

Silver State Charter High School

Performance Audit

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Prepared by

TenSquare[®]

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I. Executive Summary

Background

Silver State Charter High School (Silver State) first opened its doors in 2004 with a hybrid learning model. The vision of Silver State was “to meet the educational needs of high achieving students who prefer a non-traditional way of learning and to meet the specific needs of students who want one-on-one instruction that does not exist in the traditional setting.”

On October 26, 2015, the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA), which authorizes and oversees charter schools in the state of Nevada, notified Silver State that it would be closed for: 1) engaging in a pattern of fiscal mismanagement and 2) investing in a derivatives account. The SPCSA held a public hearing on January 4, 2016, and voted to revoke Silver State’s charter. Subsequently, the SPCSA then held a second hearing on March 9, 2016, and Silver State attorneys gave notice that they planned to file a petition for Judicial Review, noting that there were procedural and substantive issues that might affect the closure of the school. At that stage the SPCSA then directed its Counsel to work with Silver State’s Counsel to reach a Settlement Framework that would enable the school to remain open under a Receivership.

As part of the Settlement Framework, both Silver State and SPCSA agreed to jointly petition the First District Court of Nevada to appoint a “neutral, independent and qualified receiver” to take over responsibilities of the Silver State Governing Board. On June 28, 2016, the Court appointed Joshua Kern, a respected charter leader and founding partner at TenSquare, a national charter school support organization, as Receiver for the school.

Under this agreement, the Receiver is charged with operating the school in the best interests of the students. Additionally, the school has been tasked with meeting several milestones over the next three years.

By the end of the 2017-18 school year, the Receiver and Silver State agreed to:

- Work with the SPCSA to reconstitute Silver State’s Board of Directors and appoint Board members that are deemed capable of supporting Silver State’s transformation
- Achieve an adjusted cohort graduation rate, as determined by Nevada state law, of 45%
- Obtain clean financial audits, with no material findings.

By the end of the 2018-19 school year, Silver State agreed to:

- Achieve a rating of “Adequate” on SPCSA’s academic performance framework
- Achieve a 60% or greater adjusted cohort graduation rate
- Earn a 3 Star rating (or equivalent satisfactory rating) on Nevada’s Alternative Framework (if the school were to be recognized as an “Alternative School;” and
- Continue to obtain clean financial audits, with no material findings.

The Receiver hit the ground running in July and subsequently worked with school staff to ensure that the school could successfully open at the start of the 2016-17 school year. The Executive Director was placed on administrative leave prior to the start of the school year, and the Receiver worked with existing team members to appoint a leadership team. At the same time, the Receiver

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has been working to overhaul Silver State’s financial operations to ensure that the school’s budgeting and reporting is an accurate reflection of the school’s current condition.

In addition to addressing the immediate fiscal and operational crises at Silver State, the Receiver initiated a TenSquare School Performance Audit to look deeply at Silver State’s academic program—to identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities in the areas of school performance and student achievement; curriculum, instruction, integration of technology, teacher coaching, and professional development; leadership; and school culture.

TenSquare School Performance Audit

TenSquare’s school improvement practice works with schools, local education agencies, and their leadership teams to conduct in-depth school performance audits; develop data-driven, actionable recommendations and strategic operational roadmaps; and provide targeted hands-on assistance to improve organizational effectiveness and student achievement—all of which lead to significant gains in school and organizational performance.

TenSquare School Performance Audits are rigorous reviews of school performance. They include detailed analyses of:

- student enrollment, demographics, outcomes and overall school performance
- academic programming—assessing a school’s instructional program, curriculum, integration and use of technology, teacher coaching, and professional development
- school culture—determining the extent to which there is a culture of achievement for students and a culture of accountability and high performance for adults
- and, leadership capacity and human capital.

Audits serve as a tool to pinpoint critical challenges and identify a roadmap for improvement. While they highlight school strengths, they apply an expert and critical eye to help even the best-performing schools continue to improve their practice and outcomes for students. The standard used for judging schools is nothing short of excellence. TenSquare has worked with scores of schools around the country to conduct these audits, and then develop and implement targeted plans for change, leading to dramatic school improvement.

To assess Silver State’s strengths and challenges, TenSquare team members conducted a School Performance Audit from September 15-November 15, 2016. The TenSquare audit team completed extensive data analysis, conducted on-site interviews and structured classroom observations, and reviewed documents and other materials in the areas of student performance, academics, school culture, and leadership.

This report shares findings and recommendations to inform a targeted school improvement action plan for Silver State.

Key Findings

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Strengths

Silver State can build upon several important strengths:

- Silver State staff members are devoted and genuinely interested in positive outcomes for students. Silver State staff members want the school and its students to thrive.
- Teachers have taken a team approach and are working to help the new leadership be successful. Staff members will often stay late and work on extra projects as needed to help the school succeed.
- Most students are respectful to one another and adults while in classrooms.
- The school has strong infrastructure (a good building site and busses) in place.
- Though she has only been in her position for a short while, the primary instructional leader has developed a good rapport with staff and appears to have gained their trust.

Challenges

Despite these strengths, however, the audit also uncovered several challenges that the Receiver and Silver State must address as they work to continue to improve.

- Silver State lacks crucial data management systems present in high-performing schools. There is no comprehensive system to track, manage, and use data to improve teaching and learning, and to ensure that Silver State is compliant with federal, state, and local reporting requirement.
- Despite excellent recent progress, our analysis of enrollment and student achievement data suggests that it will be very challenging for Silver State to reach the required 60% adjusted cohort graduation rate benchmark by school year 2018-19.
- Silver State's hybrid educational model (part online and part classroom-based) appears to be ill-defined and lacks sufficient support for many of its students to be successful.
- Silver State's instructional model is touted as a blended learning model, with a mix of online, one-on-one, and in-class instruction. In practice, though, teachers still largely see themselves as traditional educators who teach classes with a defined scope and sequence, while students who come to school see that time as an opportunity to complete online work. This mismatch in practice does not provide the best learning opportunities for students who must complete credit recovery programs or who otherwise require more support.
- Silver State's attendance policy and current program structure do not permit teachers

to plan for and engage students in relevant, rigorous learning. Currently students can come in on any number of days and sit in any number of “courses.” Teachers cannot predict who will be in what “class” on any given day of the week. Thus, students do not appear to be benefitting from their time on campus, or Silver State’s blended learning model.

- Silver State currently uses several different online curricula and teacher-sourced materials for its courses. It is not clear that curriculum materials are sufficiently rigorous and aligned to state learning standards. Moreover, this mixture of curriculum materials makes it difficult for teachers to work together to plan and effectively manage student learning.
- Instructional practice and teacher professional development are inadequate. There does not appear to be a shared vision for what excellent instruction—and student learning— should look like at Silver State. The school lacks an effective professional development plan, and there is no consistent instructional coaching process in place to improve teacher practice.
- The current leadership team, while respected, lacks the necessary turnaround expertise, clear vision for improvement, and support (leadership coaching) needed to help Silver State meet agreed upon improvement objectives.

Recommendations

Now that many of the most immediate fiscal and operational crises are being addressed at Silver State, the Receiver should concentrate on providing rapid and targeted support for the school’s academic leaders. We recommend that the Receiver:

- Rapidly procure data oversight and management expertise, and ensure that someone is responsible for accurately managing student performance data and meeting all federal and state compliance requirements in a timely manner. Provide training to school leaders so that they can manage and use student data to improve school performance.
- Engage outside academic expertise to articulate a coherent vision for the school, develop a comprehensive school improvement plan, and implement an aligned, goals-driven process for school performance management focused on improving graduation outcomes.
- Conduct a deeper assessment of Silver State’s personalized learning model and the various curriculum resources and materials the school is using—to ensure that they are rigorous and appropriate for Silver State’s student population.
- Restructure the academic program to allow teachers to focus on preparing and managing personalized learning plans, and intentionally grouping students on campus to provide targeted instruction and support.
- Reassess the credit recovery program’s effectiveness and implementation.

- Assess the skills of the current leadership team to determine best fit to goals and priorities, and to build on leaders' strengths; provide training for instructional leaders on school improvement strategies.
- Work with the leadership team to outline clear student learning and achievement priorities, and align curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development to meet those priorities.
- Provide in-depth training and support for all academic leaders on best practices to improve student learning; use teacher coaching and clear, consistent feedback to increase the urgency and quality of instruction; and institute a targeted coaching program for teachers on high-impact strategies.
- Provide in-depth training for school leaders on Nevada school law and how it applies to Silver State's current policy and practices.

II. Audit Methodology

TenSquare conducted a School Performance Audit of Silver State Charter High School from September 15 – November 15, 2016. The audit included extensive document review and data analysis; on-site interviews with teachers and leadership team members; and structured classroom and school culture observations. The on-site observations and interviews took place on September 28, 2016.

Auditors conducted eight classroom observations across grades 9-12, totaling more than 170 minutes. An additional 60 minutes were spent observing common spaces such as hallways, the cafeteria, arrival, and dismissal. Observation data were normed across two TenSquare team members—former leaders and teachers and who have conducted performance audits of multiple K-12 schools across the country.

Documents reviewed include Silver State’s:

- School calendar
- Assessment calendar
- School bell schedule
- Master schedule
- Daily schedules
- Special education teacher schedules
- RTI (Response to Intervention) plans
- Organizational chart
- Assessment and student outcomes data for 2015-2016
- Student and teacher demographic data
- Attendance data
- Floor plan of school buildings
- Enrollment data
- Staff, parent, and student handbooks
- Professional Development plans from 2015-16
- English language arts (ELA) and math scope and sequence documents
- Other curriculum materials
- A prior school-wide needs assessment conducted in 2015-16
- Teacher and school leader observation and evaluation tools
- Pre-service schedules

TenSquare also interviewed a cross-section of school stakeholders through group and individual interviews, including:

- The Principal
- The Operations Director
- Classroom teachers (four of seven teachers, representing grades 9-12)

III. Student Enrollment and Demographic Data

Overview

Readers should keep in mind that **the data presented here are provisional**. Data included in the tables below are drawn directly from reports shared with the TenSquare Audit Team. There are discrepancies and anomalies in the data, however, that the school and the SPCSA should address as the school seeks to meet its improvement targets.

Student Demographics and Enrollment

Silver State’s enrollment patterns look very different from that of the surrounding district and Nevada as a whole; these discrepancies are likely related, in part, to data errors. Silver State has historically enrolled a disproportionately low percentage of Hispanic students, when compared with the surrounding county, Nevada charter sector, and Nevada overall. The percent of students identifying as Asian or Black/African American is low compared to the state and sector, but is in line with surrounding county trends for the past three years. In the past two years, Silver State has had a disproportionately high percentage of white students compared to the surrounding county, charter sector, and state.

Table 1: Enrollment Trends, by Student Groups, 2013-14 to 2015-16*

Enrollment	School Year	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latino	White	2 or More Races	IEP	ELL	FRL
Silver State	2013-14	0%	0%	9%	60%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Carson City	2013-14	2%	1%	42%	50%	3%	14%	17%	53%
Nevada Charter	2013-14	6%	9%	16%	62%	3%	7%	2%	28%
Nevada State	2013-14	6%	10%	41%	36%	6%	12%	15%	53%
Silver State	2014-15	0%	1%	14%	78%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Carson City	2014-15	2%	1%	43%	49%	3%	13%	17%	50%
Nevada Charter	2014-15	6%	9%	19%	57%	6%	8%	4%	23%
Nevada State	2014-15	6%	10%	41%	35%	6%	12%	16%	53%
Silver State	2015-16	0%	1%	14%	78%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Carson City	2015-16	2%	1%	43%	49%	4%	14%	18%	36%
Nevada Charter	2015-16	6%	9%	24%	52%	7%	8%	5%	21%
Nevada State	2015-16	5%	10%	42%	34%	6%	12%	17%	49%

Note: values that are disproportionately low are in **bold italics**. Values that are disproportionately high are in **bold**. *Please note that the school has not kept accurate data on students’ special education, English language learner, and free and reduced-priced lunch status. Percentages reported here are drawn directly from school-reported data. It should also be noted that percentages reported do not add to 100%, but are based on data submitted by the school for this audit.

Over the past four years, Silver State’s enrollment has declined markedly. From a high of more than 400 students in the 2013-14 school year, Silver State’s overall enrollment declined to 180 students at the beginning of the 2016-17 school year. In part, this can be explained by the closure of the middle school prior to the beginning of the 2015-16 school year—eighth graders were allowed to continue at Silver State during the 15-16 school year. And this year, declines are most likely related to the controversy surrounding (and near closure of) Silver State during the 2015-16 school year. Additionally, the existence of a competing school and a lack of clear ownership over the enrollment process at Silver State may have contributed to this decline as well. See Table 2 for more detail.

Table 2: Overall and Grade Level Enrollment Over Time

Grade Level	SY 2013-14	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16	SY 2016-17
Grade 7	22	17		
Grade 8	76	67	28	
Grade 9	93	43	44	20
Grade 10	93	72	61	29
Grade 11	91	75	96	39
Grade 12	51	134	130	90
All Students	426	408	359	180

Silver State has few systemized ways to collect and analyze student data; methods for managing information are inefficient and ineffective. In some cases, data systems are antiquated and prone to error. For example, teachers and operations staff reported that daily attendance is taken by hand. The student enrollment process is similarly a work in progress. No staff member could point to a concrete plan for recruitment and retention, based on appropriate data.

In other cases, data systems are non-existent. One teacher noted, for instance, “we did not do any data driven instruction last year. Our new administrator is working with us as a team to plan out what that should look like but... we are still not collecting data.”

Summary Findings

- Silver State’s enrollment patterns look different than the surrounding district and Nevada generally; this is likely due in part, however, to Silver State’s poor data collection and data management practices.
- Silver State’s enrollment has declined considerably over the past four years; enrollment declines have larger implications for the school’s staffing and financial picture over time.
- Silver State lacks crucial data management systems present in high-performing schools. There is no comprehensive system to track, manage, and use data to improve teaching and learning, and to ensure that Silver State is compliant with federal, state, and local reporting requirements.

Summary Recommendations

- Silver State should rapidly develop and implement effective data management processes, to ensure that it has accurate enrollment and student performance data, and that leaders and teachers can use those data to improve student performance.
- Silver State should look at the longer-term implications of smaller student enrollment and develop an enrollment plan going forward.

IV. Student Outcomes—Graduation Rate Analysis

Overview

Historically, Silver State’s cohort graduation data have been very poorly tracked, making it difficult to determine an accurate adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for Silver State. For the 2016 cohort (students entering 9th grade in 2012), Silver State leadership invested significant resources in cleaning up data and investigating whether former students were truly dropouts or legitimate transfers (which removes them from the cohort). As a result of Silver State’s efforts to clean up data, the School achieved a 45% ACGR for the class of 2015-16.

Silver State must continue to improve graduation rates to continue to operate. While there are no specific requirements for the 2017 cohort, the school must achieve a four-year ACGR of 45% for the 2018 cohort (primarily 11th graders this school year) and 60% for the 2019 cohort (primarily 10th graders this school year). To meet the 2018 target, Silver State just needs to maintain the level just achieved with the 2016 cohort. However, the 60% target for the class of 2019 will be a challenge.

There is no question that the School can improve graduation rates by providing remediation support for students that are behind. However, since the school accepts students regardless of prior academic achievement, cohort graduation rates will likely continue to be low. Students have very little opportunity to graduate with their cohort because they have not earned enough credits at prior schools.

For example, for the 2017 Cohort, of the students currently at Silver State, only 37% started with Silver State in their freshman year or beginning of their sophomore year. Therefore, the majority came mid-year sophomore year or after. While not all of those students were lacking credits, many were already behind when they entered Silver State.

Current Silver State Students

Most Silver State students are in the 2017 Cohort. While Silver State’s enrollment is fluid, both in terms of new students entering on a rolling basis and some students opting to transfer, an analysis of the current student body is helpful in attempting to determine future graduation rates. Of 180 students currently enrolled, more than one-third are in Cohort 2017.

Table 3: Silver State Student Cohorts

Cohorts	Number of Students	Percent of Total
Prior Cohorts (did not graduate in 4 years)	23	12.8%
Cohort 2017 (primarily seniors)	62	34.4%
Cohort 2018 (primarily juniors)	40	22.2%
Cohort 2019 (primarily sophomores)	32	17.8%
Cohort 2020 (primarily freshmen)	23	12.8%

As the above chart illustrates, Silver State’s enrollment increases each cohort year, with the 2017 cohort making up the largest part of the school. This is opposite of a typical school, where enrollment begins with large 9th grade classes that shrink up until 12th grade, as students drop out or transfer. This atypical enrollment pattern makes it difficult for Silver State to match the ACGR of a school where most students begin their high school career at that school.

Additional data for Cohort 2017, show that the vast majority of Silver State’s students enter high school somewhere else.

Table 4: 2017 Cohort, by Year of School Entry

Cohort 2017 Year Entered	Number of Students	Percent of Total
Beginning of Freshman year	12	19%
Mid-year Freshman	4	6%
Beginning of Sophomore year	7	11%
Mid-year Sophomore	6	10%
Beginning of Junior year	9	15%
Mid-year Junior	5	8%
Senior year	19	31%

Further analysis of the data show that most of Silver State’s students are behind where they should be at this point in their high school tenure, not surprising given how many transfer to Silver State after freshman year. For example, in Cohort 2019 (for which Silver State needs to meet 60% cohort graduation rate), just 50% of students have five or more credits (out of the 22.5 needed for graduation). Students who take a typical class load and pass their classes would have finished freshman year with six credits.

Table 5: Students “On Track” for Graduation, by Cohort

Cohorts	Number	Number Close to On Track with Credits	% “On Track”
Cohort 2017 (primarily seniors)	62	24 (with 16 or more credits)	39%
Cohort 2018 (primarily juniors)	40	14 (with 10 or more credits)	35%

Cohorts	Number	Number Close to On Track with Credits	% "On Track"
Cohort 2019 (primarily sophomores)	32	16 (with 5 or more credits)	50%
Cohort 2020 (primarily freshmen)	23	N/A	N/A

Credit Recovery

Since so many students matriculate at Silver State with fewer credits than they should have for their grade level, the school has invested in credit recovery. However, the current credit recovery program while helpful, has not been as successful as the school hoped it would. As with any credit recovery program, students that have struggled with a “regular” load of classes have great difficulty being successful with an increased class load without substantial help. Moreover, the credit recovery program has been funded by a grant which will either need to be renewed or replaced. Longer term, Silver State must figure out how to build credit recovery into their program without the need for an external grant.

Summary Findings

- Silver State’s ability to track ACGR data improved markedly this year, leading to a graduation rate of 45%.
- Cohort analysis data indicate that it will be difficult for Silver State to achieve the 60% ACGR required by the Receivership Agreement for the 2019 Cohort.
- Silver State’s model is one that makes the school attractive to students who are under-credited. Silver State’s credit recovery program, however, is not working as effectively as the school had hoped it would.

Summary Recommendations

- Silver State should immediately determine an accurate assessment of the school graduation rate and work with the State Public Charter School Authority to ensure data are accurately reported.
- The school should consider applying for alternative status, and should also work with the SPCSA to adjust the 60% ACGR currently required for the 2019 Cohort.
- The school should create or enhance efforts to interview students when they opt to transfer to understand why they are not completing at Silver State. Silver State should also look at creating incentives to keep students who are on track.
- To continually improve Silver State’s ability to track ACGR data, staff should follow up with every student who transfers or stops coming to school, within two weeks and again within a few months, to try and ascertain where the student went. Include students and all staff in trying to track down students via social media.

- Silver State should develop personalized learning plans for each student, enhance credit remediation programs, and talk with students early about the need to take classes year-round to catch up on credits.

V. Academic Program

Overview

To accurately assess Silver State’s academic program, we reviewed several key features of the program, including: the program model, curriculum, instructional delivery, access to and integration of technology, and teacher coaching and professional development. Findings and recommendations are based on an in-depth review of policy and practice documents, curriculum and instructional resources, interviews with teachers and leaders, and classroom observation data.

Program Model

Misalignment between Silver State’s vision and educational practice leads to confusion among teachers and administrators; neither the model nor staff roles clearly align to a vision of a strong online education, with personalized learning. According to Silver State’s April 2015 Charter Amendment application, Silver State exists to serve students who are in danger of dropping out of school; “recover” students who have withdrawn from school or are behind in credits; and serve students who cannot attend school during regular school hours, who have disabilities and are homebound, or who have young children and therefore cannot attend regularly.

The school is designed to “improve the opportunity for students to learn by offering a comprehensive high school curriculum, that will be offered with a flexible individualized delivery, utilizing online delivery and *24/7 availability*. Our staff will be there to help the student both during the day and the early evening.”

Our review of the Silver State program model, however, found that the flexible, individualized experience has been only partially realized. Silver State appears to have combined a traditional high school model, with online learning opportunities. Teachers do not see themselves as tutors, mentors, and learning counselors who are there to help provide personalized instruction to students when they come to campus (or even support students while they learn online), but rather as traditional classroom teachers. Teachers expressed frustration about the wide variety of learning needs they have to meet and the lack of student attention in their “classes.” For Silver State to be successful, the school must define what effective personalized instruction looks like, and provide the right supports (professional development, data management, online and adaptive learning tools, etc.) to educators to realize that vision.

Silver State’s diverse student population (with students who have very different needs and supports) creates challenges for building an effective hybrid learning model. The teachers and office staff we interviewed described Silver State’s population as a “diverse group” and anecdotally identified four distinct groups of students:

- The first group of students included those who have a significant impediment to attending traditional school (e.g. have a disability, medical condition, or children of their own).
- The second was group was comprised of “quirky” kids who were bullied or did not fit in at their traditional school.
- The third group included distance learning students who traveled regularly, such as children living in migrant farming families or rodeo students.
- And, the fourth group included under-credited, disengaged students for whom attendance at some type of school is mandatory and Silver State serves as an option of last resort.

While these descriptions are staff-reported, and based on anecdotal rather than quantitative data, they do provide helpful information about the challenges of serving Silver State’s student population.

According to staff, the first two groups of students tend to visit campus more frequently, making use of the supports the school offers. This is not to say they are universally successful, but rather that Silver State teachers report that they are able to “reach” these students and get them to school more readily.

The third group of students visit campus infrequently, according to teachers, but they are generally more diligent about work completion. It is important to note that for all three of these groups there is a heavy reliance on parent support as the primary mechanism for ensuring student engagement.

A strong staff-student relationship or additional structural supports might be of assistance in better engaging these students. Successful online programs tend to utilize a coach/mentor model in addition to the teacher to build a rapport with students and get them invested in work completion. Further, internal data mechanisms that better track student engagement across metrics and demographics would be of use.

The fourth group of students represent a significant struggle for Silver State educators. These students attend on-campus sessions infrequently, and must have significant prompting to attend. They accumulate credits at a slower rate, and their work completion is not as strong as other students’ as well.

Silver State’s proposed solution for strengthening student engagement and achievement is improved parent engagement, but research done by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) found that this is a limited strategy for improving student achievement. The HFRP’s work indicates that parental expectations and beliefs about long term outcomes (i.e. an expectation of college attendance and an emphasis on a growth rather than fixed mindset) is positively correlated with improved performance. However, the impact of parental engagement is not as significant as high quality instruction, an achievement oriented school culture, and clear expectations. In fact, parental engagement without these other factors has a minimal effect on student outcomes.

For all groups of students, there are models of on-campus, blended learning that do not rely so heavily on parental engagement. If Silver State can clarify its model, this will improve the likelihood that this fourth group of largely disenfranchised students is more successful

Silver State’s blended learning model is poorly defined, and this lack of definition likely undermines the effectiveness of the program. In theory, Silver State seeks to provide a highly individualized, largely on-line experience using heavily vetted and approved platforms. In practice, however, teachers are currently trying to teach “classes” and prepare some “direct instruction.” Moreover, teachers often deviate from provided materials and make their own because they find flaws in the online programs.

For the hybrid learning model to be effective, the school must define the right blend of online and “in class” learning, and it must help teachers redefine their roles. There are models of more successful online schooling that do not rely on additional in-person time. Schools such as Keystone employ asynchronous classes, synchronous 1:1 instruction, and regular meetings with a mentor or “success advisor” to maintain engagement. Models that employ more successful blended learning include Rocketship and Summit, both of which emphasize personalization and computer based learning in the context of an on-campus experience.

The current student groupings and daily schedule hinder the learning and planning process. Currently students are required to be physically present on campus for part of the week, but are welcome to come to campus on other days. Students are assigned days of mandatory physical attendance, but teachers reported that these were poorly tracked. Furthermore, students who drop in on unscheduled days may do so without prior notice. As such, Silver State teachers struggle to effectively manage and analyze data, predict daily class configurations, and plan to ensure high quality learning. As one teacher explained, “I teach 10 classes in three periods. That holds me back considerably. I did a lesson on writing process, but when I have students in English Foundations, 3a, 3b, and credit recovery in one room, direct instruction is very challenging.”

The unpredictable nature of student attendance means that teachers spend most of their time monitoring students as they work on computers, instead of helping them meet personalized learning goals with a structured learning plan. Direct instruction was observed less than 40% of the time. When direct instruction is provided, it must be broadly applicable to multiple classes, grade levels, and student ability levels. When larger numbers of “unplanned-for” students were present, direct instruction provided no substantive value to the class and constituted largely an inefficient use of time. For example, during a language arts class in which a large number of “unplanned-for” students were present, a twenty minute “lesson” detailing the steps of the writing process was provided. It was not customized or differentiated to meet the individual needs of students.

To maximize the impact of the time students spend on campus, it is important that teachers are able to anticipate who will be in their classes (or who they will be supporting) on what days. A process must be put into place that will allow teachers an opportunity to plan for specific student participants. It is also crucial that teachers not only know what students will be in their classes and when, but on what assignments they should be working. In every classroom observed some students were engaged in tasks that they identified as more important (for example, a large assignment due for another class) or more urgent (e.g. completion of a credit recovery assignment). Systematization of personalized learning plans and assignments will benefit teachers’ ability to support students through group and individual work.

The current program allows students to easily misrepresent their participation and performance. The auditors witnessed cheating during three observations. In one case, students were speaking to each other about an assessment they were taking. In the other two, students who were taking quizzes copied the content of a question, placed it in Google, and searched for the answer. Teachers who were present in two cases were occupied working with other students, while in the third case, the teacher was seated at his desk working at the computer. As one teacher noted, “having an attendance policy and actual classes has helped, but attendance could be clearer as to where they should be when and on what they should be working. It would make planning better.”

In addition to the relative ease with which overt cheating occurred, students were also able to “attend” class while completing other course work and when asked, two students noted that there were ways around virtual attendance policies. This is in part, they noted, because for students attending virtually, the default assumption is to mark students as present for every class. Three students also shared with one observer that they “usually binge the online assignments so that [we] can use class time to hang out.” While this is not explicitly against any rules, it does speak to the potential for students to manipulate the online system and the seriousness with which they treat instructional time.

Curriculum

Silver State Charter School uses online distance learning coupled with intermittent onsite instruction that could loosely be described as blended learning. Teachers report that they create materials to supplement the online learning platform, but receive minimal guidance in their creation. Teachers did not give consistent answers to questions about expectations for lesson planning, and most were unable to speak knowledgeably about the state standards. Similar confusion existed about the curriculum. This is not surprising as information regarding instruction is sparse.

When asked for curricular documents, the school provided a document entitled “Academic Program, Curriculum Scope Sequence Documents” for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. For mathematics, the document contained a list of lesson objectives with a brief narrative description of the content covered by each lesson. It also contained a curriculum map that provided similar information in tabular form with the addition of Common Core standards that “align” to the lessons. *The document did not reference a specific online platform.* The ELA curriculum contained a list of unit names and topics accompanying a “syllabus” that listed objectives and assessments for each lesson. No other materials were available or provided regarding instruction and curriculum.

There is no “curriculum” per se; the school’s online platform has changed several times, and teachers are supplementing the online platform, which may or may not be aligned to state learning standards, with materials of their own choosing. Per leadership team members, the school has changed learning management systems at least twice in the last year. The operations lead shared that “[The former school leader] switched the learning management system. We went from Brainhoney to Plato but then got no training, and she switched us back to Brainhoney.”

Additionally, teachers expressed concern about the overall quality of the online curriculum materials. One teacher stated that she adds "... lessons to the online platform because I have concerns that the online platform is not aligned to the level of expectation and rigor. I try to do some things that are Common Core aligned."

Additionally, it is not clear if the online platforms provide materials that are aligned to state standards. What *is* clear is that there is significant suspicion by the faculty that they do not. As a result, teachers are supplementing the online platforms with lessons of dubious quality. For example, in one class the audit team observed a teacher teaching a lesson on "the writing process." His lecture style required students to simply memorize and state the steps in the writing process, rather than use the steps. Moreover, 11 of 15 students ignored him as they did their own online work.

Teachers reported using Plato, fueleducation, Brainhoney, and "other sites" coupled with teacher made materials, literature texts, and "found materials" to create the curriculum. Such cobbling together requires a highly skilled teaching force thoroughly trained in pedagogy and able to deconstruct state standards while making aligned performance tasks and lessons. There was no evidence that this level of skill is present in the teaching staff at Silver State.

Students need more opportunities for scaffolded writing practice and feedback. The assessment and assignment opportunities provided by the online materials the audit team reviewed rely heavily on multiple choice answers. Teachers expressed concern about the quality of some of the online writing materials as well. One teacher stated, "I give the option of handing in the work we did together instead of the essay online. I supplement in-class work with outside work [that is aligned] to the English Standards."

Additionally, the limited number of writing assignments teachers asked students to complete in classes rarely rose to a level of rigor that aligned to state standards. While we observed one teacher refer to the assignment rubric in his one-on-one consultations with individual students, no other teachers articulated expectations for written work during an observation.

In some cases, the teachers appear to be on the right track in terms of writing instruction. For example, one teacher noted that she "[Tries] to teach the class as content literacy. It's helpful for kids who come to campus... I feel the work on campus is working well and we can use document based questions" to help students improve their writing (document based questions allow students to develop written responses that cite text references in short answer questions or short essays). She then provided examples of multiple rigorous texts that she is using. Other teachers referenced the use of document based questions (DBQs) in reading and content areas. Unfortunately, the timeline for completing DBQs is so generous that it reduces the level of rigor. High school students should be able to craft brief but thoughtful DBQs within one or two class periods. Teachers at Silver State are allowing students to take more than two weeks to complete such assignments.

To meet the level of rigor required by state learning standards, students must be challenged to produce written responses to literature with length and complexity that aligns to the state assessment. Moreover, students must produce such work in a finite period.

It is not clear that the current credit recovery program will be sufficient to provide students with the credits they need to graduate. In every class observed, we saw students completing credit recovery work. They did so even when it had nothing to do with the class in which they were participating. On the one hand, such a high degree of flexibility and student-directedness is laudable. On the other, it means that students are not completing work for some classes to try to recover credits.

The emphasis on credit recovery is not surprising given this year's focus on improving graduation rates. As one teacher put it, "Our main goal is to help students recover credits and bring up the graduation rate." Another also put an emphasis on credit recovery saying the school's graduation goal would be achieved if they "incorporate credit recovery and make sure kids understand the credits system and what they need to graduate."

Silver State teachers are aware that many students are behind. One teacher shared, "We receive juniors and seniors with no credits and it's almost impossible for them to graduate in two years – we get held accountable for not having on time graduation." The operations lead verified this with an example, saying, "the last six seniors who enrolled with us are credit deficient and cannot possibly graduate [on time]."

The current strategy appears to be simply emphasizing credit recovery and making it the priority for student work time. There is no strategic approach to supporting student learning or achievement. Students are simply working, often urgently, to recover credits, to understand the credit system, and to make up missed assignments so they do not fall further behind. As the data show, and teachers confirm, Silver State has enrolled a significant number of students are credit deficient, come to campus infrequently, and show little sign of improving.

The PE curriculum needs to be rewritten to provide more accountability. In physical education (PE) classes students were observed completing work for other classes. Students shared that this is typical for their PE class. One student pointed out that they do sometimes do health related work, and she was seen completing work for a health elective.

It appears that because physical activities are completed elsewhere and simply recorded, that PE is often treated as a study hall. When we asked a student if she completed the exercise she was recording, she laughed said, "I worked on my car for three hours, so I figure that counts for my cardio." Given the prevalence of health tracking apps, Silver State should have no problem providing more robust accountability for meeting PE credits.

Instruction

TenSquare visited eight classrooms during the site visit. Two auditors observed classes for 20-30 minutes at a time.

Most classroom instruction lacked appropriate grade-level rigor. Classes that did receive direct instruction had a very low bar of rigor. One history classroom, for example, had students

working through a Document Based Question (DBQ) - which is an appropriate task. However, the way students were engaged was very elementary and not appropriately rigorous for high school. Students were given small sections of text to read, and then the teacher provided most of the answers when the class regrouped. Students were passive learners. This is a missed opportunity to enable students to collectively analyze the text and debate their conclusions.

The pacing of the DBQ was also inappropriate for high school students. High school students should be able to complete the DBQ in one or two class periods. Instead the teacher said they would continue to work on this assignment for the next month. Silver State's structure contributes to this problem, since the teacher does not know when each of these students will be back again in the next few weeks to complete the task.

The limited student work on display in the halls and classrooms was significantly below grade level as well. It was much more appropriate for middle school or upper elementary students. There were many misspellings and simple grammar mistakes evident in the work. Additionally, the work itself was very basic. All of the work displayed asked students to use drawings to explain a basic scientific or a historical concept. There was no evidence of any student writing or mathematical work in the entire school. Students need to use more sophisticated and age-appropriate methods of expressing their understanding of material.

Assignments reviewed during the TenSquare visit included highly varied levels of rigor. In one class, the audit team observed students taking a quiz consisting entirely of recall questions. In two other classes, however, the team witnessed students answering more complex questions with more than one correct answer, or using short essays. Similarly, in a science class a discussion of the ethical dilemmas surrounding genetic engineering had the potential to be sufficiently rigorous, and four of the eight students provided robust, grade appropriate responses. However, two students did not speak at all, another slept, and one provided monosyllabic answers.

Last, the TenSquare team found that teachers were unable to articulate state standards or graduation requirements for their courses. During interviews, teachers could not clearly identify what skills, standards, and assessments were required for students to meet the requirements for successfully completing their courses. This clearly speaks to the need for teachers to engage in professional development that will provide them with this information as well as strategies for engaging students in rigorous learning opportunities when they are in the building.

There is no evidence that Silver State Charter School has used data to inform critical decisions; instructional decision-making is particularly devoid of a connection to data.

Many staff members cited a historic lack of data use, with several pointing to a significant systemic gap around tracking student performance. Silver State has not used a benchmarking or interim assessment system, and because teachers may be teaching many classes simultaneously, they have not integrated student progress data into their daily planning.

Teachers did not know if their online platform has the capacity to support adequate data analysis, performance prediction, and reteach planning, for example. As one teacher stated, "We have no unified way to know what students do or don't know. If they don't come in with any data [from their previous schooling] we have no way to know their skills. We have tried... [but] using our

current systems we can't keep track of them.” Two teachers noted that data collection had begun with an outside consulting firm (Public Consulting Group), but were unable to describe what data practices were being put in place.

High performing schools have robust systems for data management, display and analysis—systems that enable teachers to “own” and take responsibility for student learning and progress. Interim and benchmark assessments are critical for determining students’ literacy and math levels and learning needs. Silver State teachers interviewed reported that they believe many students *are performing three or more grade levels below grade level*, but teachers also reported that this was just guesswork on their part.

Teachers cannot adequately meet students’ needs if they do not know what those needs are. Benchmark testing will help teachers establish a baseline for each of their students. This will provide teachers with the information needed to create targeted student groupings and personalize support for students. Interim assessments are needed to monitor student progress towards goals. This will allow to teachers to determine the effectiveness of various intervention strategies.

While Silver State has recognized the need to improve data systems, they must accelerate their implementation of effective data management practices. While the planned creation of a “data room” may be part of a broader strategy, it is currently the only concrete action to which staff could point.

Since there are no clear expectations or a shared vision for what excellent instruction should look like at Silver State, instruction has lacked focus, consistency, and intentionality.

Typically, school leadership is responsible for communicating a vision for instructional excellence and implementing a framework to support best practice. In high-performing schools, this vision is evident throughout the school—leaders and teachers can clearly articulate the vision and we see it in practice throughout classrooms.

During observations at Silver State, however, it became clear that instruction lacks focus and intentionality. There was no common approach for working with students. Some classrooms had direct instruction for a small group of students while a larger group worked online. In most classes, students worked independently online the entire time. It is not clear what teachers and students should be working on during class time on campus. Some teachers actively walked around to look at screens and answer questions; while others sat at their computer during the entire class observation. Few classrooms had any posted work, objectives, or other relevant academic language.

The current program structure presents several obstacles for teacher planning and targeted instruction. Students can come to campus whenever they would like Monday through Thursday. Consequently, teachers do not know who they will be supporting from day to day. For example, one math class had 14 students working on either Algebra, Math Foundations, or credit recovery courses. Without a clear learning plan for each student—and clear expectations around teachers’ support for students—it becomes very difficult to teachers to facilitate student learning. Additionally, teachers find it very difficult to plan engaging, relevant, and targeted lessons to support and enhance students’ online learning. Thus, auditors tended to observe either generic

irrelevant lessons or no added support at all.

Another challenge with the current program structure is the number of classes each instructor must teach. The sole English teacher is responsible for managing 10 different courses. These range from credit recovery to literature classes. The English teacher must manage the coursework, grading, data management (e.g. tracking student results), and instructional delivery. The amount of time and effort required to manage 10 courses does *not* allow teachers to plan thoughtfully or appropriately. When asked about the ability to plan, one teacher stated, “Plan? I just prepare for the next onslaught!” Teachers must be given an appropriate course load and student load, so that they can invest the proper amount of time and energy needed for students to make gains.

Teacher Coaching and Evaluation

Teacher coaching and evaluation must be at the center of every school improvement plan. A consistent, focused and intentional coaching and evaluation cycle is one of the most effective methods for improving student outcomes.

The existing formal evaluation system does not give teachers enough feedback about their annual performance and has little to no impact on the quality of student learning. Best practices across top-performing charter schools around the country promote a culture of excellent instruction, which includes frequent opportunities for instructional feedback. At Silver State, teachers receive one-two evaluations per year, which are used to formally grade the teacher, rather than improve student learning.

The culture at Silver State has not been rooted in continuous teacher development—teachers reported receiving neither constructive criticism nor praise in previous school years, and it is assumed that a teacher is doing well if he/she does *not* receive feedback.

To foster best practice, annual performance evaluations should be conducted separately from coaching. Although informal observations could potentially inform some components of the annual teacher evaluation, the quality of student learning will only be improved through a continuous coaching and feedback cycle.

There is no mechanism to provide consistent coaching and feedback for teaching staff. Routine coaching and feedback through teacher observations is among the most impactful methods of teacher improvement. Informal observations provide a structured format for instructional leaders to provide regular, bite-sized, constructive feedback that improves a teacher’s practice. They are central to the improvement of instructional practice and student learning.

Currently at Silver State, there is no mechanism to provide consistent coaching and feedback for the teaching staff. Teachers note that administrators conduct informal “pop-ins” to check in on staff and will, from time to time, leave informal feedback regarding the observed instruction. However, this communication is inconsistent and not aligned to a systematic and formal observation, coaching and feedback loop. Leaders do not provide constructive feedback that

pushes a teacher's practice. No teacher described informal observations that focused on how teachers can improve student learning.

Observations and feedback must be intentionally planned by coaches/academic leaders and systematically tracked to note when teachers are observed and how they are progressing toward their coaching goal. Furthermore, through an intentional focus on clear goals throughout a coaching cycle, teachers will have an opportunity to hone their practice and can move forward with continuous development.

Professional Development

Leaders lack a streamlined, overarching plan for professional development. When asked by TenSquare to explain the professional development (PD) program, we were told that there was none in previous school years.

Initial PD planning this school year appears to be inadequate as well. Teachers reported that 2016-17 pre-service professional development was nonexistent. Pre-service PD should be spent on collaborative planning and academic preparation for the upcoming year. Instead, the previous administration scheduled a rafting trip (one day) and optional on-site time (two days) and two sessions with FuelEd (two days). There were no agendas available for the FuelEd sessions to determine the scope of the sessions.

This year, Silver State will meet with staff on Friday mornings for professional development throughout the year. Leaders mentioned that these would become data days, but at the time of the visit, they had not yet developed a clear plan for how these days would be used. Fridays had been used as time for all teachers to enter attendance and other data from the week. This is an inefficient use of time. Data collection and initial analysis should be done prior to meeting.

During interviews, teachers articulated the need for several PD sessions. Teachers desire and need more support, resources and training on how to contact and interact effectively with students' families. New to Silver State this year is an advisory program, where each staff member is responsible for tracking student data and communicating with each student's family. Although staff members like this idea, they expressed frustration with the process—from data collection challenges to an inability to reach families. Some teachers have embraced this program and are creating advisory lessons for their students. Other teachers use that time as a study hall time. Clear expectations and PD around this new initiative are critical to its success.

Public Consulting Group's services should be critically assessed to ensure best fit with Silver State's current needs. Silver State's previous administration contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG) to provide PD and support this year. During TenSquare's visit, however, only one general introductory PowerPoint was available for review. It states that PCG is contracted for 300 hours from August 2016 to June 2017 to provide "collection and analysis of student data, identify appropriate intervention strategies, support with reaccreditation process through Advance-ED and support faculty."

It is not clear from the presentation materials what PCG's plan for professional development is

and if it aligns with the school's needs. The only mention of professional development session for teaching staff is optional online courses through Pepper (a system developed by PCG). Auditors did not have access to Pepper to determine its level of appropriateness for Silver State staff. What is clear is that Silver State needs an intensive, focused, customized PD program, with data and instructional coaching designed to help Silver State build an effective personalized learning program.

Summary Findings

Program

- The blended learning model is poorly defined and as such does not serve all of Silver State's current student population.
- The current hybrid learning program model lacks definition and clear roles for teachers to support student learning.
- Organizational policies have not been systematically developed to ensure an efficient, effective program devoid of duplicative or conflicting practices.
- Current systems for taking attendance and conducting assessments provide too much latitude and allow for cheating.
- Student groupings and attendance policies hinder teachers' abilities to plan for direct instruction opportunities and to support student learning effectively.

Curriculum

- Silver State Charter School lacks a clear and cohesive academic vision that aligns curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development.
- The online learning management systems that Silver State has selected are not fully understood or used by the staff.
- The online learning management systems and supplemental materials that Silver State teachers are using do not appear to be fully aligned to state standards.
- The current credit recovery practice at Silver State does not systematically support credit recovery and disrupts student learning in non-credit recovery classes; it is unlikely to result in an increase of "on time" graduations.
- The quality of student assignments is highly varied and many do not consistently align to the level of rigor required by state standards; this is especially true for writing assignments.
- The PE curriculum is an area where weak tracking and accountability for student work is particularly evident.

Instruction

- Silver State lacks clear expectations, a data-driven process, and a shared vision for what excellent instruction should look like across classes.
- Teachers do not use any benchmark or interim testing and hence teachers have a very limited grasp of students' mastery or baseline learning levels. Moreover, there is no tracking of students' progress on personalized learning plans.

- The onsite instructional program presents several challenges to ensuring high-quality learning: namely the lack of clarity on attendance expectations, the current grouping of students, and the number of classes and students teachers are managing.
- Silver State’s classroom-based instructional support lacks intentional planning and appropriate grade-level rigor.

Teaching Coaching and Evaluation

- Silver State’s current teacher evaluation system does not meaningfully evaluate teachers’ instructional practice, or serve to improve the quality of student learning.
- Silver State does not employ a consistent observation and feedback loop for teachers, and lacks an effective system for growing and improving student learning through instructional coaching.

Professional Development

- Silver State currently lacks a strategic plan for year-long professional development to enhance instruction.
- There is no clear plan in place to support improved student learning and achievement through targeted instructional coaching.

Summary Recommendations

Program

- To realize the full potential of its hybrid learning model, Silver State must clarify its learning model. The school should research best practices in personalized learning, clearly define the role of the teacher and the purpose of onsite instructional support, and develop reasonable class/student loads so that teachers can support students effectively.
- Silver State must develop and implement policies regarding work completion and class attendance so that students are not “binging” on assignments and then using “class” time to socialize. Silver State could also look at the possibility of developing co-curricular activities and social events that would allow students to have in-person social interaction with other students, without missing key face-to-face learning opportunities.
- Silver State must also develop and implement clear policies regarding when and where make-up, remedial, and credit recovery work may be completed.

Curriculum

- Silver State should work with an experienced school improvement leader, with expertise in personalized learning, to assess and select online curricula and learning platforms to ensure that they are 1) rigorous, 2) in alignment state standards, and 3) are a “best fit” in terms of Silver State’s needs.
- Teachers should be provided with weekly professional development focused on how to maximize use of the learning management systems, online curricula, supporting materials.

- Teachers should be provided with weekly professional development designed to improve their understanding of state standards and ability to create their own complementary materials, activities, and in-person learning experiences that complement and enhance the online learning platform.
- The PE curriculum must be revised and systematized. Other classes should be examined to determine if similar issues exist.
- Credit recovery should occur at a set time, with clear parameters for those students who need credit recovery to graduate.

Instruction

- The administration must define what constitutes excellent teaching and learning at Silver State Charter School; this vision should be quickly and collaboratively developed and rolled out to the staff, so that it can be aligned to teacher observation and evaluation.
- Silver State must launch a “data driven” learning framework that holds teachers accountable for incorporating grade-level rigor and standardized test preparation into their instructional support for students.
- Silver State leadership should monitor grade level rigor by consistently reviewing weekly lesson/learning plans and observing student learning, to ensure that teachers are using higher-level questioning and appropriate rigor, and that they are meaningfully grouping students to enhance learning.
- Teachers should be provided with high-impact training on how to interpret data, how to create and implement any necessary “re-teaching” plans based on test results, and how to design effective small-group instruction to meet students’ individual needs.

Teaching Coaching and Evaluation

- Leaders should review and update evaluation systems and tools, 1) so that the evaluation rubric is clear and transparent, and 2) so that each teacher receives a minimum of two formal observations with detailed feedback directly linked to the evaluation rubric.
- Silver State leaders should create a yearlong coaching cycle for all teachers, to increase professionalism among the staff and to ensure that all teachers are meeting instructional expectations.

Professional Development

- Silver State leadership should develop a year-long professional development plan to provide teachers with the training necessary to effectively implement the curriculum and increase student learning and achievement.
- Leaders should strategically use regular Friday PD times so that teams can review interim assessment data, plan learning, and modify (or adapt) curriculum materials and instructional strategies to improve student learning and achievement.
- Silver State should critically reassess the professional development offered by Public Consulting Group for alignment with best highly effective practices.

VI. School Culture

Overview

Silver State’s current leadership has the trust and support of the staff. Staff members care deeply about the school and its students. In interviews, every staff member spoke about their unwavering commitment to the school and the students’ success. A number of Silver State policies and practices, however, undermine a culture of achievement for students and a culture of high performance for adults. Supports for the home school connection must also be re-examined.

Staff Commitment

Staff express an investment in and commitment to the students and the school. Every staff member we spoke with was clearly invested in the school and its success. Teachers expressed a commitment to do whatever is necessary to make the school work. Several teachers shared that the night before school opened most the staff stayed late to complete preparations that had not been completed by the previous leadership. They see one another as part of a team, and they are committed to working together to make the school a success.

Staff perspectives on student preparation and achievement appear to be based on assumptions, not rooted in concrete student data. Though staff members expressed commitment to the school, they also noted that they face challenges and obstacles that make their jobs very difficult. The staff reported that they are held to an “unattainable standard,” that the student population has many unique challenges. Staff members claimed, for example, that an excess of students arrive without credits, that families use the school model to “get around” traditional attendance policies, and that many students are not able to do the work because they are significantly below grade level. They could not substantiate these claims with data, however. To address staff concerns, and to understand and effectively address student needs, Silver State must engage in a systemic data collection process.

Accountability and Communication

Silver State’s shared leadership culture appears to be undermining a clear vision for improvement, and has created a situation where staff are not held accountable for improving student outcomes. The entire Silver State staff espouses “shared leadership,” a seemingly positive operating value that may in fact have a negative effect on the school. In this model, various tasks and responsibilities are spread among the entire staff. As a result, however, Silver State lacks a clear vision for improvement and an accountability system that holds staff members responsible for improvement.

For example, there are two teachers who share responsibility for assessments. When staff members were asked in interviews about what assessments students needed to take for graduation or to meet other requirements, staff were unable to answer this question. Typically, one staff member is responsible for assessment, and that administrator clearly leads professional

development for staff around assessment requirements, preparation etc. This model is diffusing leadership as opposed to strengthening it. It is clear that this leadership model developed when the previous administration was removed earlier this year—and might have made sense in the short-term. To make immediate school improvement, however, Silver State needs to realign leadership and ensure that effective accountability structures are put in place.

The absence of a structured family communication plan results in poor family involvement and staff frustration. Currently, Silver State enrolls 180 students—yet only 15 of 180 families attended the family orientation night this year. Other than the one night, there are no other opportunities or set expectations for families to be involved in the learning process. Silver State’s hybrid model of learning is premised on a clear link between home and school to ensure that students can reap the benefits of the model. High performing schools have multiple opportunities for family involvement. Teachers noted that they have a difficult time reaching families to discuss each student’s progress. All teachers interviewed said that they have little to no contact with their students’ families; they wish they had more. Teachers have also received no training or guidance on best practices surrounding family communication and outreach strategies.

Student Culture

Most students followed directions and were respectful; the few students that were disrespectful, however, were not corrected. Behavior was respectful from both students and teachers during classroom time. Dismissal and transitions proved to be more challenging. Students took advantage of these times to be rowdy and ignore staff directions. This was especially evident during dismissal. The entire student population lined up to sign out on two computer terminals. This resulted in a very long line that moved relatively slowly. Students quickly began to exhibit frustration and began to shove one another. The administrative assistant was the only adult in the area.

School wide incentives (Eagle Bucks) are not age appropriate and consequently students have very low investment in earning them. Incentive systems must be consistently and accurately used to be effective. During the audit visit, we only saw a teacher use Eagle Bucks once. One student was told she earned Eagle Bucks for her hard work. The student dismissed the rewards and told the teacher that she did not care about them. “I have lots, but I can’t use them for anything anyway...” the student murmured as the teacher walked away from her. Moreover, the Bucks system, as detailed in organizational materials, is not developmentally appropriate for high school aged students. A more meaningful incentive system would leverage students’ desire for greater autonomy and control by supporting appropriate behavior, allowing students to earn greater privileges.

Summary Findings

- School staff express an unwavering commitment to Silver State and its success. They are eager to contribute to the school's improvement and success. Although staff are devoted to the school, they believe that the school has significantly more challenges than are recognized by outside agencies.
- The lack of an effective leadership structure undermines accountability for school improvement and the creation of a culture of high performance.
- Silver State lacks a culture of student achievement. Current discipline policies are not implemented to create a safe and respectful school climate during non-class times. The positive behavior incentive system in place is used only sporadically and, because it is developmentally inappropriate, it is not likely to be effective with high school students.
- Additionally, school wide incentives systems do not have the desired outcome of rewarding desirable behavior.
- Family communication is minimal. Staff members expressed a frustration with how to best engage families in the learning process.

Summary Recommendations

- Silver State must reassess its discipline policies to create effective systems. The school should design and implement a school-wide discipline/reward system that is consistently enforced on every level and high school appropriate. The system should involve close attention to detail and appropriate responses to low and high level infractions.
- Silver State educators should receive support and training to develop and implement an effective family involvement and communication plan, designed to support students' personal learning plans.
- Silver State should review and reestablish transition and dismissal protocols for effectiveness, efficiency, and student safety, and increase adult presence during all transitions.

VII. Leadership

Overview

The findings and observations below are based on interviews with individuals, a review of school- and school-system level data and documents, and classroom and school wide observations and interviews with teachers and staff at each campus.

Silver State Charter School began the year with a significant leadership transition, with the departure of the school leader. The school is currently managed by a team of two: the new school leader and the executive assistant who is serving as a business and operations lead. This is the current principal's first time in a school leader role and it is the operations leader's first time in a significant managerial role. It is important to note that many of the problems currently facing

Silver State Charter School pre-date either of the two school leadership team members' appointment to their current roles. The new administration is faced with difficult circumstances and is doing their best to make the appropriate corrections.

Capacity

Current Leaders appear to lack appropriate experience and seem overwhelmed by their new positions. School turnaround situations require seasoned, transformational leaders with the experience necessary to drive significant change to improve student outcomes. The current leadership team, while hard working, appears to lack the expertise needed to turn Silver State Charter School around. As noted, this is the first school leadership role for the current principal. Moreover, the executive assistant, serving as a business and operations lead, expressed repeatedly in her interview that she lacks sufficient training for her role.

While the principal and the executive assistant have taken responsibility for the vast majority of leadership responsibilities, leadership is distributed across the school. Several tasks have been assigned to other staff members. Coordination of testing has been assigned to two teachers, for example, but according to teacher interviews they lack any formal authority with their peers. Moreover, the principal and executive assistant are responsible for all duties traditionally assigned to school counselors and school data leads.

The wide range of responsibilities required of the principal and the operations lead prevent them from taking on true leadership roles. They spend a great deal of time either learning how to do tasks or doing the tasks themselves. The leadership team should be reconfigured to capitalize on the strengths of current members, eliminate duplication of low skill task expertise, and acquire team members with the experience needed to transform the school.

The team is missing key finance and data management skills. The leadership team also lacks finance and data expertise. There has been significant turnover among office and financial staff, and while bookkeeping has improved, interviews with staff demonstrated a lack of access to and understanding of basic financial information. A new finance manager has been hired and a part-time bookkeeper is in place but it is unclear why these two roles are needed.

Additionally, the school is not yet using data-driven decision to drive school improvement. Teachers do not currently participate in any data protocols, and most data work is being done by the school leader in cooperation with an external consultant. In interviews, the registrar was identified as data expert on staff, but he spends the majority of his time maintaining the student information system.

Mission, Vision, and Goals

Silver State Charter School lacks a clear vision and mission to inform decision making. While SSCS has written mission and vision statements, interviews and observations suggest that the mission and vision do not guide decision making at the school. For example, while the mission statement is present on the school's website, it is not present in any handbook and teachers were unable to identify it in interviews. A school's mission and vision should contribute to the

community's sense of identity, but SSCS' mission and vision do not appear to do so. Interviews with staff demonstrated confusion about the reasons for the school's existence and the identity of the school's target population.

Clear and measurable goals, aligned to mission and vision, have not been established.

When asked about goals for the school, four of six interviewees noted the need to improve academic performance and the graduation rate. However, no two interviewees gave the same answer about school goals, and no interviewees spoke to the school's mission or vision.

One teacher stated "[Our] main goal is to help students recover credits and bring up graduation rates. We have taken a more proactive approach to graduation." Another said, "Our goals – increase parent contact, increase graduation rate, credit recovery. Student achievement is something we work on with parent contact, although I work with the kids first." A third noted, "[We] incorporate credit recovery and make sure kids understand the credits system and what they need to graduate." A cohesive vision and mission would ensure teachers understand both the institutional goals and the role they play in realizing them.

Moreover, when asked about evaluations, teachers did not speak to progress toward goals. They also cited a history of infrequent observations and no clear connection between teacher evaluations and student outcomes. For example, one teacher said, "During my first two years I received some observations but very few. [The current leader] is more visible. She comes in a lot to just hang out or for other reasons."

Silver State Charter School provided the Licensed Employee Appraisal Form used to evaluate teachers. However, evaluation forms were not available for school leaders. When asked, no staff member, including the school leader, could give a comprehensive explanation of the basis for school leader evaluation. The School Performance Plan, professional development plan, and handbooks that the current leadership team inherited do not constitute a coherent plan that employs clear and accurate data to support and evaluate teachers.

High performing schools tightly align goals for individual team members to the school's mission and vision. Required levels of performance should be backward mapped to current levels of student performance, so that goals are aligned to and help to drive student achievement.

Nevada school law and policies are often cited as excuses for poor policy and decision making. Rather than take advantage of the freedoms afforded to charter schools, SSCS has been hindered by a belief that the school's work is constrained by laws and policies that the school leaders appear to only partially understand. For example, the current attendance policies are hindering the school's progress, but the rationale provided for their existence is that they are required by Nevada state charter law.

Similarly, the drop in enrollment, from 360 to 180 students, was attributed in multiple interviews to the Charter School Authority bringing to light fiscal and academic issues at the school. Interviewees identified changes in the online learning platform as an additional factor for attrition. The limited number of state approved programs, coupled with capricious decision making by the previous leader, was identified as the root cause.

It is essential that the school leaders have a comprehensive grasp of Nevada school law and policies, especially as they pertain to online charter schools.

Summary Findings

- Leaders currently lack a leadership evaluation system, clear job descriptions, and goals tied to overall school performance.
- Leadership team members lack training and experience on how best use student performance data to drive decision making.
- Leadership team members would benefit from training and assistance to develop goals that drive school improvement and support the realization of the school's mission and vision.
- Leaders would also benefit from a clear understanding of relevant Nevada State Charter policies and how those policies affect Silver State.

Summary Recommendations

- Silver State Charter School's leadership team should be reorganized and reconstituted to leverage existing individual strengths, eliminate duplication of skills and roles, and bring on board individuals with expertise to execute an effective turnaround.
- Leadership team job descriptions must be created to ensure that leadership is aligned to support high performance and that leaders are accountable for school outcomes. This process must ensure that Silver State puts effective data systems in place, and that data are used to drive school performance.
- Leaders must have a deep understanding of Nevada State Charter law and policy.