



**Nevada State Public
Charter School
Authority**

To: Leslie Olmstead, Board President, Elko Institute for Academic Achievement
Ashley Perkins, Principal, Elko Institute for Academic Achievement
From: Mark Modrcin, Director of Authorizing, State Public Charter School Authority
CC: Jason Guinasso, Chair, State Public Charter School Authority
Rebecca Feiden, Executive Director, State Public Charter School Authority
Date: June 27, 2019
Re: Site Evaluation Report for Elko Institute for Academic Achievement

**SITE EVALUATION REPORT
Elko Institute for Academic Achievement**

Site Evaluations are a critical accountability component to the oversight of schools by the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA) and are fundamental to charter schools' autonomy. As approved by the Legislature [NRS-388A.150] the Authority is to *“provide oversight to the charter schools that it sponsors to ensure that those charter schools maintain high educational and operational standards, preserve autonomy and safeguard the interests of pupils and the community.”*

Site Evaluations allow the SPCSA to assess schools' student achievement, progress to goals, and fulfillment of their mission, vision, and educational program outlined in their charter. Improving the learning of pupils, and, by extension, the public education system; increased opportunities for learning and access to quality education; and a more thorough and efficient system of accountability for student achievement in Nevada are all foundational elements of the SPCSA's mission, the legislative intent of charter schools and are central elements of the Authority's on-going evaluation of charter schools.

The SPCSA conducts multiple visits and evaluations throughout schools' charter terms. The cumulative evidence through multi-year oversight measures become part of the record that help inform recommendations put forth by SPCSA staff, specifically renewal recommendations to the Authority Board. The Board of the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority makes all final charter renewal decisions. Site Evaluations are just one criterion considered for renewal; student achievement, financial prudence, and fulfillment of the program outlined in the approved charter are also evaluated by the Authority when making renewal decisions.

Attached is the Site Evaluation Report for Elko Institute for Academic Achievement which was conducted by Mark Modrcin and Sandra Kinne on May 22, 2019. The school is currently in its 4th year of its 2nd charter term, which expires on June 30, 2021.

Please contact the Team Lead for this Site Evaluation, Mark Modrcin, with any questions.

SITE EVALUATION REPORT

Elko Institute for Academic Achievement

Campus Name: Elko Institute for Academic Achievement

Grade Levels: K – 8

School Leader: Ashley Perkins

Purpose of Site Evaluation: Year 4, second charter term

Date of Authorization: July 2015

Conducted Date: Wednesday, May 22, 2019

Conducted By: Mark Modrcin, Sandra Kinne

SUMMARY OF SITE EVALUATION

The mission of Elko Institute for Academic Achievement is: *“To ensure that its students receive the best education possible and that they obtain the necessary skill, knowledge and confidence to succeed in their future.”*

During the Site Evaluation, the team saw this mission living out in the following ways:

- Students were frequently provided with opportunities to work individually or collaborate in small groups in order to develop knowledge and skills. Teachers exhibit an understanding that structuring lessons in this manner can be beneficial to building student capacity while also affording teachers with opportunities to provide additional support to those students needing it most.
- Teachers promote learning through real-life examples and lessons that include hands-on activities to promote critical thinking. Overall, this translated to engaging lessons in which almost all students were observed to be participating or completing the lesson/task at hand.
- Strong, consistent school operations and procedures at the beginning and end of classes as well as in narrow hallways. Students appeared to operate with a sense of urgency and understanding that there are high expectations even outside of classroom instruction.

At least one observation was conducted in all grades and general education classrooms. A total of 10 observations were conducted. Observations averaged approximately 24 minutes. Observations ranged through the full cycle of instruction, with some conducted in the beginning, middle, and end of lessons.

Common trends from stakeholders were noted in focus groups, including an appreciation for the emphasis on student and staff safety and the positive school culture and community. Multiple focus groups also acknowledged that instructional rigor is present and pushes students to succeed.

At the end of this report, the SPCSA team identifies some areas for growth and development that are recommendations to enhance the instruction and learning community at Elko Institute of Academic Achievement. Nevertheless, EIAA boasts a very strong school community that offers instruction in a conducive environment for students. Teachers place a strong emphasis on student-led discourse and student-centered activities, which helps EIAA work towards achieving their mission of equipping students for success.

I. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Classroom Environment	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport	Interactions between students, as well as exchanges between teachers and students, were respectful and developmentally appropriate. When providing instructions, teachers generally did so in a clear and courteous manner that contributed to a warm environment that was conducive to learning. Many classrooms featured student-led discourse, and these conversations were also appropriate.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory
Establishing a Culture for Learning	Observed classrooms demonstrated a clear commitment to a strong culture of learning as evidenced by students operating with a sense of urgency and the display of student work and age-appropriate content displayed in classrooms. The majority of classrooms were also well organized, especially given the constraints of the facility.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory
Managing Classroom Procedures	Procedures in classrooms were prevalent and appeared established and routine for students. Observers noted on multiple occasions that classrooms use a scale/level system to maintain appropriate sound and voice levels during instruction. Students knew and executed on expectations during transitions between activities within classrooms.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory
Managing Student Behavior	Overall, student behavior was within the established standards of conduct. Teachers were aware of any misbehaviors and almost all teachers actively moved around classrooms to proactively address any concerns. There were only two classrooms with behavior concerns, both of which were minor. In each case, teachers redirected students respectfully and in an appropriate manner.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory

II. INSTRUCTIONAL OBSERVATION

Instructional Observation	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Communicating with Students	While some teachers were found to be proficient in this category, observers rated this category as 'basic due to the majority of classrooms not having a clear, posted objective.' This indicates that the purpose of the lesson could be more well-defined. Additionally, there were a small number of classrooms where teachers needed to re-explain classroom directions either in a whole group setting or to individual students. While always done in a respectful manner, these observations prevent this rating from being proficient.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory

Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques	The majority of teachers included few, if any, probing, higher-level questions throughout their lessons. Most questions were low-level, basic recall questions. Overall, most classrooms had students that appeared engaged as evidenced by conversations that were on-task. These conversations were rarely spurred by higher level questions from the teacher.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory
Engaging Students in Learning	Engagement levels were found to be high across all observed classrooms. Evaluators noted that most instruction was supplemented by hands-on activities that included ties to real world lessons. For example, one science classroom featured an egg-drop experiment in which students were asked to reflect on their initial predictions and results to determine how they could improve their apparatus. Another science lesson in a different classroom required students, working in pairs, to draw diagrams that showed how the circulatory system works, particularly in the heart. These were clear examples of engaging lessons that were appropriate for students as they develop skills and knowledge.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory
Using Assessment in Instruction	With two clear exceptions, observers noted that few lessons included a clear plan for assessing students on the material and content covered during the lesson. Rarely was this information posted and teachers did not consistently remind students about the end goal or target of lessons. Students did receive support or feedback through fairly consistent monitoring.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory

III. OPERATIONS

Observations	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Mission driven operations	Classrooms and student transitions were consistently found to embody the school’s mission, and students regularly implemented them with little to no direction. Routines appear to be well-established and embraced by both students and staff.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory
Managing Schoolwide Procedures	From transitions into the facility at the beginning of the day to passing in the narrow hallways during transitions, schoolwide procedures were executed by all students and staff. There was a clear understanding of these expectations by all stakeholders.	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory
Maintaining a Safe Environment	Schoolwide procedures function in a manner that helps maintain a safe environment for students and staff. Despite many facility challenges, including multiple exit doors, narrow hallways, and only a few individual classrooms having attached doors, the school works hard to ensure that there is a safe learning environment for all students. Focus groups detailed that the school takes school safety very seriously, works with external experts, and practices drills regularly so as to prepare for any	Distinguished Proficient Basic Unsatisfactory

	worst-case scenarios.	
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IV. FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Group	No. of Participants	Duration
Governing Board ¹	2	60 minutes
Parents/Families	7	45 minutes
Students (3 rd -8 th grade)	13	45 minutes
Staff	9	45 minutes

Governing Board

- Board members understand the school’s mission and consider community involvement and the ability to problem solve as key facets of EIAA’s work. One board member stated, *“We try and demonstrate through leadership and example. We want our students to be able to see a problem in their community and address it.”*
- Both participating board members commented that the full Board receives updates and presentations regarding the academic performance of the school on a regular basis. Board members noted that students present on special projects, including the county science fair, in which upwards of 50% of students regularly participate.
- Board members spoke in detail about the performance goals of the school, and how the staff and Board work to achieve those goals. *“In conversations with school leadership, we want the four-star rating to be maintained. We also want our three-star rating to increase to at least a four, and we think there are a number of areas that can help us improve, including chronic absenteeism. We recognize that this problem can be attacked by phone calls and multiple letters home. It has been a challenge but having timely data available really helps us to communicate this message,”* said one board member. The other board member added, *“We also know that performance can drop in the 7th grade due to new challenges of a middle school. In response, we have put extra supports in place to help them through this process.”*
- While the Board does take some intentional steps to onboard new members, such as distribute past meeting agendas and minutes and meet one-on-one, both Board members acknowledged that there is no formal process nor is there regular governance training provided. *“As far as actual training, we’ve only done it twice in my six years on the board,”* one board member said.
- Given the school’s recent struggles to find a suitable facility that allows for possible expansion, board members expressed the desire to memorialize long-term plans in writing. One board member offered this perspective, *“We are pushing for a master plan, but that is still under development. We are trying to build this out as early as this summer. We want to double enrollment, find a facility more conducive to learning and possibly add a high school.”*

Parents/Families

- Multiple parents spoke to the small, community feel of the school and the engagement of teachers and parents. One parent commented, *“My child likes the close-knit community.”* Other parents chimed in to agree with this sentiment, adding that the school is like a big family where parents and teachers really know individual students.

¹ Two members of the seven-member board participated. Quorum was not met, and Open Meeting Law was not violated.

- When asked why they chose the Elko Institute of Academic Achievement for their student(s), parents offered responses that varied from the extensive teacher support available, to exposing students to rigorous curriculum and standards. *“This school integrates higher-level content so my daughter won’t just breeze on by and won’t get lost in the pool [of other students]. She’s pushed instead of just being allowed to coast,”* one parent explained.
- All of the parents participating in the focus group agreed that their students are challenged in class, with explanations ranging from the rigor of reading and class materials, note-taking requirements to the amount of homework. One parent noted, *“My child always has homework every day, and that helps me know what he is doing every day and what he is learning.”* In response to this, another parent offered, *“When they don’t have homework, it makes me suspicious.”*
- Multiple parents spoke to the established, high behavior expectations for all students at the school. Teachers were characterized as direct and proactive in addressing any issues right away and received high praise from parents about how they leverage communication to ensure parents are aware and partners in resolving problems.
- When asked if they feel welcome at the school, all parents voiced that they are overwhelmingly comfortable and find staff to be very positive. One parent said, *“I have had negative experiences at previous schools, and I’ve always felt welcomed here. Teachers are very accommodating.”*

Students

- Generally, students highlighted two specific aspects of the school as their favorite: the level of care teachers show students and the rigorous instruction. *“Compared to my last school where my teacher didn’t really take time to see what individual students really need help, this school is far better. I get this support at least once a week. For example, in math, there are groups with certain people where we get called up to ask for help.”*
- The majority of students felt both challenged by their courses and found the work and daily lessons to be engaging. Students provided examples about how teachers will perform checks for understanding to ensure individuals are following along with the content. One student detailed how they are challenged frequently saying, *“I feel challenged because when I raise my hand, I’m not allowed to say that I don’t know. The teacher won’t move on to someone else. Plus, when we are seated at tables for group work, we are not allowed to pass. We have to say something or we get into trouble.”*
- When asked about their least favorite aspect of the school, students expressed frustration by the uniform policy, the lack of electives, and the iReady tests. Two students did explain that they understand why iReady test results are helpful in that they explain their individual levels.
- Students overwhelmingly agreed that they feel very safe despite the unique facility arrangement. Contributing factors to this sentiment were the number of drills the school performs and that teachers make this a noticeable priority given that they are located in a warehouse. One student summarized this way, *“We constantly do fire drills when required, as well as practice shelter in place. Awhile ago, the building behind us was being repaired and caught fire. All the kids got outside really quickly even though this wasn’t our building. When drills are held during recess, teachers even take this seriously and check to make sure no one is left behind.”*

Staff

- Overall, staff members participating in the focus group agreed that there is a positive school culture at the school, and that shared leadership is a big piece of that equation. More specifically, staff acknowledged that administration is very open, expectations are clear, and they listen to the faculty about ways the school could be improved. One teacher said, *“Almost all decisions are data or fact-based. When plans for the school have gone sideways,*

the administration laid out the challenges and the options moving forward. Everything was on the table, and that level of transparency was really nice.”

- Staff also feels very supported by administration in terms of teacher support, professional development and when behavior expectations need to be reinforced with students and families. *“When I want to try new things in the classroom, the principal or assistant principal always asks for the purpose of the lesson. If it flops, I’m not scolded for doing it wrong. Instead the administration supports me and makes it a learning opportunity so that myself and others can try to do it again more successfully.”* said one teacher. Overall, the faculty also stated that the administration is very visible.
- Most teachers in the focus group indicated that staff has been prioritizing the development of clear, actionable objectives for each lesson although this is a work in-progress.
- Teachers lauded the emphasis on school safety and the steps that the school community and administration have taken to address the unavoidable shortcomings of the facility. One teacher stated that, *“We have an officer come in and talk about school safety training, and this occurs somewhat regularly.”*
- While there are many benefits to a small school community, staff acknowledged that a few more teachers would create more opportunities for students. One teacher commented, *“If we had a few more hands to make the work lighter, it would really help. We all run a number of activities and clubs, and while the school keeps getting better each year, it can be intense and draining.”*

V. OVERALL STRENGTHS OF PROGRAM

1. Positive school culture and a strong school community

In general, students, staff and parents/families spoke highly of the culture and school community. SPCSA staff also observed this throughout the day as there was a strong sense of commitment to and pride in the school by all stakeholders, including students. As guests on campus, SPCSA staff was welcomed with a sense of warmth and this continued throughout the day. Staff also observed that all classrooms displayed student work and age-appropriate posters that made the facility truly feel like a traditional school building. Additionally, students and parents commented that they feel the education at EIAA is both challenging and engaging. Teachers also noted that there are multiple opportunities for their own learning and development, and that there is a high level of transparency for all operations and expectations. SPCSA staff believes all of this contributes to an environment that is conducive to student learning and motivates teachers to perform to the best of their capabilities.

2. Emphasis on student-centered instruction

It was clear to SPCSA staff that the school has prioritized student-centered lessons throughout all grade levels. Direct instruction was limited during classroom observations, and students spent a great deal of time either working in small groups, pairs or individually on assignments. This active discussion and collaboration among student peers allowed teachers to work with individual students who needed additional support and provided students with alternative methods to demonstrate mastery of content and skills. SPCSA staff found this to lead to high levels of student engagement across all grade levels.

3. School safety

SPCSA staff heard in multiple focus groups and the leadership roundtable that school safety continues to be a top priority for the EIAA community given their location and facility constraints and challenges. Despite being located in a former warehouse, it is clear that students are well drilled in emergency procedures. During the student focus group, one student said, *“Teachers are very strict when it comes to student safety. Whenever we have a drill, the teachers always*

emphasize that if students don't know what to do, they need to speak to the teacher. This is constantly told to us by my teacher, and it is clear they take this seriously!" Given this statement, regular training with safety officers and comments in other focus groups, SPCSA staff is confident that the school is doing everything it can to maintain a safe learning environment for students. This is especially impressive since most classrooms do not have traditional doors and most also have exit doors leading outside.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS/ACTION ITEMS

1. Increase instructional rigor and implement more higher-level questions

SPCSA staff agrees with the anecdotes of some stakeholders that there is rigorous instruction occurring on the EIAA campus. Despite many student-centered activities and lessons in the majority of classrooms, however, SPCSA staff observed multiple classrooms where low-level Depth of Knowledge (DOK) questions were asked of students, focusing more on recall and skills/concepts rather than higher-level analysis or application. For example, in two elementary classrooms, teachers relied on yes/no questions or asked students to provide answers without any explanation or justification.

RECOMMENDATION

SPCSA staff suggests revisiting DOK question levels and/or Bloom's Taxonomy to push for higher-level questioning throughout all grade levels. As suggested to other schools during prior site evaluations, we encourage teachers to craft questions, related to the instructional delivery and mastery of the daily objective, as part of the lesson planning process so that teachers can be intentional in their questioning of students to informally assess progress against the stated daily objective. The staff focus group indicated that teachers are granted wide latitude in the lesson planning process so as long as plans are posted. School leadership may wish to require a minimum number of higher-level questions as part of this process.

2. Strengthen the development of and adherence to stated daily objectives

Throughout the day and as previously noted in this report, there were many instances where SPCSA staff observed classrooms with no posted or clear objective. To be clear, all lessons appeared to be relevant to core subjects, but it was rarely clear what students were to accomplish during most lessons. This was confirmed to be a development priority for at least some teachers during that focus group. Some classrooms also lacked a clear Check for Understanding at the close of lessons.

RECOMMENDATION

At the onset of the 2019 – 2020 school year and during upcoming professional development sessions, work with teachers to develop a clear understanding of an actionable, daily objective so that the goal for the end of that lesson is clear to students, other teachers and even visitors. This should help EIAA teachers and leadership to enhance their understanding of student achievement and progress towards mastering Nevada standards.

3. Develop and Further Enhance the Leader in Me Program

While this program was referred to during a few focus groups, SPCSA staff did not see this as an active element in the observed classrooms and daily lessons schoolwide. It appears to be a program selected by the school in connection to its mission, and SPCSA staff recognizes the potential value in this program. However, the evaluation team feels that there is an opportunity expand and enhance this program to make it more prevalent and effective for the student body.

RECOMMENDATION

SPCSA staff believes there is an opportunity for the school to think critically about the implementation of the *Leader In Me* program, and how it may be used a focal point for the school moving forward. Furthermore, staff would encourage school leadership and the Board to determine how it sees this program in an ideal state, and plan accordingly. This may include professional development or working with other schools that have leveraged this program more successfully so that it is more visible. SPCSA staff is happy to work with the EIAA team to identify other schools within the SPCSA portfolio that use this program so that collaboration may occur at minimal to no cost.

4. Incorporate stronger Governing Board training by September 1, 2019

During the Board Focus Group, participants stated that there has been infrequent board governance training over the last few years, and that new member on-boarding involves sharing previous agendas and meeting minutes prior to new members being confirmed. While these are steps in the right direction, best practices suggest that Board training should be delivered by a third-party that can speak to a variety of topics such as the fiduciary responsibilities of Board members, school leader evaluations, etc. A stronger, annual training in addition to a formal orientation for Board members can only benefit the school as the composition of the EIAA Board changes. Effective training can also provide the school with a safety net during times of unexpected transition.

ACTION ITEM

In collaboration with SPCSA staff, identify possible service providers of governance training and offer training no later than September 1, 2019. An external training will help current and future Board members understand their roles and responsibilities as the legal holders of the charter contract. EIAA Board members may also speaking with Board members of other, unaffiliated public charter schools to determine what may be the best path forward. There are other schools within the SPCSA portfolio that will be seeking out third-party training, and there may be opportunities to collaborate and/or share expenses.

Note

SPCSA School Support Team members will follow up on each of these recommendations during their next site visit, unless otherwise noted.

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