



**Third Party Review
Report of Findings**

Sierra Expeditionary Learning School

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Date of Review: March 22, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of the Third Party Review is to identify The Sierra Expeditionary Learning School’s (“SELS”) strengths and areas for improvement in the following five areas: student achievement, ethical leadership, continuous focus on increasing quality, responsible governance, and fiscal accountability. These areas of inquiry are taken from the *Quality Standards for Charter Schools (QSCS)* developed by the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA). A member of Insight Education Group, Inc. gathered information from teachers, students, parents, administrators, and board members. Our methods of inquiry included classroom observations, gathering school documentation, convening teacher, board, parent and student focus groups, conducting administrator and board member interviews, and conducting an online teacher survey. All questions were developed to draw-out data targeted to the five areas of inquiry and the *QSCS*. This report summarizes key findings in the five areas of inquiry, provides a narrative of data supporting those key findings, and makes recommendations for school-wide improvement.

SCHOOL RATING

<u>Quality Statement</u>	<u>Rating</u>
1. Student Academic Achievement First	3
2. Ethical Leadership	4
3. Continuing Focus on Increasing Quality	3
4. Responsible Governance	4
5. Fiscal Accountability	4

RATING CRITERIA

Using the *QSCS Evaluation Rubric*, the school is rated on a 1-4 scale in each of the five areas. This scale is described below:

- 4 = Meets or exceeds standard.** All relevant evidence gathered clearly demonstrates that the school has met the quality standard.
- 3 = Mostly meets standard.** Some, not all of the relevant evidence demonstrates that the school has met the quality standard.
- 2 = Barely meets standard.** Little of the relevant evidence demonstrates that the school has met the quality standard. Some evidence may indicate that the standard has not been met.
- 1 = Does not meet standard.** There is no evidence that the standard has been met, or the evidence indicates that the standard has not been met.

Each of the five areas contains a discrete number of quality standards. Using the same 1-4 scale, the school is first scored on each of the quality standards. These scores are then used to guide the determination of a rating for that particular area.

KEY FINDINGS

Summary of Findings

The Sierra Expeditionary Learning School opened in 2010 with the mission of inspiring a diverse group of learners to achieve academic excellence while developing a strong sense of character and community. Their goal is to preserve each child's natural curiosity and love of learning.

The school currently serves students in Kindergarten through 7th grade. Its strength lies in its strong community and the commitment that all of the stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, administration, and board members, have in ensuring that the school is successful in implementing its vision and mission. SELS has a unique focus on 21st century skills, deep, exploratory and project based learning, and character education in order to prepare students for high school, college completion, and career. The school has a very strong sense of community and parents, board members, students, and teachers are highly satisfied with the school and take great pride in the unique educational enterprise in which they are engaged.

The review team found the school has a clear mission and vision with a well-aligned program. The school has been able to maintain its emphasis on deep learning and expeditionary projects while at the same time earning higher test scores on standardized tests than the other district schools. The Director, the Board, and all of the teachers share a continued focus on increasing the quality of instruction even more.

NARRATIVE OF DATA SUPPORTING KEY FINDINGS

Student Academic Achievement First

Rating: 3 = *Mostly meets standard*

The school received a 3, *mostly meets standard*, in this area because although the school's overall achievement is high, there is an achievement gap. In addition, the school needs to work on its engagement strategies in the classroom, and could systematize its data driven instruction.

▪ *Does the school have high expectations for student achievement?*

The high expectations for SELS are spelled out in its mission and vision, and are exemplified in their semester long “expeditions.” Their goal is to prepare students for a 21st century world, one that is changing rapidly, and to have students be contributing members of their community. High expectations are apparent in all aspects of the school, from the mission statement to the curriculum to the behavioral norms. The charter states: “we believe every child is capable of achieving his or her potential to the fullest when afforded respect, fairness, kindness, discipline, and appropriate instruction.” The idea that all children can learn is clearly evident from all stakeholders and learning activities.

The school was started as an alternative to the existing schools in the district, and in the observation team's opinion, to also create a school that takes advantage of the natural resources of the area as a learning tool. The vision of the school is outlined in their charter and Web site:

We recognize that an educated person in the 21st century needs to be literate, competent in the core academic disciplines as outlined in the California State Standards, and a reflective lifelong learner. An educated person needs to have a strong sense of self and realization of his or her own gifts and talents. We help our students cultivate the following capacities:

- Creativity – think creatively, work creatively with others and implement innovations
- Critical Thinking – reason effectively, use systems thinking, analyze and solve problems
- Communication – communicate clearly and collaborate with others
- Adaptability – adapt to change and be flexible
- Initiative – manage goals and time, work independently, and be self-directed learners
- Accountability – prioritize, set and meet goals, and achieve results
- Leadership – guide, lead others, and be responsible to others
- Information – accessing and applying information technology effectively

At Sierra Expeditionary Learning School, we are committed to ensuring all of our students acquire these abilities so they are able to thrive in a changing world and be a contributor to the community. We place a strong emphasis on the relationship between the school and the home, recognizing the critical role of families in fostering children's education. We see ourselves as allies of the family, mentoring and supporting parent's efforts to guide the intellectual and emotional development of their children. When afforded respect, fairness, kindness, discipline, and appropriate instruction, we believe every child is capable of achieving his or her potential to the fullest.

The academic program is centered on expeditions. These are semester long projects that are experiential and project based and which have learning targets and several projects connected to them. The expeditions are based around the state standards—for example, they may start with the social science and science standards and then find a work of literature that is based around that topic. Math projects will also be related to the topic. They also include “field work,” which include hands-on learning experiences such as working on a farm, visiting tide pools, or going to a museum. For example, the Kindergarten expedition is called “the Strength of a Bear.”

Below is the description of the Kindergarten expedition:

In this science-based expedition, kindergarteners go deep into a study of a prominent player in the local region: the black bear. Asking the question, ‘What makes a bear a bear?’ students look into both the physical particulars of bears and also their symbolic power, especially in California and at our school, where the bear is our mascot. They work on multiple products, including a realistic model of a bear den and a bear sculpture for the school.

Expeditions are interdisciplinary, standards-based, hands-on, and engage students in real-world, critical thinking activities.

SELS is part of a larger network of expeditionary learning (EL) schools.

Our model challenges students to think critically and take active roles in their classrooms and communities. We invest in the growth of our teachers and create stimulating and rigorous classroom environments. This results in higher achievement and greater engagement in school. EL works with over 150 schools and 40,000 students around the country with great results.

EL schools are characterized by: active instructional practices that build academic skills and student motivation, rigorous projects that meet state standards and are connected to real-world needs, school cultures of kindness, respect, and responsibility for learning, shared leadership for school improvement, and school-wide commitment to improved teaching and leadership practice. In EL schools, learning is public, challenging, meaningful, active, and collaborative. It is guided by ten design principals: the primacy of self-learning, the having of wonderful ideas, the responsibility for learning, empathy and caring, success and failure, collaboration and competition, diversity and inclusion, the natural world, solitude and reflection, and service and compassion. It is a reflective practice, and all teachers are expected to continually improve on their practice. The EL model is one that has very high expectations for student achievement and encompasses 21st century skills and critical and higher order thinking, and works on “soft skills” such as character development. SELS is following this model “to a T.”

At SELS, students are expected to not only achieve well in the classroom and in core academics but also in character traits and development. The school has infused “Sierra Norms” throughout every program in the school, including its academics. The norms are: **Strength, Integrity, Empathy, Respect, Responsibility, and Adventure**, creating the acronym “SIERRA.” The SIERRA norms all on the walls of every room in the school, and not just the definitions but also clear examples of what each norm looks like. There are rubrics for these norms, they are infused throughout all projects, and students are expected to live and breathe them at all times, including outside of school. Parents are sent home with guidelines on how to reinforce the norms at home. I heard countless stories of these norms being demonstrated outside of school—

from exemplifying the norms during fieldwork to picking up a mess at the grocery store. I also consistently saw these norms displayed in classrooms, from a teacher encouraging a student to take an academic risk on a math problem, to students engaging in peer tutoring, to showing evidence of growth on these norms in the student yearly portfolio.

There is also a strong emphasis on being a key part of and giving back to your community. Students are organized into “crews,” not classrooms. The entire school does a service project and many crews do service projects as well, as community service is one of the goals of the schools and an exit outcome for students. Every adult in the school, from teachers to administrators, to office staff, is committed to help students grow and learn, not only academically but also as a person.

The EL model is considered one that uses research-based best practices. It is nationally recognized as an innovative school improvement model, and is used in several high performing charter schools. The model is based on five core practices: Learning Expeditions, Active Pedagogy, Culture and Character, Leadership and School Improvement, and Structures. These core practices “work in concert and support of one another to promote high achievement through active learning, character growth, and teamwork.”

The SELS charter also outlines specific learning outcomes, which are assessed via expeditions and state testing results. These are:

to develop critical thinkers and problem solvers, to support students in becoming effective and confident communicators—able to write and speak with clarity, accuracy, and precision, to build strong literacy skills and language development by focusing on the core academic subjects through an integrated curriculum, to instill tolerance and broad worldviews while fostering an appreciation for local and global diversity, to enable all students to become self-motivated, competent, lifelong learners, by addressing students’ emotional, social, cognitive, physical and reflective learning systems, prepare students to be productive citizens in the 21st century through a flexible and evolving instructional program based on research, provide a variety of extended and enrichment learning opportunities for its students. All of these goals will enable students to be self-motivated, competent, lifelong learners, because they provide a solid foundation in academic content knowledge from which the students can build upon by continuing their education through college and beyond.

Again, these specific and extensive goals are evidence of the high expectations SELS has for all students, and are demonstrated in the classrooms, via expeditions and through the final product of expeditions, the portfolios.

According to the charter, SELS also sets rigorous goals for student exit outcomes based on CA state standards:

1. Students will meet or exceed the average performance levels of students in schools with similar demographics in the District in English–Language Arts and Mathematics as measured by the STAR assessment.
2. Students will maintain progress toward benchmarks of proficiency in all academic subjects as

defined by the California Core Content Standards.

3. Students will demonstrate continual improvement on the STAR, CST, and a minimum of one year's growth on CELDT for each year of instruction.
4. The School will strive to meet or exceed the API requirements for renewal.
5. The School will strive to meet or exceed Adequate Yearly Progress goals.

In its charter and in its curriculum scope and sequence, SELS has listed strategies and methods for assessing whether or not students and the school has met these goals.

In addition to the EL curriculum, SELS has implemented several nationally recognized literacy strategies such as CAFÉ and the Daily Five. CAFÉ is: **C**omprehension, **A**ccuracy, **F**luency, **E**xpand Vocabulary, a method to increase reading skills and comprehension, again to promote deeper learning and not just a “drill and kill” style of teaching reading. The Daily 5 includes: read to yourself, read to someone, listen to reading, work on writing, spelling and word work; five literacy strategies students should use every day. Again, these methods work on reading strategies that encourage students to be self-sufficient and self-motivated.

Because the EL curriculum teaches so much higher level and critical thinking, SELS is already ahead of the curve for the implementation of Common Core. They have already begun to implement a math curriculum that is based around the common core. For other subjects, they will simply need to slightly modify their expeditions, as the expeditions are already based around the same types of skills that the CCSS include. The school is constantly self-assessing and looking for ways to improve its curriculum and instruction. For example, in order to implement the common core, the staff asked for some professional development around teaching non-fiction texts, and this year they are implementing the Daily 5 and the CAFÉ curriculum and strategies.

Student leadership is also being consistently modeled and taught, which is consistent with the high expectations of the SIERRA norms and the EL. At each crew's morning meeting, one student is expected to lead a community building game for the day. They are expected to give clear instructions, to model the game, and to reflect upon how it went afterwards. The team also observed the student leadership of the weekly all school community meeting, where students read announcements and lead activities. Sometimes students as young as kindergarten and 1st grade lead these meetings, on a microphone, in front of the entire school community! They are also well prepared, with a laminated sheet of paper outlining their activity and anything else they need to do for the meeting. This laminated sheet then goes into their portfolio of work. Older students are buddied up with younger students, in order to be role models and to help teach behavioral norms.

The school also has Habits of Work, which are based on the Sierra Norms and the guidelines for EL. Their purpose is to “aid students in developing study skills, time-management skills, persistence, self-awareness, and the ability to seek feedback and assistance.” Essentially, these are skills that will help students be successful in high school, college and beyond. Again, students are constantly assessed on these, they are integrated into assignments, and there is a separate rubric for these “H.O.W.,” as they call them.

Of the teachers who responded to the survey, 100% strongly agree that the school has high

expectations for student achievement and 100% strongly agree or agree somewhat that the school provides a challenging and coherent curriculum for each individual student. Teachers seem to be very on board with the high expectations for the students, commenting that “students always come first.”

From classroom observations, it is clear that there are consistent, high expectations. All classrooms are set up in a similar fashion, with reading corners, a rug for activities, and the SIERRA norms on the walls. Many classrooms had a list of “RIP” words—these are words that are overused and should be substituted for other, more descriptive or sophisticated words. In each class, the team observed the SIERRA norms at least 2-3 times, from teachers asking students to take an academic risk on a math problem, or rubrics outlining the SIERRA norm that would be worked on during this project. Learning goals are reviewed at the start of each day, and teachers make sure that students have read and understood them. All learning goals include critical thinking skills such as evaluation or application. One example was: “I can analyze math thinking for creativity and accuracy.” Teachers pre-taught key vocabulary for that lesson, such as the definition of the word “analyze.” Teachers were constantly asking students to push themselves—whether it was reflecting upon how they could improve their morning meeting activity, or asking them to “think bigger.” The team also observed teachers asking students to self and peer assess, encouraging reflective learning and revision. Students were expected to explain their answers in each class (whether orally or in written form) in complete sentences. The team observed students taking scaffolded college style notes on anatomy, and highlighting and summarizing non-fiction texts.

What struck our team the most about SELS was the joy factor. These students *love* their school, and are so excited to learn. During the student focus group, the students were so enthusiastic, they literally gushed about their school, especially the fieldwork and the expeditions. They even talked about loving “hands on learning.” They described in detail that they felt challenged and that the teachers “push them, but just enough” and “when I need help, they help me, but they try to make me do it by myself first.” They described in detail the use of rubrics for everything, including the SIERRA norms, from being on time to class and keeping their cubbies neat. It is clear that they know what is expected of them and that they are expected to succeed and do their best.

Parent participation aids in this expectation for high achievement. At home, parents are expected to help uphold the SIERRA norms. One parent told a story of her daughter complaining that someone in the grocery store had no integrity because they knocked something over and did not pick it up, and that the child then picked up the mess herself. (She was pleasantly surprised to hear her 2nd grader talk about integrity in the grocery store). Parents are also very well informed about what their students are learning and are expected to follow up and ask students how they are doing, and make sure they are on track. Parents, teachers and students also work collaboratively twice a year to set academic and character goals with students. They work as a team to ensure that the students meet these goals.

The Board and the Director see their highest priorities as educating kids and implementing the vision of the school. They believe that their job is to make sure all stakeholders are involved in this.

▪ *Are students meeting high performance standards?*

SELS students are meeting high performance standards. In addition to the high standards and learning targets set during the expeditions, SELS students exceed the districts performance on the STAR tests.

Below are the API scores:

SELS API scores, 2011-12

Met Growth Targets
Schoolwide: Yes
All Student Groups: Yes
All Targets: Yes

Groups

	<u>Number of Students Included in 2012 API</u>	<u>Numerically Significant in Both Years</u>	<u>2012 Growth</u>	<u>2011 Base</u>	<u>2011-12 Growth Target</u>	<u>2011-12 Growth</u>	<u>Met Student Groups Growth Target</u>
Schoolwide	63		900	927	A	-27	
Black or African American	0	No					
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	No					
Asian	1	No					
Filipino	0	No					
Hispanic or Latino	17	No	758	852			
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	No					
White	42	No	958	960			
Two or More Races	3	No					
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	13	No	763				
English Learners	13	No	748				
Students with Disabilities	7	No					

As seen below, SELS’ overall, API score is significantly higher than that of all but one other elementary and middle schools in the district.

Comparison of scores with other district schools

<u>2012 Growth</u>	<u>2011 Base</u>	<u>2011-12 Growth Target</u>	<u>2011-12 Growth</u>	<u>School- wide</u>	<u>All Student Groups</u>	<u>Both Schoolwide and</u>
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<u>TAHOE-TRUCKEE JOINT UNIFIED</u>	816	810	D	6			
Elementary Schools							
<u>Glenshire Elementary</u>	848	838	A	10	Yes	No	No
<u>Kings Beach Elementary</u>	820	803	A	17	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Tahoe Lake Elementary</u>	836	808	A	28	Yes	No	No
<u>Truckee Elementary</u>	830	827	A	3	Yes	No	No
Middle Schools							
<u>Alder Creek Middle</u>	828	827	A	1	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>North Tahoe</u>	841	829	A	12	Yes	Yes	Yes
High Schools							
<u>North Tahoe High</u>	756	733	5	23	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Tahoe Truckee High</u>	770	794	5	-24	No	No	No
Small Schools							
<u>Cold Stream Alternative</u>	796*	746*	5	50	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Donner Trail Elementary</u>	912*	881*	A	31	Yes	Yes	Yes
<u>Sierra Expeditionary Learning</u>	900*	927*	A	-27	Yes	Yes	Yes

It should be noted that SELS does have a significant achievement gap between its white students and students of color, special education students, FRL, and ELL. Although it should be noted that it is such a small school that the special education, ELL, FRL were not statistically significant and the Latino population is still small so that a few students can skew the results. It should also be noted that in comparison to the other schools in the district, the achievement gap is slightly or significantly less, and that a score of over 700 for Latino, FRL and Special Education subgroups is much higher than the statewide average. However, considering its significantly higher API than the other schools in the district, this gap should be less. Additionally, the API for Latino students dropped from 852 to 758 in 2012. The school needs to take more steps to reduce the achievement gap and increase achievement for Latino students, especially considering that the numbers of FRL and ELL students in the surrounding area are increasing. Finally, one teacher raised the concern that, like many project based learning environments, they have a bit of a “Swiss cheese model” where some standards are learned extremely well, and others are barely touched upon. Incorporating all or most of the standards into EL projects is an area of growth.

In order to prepare students for the STAR tests and to assess those students who are not tested via

the STAR, the school also administers the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Below are the results for the Developmental Reading Assessment in 2011-2012.

Reading

Overall

Kindergarten :	(no fall assessment)	At grade – 60%	Above grade – 40%
1 st :	fall DRA:	Below grade – 40% At grade – 40% Above grade – 20%	spring DRA: Below grade – 35% At grade – 10% Above grade – 55%
2 nd :	fall DRA:	Below grade – 9% At grade – 54% Above grade – 27%	spring DRA: Below grade – 9% At grade – 54% Above grade – 27%
3 rd :	fall DRA: +	Below grade – 35% At grade – 28% Above grade – 37%	spring DRA: Below grade – 18% At grade – 45% Above grade – 37%
4 th :	fall DRA:	Below grade – 35% At grade – 25% Above grade – 40%	spring DRA: Below grade – 35% At grade – 25% Above grade – 40%
5 th :	fall DRA:	Below grade – 18% At grade – 42% Above grade – 40%	spring DRA: Below grade – 9% At grade – 50% Above grade – 40%
6 th :	winter Dibels:	Below grade – 30% At grade – 25% Above grade – 45%	spring Dibels: Below grade – 20% At grade – 25% Above grade – 55%

		<u>Fall</u>	<u>Spring</u>
Overall:	Below/Borderline Grade Level –	24%	20%
	At/Above Grade Level –	76%	80%

As seen above, approximately, 20% of students are reading below grade level, this is higher in some grades, almost 40% in some. Although major gains were made 3rd, 2nd, 5th and 6th grade, there were no gains made in 4th grade and only some progress (comparatively) in 1st grade. The school increased its reading progress overall by 4-6%. It should also be noted that a large

portion of the students, around a third, are actually reading above grade level. This again, could point to the achievement gap amongst the subgroups at the school. When interviewing the teachers, in response to these tests as well as in response to the upcoming Common Core, the 3rd and 4th grade teachers have done major professional development on reading strategies, and implemented the Daily 5 and CAFÉ strategies and methods.

The school has created their own benchmark assessments for math based upon the state released STAR practice test questions for grades 2-7. For Kindergarten and first grade they use the assessments from the Bridges curriculum (math curriculum based on common core) and check progress with those based on state standards.

Math

Kindergarten : no fall data Spring: At grade – 85% Above grade – 15% +

	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Spring</u>	
1 st :	Basic – 20%	20%	...
	Basic/Proficient border – 15%		
	Proficient and Advanced – 65%	80%	
2 nd :	Basic/Proficient border – 18%	18%	-
	Proficient/Advanced border – 18%	64%	
	Advanced – 64%	18%	
3 rd :	Basic – 36%	18%	+
	Proficient – 28%	45%	
	Advanced – 36%	36%	
4 th :	Basic/Proficient border – 17%	17%	-
	Proficient – 17%	35%	
	Advanced – 66%	48%	
5 th :	Basic – 18%	9%	+
	Proficient – 18%	18%	
	Advanced – 64%	73%	
6 th :	Basic – 25%	15%	+
	Proficient – 54%	85% for Proficient & Adv.	
	Advanced – 21%		

Overall:	Below/Borderline Grade Level –	<u>Fall</u> 26%	<u>Spring</u> 10%
	At/Above Grade Level –	74%	90%

As the results show, students are doing better in math, with only 10% below grade level. There were gains made in 6th, 5th, 3rd, and Kindergarten, but no change in 1st grade and students actually

fares worse on the spring assessment in 2nd and 4th grade. The team suspects that these are the same students: special education students, economically disadvantaged, and English Language Learners that are still not at grade level, consistent with the STAR test results.

In terms of the students' exit outcomes, the school has met most of its goals.

The charter outlines the following goals "Sierra Expeditionary Learning School is committed to achieving the following student exit outcomes as measured by the California Standards Tests:"

Students will meet or exceed the average performance levels of students in schools with similar demographics in the District in English–Language Arts and Mathematics as measured by the STAR assessment: this goal has been met.

Students will maintain progress toward benchmarks of proficiency in all academic subjects as defined by the California Core Content Standards: this goal has been met.

Students will demonstrate continual improvement on the STAR, CST, and a minimum of one year's growth on CELDT for each year of instruction. This goal has only been met for some subgroups.

The School will strive to meet or exceed the API requirements for renewal: this goal has been met.

The School will strive to meet or exceed Adequate Yearly Progress goals: This goal has been met.

Teachers do analyze the results of interim and benchmark assessments, but only on a classroom and individual level. According to teachers, "for reading assessments, we have one-on-one conferences, we talk about what they see and what I see, and we set new goals and set up another time. Parents are aware of the goals, we send home sheets explaining what they are." They also have conferences twice a year with students and families to discuss where students are in their progress and to set goals. Teachers have an extensive progress report rubric, which shows standards for reading, writing, listening and speaking, math, science, social science, and the sierra norms. The use of assessment data is discussed in these meetings.

Because SELS is such a small community, they truly know their students and what they need. They have reading and speech specialists who come in several times a week to work with the kids. However, there is very little evidence of going about data driven instruction in a truly systematic way; the school is not using any program such as Intell-Asseess, Illuminate, or Data Director to help with benchmark assessments and they do not seem to have a designated time to analyze data and create instructional plans based upon the data. Teacher survey results confirm that this could be an area for growth, with 51% agreeing somewhat, 14% agreeing strongly and 28% saying they did not know to the statement "I have been adequately trained on how to use the school's data management system." Additionally, 14% disagreed strongly, 57% agreed somewhat, 14% agreed strongly, and 14% responded they did not know to the statement "I am able to use the school's data management system to track my students' achievement." Then

again, 100% of teachers agreed strongly or somewhat to the statement “I know how to use student achievement data to improve my instructional practice.” There seems to definitely be a disconnect as to what data management systems teachers are using and how they could do this systematically. Also, if data was used to look at the school holistically, they may spot trends that could help them reduce the achievement gap within subgroups. Teachers could give supports and apply strategies to ELLs, low-income students, and special education students across the board, and be consistent amongst classrooms and grade levels.

▪ ***Does the school provide a challenging and coherent curriculum?***

The instruction at SELS is strategic and well organized. Each semester, the grade level class has an expedition, which is designed in detail by the teachers, complete with learning targets, guiding/essential questions, case studies, fieldwork, interviews and lessons from and with experts, service learning, and final projects. These are again, interdisciplinary units that incorporate all of the state standards. For their final projects students create an authentic, real world product such as books, videos, or even a garden!

According to the charter, the school provides a rich, inquiry-based, interdisciplinary curriculum based around its learning expeditions:

The Expeditionary Learning framework focuses on high achievement through active learning, character growth, and teamwork. It emphasizes project-based learning, reading and writing across the disciplines, inquiry-based science, math and social studies, and learning in and through the arts. Literacy is central and reading and writing are integrated throughout the curriculum. Character development and teamwork are not just emphasized, but embedded in school structures, practices, and rituals and integrated into the academic program. Utilizing an engaging, relevant curriculum, the mission of Sierra Expeditionary Learning School is met through attention to academics and life skills—the body through physical education, exploration, and health, and the spirit through awareness of self and our connection to the world.

The evidence provided and observed confirmed that the school is meeting its mission and implementing the curriculum. The instructional program has been strategically designed to align with research based best practices and standards. During their summer professional development (PD), the scope and sequence for the year is designed, and expeditions are designed. All lesson plans are aligned to this scope and sequence and expeditions.

All lessons started with reviewing the learning targets, which are generally related to the expedition and/or other key skills (such as literacy or math). The team observed critical thinking in tasks that involved application and evaluation in each classroom “what’s a different way to do this problem” or “how else could you represent your understanding” as well as differentiated instruction (see below). Each lesson incorporates a closing activity as well, usually a type of formative assessment or an exit ticket. The team observed this in several classrooms.

A challenging and coherent curriculum was apparent in all classrooms. Lessons appealed to all types of learners and included many forms of critical thinking, as well as basic skills such as literacy. The team observed interactive math journals, student presentations, reading and

vocabulary stations, vocabulary application games (placing the names of the bones on an actual skeleton model), and different ways of finding the common denominator with fractions.

In one class, the students discussed the previous day's authentic learning activity of ancient Indian papermaking. Pre-teaching vocabulary was also frequently observed after reviewing the learning goals—"what does analyze mean? What about accuracy?"

The school also seems to be using some college level skills in many classes, particularly in the area of self-reflection and student motivated learning. The team observed several times in which the students had to assess themselves on a rubric. They also observed students taking notes on graphic organizers, writing one-sentence summaries of a text, and highlighting the key parts of a text. These skills, especially for elementary and middle school students, will help students in high school and beyond.

In classroom observations, although engagement was relatively high, only a few engagement strategies were apparent. We observed cold calling and taking volunteers. Although the level of engagement was generally around 80-85%, we did observe some students disengaged or off task (heads down on desks, spacing out). Often, only 4-5 students would raise their hands to answer a question, in which case the teacher would likely cold call on a different student. Frequently, though, students were excited and enthusiastic to share their thoughts or an answer to a question. A joy factor was definitely highly apparent. This also led to several students calling out, or "blurting out" as the Director called it, mostly from white boys. This is concerning as they are likely drowning out the voices and ideas of other students, particularly English Language Learners and/or Special Education Students. This is an ongoing issue which the school has spent extensive time discussing. Teachers should consider using a wealth of engagement strategies such as using calling cards or sticks, using think-pair-share or dyads, or smaller group discussions, rather than whole class discussion.

As part of their final, summative assessments, all students must put together a portfolio of their work and present this to a panel. The portfolios include work from throughout the year, much of which has been revised several times. Samples of portfolios showed: a cover letter, case studies, field work, writing and literacy, projects, products and performances, math, and service learning. They also had sections on adventure, crew and character, student goals and reflections, enrichment, other excellence of evidence and artifacts such as maps, writing samples, artwork, and Spanish work. Again, students take pride in their work and there is concrete evidence of deep learning.

On the teacher survey, 100% of teachers strongly agreed that the school provides a challenging and coherent curriculum for each individual student. However, 100% of teachers agreed strongly that they are confident that their students are actively engaged during class. This is not consistent with what the team observed, as the team observed at most 95% of students engaged, and on average 80-85% of students, 100% of staff also reported using pair shares very frequently, and 85% reported using small group work very frequently or somewhat frequently (14%).. 100% of staff reported using manipulatives, peer tutoring, reading and writing workshops, project based activities, and student inquiry and very or somewhat frequently. (It is interesting that the project-based activities were only at 85% very frequently, as this is the instructional basis for the entire school). Teachers also reported using reflective writing, graphic organizers,

multimedia, and student reflection somewhat frequently. In observing students and teachers at work in the classrooms, the review team observed the use of all or most of these techniques, especially reflective writing, peer tutoring, and student inquiry.

Another area of growth is the continuity of curriculum from year to year and semester to semester. Although the expeditions are designed as semester long experiences, there was no evidence of connections between the two expeditions in each grade level or any connections between grade levels (such as between 1st and 2nd grade). However, there is extensive looping—the 2nd and 3rd grade students stay together for two years with the same crew, as do the 4th and 5th grade students. Additionally, if there is more than one class per grade level, the teachers co-plan the expeditions and some lessons, ensuring a coherent curriculum across the grade levels.

Although the joy factor and engagement is high, there does not seem to be a huge sense of urgency at the school. The team observed that transitions were rarely tight (3-5 minutes to transition to an activity with lots of talking and off task behavior), and that long stretches of time were used for mundane tasks: 15 minutes to review the correct answers to homework—not why the answers were correct, simply just the answers, or 5-7 minutes explaining the instructions for an activity. One student was doing a presentation on his vacation to New Zealand, which was amazing presentation and academic discourse practice for the student, but it did leave ~20 other students simply listening and asking questions from time to time for about 20-25 minutes. There was no evidence of the belief that each and every second needed to be used for learning. This is an area of growth, especially if the school is to reduce the achievement gap.

▪ ***Does the school provide a curriculum tailored to meet the needs of each individual student?***

Differentiating instruction to make sure each student has an appropriate level of challenge and support is a priority at SELS. The expeditionary learning model in and of itself is a huge opportunity for differentiation that teachers constantly take advantage of. Students have choices in products, in presentation, and process and often by content. The expeditionary learning model also creates opportunities for differentiation by learning environment due to fieldwork. The team observed abundant evidence of teachers differentiating by learning style, interest and readiness. For guided reading, all students are placed into flexible ability groups based on data gained on regular/interim assessments (DRA). All groups are accountable for the same content, skills and standards and are required to take the same internal and external assessments. These groups are also often changed, based upon the results of assessments. For those students below grade level, they are constantly reassessing their abilities and adjusting curriculum to meet the needs of individual students. Classroom observations also confirmed the use of differentiated reading instruction and materials, as well as individual reading conferences so that students can do formative assessments on reading abilities.

On the teacher survey, 100% of the teachers stated that they frequently differentiate instruction to meet the needs of both high and low-performing students. 100% of teachers strongly agreed with the statement that the school provides a challenging and coherent curriculum for each individual student. 85% strongly agreed and 14% somewhat agreed with the statement, “I can

effectively differentiate instruction to meet the needs of low performing and high performing students in my classroom.” 100% of teachers strongly agreed that they are “confident that their instructional practices allow me to meet the needs of each student.” During the teacher focus group, teachers explained how they provide customized support and challenge for students. One teacher said:

I teach from a menu, kids have choices of different activities, content is the same but reading from the text, or they have a conversation or watch a video. We are trained to know where their comfort level is especially with their academic reading level, and students know they need to be in sweet spot between too easy and too hard. They choose the more challenging problems, they push themselves, its part of the culture. With the menus students tend not to go for easy option. We have long-term extension projects, have something else that they go to when they are done with the core.

Students were similarly detailed in their discuss around differentiation. They stated things like “if you are having trouble, she gives you a couple of strategies and lets you pick the one that works best for you” and regarding math: “when I came here I was having a hard time with math, and now I feel so comfortable. [The teachers] have provided all of us with multiple strategies— number line, standard algorithm, breaking numbers down. We each have a different one that works for us.” From these two statements, it is clear that teachers are differentiating by readiness and learning styles. Students also described teaches differentiating by interest:

[the teacher] gives us a rubric, this how I get to a standard level but I can push myself to get a 4 to do this, this, and this. We got a craftsmanship rubric for ancient India, you can just do the things you are supposed to do (language, literature, or law) but to get a 4 but you add something like religion and math.

It is clear from teacher and student comments that there is an emphasis on differentiating instruction and that students truly feel like their needs are being met.

Classroom observations confirmed the use of differentiating instruction by readiness, learning style and interest. Students were consistently self-assessing using rubrics, “fist to fives” or thumbs up/thumbs down. In the 6th grade classroom, students were given a menu of choices on how to their math logs that was actually placed literally, in a plastic menu board. The following was the task:

Learning target: rewrite the expectation from the right side of the page in your own words.

What I learned: write 1-2 sentences about new information you learned about this topic. Complete this after you have finished the right side of the page.

Proof: make up a problem that proves you learned the new concept. Solve the problem. Explain your thinking with pictures or words.

Reflection: express your new learning in ANY creative way. Your reflection should be neat, interesting and visually appealing. Possibilities include: map, drawing, cartoon, idea web, comic strip, poem, flow chart, mnemonic, what if statement, storybook form, asking questions, cross word, graph, etc.

Again, this math task is evidence of differentiating by interest and learning style. The team would also note that the task also emphasized key literacy and critical thinking skills as well, in

particular, having students explain their understanding of math in complete sentences. In another classroom, after the teacher did a quick formative assessment using a “fist to five” the team observed the students working on additional math problems while the teacher gave the students who self-assessed as having less of an understanding some more one-on-one personal assistance. In a third classroom, we observed stations, where students were reading individually, other students had reading conferences, other students played a scrabble type game to practice new vocabulary, other students made up games and activities using felt pouches full of objects related to the story they were reading, and a final group of students wrote their stories. Students were on task as well to do a literacy assignment where for the story they had to do a character setting, Events: 1st, 2nd and 3rd event, a problem and a solution. The team assumed that if students were not conferencing with the teacher or writing their story, then they could choose to play the word game, read or play with the objects in the felt pouches.

The use of formative assessment was abundant. Teachers are constantly preassessing and having students peer and self-assess, all of which was observed in every classroom. In every classroom, the team observed teachers assessing the students on their levels and adjusting instruction accordingly. Besides the examples mentioned above, we observed the First Grade teacher doing a formative assessment on the writing task. She said “ [for the]Writing center—you worked on your solutions and adding details to your solutions. Hands in the air if you feel like you got that down. Hands on shoulders if you need help. Hands in lap, I would like some more help. We are not saying anything, just doing our hands.” Since there were many hands in the lap, the teacher said that they would go back to the lesson the next day.

The charter outlines the process for remediation:

All students at Sierra Expeditionary Learning School are provided with differentiated instruction in all classes. As outlined in the courses below, students are given many opportunities to receive enrichment and remediation in all of their core classes. The following is a summary of programmatic offerings that support both students who perform above and below grade level:

- “Literacy Time” (30 minutes daily, ability-based grouping for language arts instruction)
- Multi-age classrooms that allow for modeling/mentoring

Remediation and Intervention Plan

A student who does not meet the standards at the “proficient” level or higher will participate in a variety of remediation activities, ranging from before/after school assistance to intensive intervention strategies (i.e., flexible ability-based grouping, push-in/pull-out support, tutoring and parent support). Teachers will consult with the student and parents to develop a greater understanding of the student’s needs and the potential resources to address those needs. Students who do not show progress after a designated time will be recommended to a Student Study Team, in accordance with TTUSD practices. The SST will consist of, at a minimum, two Sierra Expeditionary Learning School teachers and the school director. The SST will create a remediation plan to address the student's needs. If the SST determines a child might have a special need, the student will be referred to TTUSD Special Education Program for evaluation and services.

Teachers and administrators confirmed the continued use of the above policies and commented on remediation and teaching those with special needs, such as ELLs or Special Education students:

I have people in and out of my room all day long...we do have small class sizes. We assess regularly, we always know where they are. We have an ELD coordinator, speech therapist and a reading specialist. [Students who need extra help] have three hours a week that they work on homework and class assignments. We have a unique ability to set up study hall—recess or lunchtime just to do the work. Students do math class, then go directly to study hall and can do HW that was just followed up from math class. Then they can read ahead. We have an SST process, teacher fills out a form and gathers evidence, and come together and set up a plan to meet with parents and then a piece to make us most successful. We have behavior contracts, IEPs, specialized learning time.”

It is clear that the teachers and staff are supporting ELLs and Special Education students on an individual basis, however, the support could be more cohesive in and outside of the classroom.

According to SELS’s charter, in addition to the EL model, the school is committed to “accessibility and diversity” and to create a “safe and culturally competent learning environment that is accessible to all families.” In respect to English Language Learners, the charter lays out a plan:

- Educate staff and administration about the impacts of language and culture on education.
- Provide trainings so that educators welcome and embrace English Language Learners.
- Create educational structures that support learning for English Language Learners.
- Build accountability, assessment and ownership for serving English Language Learners into the life of the Sierra Expeditionary Learning School.

The charter also outlines the use of an English Language Coordinator:

the EL Coordinator will be involved in the identification, assessment, placement, re-classification and monitoring of the English Learners. An annual MOU and fee for services will be contracted between TTUSD and Sierra Expeditionary Learning School to determine the level of coaching and staff support the TTUSD English Language Program Coordinator will provide to the EL Coordinator.

And its plans for ELD instruction:

Structured English Immersion Program. In this program, EL students will be taught in English with some support in the student’s primary language. EL learners will participate in all English core content instruction and receive focused English Language Development (ELD) for at least 30 minutes a day. ELD will consist of focused reading, writing and oral speaking and listening time. All Sierra Expeditionary Learning School students will participate in “Literacy Time”- ability- based grouping for language arts instruction. In addition, all students will participate in Spanish Language instruction. Since Spanish is our dominant second language in Truckee, it will be an excellent opportunity for native Spanish Speakers to model learning another language and culture

to native English Speakers.

The school administers the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to its ELLs and incoming students (if necessary) and monitors improvement on the CELDT tests.

Teachers are constantly monitoring students and adjusting lesson plans, groupings and support based on the needs of each student. Although the team did observe some ELL strategies such as making everything verbal visual and vice-versa, word walls and graphic organizers, and the use of an ELD instructor, due to the significantly lower scores with ELLs and Latinos, this could be an area of growth for the school. The ELD coordinator could do more PD with the main teachers in order to integrate even more ELL strategies in the classroom, as most ELL strategies aid in understanding for all students, including special education and lower achieving students.

In terms of special education students, the school participates in the SELPA with the district. The school has a part-time speech specialist and a reading specialist. The school currently has approximately 12 special education students who have IEPs and are receiving services, however, this number is changing as they are constantly assessing students. There is appropriate use of the SST process and 504s and IEPs. The administrative team commented that often times students choose SELS because they are not receiving the additional support they need at regular district schools, so the school is constantly assessing students for special education services.

▪ ***Do teachers have the resources they need to promote high levels of achievement?***

Of the teachers who responded to the survey, 100% agreed strongly that they have both the materials and the support that they need to promote high levels of student achievement. However, only 57% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed to the statement “the school allocates resources for programmatic improvement based on the results of student assessment data,” and 28% said they did not know, while 14% said they disagreed somewhat, again showing some lack of information on using data to make instructional decisions. Teachers, the Director, and the board expressed that the school makes the most of limited funds. The Director, in conjunction with the board and feedback from the teachers, is committed to spending the vast majority of the budget on curriculum and instruction.

SELS is considered part of the district and therefore they receive support under Measure A, which is a local fund that is designated for school supplies and instructional resources. The school start-up grant has also been used to purchase technology, and input from the teachers and parents was used to make these purchases.

The Director and administrative team reported that they try to fundraise to cover their fieldwork and most of the additional expeditionary learning tasks. “We try to align budgets with family donations, that is paid for by fieldwork. The more we raise in family donations, the more we get in fieldwork. We tend to raise 20-25K, divvy it up to classrooms, and make sure we don't overspend budget.” The Director also reported that he asks for feedback from parents and teachers on how to use the money from the start-up grant, and he is constantly talking to teachers about what they need for the classroom.

Observations evidenced an abundance of teaching materials, and consistent curricular materials. All classrooms had a very similar set-up and materials. Each classroom had posters for the days of the week and months, as well as number lines and letters. There were several outside reading books, document cameras and projectors. Table set-up is in groups, which is consistent with the EL curriculum. Each classroom had a laptop cart (although none were in use at the time of observation), a rug area, a main white board, and a smaller white board for the carpet instruction. Also seen were math manipulatives and demonstration tools such as blocks and Cuisenaire rods, well-organized bins or shelves with writing implements and other supplies for students.

One of SELS's greatest resources is its faculty and strong leadership. When asked to state the most positive aspects of working at this school, teachers consistently responded, "collaboration" "the staff" and "support." Teachers work together to design curriculum and implement common practices. The classrooms are strategically located, with rooms of the same grade located next door to each other. Teachers also spoke highly of the support the principal provides as they work to plan projects and to develop curriculum.

Again, in terms of strategic design, the school has chosen to focus its limited resources on core instruction. All electives are voluntarily taught by parents (the choice of electives is determined by what skills parents have), and the school has a part-time PE and a part-time Spanish teacher. The operations and administrative team is quite small—there is one Director, and one operations staff member who supports the Director, and the school has no plans to extend the administrative staff.

Time is another limited resource that the school uses strategically. A great deal of time is set aside for staff professional development and collaboration, when teachers can develop their skills, research, design and refine curricula, and reflect on student learning. This report will detail findings related to professional development further in the section on Continuing Focus on Increasing Quality.

▪ ***Does the school culture support student achievement?***

One of the "shining lights" of SELS is its school culture and community. The parents, teachers and students are thrilled to be there. One teacher commented: "the school is like the people and the place that we live in, wild, adventurous, outside the norm, amazing and beautiful." Another teacher commented that she has "never been happier in her life." Students absolutely love their school, constantly commenting on "how awesome it was."

Because of the SIERRA Norms, behavior is, with a few exceptions, quite consistent. Teachers commented that "its really nice because we have revolve all behavior with SIERRA norms, and we have a consistent and common language." When they talk about behavior, teachers comment that they frame it around [their] SIERRA norms and say which norm do you think this behavior is not following, and ask, how can you change your behavior so its more related to norms?" The team observed a student being pulled aside after community meeting by his teacher and the principal to talk about his behavior. The activity centered on dancing, and the teacher was explaining in a compassionate, specific and calm manner how his behavior was not appropriate for school. They talked about the norms around respect, responsibility, and integrity.

Because of the SIERRA norms, students are generally well behaved outside of school, and one teacher commented on how well her students did when doing fieldwork or activities outside of school.

We go country skiing on Mondays, and there was another school there. Our students noticed that that school was having birthday party and smashing the cupcakes into each other's faces. Our students said behavior around cupcakes was not OK in public and in a place where its not just students....It's the little things, they see the value in it.

Again, parents commented that they try to reinforce the SIERRA norms at home as well, and teachers send home information sheets on how to do this. Parents see their most critical role as reinforcing the norms at home. "The motto: we are crew, we are not passengers, really resonates as parents to participate fully. You are not just a parent to your kids, you know the whole crew's name, and you are watching out for community." Another parent said: "Understanding the norms and how that crosses over from school to home, and how to support. It." They further commented:

there is a feeling of security and safety that the student has in the classroom and at recess. I saw a little boy at yard duty who told me that I really like this school and my old school was not like that. I see that with a lot of children regardless of disposition or how social they are.

The parent survey stated that the most cited reason for loving school was their classmates. The number one thing that parent said their students said they liked about the school in the survey was character.

The school also does a lot to celebrate success. There is a Gratitude Night, where the school celebrates holidays and birthdays, and a Celebrations Night, where students display and present their end of year products from the exhibitions for the community to see. When the team was there, they were getting ready for their all-school dance that night, and the excitement was palpable. Parents also commented that there were several school potlucks and other ways to get involved.

Again, the school also teaches Habits of Work via the SIERRA norms and via other instruction. According to the charter;

Sierra Expeditionary Learning School students are expected to build culture and character through their Expeditionary Learning experiences. Habits of Work will be fostered through learning expeditions and instructional practices, as well as through activities specifically focused on community building. Students will be assessed on these Habits of Work as they are articulated through academic courses and any related school activities or events.

The Habits of Work are built into their Expeditionary Learning experiences as well as regular rubrics. Students commented on them as well, saying that it was hard..."sometimes you can get a "not meeting" [the standard] for having your cubby be messy and then again for not doing your HW. In one classroom I observed students self-assessing on the Habits of Work rubric. The teacher's instructions were to: "look back on habit of work evaluation on yourself yesterday. Circle one word to maintain your excellence or to bump it a level." Again, the school is teaching

“life skills” and study skills as part of their strong school culture—those habits that make you a successful adult such as organization and timeliness.

Classroom visits confirmed these high behavior expectations and Sierra norms. The morning meeting and community meeting activities emphasized community building, leadership and teamwork. Student’s demonstrated the SIERRA norm of adventure by taking academic risks during math instruction, after the teacher asked: “who would like to take a risk on this to make sure they are doing it right? I want someone who is iffy on this” there were several students who volunteered. I observed students helping each other in each class, and students working with all different types of students regardless of background or level. There was also definitely a joy factor in each classroom—students were enthusiastically volunteering to read learning goals, read with a teacher, answering questions, or play a game to review bones in the body.” Anytime a teacher asked a question, several hands went up to answer it.

Teacher survey results also confirmed the strong school community. 100% of teachers strongly agreed to the statement that “the school provided a safe, healthy and nurturing environment characterized by trust, caring and professionalism” and that students and teachers feel safe at this school, and that student conduct policies are clear, and that students know the rules and policies.

The school campus, which is located next to the district office, is safe. They also have access to the resources at the district office such as a basketball court and cafeteria as the district office used to be a middle school. It includes a playground and an open space for gathering. Students have recess every day before or after lunch and have PE every other day.

Documents provided listed clear procedures for emergency drills and for real emergencies.

When I asked students to raise their hands if they felt safe at school, every single hand went in the air. They repeatedly said there was “no bullies.” One student commented “I feel safe because no bullies if you get hurt the teachers take care of you, everyone care for you” and another said; ”I love SELS because I used to go to another school and I feel safe here, sometimes at my old school I would fake sick, when I came here I felt so safe, everyone has your back.” Another student said “everyone plays with each other. There are no cliques.” It is clear that the school is a supportive environment that aims to build character as well as academics.

■ ***Is the school community engaged in supporting student achievement?***

The school leaders demonstrate the mission in daily action and practice and share their vision among the parents and the board. Parental involvement is strong at SELS. 100% of the teachers surveyed agreed strongly or somewhat that the school productively engages parental involvement as part of its support system.

Parents have several avenues to be involved in the school. Parents are invited to attend the weekly community meetings, to see what is happening at the school, be part of the community, and to show their support. They are also invited to observe board meetings and there are multiple committees that parents can volunteer with. Teachers reported that parents can be involved by chaperoning and driving on fieldwork, and by helping out in the classroom. Many

teachers have parents helping daily. They also “sent home sheets explaining what the learning targets are and how parents can help with the SIERRA norms at home.” Most crews have folders that go home once a week with announcements and student work, one teacher has a blog. Parents reported that “teachers can articulate if a child strayed from behavioral norms—green (all is good), yellow (pre-advice, what was wrong with behavior today), red (Sent to office).” There is a parent newsletter and so parents know what is going on in the school and how they can help. Many teachers send home agendas where the teachers and parents can write notes to each other on student progress. For portfolio expeditions and celebration nights, parents are a key component. Parents run many Friday elective courses, and the courses offered are in the areas of the parent’s expertise or interest—from making Legos, to the school newspaper, to building Web sites, to walking. Parents truly view themselves as part of the community; as part of the crew, and they know their support is vital to the school. They view their most crucial roles as supporting learning and norms, fieldwork, the admin team, and supporting the school financially.

The administrative team reported that although they have a strong core group of parents who are involved, it sits around 25% parent participation and they wish they had 100% parent participation. They do have a “SELS 100” campaign, which for this year is focused on 100% of the school community donated. The Director reported that they could “do mandatory hours... but we want to encourage it without it being forced. We want more people involved because it will put less pressure on those that are involved.” They do have a Parent Teacher Crew, their version of Parent Teacher Organization, which was less formal in the past, but this year they have really delineated their goals and roles.

Parents meet with teachers formerly twice a year for conferences with the student, and “they discuss where the child is, child sets goal, how we asses where they are and the child decides what they would like to accomplish “ The goal setting is a community effort. In general, parents view their role as support to teachers is crucial to student success at school—whether it’s making sure the students do their homework and reading and helping them to meet the standards.

As the board is made up almost entirely of parents of students at the school, the board is very active in spreading the vision and mission of the school in the community and actively recruiting. They are also constantly trying to get 100% parent participation in the school, and thinking of more ways for parents and community members to be involved.

The school is active in the surrounding community, and uses community members as much as possible to help support learning and the school itself.. Many community members volunteer to teach the elective courses. The EL learning also incorporates service learning as one if its key factors. 7th grade students are paired with a mentor who is a member of the community to learn about how to be productive members of society. Local experts are used in the expeditions as much as possible—local farmers, fisherman, museum workers, architects, accountants, etc. Teachers did mention in the survey that they would like to make the community more aware of the great things happening at the school and forge even more partnerships with town experts. ~42% of teachers also reported that they did not know whether or not the administration seeks input from the community. The school should continue to develop relationships and keep communication strong with the surrounding community.

Summary

- The school has a strong academic record and is faring well on the state tests. However, there is a significant achievement gap between white students and the other subgroups, and the school could do more to support ELLs, low income students, students of color and students with disabilities, especially within the classroom by integrating more strategies for these students.
- The use of differentiated instruction is strong and is seen throughout all lessons and assessments.
- The school needs a more systematized way to analyze the results of interim and state assessments and a more systematized way of using the results of these assessments to guide instruction.
- Although the joy factor was very high, there is a lack of a sense of urgency in the classroom, and each and every second is not necessarily used for learning. Teachers need tighter transitions and quicker instructions.
- Critical and higher order thinking and tasks are abundant, due to the EL curriculum. The school is already either implementing or has plan to implement the Common Core. Due to the nature of the EL curriculum, this will be a relatively seamless task.
- School culture is extremely strong and positive and all stakeholders feel that they are an integral part of the community.
- While students are actively demonstrating the SIERRA norms, and teachers are frequently modeling and assessing them, the school could work on using a wider variety of engagement strategies, and in particular to stop some students from calling out and often drowning out other students.
- Teachers have implemented a suite of instructional approaches and curricula that are well grounded in research on best practices, standards based, and in line with the EL program. The school could continue to integrate even more standards into the expeditions and make clearer connections for expeditions from semester to semester and year to year.
- The school should also consider using more instructional strategies such as multimedia/technology, more reflective writing and student journals, and the use of more direct instruction to prepare older students for high school.
- Students who are low performing receive support through one-on-one help.
- Facilities are safe, but students would be better off (and parents would be more pleased) if the school had more access to the facilities in the district. The school also needs to find space for the 8th grade class.
- Parents are deeply engaged in the school community and are highly satisfied with the school. One suggestion for maximizing parental involvement even more is to tap into potential parental resources through offering more diverse opportunities that will be convenient for parents.
- The school should continue to reach out to the community for expertise and for support, as well as to spread the news of SELS success.

Ethical Leadership

Rating: 4 = Meets or exceeds standard

The school received a 4, meets or exceeds standard, in this area because there is evidence of a strong focus on student learning with a deep commitment to teachers' professional growth. The school's leadership has done well with engaging all stakeholders in the school's mission, despite limited resources and staff.

■ Does the leadership effectively engage all stakeholders in the school's mission?

The Director actively engages all stakeholders in the school's mission and continuously asks for feedback on how to improve the school. He commented that [his job is] "managing everything" and "containing the vision with which the all the components are operating in: curriculum, finances, parents, board... and making sure that it all continues to work." He is continually meeting with, taking input and asking for feedback from all stakeholders in order to maintain and improve the quality of the school. In general, David is very well liked, admired, and respected. He seemed to have a personal relationship with all the students, staff, and parents at the school.

The Director leads a very close-knit faculty. In the teacher survey, 100% of teachers strongly agreed that the administration effectively communicates and engages teachers and parents in the vision and the mission of the school. The team meets weekly to discuss a range of aspects at the school, and they also have extensive time in the summer for planning.

Students are also very bought in to the vision of the school. They constantly cite the SIERRA norms, and aspects of EL learning using words like "taking academic risks" and "hands on learning." They were very excited to show the team the skeleton they use for anatomy and the fish tank where they are going to grow trout. They cite fieldwork as their most favorite part of the school. From classroom observations it was clear that the "joy factor" was very present, and that student engagement in reading, writing and college readiness skills was high. The teacher survey reveals that 100% of teachers agree or strongly agree that the administration effectively communicates and engages students in the vision of the school.

SELS aims to include parents in the vision and mission of the school as much as possible. Parents attend the weekly community meeting voluntarily, and are very clear as to what the expectations of them are regarding the SIERRA norms and helping students to learn. Again, they identified as their most critical role to communicate with the teachers and to help students learn academics and character norms. In the parent survey, 100% of parents agree that their students' experience has been positive and ~88% said that the top priorities for the school should be focusing on learning and the norms. Again, parents view themselves as part of the "crew," as an integral part of the community. The teacher survey indicates that 100% of teachers strongly agree that the administration effectively communicates and engages parents in the vision and mission of the school.

The Board sees that its most critical role is helping to implement the vision of the school. They believe that their role is to help the Director meet their targets and to provide resources. Again, as most Board members are also parents, they play an integral role in the school. They also are

huge participants in recruiting, enrollment and fundraising, communicating the vision when talking to the community.

▪ ***Does the leadership generate and sustain a culture conducive to staff learning and professional growth?***

Professional Development (PD) is a key focus of SELS's values and mission. The staff participates in regular and frequent professional development, and most of this time is spent focusing on improving student learning. There are about two weeks of targeted PD in the summer in order to plan the next school year, and early release on Wednesdays so that staff can participate in PD. In the school's charter, PD is described as "school faculties and administrators are offered a coherent, demanding, and highly regarded program of professional development to implement the model and to realize significant improvement in student learning and character development." The Professional Development Record describes PD as:

The seven days prior to each academic year and the 5 days after each academic year are spent on full or half day PD with the entire staff. Two of these days on each side include support staff as well. Every Wednesday throughout the academic year we hold staff meetings. These meetings are a mix of logistics/school info and PD. Due to our small overall staff, these meetings act as PLCs, addressing issues which impact the school, such as teaching and learning, student behavior, intervention needs, etc. One-two of these days per month are minimum days, thus providing an extra 3 hours of PD time.

Due to small staff, daily communication between admin, teachers, and specialists (reading, ELD, resource, counselor) keeps all informed and up-to-date. SST meetings are held every Tuesday to address the needs of identified students, and all students are monitored regularly, both with formative and summative assessments by teachers and specialists. We belong to Expeditionary Learning (EL), a national organization with a specific program model (<http://elschools.org/>). We contract with them each year for both on and off site PD.

The PD record also includes a list of conferences that the staff attends such as the EL conferences, CPR training, emergency drills, harassment and discrimination training, PLCs, assessment workshops, diversity workshops, and leadership workshops for the Director.

The bulk of the PD centers around what the "school designer" who comes from the central EL office, plans. She comes at the start of the year, assesses the school on an EL rubric and creates a PD plan for the school, then comes every other month to check in and follow-up. She also writes an extensive protocol for implementing this plan. The plan for Spring 2013 includes curriculum, instruction, assessment, culture and character, and leadership. The school received mostly 4's out of 5 (almost exemplary) in their rubric from the EL school designer.

This protocol, along with needs identified by the staff for expeditions and based on student achievement data, make up their PD plans.

The school does extensive PD for approximately two weeks in the summer where the school designer helps teachers plan the expeditions. They also do some PD in the Wednesday meetings, and many teachers go to conferences. For example, 2-3 of the teachers went to the Daily 5 and CAFÉ literacy conferences this year to learn more about reading strategies. PD is highly

organized and is structured in a similar fashion to student lesson plans, complete with learning targets, guiding questions and assessments. PD plans and materials given to the team showed readings on best practices and sample rubrics.

Peer review is a key component of PD. The school has a protocol for peer review and all teachers use the same form. They look for indicators such as consistent classroom display: learning targets, do now, agenda, practice and prep, instructional methods: direct instruction, small group work, discussion, independent activity, guided practice and whole class activity, as well as differentiated instruction, assessment (formative and summative) and classroom culture: management, discipline, physical space and peer interaction. There is space for observation and comments and questions. The leadership team supports the peer observations and covers classrooms for teachers so that they are able to observe their peers. Teachers also commented in the survey that they are most likely to approach another teacher for professional support, followed closely by the Director, which confirms the usefulness of peer observation.

The Director also uses a consistent form for classroom walk-throughs and does a formal review at the end of the year for all teachers. He does informal walk throughs about every two weeks and formal walkthroughs about twice a year. The walk through form looks at student activity, student work, teacher's role and EL objectives, using many of the same subcategories as above. The teacher evaluation form is extensive, and is based on the rubric for EL standards and CA standards for the teaching profession: engaging and supporting all student in learning, creating and maintain effective environments for students learning, understanding and organizing subject matter for student learning, planning instruction and designing learning experiences for all students, assessing student learning, developing as a professional education, student progress toward attainment of academic standards, and expeditionary learning. If the teacher does not meet the standards, he creates an improvement plan and goals for next year. The teacher also can comment. Again, the Director states that he has such a high level of expertise amongst his teachers that improvement plans are not usually needed. The Director does not often go into classrooms as much as he would like, as they are a bit short staffed at the administrative level and he is focused on the day-to-day operations of the school. Once the school is fully built out and operations are running more smoothly, he plans to be in classrooms more often.

Teachers commented on the PD time:

At the end of summer we do all staff PD, where the school designer comes and we learn protocol and how to get ideas for expeditions, write rough drafts for expeditions. She comes back and checks in with us, and she checks in the week before school gets out, week before school starts. Once every other month, are scheduled dates for her to come in and meet with us...Depending on our work plan for that year, and based on scores for benchmarks, that will be guide for the following year So, last year our plan was a writing plan and this year is looking at reading. All of our PD [this year] has been focused on reading strategies, complex texts, pre and post reading strategies. As a staff we choose our work plan and PD is designed to meet needs.

The Director also commented on the focus PD time:

We have a parking lot [for PD], where we sticker things off and try to address issues.

This year the work plan was around literacy—The Daily 5 and CAFE. We know that we

want to do some intense PD for middle school on ELA. We also need to clean up their map, scope and sequence.

It is clear that their PD is extensive and based upon staff and student needs.

Teacher survey results reflected that teachers are expected to reflect on their practices and change what is not working, with 100% strongly agreeing to this statement.

100% of teachers strongly agreed to the statement that “the administration has cultivated a culture conducive to professional growth.” Teachers also marked in the survey that the top three professional development topics like would like to see were: differentiating instruction, instructional strategies that engaged students, assessment design, and ELD strategies. Their comments on ELD strategies and engagement strategies would be consistent with what was observed in the classroom. Teachers also commented in the survey that they have reading specialists, ELD instructors, weekly PLCs with their grade level partner.

According to the teacher survey, 100% of the staff reported that they receive staff meetings and collaboration with peers as instructional support. Coaching was slightly lower at 72% and mentoring at 28%. In terms of collaboration, the school received high marks from teachers, as also evidenced by the teacher panel. 100% strongly or somewhat agreed that the school created a safe environment for collaboration and that they felt safe sharing their practices with their peers. 100% of teachers agreed and that they had formal time to collaborate with their peers. 100% of the staff felt valued as a professional, and 100% agreed strongly that they were encouraged to take risks. Teachers rated the quality of the PD as high (100%) and that they have input into the PD provided (71%). All of the teacher survey data around PD corroborates the school’s mission to grow their faculty members as professionals. However, 14% somewhat disagreed that collaborating with their peers was useful, so this could be an area for growth.

Data driven instruction is corroborated somewhat by the teacher survey results. 100% of teachers reported that professional conversations are based around data frequently (42%), or sometimes, (57%). According to the survey, most data conversations are centered on standardized tests (100%), benchmark assessments (100%) or teacher created test data (100%), diagnostic test data (71%), and textbook assessment data (57%). The fact that PD conversations are not always centered on data is further evidence that instructional data analysis needs to be more standardized.

▪ ***Does the leadership monitor and evaluate the success of the school’s program?***

The Director as well as the board are committed to monitoring and evaluating the success of the school program. As stated above, they set annual targets for student achievement, do several interim assessments, analyze data from assessments and then create action plans based on the data. The EL PD provider also creates a similar plan. They also survey parents and teachers to constantly evaluate and improve the program.

All (100%) of the SELS teachers agreed strongly or somewhat that the administration both regularly monitors and evaluates the success of the school’s program and 57% were aware that the Director provides regular, public reports on the school’s performance to the school community and the school’s authorizer (the district). An area of growth might be to make

teachers aware of how often the school reports on the performance to the district/authorizer and the community.

▪ ***Does the leadership make decisions in the best interests of students?***

On the survey, 100% of teachers agreed strongly that the administration makes decisions with the goal of optimizing successful teaching and learning experiences, 100% agreed that he implements practices that are inclusive of all types of learners, 100% agreed that the administration uses their influence and authority for the primary purpose of achieving student success, and 100% agreed that the administration has cultivated a culture conducive to student learning. Parents, teachers, school leaders, and board members assume collective and individual responsibility for all students' success. It is clear from his knowledge of best practices, leadership of PD, and feedback to teachers that student success is constantly at the forefront of the Director's mind. Observation data, teacher, student, parent and board member panels all showed strong evidence that the Director always puts students first in all decisions.

The board commented that their role was to ensure that the Director, staff and faculty were upholding the vision of the school. The Director also listed PD and student success as one of his most critical roles.

▪ ***Does the leadership treat all stakeholders professionally?***

100% of teachers agreed strongly that the administration treats all individuals with fairness, dignity, and respect and that they are valued as professionals. The reviewer observed positive interactions between all stakeholders, and the Director truly listening and taking notes on what all stakeholders had to say—whether it be teachers, students, parents, or the Board. The teachers spoke about their professional opinion being sought out for decisions about the instructional program. Parents and the board all spoke enthusiastically about the Director and seemed to have a positive, collaborative, personal and trusting relationship. Time and time again, teachers reported receiving support from the administration and to their needs and feedback being listened to and integrated.

Summary

- The Director is well versed in instructional practices, developing teachers, and charter school management and has created a board that complements and supplements his skill sets and knowledgebase.
- The school leadership engages stakeholders in the mission and vision of the school. There are several opportunities to do this throughout the year.
- A strong culture of teacher learning and growth exists and is nurtured through multiple opportunities to reflect with peers and the Director. This collaboration promotes reflective practice and professional growth.
- School leadership uses the best interest of students, and of the teachers who work with students, as its lens for all decisions.

Continuous Focus on Increasing Quality

Rating: 3 = *Mostly meets standards*

The school *mostly* meets standards in this area. There is a clear plan for accomplishing the school's mission as stated in its charter. The Director and teachers use data analysis to examine their teaching and adjust their approaches, but should be more systematic in their analysis and how data influences instruction.

▪ ***Does the school use data for self-examination and improvement? Does the school involve all stakeholders in self-evaluation and improvement?***

There was some evidence of the school collecting and analyzing data for improvement. The Director and the teachers both spoke about reflecting on what is working and what needs adjustment and changing accordingly. The school does several interim assessments (math and DRA), analyzes data from assessments and then creates action plans based on the data. It also bases its PD plans on data.

As reviewed earlier, the school does not use an outside data tracking system such as Intell-Assess, Illuminate or Data Director, nor do they really have a systematic way of tracking data, or analyzing data in detail. Because it's such a small school, and they know their kids so well, the school does not see it as a necessity. They track scores on each interim assessment, progress made on each interim assessments for individual students, and use this for various interventions, whether it's for reading or ELL support or for SST and RTI plans. Again, this data is analyzed during PD sessions and is used to inform and revise instruction. It is also used to identify areas of need for staff development. Again, the school could benefit from a more standardized system, especially as a way of analyzing question data, such as the most common wrong answers, vocabulary issues, or analyzing which standards need to be re-taught. They also may be able to see trends within subgroups (although the populations of most subgroups is still quite small). A more systematized approach may also clear up some of the confusion that faculty reported on the survey regarding data.

Teachers meet with families and students twice a year to set goals, and most of this goal setting is based on data. They also set goals for the SIERRA norms. As much as students were "fluent" in the SIERRA norms, they seemed to know nothing about the content or state standards. This could be because they are very well acquainted with the learning targets, and most learning targets incorporate the state or common core standards. It is likely that the students have just not been exposed to the vocabulary of the state standards, but it may be that teachers need to make a clearer connection between learning and lesson plans and state tests. Parents also report knowing very little about how their students did on the end of year state tests, although they were very informed about any interim assessments or portfolio assessments.

The Director reports that:

in terms of progress monitoring piece, we test every kid at the start of year, if they are below grade level, we are constantly assessing them--any kids getting intervention is being assessed every 2 weeks....we don't have enough time [in the school's history] to show trends, and it changes so rapidly because we have so few kids. We know the kids

so well. It's been hard because it's not longitudinal.

The teachers report:

We communicate to students [on how they are doing] on a regular basis. For reading assessments, we have one-on-one conferences, we talk about what they see and what I see, and we set new goals and set up another time. Parents are aware of the goals, we send home sheets explaining what they are. We also meet with students one-on-one on a regular basis, and work on strategies to meet those goals.

It is clear that they are using data to have one-on-one discussions and interventions with students, to differentiate instruction, and to meet the needs of all learners.

Some use of data was evident in the classroom. Again, teachers are constantly doing formative assessments and differentiating instruction. Flexible small groupings for reading and writing are based on interim assessments and are frequently changed based upon classroom performance and data from testing. Teachers also have reading conferences with students.

Survey questions about use of the school's data management system to track students' progress and achievement confirm wide-spread use of data driven instruction, professional development and decision making but also some lack of consistency. About 33% reported doing academic conferences weekly or daily, another 14% said monthly, and another 28% said semesterly. 71% agreed strongly, 14% agreed somewhat to the statement "I have established long term goals for students based on assessment results." However, 14% said they disagreed somewhat to the statement. 71% agreed strongly and 28% somewhat agreed to the statement that they had set short-term goals. All teachers assess their students weekly. Again, some varying results come in when you talk about data management systems, perhaps because the school does not have a formal system. 57% agreed somewhat, 14% agreed strongly, and 28% responded "I don't know" to the statements that they have been adequately trained to use the data management system, and that they can use this data management system to track student achievement. All teachers strongly or somewhat agreed that they knew how to use achievement data to improve their practice and that the school allocated resources to for programmatic improvement based on the results of student assessment data. Although teachers are using data to drive instruction, it could be done in a more consistent, systematic way.

The school delivers a parent survey each year, which provides a wealth of parent opinion data about parent satisfaction with everything from the overall education to school culture to individual support and progress. It also asks parents to provide any suggestions. The aspects of the school that parents did say could be improved were "more enrichment, particularly music and art, better facilities, and more feedback/communication on student progress were on 17% of all questionnaires. More PE, larger student population, and higher academic standards were on 8% of questionnaires." Again, parents are highly satisfied with the school, and most of the feedback does center on facilities and electives, but parents as well, did talk about feedback about academic progress.

As mentioned in the previous section, the teacher evaluation process includes peer observation, formal and informal observations by the Director, and an end of year assessment using the California Standards for the Teaching Profession and EL standards. This information is used as

part of the PD process. The Director also uses data based on assessments to help plan PD as well.

▪ ***Does the school have well-defined benchmarks for student achievement?***

Teachers use state content standards and benchmarks to make sure all students are at grade level. Since their API for the school is quite high, they do not set a school-wide goal for assessment or for their subgroups. They do, however, set goals for individual students. They use benchmark assessments for DRA and math to measure progress toward those goals. SELS clearly has a culture of using data to drive instruction, and particularly to ensure that all students have the supports they need. All teachers either strongly agreed (57%) or somewhat agreed (43%) that the assessments they use effectively indicate student mastery of the standards, and 85% strongly agreed and 14% somewhat agreed that they can accurately describe to what degree my students have mastered content standards. Most teachers (85%) use data to identify students who are performing below grade level, and 100% agree strongly or somewhat they have integrated in-class interventions for students below grade level.

SELS also does well in communicating progress to students. In response to the survey item, “My students can accurately describe to what degree they have mastered content standards for my course,” 43% agreed strongly and 57% agreed somewhat. The team suspects that there is a variation here by grade level, with the older students being able to more accurately self-assess. The answers to “communicate student benchmark results to students” varied although it is clear that teachers are constantly communicating results, with 14% saying constantly, 43% saying very frequently, and 43% saying somewhat frequently. The response rate to parents was much less consistent, with 14% saying that they communicate benchmark results to parents constantly, 14% saying very frequently, 57% saying somewhat frequently, and 14% saying infrequently. This response also correlates to the numbers of parents indicating that they would like more communication on student progress in the parent survey. Teachers reported using a variety of feedback mechanisms to tell students how they are doing at least daily or weekly: graded assignments (100%), tutoring (100%), and oral feedback in class (100%). All teachers issued progress reports and report cards semesterly. One-on-one conferences varied—with about 14% of teachers in each category, making it somewhat inconsistently. In classrooms, the team observed learning goals on the board, and heard them being reviewed and explained by teachers. The learning goals are also very clearly linked to all activities and assessments.

Parents in the focus group reported that the teachers communicate with them about their children’s progress. Again, this is seen in the bi-annual conferences, sometimes in communication sent home, and just informal interactions during drop-off and pick-up. Teachers reported that parents can accurately describe to what degree their students have mastered the standards (28% strongly agree, 71% somewhat agree). When indicating the frequency with which they communicate student achievement benchmark results to parents, 14% selected “constantly,” 14% selected “weekly,” 57% selected “quarterly,” and 14% selected “infrequently.” Again, communicating interim progress to parents varied, which may have to do with the emphasis teachers put on individual students. This could also be an area of growth, and may correlate with the parent survey results. The team believes that for the low performing

students, teachers are communicating constantly, but for students who are at or above grade level, the teachers do not communicate as much.

▪ ***Does the school use data to determine how resources are allocated?***

On the teacher survey, 100% of teachers agree strongly or somewhat that the school allocates resources for programmatic improvement based on results of student assessment data. 100% of respondents also agreed that they have adequate resources to implement intervention instruction in the classroom. As stated above, the Director uses data from assessments and observations to determine PD needs. Board members described a careful process of allocating resources through short and long term budget planning, and emphasized that in terms of budgeting they “go back to the mission.” As stated above, professional development is determined by analyzing student achievement data, and is done in tune with the recommendations of the school designer.

▪ ***Does the school establish both long and short-term goals and plans for accomplishing the school’s mission, as stated in its charter?***

The charter outlines several exit outcomes (long term goals) and short-term goals. It also lists several ways of measuring those goals. For long-term goals, the charter outlines proficiency in math, ELA, social science, science, character growth, and community service. The methods of measuring these range from portfolios, expeditions, state tests, to self, teacher and peer evaluations. The charter also lists a number of strategies for ensuring the goals are met.

The goals as stated in the charter are as follows:

In alignment with the Sierra Expeditionary Learning School mission and values, we are committed to providing all students with an excellent, high-quality education and meeting the following overall student goals:

- To develop critical thinkers and problem solvers.
- To support students in becoming effective and confident communicators—able to write and speak with clarity, accuracy, and precision.
- To build strong literacy skills and language development by focusing on the core academic subjects through an integrated curriculum.
- To instill tolerance and broad worldviews while fostering an appreciation for local and global diversity.
- To enable all students to become self-motivated, competent, lifelong learners, by addressing students’ emotional, social, cognitive, physical and reflective learning systems.
- Prepare students to be productive citizens in the 21st century through a flexible and evolving instructional program based on research.
- Provide a variety of extended and enrichment learning opportunities for its students.

The plan also lists exit outcomes such as:

- Students will meet or exceed the average performance levels of students in schools with similar demographics in the District in English–Language Arts and Mathematics as measured by the STAR assessment.
- Students will maintain progress toward benchmarks of proficiency in all academic subjects as defined by the California Core Content Standards.
- Students will demonstrate continual improvement on the STAR, CST, and a minimum of one year’s growth on CELDT for each year of instruction.
- The School will strive to meet or exceed the API requirements for renewal.
- The School will strive to meet or exceed Adequate Yearly Progress goals.
-

As evidenced by the interim assessments and API scores, the school has met these goals for each year that there is data.

The school board members spoke repeatedly of strategic planning, especially in the area of finance. They commented on how their role has shifted from opening the school to running the school, with a specific focus on increasing parent involvement and making sure they have adequate facilities. The board and the Director discuss the budget monthly as well as yearly. The board is committed to helping the Director meet these larger goals.

Summary

- The school principal, in conjunction with the larger EL organization, has provided excellent PD based on data, student needs and teacher requests.
- Teachers regularly collect data. Teachers use assessment results to revise and individualize instruction, form small groups, and request professional development.
- The teachers communicate with parents somewhat frequently about progress, and parents are very satisfied with the tone and quality of communication. However, communication with parents seems to be inconsistent, with some parents and teachers reporting more or less communication.
- The school needs to do a better job of standardizing and systematizing the data from results of interim assessments to drive instruction, especially in terms of sub groups (and not just individual students).

Responsible Governance

Rating: 4 = Meets or exceeds standard

The school received a 4, meets or exceeds standards, in this area. The Board has demonstrated thoughtful governance. They are committed to the mission of the school and have fulfilled their responsibilities in supporting the school administration.

- ***Are school policies fairly and consistently implemented? Are they consistent with the school charter?***

The teachers expressed complete satisfaction with consistency and fairness of decisions. On the teacher survey, 100% of teachers agreed strongly or somewhat that the school policies are implemented in a fair and consistent manner. This may be in part due to the Director constantly soliciting input from teachers and parents on most decisions, and the amount of time staff spends in PD and meetings, which is focused on creating a strong school and faculty culture. All parents and faculty have to sign their respective handbooks, ensuring that they read and are very aware of the school's policies. Board members and teachers review and give feedback on all policies. The Board reported: "we look at the student and employee handbook annually, and have it ready to go before the start of the school year. We start with the law firm that specializes in charter schools, they provided us with a draft employee manual." During the interviews, board members reported that they were involved in reviewing policies and practices, and that they solicit feedback from everyone. We really do make thought out decisions, not knee jerk decisions. WE get community input—staff and parents. We really want to hear staff perspective, they are here and they are the educators."

- ***Does the board fulfill its governance and management responsibilities?***

The board currently has nine members, including experts in finance, law, marketing and innovation, small business ownership, education, marketing, law enforcement, sales, and non-profit management. It also includes several key leaders of the community, and is made up almost entirely of parents of students in the school. The board itself takes great care in making sure the members represent a wide variety of backgrounds, expertise and skill-sets, especially those that complement and supplement those of the Director. Board meetings are monthly, and minutes are published on the Web site. Parents, teachers, and the public are invited to attend board meetings as observers and to give input. The board also takes part in hiring committees for teachers. The board members who were interviewed expressed that their most critical responsibilities include ensuring that the school is financially in good standing, ensuring that the school has great facilities, supporting the Director, and supporting the school in fulfilling its mission, including through raising funds. According to the charter, the board is responsible for:

- Legal and fiscal well being of the organization and the school.
- Hiring and evaluating the Sierra Expeditionary Learning School Director. Other staff will be retained as Sierra Expeditionary Learning School and the Board determines it to be necessary.
- Approving and monitoring the implementation of the organization's policies.

- Developing and monitoring an overall operational business plan that focuses on student achievement.
- Approving and monitoring the organization's annual budget and fiscal policies.
- Acting as fiscal agent. This includes the receipt and management of funds for the operation of the organization in accordance with all applicable laws and the mission statement of the organization.
- Contracting with an external auditor to produce an independent annual financial audit according to generally accepted accounting practices.
- Regularly measuring both student and staff performance.
- Encouraging active involvement of students, parents/guardians, grandparents, and the community.
- Performing all of the responsibilities provided for in the California Corporations code, the Articles of Incorporation, Bylaws, and this charter as required to ensure the proper operation of the organization and member schools.

The panel discussion with the board, a review of the financial audit, and the school's annual report reveal that the board is fulfilling its responsibilities.

Active board finance, facilities, development, hiring, and board development committees ensure that the school is carefully managed and governed. Documentation provided shows that the board has met its responsibilities related to budget development, accounting, workers compensation, unemployment insurance, attendance accounting, and STRS, and Social Security.

The board also evaluates the Director annually, based on an evaluation rubric and feedback from all stakeholders. According to all documentation, the panel discussion and observations, the board is fulfilling its duties.

Does the school monitor the current charter school environment?

Board members and the Director reported that they feel well informed about current charter school issues. The Director is on several listservs for the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) and the California Department of Education. They use CCSA as a resource for compliance and the charter writing and renewal process. The school also outsources many of its finance and back office services from a company called ARI, which informs them on many political and financial issues facing charter schools. They also work with a law firm that specializes in charter schools

The school, the Director and the Board have an excellent relationship with the Truckee Unified District, which is also their authorizer, and whose office happens to be practically on the campus of SELS. They have access to facilities such as busses and a cafeteria, which many other charter schools do not. The CFO of the district has been very helpful in informing SELS of budget issues, and the district personnel regularly attends Board meetings.

As the school is part of a larger EL network, the school keeps abreast of many charter school, and especially expeditionary learning issues as well as new innovations in that manner. The Director attends a leadership training specifically for EL schools each year, along with many

other PD sessions for EL schools. The Board stated that they have an “open door policy, [the Director] asks when he needs something. Each of us is on committee where we are working closely with him—facilities, etc. Also, as parents we see him at drop off or pick up, we are very present at the school.”

The board members interviewed stated that they have not to date attended specific trainings for their role as board members, in part because they each bring expertise from their professional lives, and there is usually someone on the board who can provide any needed information. They also expressed that there were tons of opportunity to be involved in the larger EL or CCSA network, but that they do not have a ton of time. One board member stated: “we try to bring our experiences from outside the school, many people are on other boards.” The Board does an annual retreat for strategic planning and board development and has done a self-evaluation in the past. They also stated that “another outside consultant came in for strategic planning as we transitioned from founders to the first board.” Overall, the board uses its resources to monitor the charter school environment.

- ***Does the school actively engage the school’s authorizer in monitoring the educational program?***

As stated above, the school is authorized by the district and the school campus is practically part of the district office. Observations indicated that the school complies with all mandates regarding communication with their authorizer, including visits and all forms. The team observed a very positive relationship, and a positive review of financials. Again, members of the district regularly come to SELS Board meetings, and the Director is in constant contact with the district in terms of facilities, budgeting and other school related issues. They seem to have an extremely positive and productive relationship. 28% of teachers reported that the school engages the schools authorizer in monitoring the school’s educational program an that the school actively engages the school’s authorizer in monitoring the school’s fiscal status. The rest of the teachers were not aware of how the authorizer communicates with the school.

Summary

- The board is composed of people with a great deal of expertise who are very enthusiastic about the school’s mission.
- The board reviews the school policies that were developed by the principal, and the board members see the policies in action through communication with the principal. They also give feedback on all policies.
- The school has a very positive and productive relationship with the authorizer and the school complies with all mandates requested by the authorizer.
- The teachers feel that the school policies are fair and are implemented with consistency, and regularly give input into them.
- The board fulfills its governance and management responsibilities and works hard to preserve the integrity of the school’s charter.
- The board keeps abreast of the charter school environment.
- As the school continues to grow and move to a more stable state, the board would benefit from surveying teachers about operations and administration and using the survey data to review current policies.

Fiscal Accountability

Rating: 4 = Meets or exceeds standard

The school received a 4, meets standards, in this area because the school has fulfilled its fiduciary responsibility as stewards of public funds.

- ***Does the school conduct an annual financial audit that is made public?***

The school has undergone an annual audit as required by law and the audit determined that the school is in compliance.

- ***Does the school's budgeting process ensure that public funds are used appropriately and wisely? Does the process include all stakeholders?***

In his interview, the Director explained the budgeting process, and the same information was presented during the panel discussion with the board:

The budget is reviewed monthly, and is on the Board agenda every single month. We have a working July 1 budget, submitted in April/May, and reviewed by the Board. We do the first interim and second interim budget as required, and the district is part of that and we have a five-year projection. We follow the state regulations and their guidelines.

The board also indicated that their highest priorities were on instruction, facilities, and teacher compensation, in keeping with the mission and vision of the school. Again, most of the financial matters are outsourced to company, which specializes in finances for California charter schools.

The Board and the Director are committed to taking feedback on the budget from all stakeholders. All board meetings are open to the public and the minutes are published online. According to one board member: “determining budget priorities comes from the Director, he gets staff and parent input as recommendations.”

Board members in the focus group shared that they see part of their role as to help raise money. Teachers seem to be well informed about the budget and its relationship to the educational program. According to the survey, 85% of teachers are aware of the school's short-term financial plans to effectively implement the school's educational program, and 85% are aware of the school's long-term plans. Teachers are also in agreement that the school has clear fiscal policies to ensure that public funds are used appropriately and wisely. There seemed to be a little bit of a disconnect with teacher's knowledge of the budget, with many responses indicating “they did not know” to questions on a financial audit and ensuring that financial resources are related to student achievement.

Parents did seem to know that the school received less than the district in per pupil funding and that their teachers were paid less than other district teachers. They also saw it as part of their role to help fundraise for the school.

- ***Does the school ensure that financial resources are directly related to student achievement?***

Payroll, accounting, and auditing are done by outside agencies or the company that the school has hired to do their back office work. The 2012 audit shows that the school is in fiscal compliance. Other documentation indicated that SELS has insurance through the CCSA Joint Powers Authority, providing coverage for property, general and professional liability, crime, and school board liability. Classroom observations showed that classrooms were very well equipped with student materials, classroom library books, math manipulatives, and other resources. One concern is that 42% of teachers indicated that they did not know whether or not the school ensures financial resources are directly related to student achievement, which is a sign that perhaps the Director should do some PD around budgeting. The majority of the evidence suggests that the money is allocated to the right line items, even though all stakeholders acknowledge that they would like more funds to provide the full instructional program outlined in the charter.

Summary

- The school adequately fulfills its financial responsibilities, and has hired an organization with charter school finance expertise to handle most of its financial tasks.
- The Board and leaders carefully plan and monitor the budget in the short term and long term.
- The Board, the Director and the parent community are actively strategizing to raise the funds to maintain and enhance the instructional program.
- Teachers might benefit from having more knowledge around the budget.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations reflect the key findings described above, and are intended to help SELS School be strategic in its efforts to fulfill its mission. Given its strong start and dedication by all stakeholders to the vision of active learning and nurturing students as leaders and citizens, the review team believes the school is positioned well to begin to take on additional initiatives as outlined below.

- 1. Develop a detailed action plan.** The following recommendations involve numerous decisions and stakeholders, and many of them will take time to develop and implement. As a result, we recommend that the school develop an action plan and implementation timeline for each of the recommendations, and any other existing school initiatives. The plan would outline objectives, benchmarks, persons responsible, timelines, and indicators of success for each initiative being undertaken by the school.
- 2. Continue to work to reduce the achievement gap between white students and ELLs, Special Education students and FRL students.** Although the school's white and affluent students have high achievement and the school's API score is very high as a whole, and the subgroups above scores are still higher than the districts, the school can do a better job. The school has implemented several supports for individual students, but should implement strategies across the board and between grade levels for supporting the achievement of the subgroups above. Classroom teachers should take also responsibility for ensuring that the support to ELLs and Special Education students is cohesive in and outside of the classroom, and amongst "home room" teachers and support teachers, and that home room teachers are reinforcing skills and content taught by support teachers and vice-versa.
- 3. Improve classroom engagement strategies, especially for subgroups above, and increase the sense of urgency in the classroom.** In classroom observations, the team did not observe a wide variety of engagement strategies, and often saw students either disengaged, or students "calling out," especially white males. Professional Development should be done on improving engagement strategies for all students, especially the subgroups above, and especially in the older grades as research has shown that in Middle School "calling out" can become an issue and restrict learning for many students, especially in math instruction. In addition, teachers need to take care that every second of time is used for learning and that transitions are much tighter.
- 4. Implement a more consistent method for analyzing benchmark assessments and creating instructional plans based on data.** Teachers seem unaware that there are any systems for analyzing benchmark assessment data. This could help with student achievement as it could point out larger trends in the data, and help address the achievement gap above.
- 5. Improve communication with parents on student progress and achievement.** There seemed to be mixed results on whether or not parents were informed as to the progress of

their students. We suggest that regular communication is done consistently for the parents of all students, and not just students of concern/those that are struggling.

6. **Involve all stakeholders in the governance and leadership of the school.** Due to the focus on instruction, teachers currently have little opportunity for leadership. They also seem slightly uninformed as to budget processes and governance. The school needs to encourage feedback and input, particularly from parents and teachers on the budget, and be better at informing all stakeholders on the budget process and governance of the school. The board, if it is not already, could do a “360 degree” review of the Director, which includes feedback from all stakeholders—teachers, parents, operations team, and students.