school meets the academic needs of the students.
- I know how my child is progressing in school.
- Overall the school performs well academically.
- The school succeed in preparing children for future work.
- My child's teacher helps me to help my child learn at home.

It was because of those responses and parent survey responses, it was noted in the annual report, that goals were developed to “increase attention to respect and rigor this year.”

Both the teachers and the parents, in their focus groups, shared similar information. The staff feels comfortable contacting parents by email, phone or in person during pick up. If a student has a behavior issue, a written plan is communicated to the parents. Some teachers have an open door policy from 3 to 4 p.m. each day. Staff believes parents feel comfortable approaching a teacher to talk about student progress or other concerns. Parents, too, believe the school has an open “environment of flexibility.” Parents attend a conference twice a year and receive three progress reports a year. Parents see a work sample and strengths/challenges for their students. The parents noted teachers are quick to respond to emails, and parents are encouraged to be in the classroom.

The Charter Board consists of four parents with students enrolled at the school and two adults who do not have children at the school. The board members represent various backgrounds (i.e., financial, technology, administration, and fundraising). The new “Friends” groups consist of a mixed group of parents with a board liaison with each group to make connections with families. The board has also been recruiting new members; for the first time this fall they have accepted applications for board membership. Beginning in December, 2013 the board reviewed applications and interviewed each person before the board voted on new members. The Charter Board also met with teachers to hear concerns, salary issues, and expenses.

Fundraising was discussed by the Charter Board members. With additional revenue they would like to hire a community liaison to support teachers who are doing it now. They believe a community liaison would benefit the community's view of the school. While fundraising efforts have improved in the last year, they realize they do not have a grant writing system in place or a diverse fundraising program at this time.

Summary

The Review Team saw evidence of building community between grade levels and classes through creating school-wide “families” and having regular classroom meetings. Other evidence was apparent in well-organized classrooms, student projects on the walls integrating projects and curriculum, and appropriate student work stations. It is apparent that students are happy, given autonomy, and feel the respectful environment. One student commented, “I’m a self-described difficult student, and I’ve had an awesome experience.”

During focus group discussions with students, parents, school leaders and the Charter Board, there were challenges described such as:

- Facility concerns continue to include the parking issue, the need for more natural light in the school, and play space for students.
- Students mentioned not having a playground and/or gym is a concern.

- Parents feel there are computer and technology needs that still should be met.
- Parents are concerned about the transition for students from SWCS to high school.

During focus group discussions with students, parents, school leaders and the Charter Board, there were also successes:

- The Charter Board members are pleased with the academic expectations.
- The Charter Board is feeling more experienced and is having more conversations about the school itself, rather than just current issues.
- The new “Friends” group has helped to make connections in the school community.
- The school is very proud of its place-based and project-learning structure.
- Staff noted the new math program, *Singapore*, has improved math instruction and is better aligned with Common Core.
- Parents feel the size of the school is one of its strengths.
- Parents are pleased that difficult students do not get “counseled out.”
- The strength of the parent community has increased.
- Students feel challenged in classes and find it easy to make friends.

One of the ways the school is organized is through its parent communication. Parents feel the open campus encourages parent involvement, Parents noted the school's safe environment is a strength, including no tolerance for physical issues between students and the front door is now locked with a buzzer and video camera. Having the social and emotional life of the students is a priority of parents as well as staff. Overall, parents are pleased that problem solving and positive discipline is helping create future adults.

The Review Team believes that the staff has the entire success of the school in mind, in addition to an individual's success, which is a strength. The implementation of the new math program appears to be going well, especially since all staff was involved in its decision and implementation. There is a strong awareness of programs and fidelity to implementation. With a new process of teacher evaluations, it appears the school leadership and staff are working together to assure student achievement.

Comment

As Southwest Charter School moves forward with its continued contract with the State Board of Education, the school is encouraged to find outreach possibilities to increase diversity, to look for grant opportunities, to follow through with Common Core State Standard alignment, and to continue its parent communication that is in progress. The Charter Board would be well served to implement professional development training and use the OSBA Handbook to support their work.