

Strategic Academic Improvement Plan

Rocky Mount Prep

December 2015

Introduction and Overview

This strategic academic improvement plan for Rocky Mount Prep was created collaboratively by the school's management and board to address the specific questions requested by the Office of Charter Schools. The plan was initially developed during the summer of 2015 to set priorities for the academic program and budget for the school year. It has been refined and updated during the school year, with considerable review during December 2015. All strategies and action steps are included in the school's approved budget.

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I. Student Performance: Data Analysis & Plan for Improvement

A. Our Data Analysis Process

To develop this improvement plan, Rocky Mount Prep conducted an extensive analysis of state student performance data from 2012-13 to 2014-15. The analysis included reviewing state test proficiency and growth data as determined by EVAAS, including variations in subgroups, subjects, and grade-levels.

The analysis was conducted by members of the school leadership team and faculty, including senior leaders, principals, deans, and teachers. In addition to state data, our regular analyses include data from NWEA Measures of Academic Progress, EasyCBM progress monitoring, digital content data, and Schoolnet Benchmark data, which was conducted in November of this year and will be repeated in February and April. This gives us multiple data points to use in determining student learning needs and prescribing the right solutions to improve learning.

The data analysis used for this plan is a follow-up to a detailed analysis during the summer of 2015, which was used to develop the school's plan for improvement during the 2015-16 school year. During late November

through mid-December, teachers and leaders have reviewed the most recent benchmark data to make curriculum adjustments, and NWEA MAP is being conducted in mid-December in order to provide an additional view at student performance progress and needs.

School leaders and teachers work collaboratively in Professional Learning Communities and planning periods (as well as during the summer) to understand the data and make adjustments in curriculum and instruction. Rocky Mount Prep releases students at 1:30 on Friday afternoons in order to allow teachers more time to participate in professional development, collaboration, data analysis and planning.

School leadership shares student performance data on a regular basis with the Board of Trustees, including in the summer after state testing data is released, NWEA MAP data three times per year, and this year we are sharing Benchmark data for the board to track progress on state standards during the year (we conducted our first Benchmark ever in Spring 2015).

B. Sources Of and Trends In Low Performance

The analysis reveals the following, which we are committed to improve:

- The primary sources of low performance are in elementary and high school divisions, with middle school performing the highest.
- The lowest overall performance is in math.
- Rocky Mount Prep met or exceeded expected growth in 9 of 16 areas measured by EVAAS for the 2014-15 school year.
- All tested subjects in middle school met or exceeded growth, with growth exceeded in 6th and 7th grade math and 8th grade science
- Elementary growth was not met in 3rd and 4th grade reading, 4th grade math and 5th grade science.
- The school did not meet growth in its high school EOC courses, after meeting growth in those courses in 2013-14
- EOC proficiency scores show the greatest overall drop in performance in Math 1 in high school, followed by English 2. Biology increased from the previous year (even though growth was not met)
- Reading scores dropped in 4th-6th grade, especially in 5th grade (even though this grade met expected growth), and increased in 8th. Other grades were relatively flat, with overall reading proficiency dropping from 43 to 38.
- Math scores dropped in 3rd and 6th grade and increased in grades 4, 7, and 8, with overall math proficiency remaining about the same as the previous year (still quite low with an average of 19.3).
- Science in 5th grade remained low at 18.1, while 8th grade dropped slightly, but averaged 71.3.
- The percentage of high school juniors attaining the minimum UNC ACT composite score increased significantly to 45, almost double the previous year.
- The lowest-performing sub-groups are Students With Disabilities, which are very low in virtually every grade, and Economically Disadvantaged Students in Math (a trend very similar to the schoolwide trend in math).
- Our performance on the Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) target was 62.1 percent compared to 61 percent for Nash-Rocky Mount, 52.6 percent for Edgecombe, 54.5 percent for Halifax, and 55.2 percent statewide.
- Our percentage of free-and-reduced lunch students has increased every year since 2012-13, from the mid 60's to the current 75. This is target subgroup that our school's mission was designed to serve.

C. School Factors Associated With Low Performance

There are several factors that have contributed to the school's low performance in recent years. Here are the ones we believe are most relevant:

1. *Teaching to mastery rather than the test.* Rocky Mount Prep's original charter application stated clearly that the school believed deeply in mastery learning. For many years, the school drifted away from this philosophy with a narrow focus on "teaching to the test." Since the school "restarted" its vision in 2012 to with an updated strategy to recapture the spirit of its original charter, we have invested heavily in new curricula and assessment systems proven by research that focus on mastery learning. We have targeted instruction on closing gaps and building a stronger foundation of basic skills in order to prepare scholars for success in higher-order thinking and application. While this is not yet visible in test scores, we remain confident that this is a critical approach for long-term success, and it is backed by overwhelming scientific evidence.

For example, when we finally received our test results from 2012-13 in the middle of the 2013-14 school year due to delays in the new testing system, we realized our scholars could not succeed in grade-level content in math because of serious deficiencies in foundational skills. The school had a history of inconsistent math curricula prior to 2012-13, and we found that upper elementary students could not fluently compute—much less perform fractions. That winter, we made the intentional decision (particularly in math) to go back to fill in gaps and strengthen prior knowledge and skills with the full understanding that this might not be detected in grade-level testing but with a belief that scholars cannot succeed long-term unless this was done. This strategy has not delivered results as quickly as we would have hoped, however fall 2015 benchmark data shows significant movement of scholars from Levels 1 to 2 and we believe this trend will continue throughout this year. In reading, data now shows that our scholars (unlike in many other schools) know how to read, which allows us to focus on reading comprehension and application. In addition, we have found during the last two years that our elementary reading and math curricula, while evidence-based and Common Core-aligned, have not been adequately aligned to state testing items.

2. *Test prep application and practice.* Given the size of our scholars' academic gaps, we also made the decision to focus on instruction and gathering data through online assessments rather than giving scholars lots of practice in applying what they know with simulated state tests and questions. In hindsight, this was a mistake because scholars have not practiced taking tests enough and do not have the strategies and endurance needed to succeed with lengthy Common Core passages and problems. We believe this has particularly affected elementary scholars who had not participated in state testing before.
3. *New students.* Rocky Mount Prep has brought many new scholars into our school over the last four years, which has had an impact on student achievement given the performance of the local schools from which they came (many of which have lower test scores than ours) and the fact that most new students come in academically below scholars who have been with us for several years, and this has also resulted in a higher level of social-emotional behavior problems than before (which has impacted instruction as we have developed systems to adapt). This growth has been to respond to a large waiting list (over 500 per year since 2012) and a plan to improve the financial performance of the school while fueling significant new investments in salaries and benefits, curriculum and digital content, technology, professional development and support. While the school has grown only by a net of 157 students since the end of the 2011-12 school year, we have added more than 300 new students in the last three years, not counting incoming kindergartners (this is a result of an historical trend of family changes in the summer as attrition during the school year is low). Prior to 2012, the school had screened out students

whose academic and behavioral performance were below average—a situation which the school rectified after DPI declared its admissions policy non-compliant. We believe this was a factor in the school’s higher test scores prior to Common Core.

4. *Teacher Inconsistency.* As a rural school in an impoverished region of Eastern North Carolina, we have been challenged to recruit and retain top teaching talent, especially with a statewide and nationwide teaching shortage. Despite aggressively improving salaries, benefits, curriculum, resources, professional development, and support, we have sometimes struggled (like other schools in our area) to have highly effective teachers in every classroom. Locally, our two largest school districts averaged 18 and 24 percent teacher turnover last year, and fortunately ours has not been that high. Overall, we are proud of our team of teachers, however some areas of lowest performance can be attributed to teacher performance or change. In some cases, we have not renewed teacher contracts. In other cases, teachers have moved away due to changes in their lives or the lure of more money in Wake County. In our high school last year, we lost three excellent teachers in the middle the school year (some for personal reasons and some having to do with the principal and culture). This clearly impacted EOC scores, as did bringing in a new teacher for Math I that year who was unfamiliar with our curriculum. It has been especially hard to attract Exceptional Children’s teachers. In 2014-15, we lost a teacher a week before school started and filled in with teaching assistants overseen by our Dean of Specialized Services (a highly qualified EC teacher), however this affected EC subgroup performance. We promoted a teacher from within this year to fill this gap. Overall, we have recruited a large number of young teachers who are growing and improving. In a few cases, we have been forced to hire retired teachers or use long-term subs for extended periods (or this year a greater use of NC Virtual Public School in our high school science courses). All of these factors have a critical impact on performance as research shows teachers are the key. We remain vigilant to hire the best-qualified teachers we can find.
5. *Principal Inconsistency.* We believe one of the most critical factors in a school’s success is an effective principal who buys in to the mission, vision, and systems of the school and provides consistent, day-to-day instructional leadership and follow through for teachers and staff. In our model, we have three principals—elementary, middle, and high. Rocky Mount Prep has had inconsistent principal leadership over the last three years, some of which was because we did not hire the right fit from the available pool and some due to circumstances beyond our control. When the previous headmaster left and new school management was hired in 2012, the school was left with limited principal leadership capacity—especially for the transition to Common Core and our new strategy to update the school’s original vision. We have had mixed results with hiring leaders from conventional public schools, with two smart people not working out as the right fit. One interim hired when an older principal retired during the 2012-13 year decided not to renew after the initial term. Another who was promoted and making strong contributions had family issues arise and moved back out of state. Yet another last year suffered a serious medical condition and had to take leave mid-year, which had a traumatic effect on staff and scholars and is one factor we believe affected a downturn in academic growth in NWEA MAP scores in our elementary school during the second half of the year as we were short-handed in supporting the staff to the level they received before.
6. *High school strategy and schedule.* One of the most dramatic changes made at Rocky Mount Prep in recent years has been the transformation of our high school instructional model. As part of our strategic change in 2012, we made significant changes to our school facility to support an ambitious blended learning strategy to personalize learning for scholars and accelerate growth. The entire model was based on the pioneering success of nationally renowned Carpe Diem Schools. In retrospect, it was done for the right reasons and was given considerable time and effort, however it was too aggressive given our leadership capacity and scholar and teacher mindset and skillset. The first year was extremely difficult as facility improvements were not completed on time by contractors. Another critical factor is that

students were not acclimated to the mindset of taking more ownership over their learning and teachers felt they had less control with textbooks replaced by online content. In 2013-14, we recruited a new principal and several new teachers and adjusted the schedule to a 4-by-4 block schedule. Despite the fact that we made growth in 2013-14 in EOC subjects, there remained concerns about student culture, academic rigor, and instructional leadership. Based on feedback from staff, we modified the schedule during the 2014-15 school year to allow for more personalized learning and small-group instruction to more closely resemble *Carpe Diem*, to which we had sent several teams. Mid-year, three teachers resigned citing personal reasons but this was also affected by a consistent staff disconnect with principal leadership and a deteriorating student culture. New teachers were hired for second semester, however we believe this transition affected test results as two of the EOC teachers who left had strong records of results during their time with us. Schedules and some curriculum (in Math I) were modified to improve in second semester. When the decision was made late in the year not to renew the principal's contract, it sparked political concerns with some scholars and parents that impacted performance.

7. *Scale of change.* Finally, change is challenging in a school, and Rocky Mount Prep has realized some of the benefits it planned in its strategic transition in 2012-13. As a large K-12 school, it has been a huge undertaking to “re-start” virtually everything in the entire school—elementary, middle, and high. There have been many moving parts to change and coordinate, as we have integrated new curriculum, technology, professional development, personnel, systems and support in every part of the school. The magnitude of change has put a huge mental and physical strain on our team. Some of these changes were mandated by the state (Common Core, new testing, Powerschool, Home Base, teacher evaluation), others were targeted to reclaim our original charter commitments that were not being met or to address significant downturns in academic performance in multiple subjects and grade levels in 2011-12, and others have been our effort to innovate and get ahead of the curve. We have learned from experience to phase in things more slowly and make the workload more manageable wherever possible.

In hindsight, we tried to change too much too fast, however we were faced with many issues K-12, such as obsolete curriculum, a lack of preparation for Common Core, a needed change in teachers and leaders, and a need to make significant investments in the factors that contribute to academic and financial success. If we had not made the changes we did the school would not have freed the financial capacity to invest in the infrastructure needed to realize our potential. The lesson we have learned is that it takes longer than expected to turn around a strategy, culture, and performance, as many large-scale K-12 school turnarounds take at least five years to deliver consistently better results.

D. Academic Improvement Goals

In order to meet the State's requirements for the 2015-2016 school year, Rocky Mount Prep's Board of Trustees required school management to develop in conjunction with the board an academic growth plan to meet the following objectives:

1. To Meet or Exceed Growth as defined by the state's accountability model in order to increase the school's growth score identified by the state from the current 56.7 to at least 62.4 by June 2016, a minimum growth of 10 percent
2. To increase the current overall achievement score identified by the state from 36 to at least 39.6 by June 2016, a minimum increase of 10 percent

Note: The board projects that the above score improvements should result in an over overall performance score of 44, a 10 percent increase from the current score of 40. Additionally, upon achieving the above objectives, there shall be an annual growth rate of at least 10 percent in the above scores each year for the next 5 years.

E. Specific Action Plan To Improve Academic Performance

1. Strategies and Actions to Improve Academic Performance Schoolwide

Before addressing strategies and actions targeted at specific areas of academic weakness, here are several strategies and actions we are implementing this year to improve academic performance schoolwide.

a. Human Resources

People are our greatest resource. To improve our capacity to achieve at a higher level, we have invested in more and in some cases new people to help us improve. These include:

- A new high school principal from Charlotte-Mecklenburg tasked with a mission to focus on improving structure, teambuilding, academic rigor and data-driven instruction
- A third principal promoted from within in September as a new middle school principal (note that a medical condition has kept our former elementary principal out since the spring and we had been covering with only two principals until this action)
- An extra academic dean for academic coaching in middle/high in addition to an elementary and specialized dean
- An additional AP to provide elementary support
- A new Dean of Scholars position to provide leadership and support for behavior in grades 6-12
- An In-School Suspension facilitator for grades 6-12
- MasterMind Prep added a new member of its senior leadership team to focus on academic literacy and innovation in addition to the Director of Teaching and Learning who focuses on math, data, and culture. They split the Chief Academic Officer role, and both lead the academic coaching model.
- Four net new social studies teachers in MS/HS and third math teacher in HS
- Additional TA to support math instruction in grades 1 and 2 will be added in January 2016
- Two teaching residents to provide small-group math instruction in grades 3-5 will be added in January 2016
- A full-time data specialist to manage assessments, data, and reporting (in addition to our Powerschool student data manager) to free other staff to focus on instructional support.

b. Schoolnet Benchmarks

Last spring was the first time we used state test-aligned school benchmarks, and we are administering benchmarks three times this year. The first time was in mid-November 2015 and was administered entirely on Schoolnet to give us quicker access to data so that the online program scores them automatically. The second and third benchmarks (in February and April) will be given on paper where the state test is paper-based and online where they are online.

Teachers are improving in their use of this data and are using it to realign instruction based on areas of greatest student weakness, including using the “Do Now” time at the beginning of each class to focus on specific standards-based content that scholars needs to learn as pinpointed by the benchmarks. These benchmarks are a huge step forward in our instructional evolution, and their implementation was possible this year by expanding the size of our academic leadership team to free time for focus on developing this and other critical areas of improvement.

c. Teacher Observations, Feedback, Coaching, and Collaboration

We have developed our own instructional coaching model this year, which specifically defines essential teaching competencies for success under two domains: High-Expectations Culture and Data-Driven Instruction. The Framework for Teaching and Learning Excellence clearly defines what Teacher Actions and Scholar Evidence for academic and behavioral success look like in very clear terms. A similar framework has been developed for principals. This process will help teachers and leaders improve in very specific ways.

We have created a rubric aligned to the Framework based on rubrics from The New Teacher Project and Uncommon Schools, and it is embedded in an online coaching and feedback tool called Whetstone. This provides immediate feedback to teachers, and we plan to include video-based observations and feedback as part of the system later this year. We find this model more effective than the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation system, which is much more time-consuming and less precise—yet we unfortunately also have to use it, which takes away valuable time from school leaders.

Our principals have spent more time providing evaluations and feedback on the state system, while our deans and Academic Directors overseeing Math and Literacy as well as consultants provide more frequent feedback for continuous improvement. They then meet during daily planning periods, which are 75 minutes per day, to have discussions about improvement and provide just-in-time professional development.

The schedule was changed this year to allow for subject-based vertical planning to allow for more substantive discussions and data analysis within content areas. On Friday afternoons, after early dismissal, teachers participate in grade-level planning as well as other collaboration and professional development from 2-4 p.m. or later.

d. Motivating Stakeholders

One component of our Framework this year is Academic Ownership, which we have asked teachers to work to develop in scholars so they will take more ownership for their mindset and learning. This process, including an emphasis on growth mindset and core values, has been part of our morning meeting time each day. We also use positive behavior points for recognition and rewards and are experimenting with competitions based on growth in performance on online programs. For the second half of the year, we are making plans to implement school-wide recognition and reward programs to motivate scholars, staff, and parents to align their behaviors with actions that support academic goals, including actions parents can take to support learning at home.

e. Behavioral Interventions

As a Title I school, many of our scholars have substantial obstacles in their lives that are barriers to learning. It is our mission to serve these scholars, and we do many things to support and encourage them in positive ways and try to teach through and overcome these barriers, at least in ways that are within our control. This year, we have improved procedures and strategies to ensure greater time on task in class and more specific rewards and consequences for behavior. Currently, we are developing a behavioral Response-To-Intervention model in our elementary school for the second half of the year to provide a greater level of redirection, social skills instruction, reflection, and parental involvement with scholars who consistently interrupt instruction and make poor choices. We implemented a full-time staffed In-School Suspension room for the first time this year in middle and high school.

2. Strategies and Actions to Improve Math EOG Performance

Academic Goal for Math EOG

Rocky Mount Prep will Meet or Exceed Growth on End-of-Grade Math tests in grades 3-8, resulting in an increase of at least 10 percent from the prior year—from 19.1 percent to at least 21 percent proficient by June 2016.

Strategies/Actions

a. Elementary Math Initiative

Our elementary math program is rooted in Math In Focus: Singapore Math (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), selected in 2012 for its rigor, alignment to Common Core standards, and evidence of effectiveness in schools around the world. We viewed this as selection of an expensive curriculum that was the best available for long-term success. Teachers received substantial training and support from the publisher as well as our in-house Dean of Math. This followed a period of years in which the elementary school had used several different programs, and teachers had used a variety of resources, unaligned grade-to-grade. It was mid 2013-14 when the 2012-13 test scores were released before we realized that math performance was extremely low.

In January of that school year, two years ago, we analyzed the state and mid-year NWEA data and conducted additional testing to determine the root causes of the low performance using diagnostic testing provided by Morningside Academy, a nationally known consulting group with a proven track record of accelerating academic achievement using evidence-based methods consistent with our pedagogical philosophy (as stated in our charter application). Results indicated that students could not succeed at the new, higher standards because they were not fluent in the underlying foundational math skills necessary for mastery of grade-level content, what Sal Kahn of Khan Academy calls “swiss-cheese learning.” In late winter of that year, we made the internal decision to suspend teaching Math In Focus and provided teachers with more basic curriculum to “fill gaps”. It was a difficult transition at that point in the year, especially given the fact that we missed two full weeks of school due to snow and ice just at the time we were making the change. In hindsight, this in-house decision probably resulted in setting the bar too low and in overloading teachers in learning a new approach. Thus, math scores remained low for another year.

That spring, we contracted with Morningside to work closely with our Academic Director overseeing Math and our Deans to integrate its foundational math fluency and diagnostic-prescriptive model with Math In Focus in order to provide teachers with much more comprehensive content to scaffold students up to grade-level standards. Over the past two years, we have invested more than \$100,000 with Morningside for math content, consulting, and coaching in partnership with our own academic support team. Last school year, we found teachers spent most time on diagnostic and prescriptive instruction and were unable to find the time to get to Math In Focus. This past summer, we worked with Morningside again to develop new pacing guides for teachers to make it easier for them to manage their time, and we moved math-fact computation out of math class into a math specials period. This allows us to simultaneously fill gaps while also teaching aligned lessons from Math In Focus. Fall benchmark data shows a trend of growth in math proficiency and movement of students from Levels 1 to 2 in all elementary math grades, a trend we believe will continue throughout the year. This is a sign that our strategy is paying off. In January, our next phase with Morningside is to introduce a new strategy for students to learn and practice solving word problems as well as a process they have developed called Think-Aloud Paired Problem-Solving (TAPPS), a proven method to accelerate critical thinking and problem-solving skills in math and reading comprehension.

b. Middle School Math

One of the bright spots in our academic performance during the last three years is the success of our middle school math curriculum, which is driven by Carnegie Learning's MATHia software, using their powerful Cognitive Tutor adaptive technology. Originally developed by Carnegie-Mellon University, this puts the core math curriculum online to personalize instruction at each student's level and frees teachers to teach in smaller groups to specific student needs as revealed by data...to either fill gaps, provide extra practice, or enrich skills. It has some of the strongest scientific evidence of effectiveness of any math curriculum on the market. Teachers and students also have access to the Carnegie textbooks, and teachers align curriculum modules to required instructional standards as well as student needs based on data.

Since introducing this program in our middle school, we have met or exceeded growth in each grade level every year (except for 7th grade in 2013-14 when the late-summer departure of a teacher forced us to use a long-term sub for much of the year until we hired a teacher who did not turn out to be effective). While overall proficiency must be higher, we are encouraged by the growth we have seen, especially with teachers who have embraced this approach in grades 7 and 8 last year with the addition of a different teacher in grade 6 this year.

This year, due to classroom space constraints and Carnegie's success in the classroom, we made the strategic decision to create a Middle School Math Lab that combines three math classrooms and a 48-seat computer lab into one open space with dividers. This allows for more individualization, flexibility, and team-teaching. It is similar to a model pioneered by School of One and New Classrooms. We believe this improvement, building on past success in this area, will continue to improve math performance in middle school. However, incoming scores for 6th and 7th grades show a significant number of new students who are lower than these grade levels started last year...meaning that progress will be reflected more in growth than proficiency, which may decline or not increase from last year.

c. Math Test Prep Practice Period

To give our students more practice in taking tests and working with passages and problems similar to those on the EOG, we are changing our elementary and middle school schedules in January 2016 to create an additional period devoted to math test prep practice and review. Test Ready curriculum from Curriculum Associates has been purchased for this initiative, which will involve all teachers in grades 3-8, with math teachers teaching the lowest performing students. Teachers will be trained and receive materials in our professional development planning period on December 18. This schedule change will eliminate our morning meeting time and reduce other core periods by 9 minutes each but will significantly add to the time spent on math each day.

d. Blended Learning

Students in our elementary school spend one period a day in personalized learning time using adaptive or teacher-assigned digital programs. This year, we have modified our math digital content by removing Reflex Math and adding ST Math, an expensive math problem-solving program with strong evidence of effectiveness. ST Math started in November in order to not overwhelm our staff with too many new things at the beginning of the year. This year, students in grades 3-5 spend up to one hour a day in interactive math instruction in ST Math and Dreambox Learning, another engaging, game-based math program that we have used for four years. Higher-achieving math students will also work on software during part of their math test-prep practice period using Waggle, an adaptive program from Triumph Learning that simulates problems similar to those on the EOG and provides immediate feedback to students. Lower-achieving students in middle school also use Khan Academy and ST Math to supplement Carnegie, and Waggle is used in some cases in math and ELA.

3. Strategies and Actions to Improve Reading/English/Language Arts EOG Performance

Academic Goal:

Rocky Mount Prep will Meet or Exceed Growth on End-of-Grade Reading tests in grades 3-8, resulting in an increase of at least 10 percent from the prior year—from 38 percent to at least 42 percent by June 2016.

Action Steps To Achieve Goal

Strategies/Actions

a. Elementary Reading

In keeping with our original charter application’s commitment to systematic, explicit Direct Instruction, Rocky Mount Prep has made a considerable investment in evidence-based reading curriculum over the last three years. In 2012-13, we implemented Read Well in grades K-2, a phonics-based curriculum from Voyager-Sopris with strong evidence of effectiveness. Due to budgetary constraints, teachers in grades 3-5 did not get new curriculum until the following year, when we implemented Reading Mastery from McGraw-Hill based on evidence input from outside experts. The school had moved away from a previous version of this curriculum in the 1990’s despite the fact that it was a central instructional commitment in its original charter application.

In 2014-15, we implemented Reading Mastery in K-2 because we were not seeing the kind of results with lower-performing readers that we expected. Since that time, we have seen improved performance in early literacy with the curricula’s richer vocabulary and repetition, something our students desperately need. As evidence, the number of students passing the state BOG-3 test at beginning of 3rd grade has increased from 12 in 2013-14, to 18 in 2014-15, to 24 this year.

In 2013-14, we implemented double-literacy periods at mid-year to accelerate achievement and found that reading growth increased significantly on winter-spring NWEA MAP as compared to fall-winter. With that success, we stuck with that plan for 2014-15 albeit with the addition of several new teachers to our school who had not taught Direct Instruction before, and we did not get the results we had expected.

In reviewing our lack of performance last year, our new Director of Learning Innovation (who has a strong literacy background in Direct Instruction) and our elementary dean and a lead teacher worked hard over the summer to re-align the curriculum to fill gaps in tested standards that were not adequately covered by Reading Mastery. This included a movement away from “reading” to a “humanities” approach that integrates Reading Mastery’s strong fiction and non-fiction content supplemented with award-winning novel studies and non-fiction passages, writing (Adventures in Language which is a Direct Instruction writing program based on Core Knowledge content using 6 Traits of Writing), and social studies based on the Core Knowledge sequence. Instructional content varies by class period based on the instructional needs of scholars, who are grouped homogeneous by competency in order to focus instruction more effectively. We believe this comprehensive approach in elementary school is giving our scholars a deeper level of content knowledge and comprehension.

As in math, we have purchased test-prep curriculum to provide students with large doses of practice in the second humanities period at least three days per week starting in January. We also are introducing the strategy of “retelling” and the previously mentioned TAPPS process to improve comprehension.

Elementary scholars spend some time every day during personalized learning time using Lexia Core 5, an adaptive online reading instruction program backed by strong evidence. As scholars reach grade level in this program, they are moved into the adaptive Waggle program, which similar to math provides scholars with extra practice and feedback on reading passages similar to those on the EOG. Waggle is new to our school this year.

b. Middle School English/Language Arts

As in math, our performance in middle school English/Language Arts has led the school in recent years, where we have consistently met or exceeded growth on state tests. This has largely been a result of two highly effective teachers, one of whom we unfortunately lost this past summer due to personal issues.

Similar to elementary school, we have continued to group our scholars in ELA classes based their reading competency and differentiated instructional content and strategies by group in order to accelerate learning. This year, we have expanded our use of Direct Instruction curriculum for lowest-achieving groups during the first part of the year with Anita Archer's Rewards Intermediate, Rewards and Rewards Writing (Sopris West) as well as Bob Dixon's Reading Success (McGraw Hill). These proven, evidence-based series focus on systematically teaching and accelerating reading comprehension, fluency, and writing skills and strategies. This is particularly needed in 6th grade and 7th grade, where a large number of our scholars (10-20 percent of whom are new to our school this year) entered the year significantly behind grade level. As we move into the second half of the year, some groups will move into high-interest novel studies or other rigorous content.

A significant addition to and investment in our middle school ELA curriculum this year has been implementation of the Springboard textbook series (published by The College Board, creators of the SAT), which provides a rich and rigorous new text for teachers and scholars that integrates high-interest fiction and non-fiction with research and writing assignments, all aligned with College Readiness and Common Core standards. We started the year using Springboard in our highest-performing groups and have purchased copies for every middle school scholar with a goal of transitioning everyone into it during the year to ensure adequate rigor and challenge. One innovation we have implemented is to use inexpensive new Kindle Fire tablets for each scholar to read books and passages linked to Springboard lessons as a group in class using the Curriculet online reading platform, which provides scholars with thousands of books, integrated quizzes and data tools for teachers on any device. Scholars can also read at home with this platform. As with any new program, it is taking teachers and scholars some time to adapt to Springboard and Curriculet, but they have received them warmly and believe they are essential for our improvement.

As part of our middle school blended learning model, scholars rotate within class between teacher-led instruction and online instruction in several programs...allowing teachers to differentiate in smaller groups. For the first part of the year, we have used TeenBiz from Achieve3000 to provide practice in informational text, as well as Curriculet. In December, we are transitioning to Wordly Wise3000, which provides online vocabulary instruction and practice, as well as Waggle ELA. TeenBiz will be used only in Social Studies classes for the rest of the year.

c. Social Studies/Non-Fiction

One major change in middle school this year is the addition of three new Social Studies teachers and a change in strategy that will support growth in prior knowledge and reading comprehension. On a former principal's recommendation, we had been using a model in which scholars learned social studies online with content similar to high school and asked English teachers to include history and non-fiction content in their lessons. This year, we have returned to a more traditional model with teacher-led focus on history, geography, and non-fiction. Our social studies teachers are developing lessons with Makin book sets and primary source documents that include content aligned with the Core Knowledge sequence as well as the NC Essential Standards for Social Studies. As previously stated, online content is also available through TeenBiz in these classes. After Christmas break, we also will be including some Reading Test Prep in these classes to support growth in literacy.

4. Strategies and Actions to Improve 5th Grade Science Performance

Academic Goal:

Meet or Exceed Growth on the 5th Grade Science test, resulting in an increase of at least 10 percent from the prior year—from 18.1 percent to at least 20 percent by June 2016.

Strategies/Actions

Fifth grade science has been a persistent area of low-performance for the last three years. The curriculum used in science is Science Fusion from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, a very expensive and high-quality program. Our academic leadership team is reviewing curriculum alignment with the teacher for the remainder of the year as it relates to tested standards, the dean and school leaders will be monitoring the teacher to ensure the right focus is placed on the standards, and more practice with science test-prep questions will be implemented for the remainder of the year.

5. Strategies/Actions to Improve High School Performance

Academic Goal:

Meet or Exceed Growth on End-of-Course tests, resulting in an EOC increase of 10 percent from the prior year—from 36 to 39.6 percent by June 2016.

Strategies/Actions

a. Leadership

One of the biggest changes to our high school this year was recruiting a new, experienced principal from Charlotte-Mecklenburg who wanted to be part of our high school vision. A high priority was to restore and refocus a culture of high expectations, which had deteriorated under the previous school leader. Significant progress has been made in this area with more consistent use of our Positive Behavior Support resources and implementation of our policies with appropriate consequences, however we are not yet where we want to be.

b. Academic Model

Instructionally, we made a significant change in our blended learning model—moving away from the individualized rotation model with vendor-provided online curriculum used for the last three years. Instead, we have put teachers in charge of the curriculum (which they wanted) and gave them plenty of instructional resources, including becoming the first school in North Carolina to partner with Gooru Learning to provide teachers and students with access to thousands of curated lesson collections or playlists. Teachers are free to use these lessons, realign them, or create their own. English teachers have Springboard as a primary resource in grades 9 and 10 while Math teachers have Carnegie Learning and Khan Academy. Curriculet, Achieve3000, and Wordly Wise are other programs available for teachers and scholars.

Students rotate within classrooms every day, ensuring they have more time in class than last year when students alternated between personalized learning in a lab and small-group office hours when they were not in class. Similar to our elementary schedule, scholars spend one period in personalized learning time per day working on content assigned by the teacher.

Unfortunately, we lost several key teachers due to personal issues with spouses moving out of town over the summer and we have more new teachers than we had anticipated. The high school team is working hard, and they and our scholars are adapting to the new, more traditional approach. We are using NC Virtual Public School for electives, AP courses, and to replace a science teacher whose spouse decided to move two weeks before school started (and we have not yet been able to fill the position).

One improvement we want to make but will be unable to make this school year is to return to a full-year high school schedule instead of a 4x4 semester schedule—at least in grades 9 and 10. This will give our scholars the entire year to grow academically, which we believe they need. In the past two years, high school administration and counselors and many parents have wanted to stay with the traditional 4x4 to give students more flexibility for electives and credit recovery. While it is not possible to make this change mid-year, we plan to make it next year and expect to see greater improvement.

c. High School Math

Due to its success in middle school, we recommended that our high school adopt Carnegie’s Cognitive Tutor for Math 1 last year. The principal and math teacher strongly resisted making the change, however low performance in first semester enabled us to make this change for second semester last year. NWEA MAP data showed approximately six months of math growth in 9th grade during the second semester as opposed to one month of growth in first semester...with the same teacher. This year, we are using Carnegie for Math 1, 2, and 3 and have developed a pre-Algebra math elective course combining Direct Instruction and Khan Academy, which we believe will strengthen prerequisite math skills for students significantly behind grade level before we enroll them in Math 1.

d. High School English

As in middle school, we have implemented Springboard in 9th and 10th grade English classes as well as Curriculet. Other changes in high school were described in the previous schoolwide improvement section.

6. Our Academic and School Model

Our school design is consistent with our original charter application and has been updated to model some of the highest-performing schools in the nation. It is based on five core operating principles:

High Expectations, No Excuses Culture. We believe all scholars will learn to high levels when we expect academic and behavioral excellence and teach them to expect greatness from themselves. Everything must be earned, and no excuses are acceptable. Academic growth is possible only when a safe, structured and orderly environment is in place as a result of strong personal relationships, explicit rules, routines, rewards and consequences for behavior and time management. We base all decisions on our Core Values of Integrity, Service, Optimism, Excellence, Responsibility, Perseverance, and Innovation.

Excellent Teaching and Leadership. Great teaching matters the most to accelerate academic achievement. We make a deep investment in improving the effectiveness of teachers and leaders with intentional training and development, intensive instructional coaching, frequent feedback and support, adequate planning and collaboration time, performance-based pay and abundant instructional resources. Teachers are able to specialize in their subject, even in elementary school.

Personalized Mastery Learning. Every scholar’s needs are different, and we structure learning in small, sequential steps to meet them where they are and give the right lesson at the right time in the right modality to close gaps faster. We personalize learning by blending the best of teaching, technology, and tutoring with

proven methods. When teachers and paraprofessionals do what they do best, and computers do what they do best, scholars advance quickly—but only as they demonstrate mastery.

Engaged Families. Parents are essential partners in their scholars' education, and we strive to earn high levels of parent satisfaction and loyalty. We believe that the power of choice, when parents choose to enroll or withdraw scholars, is a powerful motivator. We are committed to serving families in ways that are markedly better than other schools through strong personal relationships, consistent communication, and educational events that involve them in supporting the school and learning at home.

Focus on Results. We aim to deliver superior academic performance, well above district and state levels, so our scholars will excel in college, career and life. This is why we emphasize “doing what works” with proven practices and programs based on the best scientific evidence as well as operational efficiency to maximize investment in academics. We use data to drive and track educational and business decisions, track group and individual goals, and when something doesn't work, or can be improved, we have the courage to change.

Key Features of our School Model:

Structured, Orderly Culture.

Scholars need a safe, orderly environment to learn productively. We establish a calm, caring, and structured environment by having high expectations, accepting no excuses, and building strong personal relationships with our scholars. We use best practices in positive behavior support, including a strictly enforced school dress code, explicit rules, common routines and procedures, rewards and consequences with a merit and demerit system for immediate response to positive and negative behavior.

Challenging Core Curriculum.

We align our curriculum to ambitious learning standards, including state standards, and we adopt curriculum and digital content with proven evidence of effectiveness. Our curriculum foundation is the Core Knowledge sequence, as well as reading and math curricula based on sound evidence and the Direct Instruction method. All curricula are designed to accelerate learning by building sequentially in reading, math, writing, science, history, geography and the arts. We emphasize and support literacy in every class, in all subjects, and scholars are encouraged to read independently to develop a love of reading from an early age.

Assess Early and Often.

Scholars learn best when we pinpoint what they know and don't know and adjust instruction to their level. We use a variety of assessments and tools to frequently capture, analyze, report and track academic and behavioral data. Then we place scholars where they should be, group them with others similar to their needs, adjust instruction so they will continue to improve, and continuously monitor progress.

Learn By Mastery.

Learning occurs only when scholars can demonstrate mastery of content. Our proven mastery learning strategies include specific goals; flexible, homogeneous grouping; clear instructions that eliminate confusion; modeling new knowledge, skills and concepts; interactive, systematic and explicit instruction; frequent feedback, including immediate correction of errors; repetition; and re-teaching what has not been mastered. Grade level and age are less important than the ability to advance based on mastery.

Focused Intervention.

We target scholars with greater deficits in reading and math based on assessment data and provide them with targeted instruction to close achievement gaps during the school day and summers. This class and small-group intervention allows teachers and paraprofessionals to build academic skills with extra time and curriculum tailored to individual learning needs. Tutoring by tutors and digital online programs usually happens during learning lab time so that it does not take away from core instruction.

Blended Learning.

We believe online learning is the greatest innovation in education since the printing press. Our “hybrid” school design uses blended learning, which combines the best of face-to-face teaching with interactive online learning at school. Scholars are scheduled strategically to learn through the most effective modalities for their individual needs, including small- and large-group instruction, online learning, tutoring, cooperative learning and independent practice. Data connects these modalities for continuous growth.

Make More Time.

Our model provides more learning time on task to close gaps as quickly as possible and ensure that every scholar masters the academic content necessary to succeed. This means a longer school year, an extended school day, strategic scheduling, targeted tutoring, and efficient procedures to make every minute count. We also use double periods for humanities (reading with fiction and non-fiction, including history and geography as well as writing) in elementary and middle school.

Plenty of Practice.

Like great musicians and athletes, our scholars learn by doing and practicing what they learn until it is automatic. We know that introducing a concept or skill only one time doesn’t have a lasting impact. Practicing until a scholar can apply what s/he knows quickly and with a minimum of effort is essential to learning. We incorporate practice in a variety of ways, including online learning, worksheets, timed fluency exercises, and cooperative learning.

Leadership Mindset.

We want scholars to become successful leaders of character in their families and community. Our team intentionally develops leadership skills, including character, growth mindset, and social-emotional skills in scholars in a variety of ways, focusing on core values of integrity, service, optimism, excellence, responsibility, perseverance, and innovation. We strive to make connections in the classroom and in morning meetings with proven curriculum; discussions; real-world connections such as career exploration, internships, entrepreneurship; soft skills such as time management and organization skills, public speaking, and teamwork; and experiential learning.

College & Career Focus.

Our scholars learn faster when they understand why school is important, how it connects to success in college and life, and that their intelligence and success grows with hard work and effort. They must learn how to take personal responsibility and ownership for their learning and behavior and how to persevere when they hit obstacles. We use a variety of strategies to develop a growth mindset, discover dreams, set goals for college and career, and accept personal responsibility. These include curriculum, classroom discussions, college signage and field trips, career days, college planning, career exploration and more.

II. Governance

Overview

This section describes the Rocky Mount Preparatory Board of Trustee's involvement in developing this academic improvement and growth plan. It also outlines how the board will work to ensure objectives outlined in the plan are executed successfully in order to meet and exceed the state's growth requirements for school year 2016 for grades K-12. This section was entirely developed by the Board.

The previous section outlined the Board' expectations of RMP management (MasterMind Prep and school Principals and Teachers) with specific academic goals and objectives for this year and the next five years.

A. Board Involvement in Plan Development

The Board's involvement did not start recently. In fact, the Board set clear expectations for academic results for the 2015-16 school year in a closed meeting with the CEO as part of the June 2015 board meeting. In August, the Board spent six hours during a half-day strategic planning retreat with management to review, discuss, and provide feedback on the plan to improve academic achievement for the year. The plan was approved and incorporated into the budget for the year.

After the November meeting with the Charter School Advisory Board, the Board Chairman met with the CEO to discuss expectations for the improvement plan to be presented and discussed at the next board meeting. On December 7, management presented the essential elements of the plan as well as the Charter Renewal Self-Study, and the Board provided its feedback to management. As part of that meeting, the Board held a closed session with its attorneys to discuss management's performance as it related to the plan.

During the open meeting, the Board requested that management write a detailed plan and submit it to the board for review by the end of the week. The Board Chairman presented a draft of this section of the plan to the Board for their review. The Board had a substantive discussion on setting more specific academic improvement goals for management that would be based on the state accountability measures.

The Board approved the draft as well as a plan to reorganize into committees designed to work directly with RMP management to focus on the development of critical components of the plan prior to the December 22nd deadline imposed by the state. During plan development, committees may also elect to use an outside resource (independent education advisor) to benchmark and validate components described in the plan to ensure RMP management's objectives are in-line with industry and most importantly North Carolina standards and requirements (e.g., if RMP management outlines a method of reducing class size by 10% with the object to improve the quality of learning, this objective may be assigned to the Academic Committee for review prior to acceptance. The Academic Committee may consult an outside resource to ensure this objective is beneficial to the success of improving learning quality).

The Board agreed that once all components of the plan are vetted and approved by the assignment committee and RMP management, they will be approved by the full board, finalized and submitted to the state.

After receiving the plan via email on December 11, the Board met in a special called meeting on December 14, 2015, to discuss the plan with management. As a result, the board agreed on the academic improvement goals included in this plan and the Renewal Self-Study and directed management to make goals clear in every section of the plan. The plan was edited and submitted to the Board for review via email on December 16, 2015, and the Board submitted final edits and approvals on December 17 in order to meet the deadline to provide the Charter Renewal Self-Study to the Office of Charter Schools on time.

B. Board Monitoring of Successful Plan Execution

Once the plan has been submitted to the state, the Board will continue to monitor its progress and success. This will be accomplished in several ways.

1. The full Board will receive monthly updates on action plan progress from management and the appropriate committee, including qualitative and quantitative measures
2. Appropriate Board committees will monitor their assigned objectives (e.g., Academic goals will be monitored by the academic committee, and financial goals will be monitored by the finance committee, etc.). This will allow the appropriate committee to interface directly with the RMP management team and/or staff between scheduled board meetings. Each committee will also have the autonomy make any suggestions needed to ensure the objective remains on task between scheduled board meetings.

New Board Committee Structure

The following describes the new board structure that was adopted by the board during the December 7th, 2015, board meeting. The board is now organized into 3 committees: Finance, Academic, and Governance. Each committee will have a specific relationship with RMP management as it is related to objectives outlined in current and future strategic plans. This new structure is designed to ensure the board remains engaged with the operations and academic activities of the school.

a. Finance Committee:

The finance committee is commissioned by and responsible to the Board of Trustees. It has the responsibility for working with the CEO and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) to create the upcoming fiscal year budget; presenting budget recommendations to the Board; monitoring implementation of the approved budget on a regular basis and recommending proposed budget revisions; recommending to the Board appropriate policies for the management of the organization's assets. The finance committee shall be assisted by the CEO and CFO.

Members:

- Margret Evans – Chair
- Thomas Parrish
- Morris Wilder

Responsibilities

1. Prepare an annual budget for the organization in collaboration with the CEO and CFO.
2. Also in collaboration with the CEO and CFO, develop and annually financial forecast and develop long-range financial plans based on the forecast.
3. Arrange for an annual audit to be provided to the Board of Trustees.
4. Provide oversight of the procurement process.
5. Review monthly financial statements and variances from budget, and recommend action to the Board, as appropriate.

b. Governance Committee:

The governance committee is commissioned by and responsible to the Board of Trustees to assume the primary responsibility for matters pertaining to Board of Trustees recruitment, nominations, orientation, training, and

evaluation in accordance with the bylaws of the organization as well as established policies and practices approved by the Board of Trustees.

Members:

- Ricky Parks – Chair
- Marcus Whitaker
- Chip Williams

Responsibilities:

1. Analyze the skills and experience needed on the Board.
2. Create a short and long-term board recruitment strategy.
3. Work with Board Chair and CEO on a succession plan for board officers.
4. Recruit individuals to serve as members of the Board and develop a slate of trustees for consideration by the membership at the annual meeting in accordance with selection/election procedures outlined in the bylaws.
5. Develop and review annually the procedures for Board recruitment.
6. Develop an orientation and training plan for new trustees.

c. Academic Committee:

The Academic Excellence Committee is commissioned by and responsible to the Board of Trustees to assume the primary responsibility for working with the CEO to define academic excellence, ensure that all board members know the charter promises that were made to the community and the authorizer and to devise clear and consistent measures to monitor these goals.

Members:

- Marcus Whitaker – Chair
- Chip Williams
- Thomas Parrish

Responsibilities:

1. Define and continue to refine what academic excellence means for our organization.
2. Ensure that all board members understand the key charter promises we have made to our community and to our authorizer.
3. Work with the school leadership to devise clear and consistent ways to measure progress towards stated goals.
4. Work with school leadership to set annual academic achievement goals, to be presented to and approved by the full board.
5. Work with school leadership to share with the board annual successes, barriers to reaching academic excellence, and strategies to overcome these barriers.

C. Board Organization Chart

RMP Board of Trustees

