

**Honey Creek Community School
Charter Re-Authorization Evaluation Report**

Submitted to Dr. William Miller, Superintendent,
Washtenaw Intermediate School District,
and to the Washtenaw Intermediate School District Board of Education
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Introduction

In December, 2008, The Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD) entered into an agreement with Dr. Nelson Maylone of Eastern Michigan University. Dr. Maylone's general charge was to conduct a chartering re-authorization evaluation of Honey Creek Community School, a Public School Academy chartered by the Washtenaw ISD in August of 1995. The specific charges were:

1. to determine if the school is adhering to its stated policies, and
2. to determine if an articulated curriculum is being effectively implemented, as called for in its charter.

In order to place findings in an authentic context, and by agreement with Mr. Leyschock, the evaluator examined the following aspects of Honey Creek.

- A. Curriculum, including curriculum articulation and alignment of curriculum and instruction.
- B. Effectiveness of instructional practices, focusing on personalized learning and the use of teaching/learning teams.
- C. General quality of assessment practices, including alignment of assessment to instruction and use of multiple assessments.
- D. Professional development.
- E. General operating policies and procedures, including finances.
- F. Enrollment policies and procedures and student demographics.
- G. School leadership.

The Honey Creek Community School Charter, and its Mission, Belief and Philosophy Statements provided points of reference for the study and for findings. The Washtenaw Intermediate School District's "Common/High Expectations"—sometimes referred to as the "educational ideas that frame our work", as delineated in the WISD's 2010 Plan—

also offered a lens for the evaluation. (Those expectations are personalized learning, effective instructional practices, multiple assessments, teaching/learning teams, and early childhood/family support.)

Evidence was gathered in various ways, including the examination of enrollment data, self-assessment documents, MEAP documents, annual reports, summaries of parental surveys, handbooks, policy and procedure documents and others, most of which were provided by the Honey Creek Director and the Assistant Director. Additional evidence came from interviews with the Director, the Assistant Director, eight teachers, eight parents, two Board members, and six students. Note that several interviewees were chosen at random by the evaluator.

Evaluation Protocol

Evaluation activities included:

1. A preliminary meeting with Mr. Rick Leyshock to discuss the scope of the evaluation.
2. A meeting with Mr. Leyshock and Director Al Waters to discuss the evaluation project and to establish expectations, timelines, etc.
3. A series of hour-long interviews with Honey Creek staff members, parents, Board members and students.
4. A review and analysis of hard copy and electronically submitted documents, especially as they related to school curriculum.
5. Frequent email communications and several phone conversations with Mr. Walters, Ms. Almquist, and Mr. Leyshock, most frequently asking for answers to questions.
6. A follow-up meeting with Mr. Walters and with Ms. Almquist (which included a school tour.)
7. A final meeting with Mr. Leyshock.

Report Audiences

This report is prepared for Dr. William Miller, WISD Superintendent, and for the Washtenaw Intermediate School District Board of Education. It is expected that it will

be made available to members of the Honey Creek School community, including the Honey Creek Board of Education.

Report Limitations

The study was designed to answer the two primary evaluation questions noted above. Additional analysis was done to provide an authentic context for the findings. The study does not represent a comprehensive review of all aspects of school operation, and does not relate to any other accreditation status. Although budget documents were reviewed, this report does not represent a budget audit.

Area Reports

A. Curriculum, including curriculum articulation and alignment of curriculum and instruction

The 2005 Evaluation Report noted the difficulties associated with attempting to align curriculum and instruction. At that time, roadblocks to alignment at Honey Creek included high teacher turnover (which can make professional development more difficult and can depress institutional memory), the then-recent grade level reconfiguration, and the addition of a middle school. The Report also noted that “A self-identified curricular weakness at Honey Creek is the lack of a ‘map’ linking learning from one grade level to the next.” Time and hard work has allowed the Honey Creek staff to make substantial progress in overcoming these difficulties and to offer a more clearly articulated, well-organized curriculum, understood by teachers and attended to consistently. Highlighting the school’s commitment to curricular articulation (and perhaps in response to the weakness noted in 2005), Honey Creek recently subscribed to a curriculum mapping service, which, according to Honey Creek Director Al Walters, will “allow [staff] to document and archive our curricula, giving our teachers the ability to retrieve curriculum and lesson plans from previous years.”

That mapping is a work in progress: Mr. Waters also stated that “...documenting curriculum has always been a challenge for Honey Creek.” One teacher described the history of curricular development at Honey Creek as “chaotic.” Some grade level curricular articulation is incomplete (with middle grades mathematics being mentioned by several teachers as “needing work”.) Mr. Waters noted that “There is frustration with ever-changing GLCEs (state Grade Level Content Expectations.) Still, it can be stated Honey Creek has a sufficiently articulated curriculum which is being effectively implemented, as called for in its charter.

A significant feature of curriculum at Honey Creek is that it is both standards-based (aligned with Michigan Department of Education GLCEs) *and* congruent with the school's unique vision and mission. That is, GLCEs are “delivered” in a context having the following characteristics:

1. An integrated and interactive approach to education, including multi-grade clustering.
2. A thematic approach to teaching and learning, with frequent use of work stations, centered on “meaning and purpose in...students' lives.”
3. Teaching responsibilities shared among all members of the community, with teachers acting as “expert models” and students as apprentices.
4. A strong Academic Service-Learning program.
5. A commitment to multicultural and environmental education.
6. The fostering of understanding of diversity and differences among people.

A Honey Creek parent offered a representative comment regarding any potential conflict between the school's vision for teaching and learning and the necessity to fully address Grade Level Content Expectations: “I think the *execution* of the GLCEs is more important...it's a big picture approach. Teachers design assignments to the GLCEs, in fact, GLCEs are included on Progress Reports, but it's not a laser focus.” A teacher commented that “We *do* teach the state curriculum, but incorporate social skills; we attend to affect and application always.” Said another teacher: “Team-building is big...we do getting-to-know-you games, social games. There is no pretense that that's curricular, but it ends up supporting academics.”

Recent school improvement goals have been established with an eye toward improving student achievement in mathematics and in literacy. MEAP scores—which act as a

single, limited measure of student progress—indicate improvement in several areas, especially in science (across grade levels) and writing (particularly in the upper grades.) Under the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (which in Michigan rely heavily on MEAP scores), Honey Creek has “met AYP” and has earned a State of Michigan Department of Education “Education YES!” rating of A. Further discussion of MEAP scores is found in the next section.

As noted above, an important feature of the school is its Academic Service-Learning (AS-L) program. The Honey Creek AS-L program appears to be in alignment with the *Essential Elements of Service-Learning* of the National Youth Leadership Council, which emphasize integration of service tasks into the rest of the curriculum. This initiative is in keeping with the Honey Creek mission and belief statements and philosophy, and is supportive of curricular implementation. Recently, AS-L activities at Honey Creek have included the Books of Hope project (an effort to provide student-written books for Ugandan children), and several projects with an environment theme. At the parent interviews one participant said that “AS-L is wonderful...it really makes all the other learning real for the kids.”

Honey Creek is uniquely housed within High Point School, allowing for numerous opportunities to interact with and learn from students who are differently-abled. Research indicates that children who become comfortable and maintain friendships with children with disabilities—including severe disabilities—benefit in many ways, and that the benefits are mutual. Such interaction increases the likelihood of higher academic achievement. A parent commented that “Our kids have benefited from the High Point connection...they are more tolerant.” A middle grades student said that “I didn’t even know for a year that High Point was a different school from Honey Creek. I don’t think Honey Creek would be Honey Creek without the High Point kids.” (See more on this relationship in the “Enrollment policies and procedures and student demographics” section of this report.)

An important new curricular support program at Honey Creek is the Instructional Consolation Team (ICT), an initiative of the Michigan IC Team Consortium. When fully functional, the team—composed of seven or eight staff members—will be available for teachers when they have concerns regarding students. The goal of the ICT at Honey Creek is to “enhance, improve and increase student and staff performance.”

A comprehensive evaluation of the level of instructional and curricular alignment would require long-term observation of instructional activities; that is beyond the scope of this re-chartering evaluation. Nonetheless, interviews with school community members and a review of documents indicate that Honey Creek teachers have been and continue to be intimately involved with curricular development, and that they provide student learning activities aligned with Honey Creek’s curriculum. Teachers interviewed appeared knowledgeable of the academic curriculum, and they were eager to discuss how they curriculum is implemented. Furthermore, teachers’ descriptions of their curriculum delivery methods were in keeping with the school’s mission and belief statements and philosophy, perhaps even more so than in 2005. As then, Honey Creek teachers describe themselves as mentors and “expert models” for students, and not simply dispensers of knowledge. This is also in keeping with stated beliefs and philosophy, and represents the way in which Honey Creek uniquely implements curriculum.

As in 2005 and 2001, Honey Creek parents appear to be less familiar with curricular specifics than are the teachers, but this is undoubtedly typical of schools. During interviews, parents acknowledged that teachers appeared to be adhering to an articulated curriculum, but could not always articulate it themselves. (See note #3 below.) The Honey Creek Parent Handbook provides parents with only a very brief curriculum overview, and could provide more specific information.

Additional curriculum notes:

1. For the first time, Honey Creek is receiving Title I funding to assist lower-achieving students in the areas of mathematics, reading, and writing. New,

additional support staffing comes in the form of a teacher consultant, a social worker, and an occupational therapist contracted through the WISD. (See comments on special needs students in the “Enrollment polices and procedures and student demographics” section of this report.)

2. The school has again been awarded a Small Rural School Achievement Award (\$25,000) for use in teacher and administrative development, learning improvements, and teacher bonuses.

3. In the past, Honey Creek highlighted its curriculum and student achievement by way of a Winter Curriculum Fair. The 2005 Evaluation Report noted that the Fair may have lost its effectiveness, and contained the suggestion that the school consider rehabilitating the Fair, especially given the Fair’s potential for cementing and strengthening instructional/curricular alignment. Honey Creek now offers a semi-annual community Curriculum Celebration at each level, the stated purpose of which is to allow visitors to “...gain an understanding of both Honey Creek’s curriculum and...philosophy.” At the Celebration, various student performances, products and portfolios are exhibited. Regarding the Curriculum Celebration, one parent commented that “I didn’t really have the big curriculum picture, but Curriculum Night was very helpful.” One parent noted that “We have a Curriculum Night, but never get a syllabus, no written curriculum. That would be nice.”

4. Research, experience, and common sense all indicate that student enrichment opportunities—focusing on the needs of youngsters—can be supportive of academic achievement and can contribute to student well-being. The 2005 Evaluation Report noted a “lack of organized sports offerings” and encouraged the Honey Creek community to continue to develop enrichment opportunities for students. Lack of resources and issues of scale generally make it difficult for a school the size of Honey Creek to offer comprehensive enrichment activities (music lessons, extensive sports activities, etc.) on a par with larger, traditional public schools. However, unusually strong parental volunteerism, the offering of

a summer camp, and near-universal student enrollment in after-school programming have gone far to make up for lack of regular school-day enrichment initiatives at Honey Creek. The after-school program offers a rich assortment of activities, including sports, music, and special interest clubs. As with AS-L, these enrichment opportunities act as integrated extensions of students' school days. "Aftercare is excellent...we like the structured activities and the tie-in with the school day", said one parent.

In spite of limited resources, there have been several important enrichment additions at Honey Creek in recent years:

~ A weekly art program—aligned with the Michigan GLCEs and often including High Point students—is now offered to all students. (Mr. Waters has expressed the desire for a shared art space for Honey Creek and High Point students that would allow for additional opportunities for “creative expression in both music and art.”)

~ There are now more computers available for student use, and laptops were purchased for the entire faculty.

~ The music program has been upgraded by the recent addition of a middle school choir.

~ The richly furnished Arlene Saalbach Media Center (described by Mr. Waters as “state-of-the-art”, and also open to students from High Point and Gretchen’s House) opened in 2007.

~ An all-school talent show was added in 2006, and has “grown to a large community event”, according to Mr. Waters. He also notes that the annual winter and spring performances have grown considerably.

5. The Honey Creek website homepage offers a link to a curriculum page. In reality, the website curriculum page simply notes that Honey Creek classrooms are multi-age, and offers no curricular content information.¹

Summary: Honey Creek Community School has an articulated, standards-based curriculum, aligned with the Michigan Curricular Framework, and uniquely situated in the context of local principles and practice.

B. Effectiveness of instructional practices, focusing on personalized learning, and the use of teaching/learning teams

Lacking extended formal classroom visits accompanied by observation protocol, and lacking access to certifiably valid and reliable student academic assessment data beyond aggregate MEAP scores, it impossible to fully characterize the general quality of instructional practices at Honey Creek. Anecdotal evidence, however, allows for the following observations.

1. Teachers continue to utilize teaching approaches which are in keeping with the Honey Creek Mission, Belief and Philosophy Statements. These include integrated and thematic instruction, differentiation, teaching teams, and “hands-on” learning experiences. Academic Service-Learning activities obviously provide additional support of the school vision. Furthermore, teaching and learning activities at Honey Creek seem congruent with both long-standing and emerging educational theories and schools of thought, especially developmentalism and constructivism. There are philosophical differences among educators regarding best practice, but research-based evidence generally is supportive of the claim that the Honey Creek approach is effective for both insuring student academic achievement and for preparing students for adult roles.

¹ There is a brief statement on the webpage asserting that the curriculum is “entirely teacher-created.” This is perhaps misleading, in that the Honey Creek curriculum builds on Michigan’s Grade Level Content Expectations.

Teacher themselves claim that they have to a great degree “perfected” a unique balance of attention to student academic success and to social skills and affect. Said one: “We start with the State curriculum, but it’s only the start. Our challenge has always been to build on the raw curriculum our way, the way our students and parents expect at Honey Creek. I think we’re there.”

2. The 2005 Evaluation Report noted that, in evaluator interviews with teachers and parents, there were several oblique references to instruction at Honey Creek which implied that instruction sometimes lacked clarity, purpose or direction. To whatever extent that may have been true in 2005, no such suggestions were heard in 2009, and interviews left the evaluator with a sense of increased teacher focus and professionalism. A representative comment from a parent was that “They [teachers] seem somehow to be true to our vision; they have a more respectful child-centered approach to education, but things are never watered down. It all seems pretty intense and purposeful and effective.”

3. Teachers at Honey Creek have developed and have committed to print hundreds of lesson plans and descriptions of student learning activities. Although they vary by topic, by grade level, and even by teacher, most exhibit a high degree of organization, thoughtfulness and purpose. All are explicit regarding expected student outcomes; this helps to ensure implementation of curriculum.

4. Overall parental satisfaction with the quality of instruction at the school and with the school in general is high, as evidenced by parental surveys and by comments made during parent interviews. Honey Creek’s commitment to personalized learning and to team-teaching are particularly evident in the following representative parent interview comments:

“Traditional special student needs are certainly attended to, but what I like is that every child is treated as an individual...everyone seems to care.”

“ Teachers here understand personalities.”

“Support staffing is excellent, and I like the reciprocal relationships here.”

“We love that there are all sorts of diversity here.”

“Teachers make sure kids are in the ‘right place.’”

“I love that teachers seem to work together so well...they really do seem to be a team.”

“Teachers are phenomenal...committed, enthusiastic and personable.”

“Our students are *friendly* with teachers; this is different than at other schools. There is no reward for being a bully here.”

“My boy dislikes math, but his teacher *works* with it, rather than making threats, etc.”

“The staff seems to be pretty coordinated. We’ve been here awhile, and it wasn’t always so...I know there was dissention. Now all teachers seem to be on the same page.”

“The ‘Honesty Circles’...*they work!*”

5. After a few perfunctory complaints from students during interviews (“One thing I don’t like is we can’t throw snowballs”; “I would change the rule on hats”, etc.), it emerged that they generally feel very comfortable at Honey Creek and that they view teachers as advocates and even as friends. This was seen as supportive of learning by those students interviewed. Said one, “This is the best school I have ever attended. You can approach teachers; they’ll explain until you get it.” Another noted that “Everything here makes learning easier.”

6. Honey Creek does not do any formal research regarding the future success of its graduates; existing evidence is then and very much anecdotal. While such research can

be difficult and time-consuming, it can be valuable. It is suggested that the Honey Creek staff—perhaps in cooperation with the WISD—develop a plan for such research.

Summary: Anecdotal evidence points to high quality instructional practice at Honey Creek with a continued focus on personalized learning and teaching teams, in keeping with the school’s vision. General parental and student satisfaction with instruction and with the teaching staff offer confirmation of effective instruction.

C. General quality of assessment practices, including alignment of assessment to instruction

The Charter Re-Authorization Reports of 1997 and 2001 both noted concern regarding the overall assessment picture at Honey Creek. The 1997 Report stated that “...there is a lack of any assessment mechanism to assess the impact of the curricular and total program on students on an on-going basis.” The 2001 Report also noted that “...no formal, definitive assessment program ...appears to be in place.” The 2005 Report noted that “Student academic assessment at Honey Creek is varied and inconsistent, and there exists faculty ambiguity regarding quality assessment practice.” The 2005 Report further suggested that there remained a need “...for the school staff to continue to develop a broad, purposeful, integrated, cohesive assessment plan which tracks all important ‘measurables’, as defined by the school community.” (One of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District’s “Big Ideas” is that good schools make use of multiple assessments.)

Based on anecdotal evidence, it appears that there is now more “assessment consistency” at Honey Creek, Traditional objective assessment seems to be less out of favor among staff members and parents, although alternative assessment is generally still seen as superior and more in keeping with Honey Creek’s philosophy. An

encouraging observation is that use of rubrics seems more pervasive at Honey Creek than in 2005.

Still, the evaluator wishes to repeat an observation from the 2005 Report: “It may be that the historically poor quality of traditional teacher-produced classroom level assessments (i.e. tests) in U.S. schools has produced a subtle backlash among Honey Creek teachers, who—to their credit—aspire for something better. Honey Creek teachers (and ultimately students) may benefit from staff development opportunities focusing on quality assessment...whether traditional or alternative.”

As further noted in the 2005 Report, the consensus among assessment experts and master practitioners is that a balanced, effective student academic assessment program combines objective and alternative (performance) assessment. Keys to the effectiveness of traditional assessment are instrument validity and reliability, which imply assessment alignment with clearly stated outcomes. The chief characteristic of quality alternative assessment is its ability to reliably check on student curricular mastery, as opposed to simply providing students with engaging or interesting activities—although that remains a fortuitous benefit of the approach. The effectiveness and usefulness of both forms of assessment are greatly dependent upon an articulated curriculum and on clearly stated objectives, an area in which Honey Creek has made important strides. An articulated curriculum and clearly stated objectives are the friends of authentic student achievement.

Assessment Notes:

1. Honey Creek’s Continuing Progress Charts appear to provide helpful summaries of student academic achievement, and provide teachers with the opportunity to communicate with parents regarding student strengths, weaknesses, interests, etc. Report cards provide parents and students with important and detailed information on student progress, tied to specific objectives/GLCEs. Director Waters has indicated that electronic reporting “through a benchmarked-based student assessment system” is forthcoming.

2. Honey Creek Community School continues to publish and analyze results of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests. Due to the comparatively small number of students taking the test at the school each year, the Honey Creek staff rightly continues to look at year-to-year changes in MEAP scores with caution. The staff also understands the limited usefulness of comparing Honey Creek's MEAP scores to those of other, dissimilar schools. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that aggregate scores at all levels tend to be above state averages. Several specific MEAP test results observations are offered:

a. Student achievement in science as measured by MEAP tests has been stable in recent years, but at a high level, with over 80% of Honey Creek fifth graders and over half of eighth graders scoring in the highest of the MEAP's four achievement categories ("advanced"). These science scores are significantly above state averages.

b. No Honey Creek students in 2008 at any grade level were able to score in the highest writing achievement category, reflecting statewide realities. Still, as with science, writing scores at Honey Creek almost universally beat state averages.

c. Encouragingly, nearly no Honey Creek students at any level on any tests fall into the lowest achievement category ("not proficient.")

3. Honey Creek's school handbook offers parents and students important information regarding school assessment practices, albeit with a lack of clarity. The latest Honey Creek Annual Report (2008) contains a section ostensibly about school assessment practice ("Methods of Assessment"). This is misleading; the section merely reviews MEAP data.

Summary: The Honey Creek staff continues to primarily rely on varied alternative/performance assessments, but with more focus and apparent integration than in the past. There is reduced reticence regarding the judicious use of quality traditional assessment. Students may benefit from additional staff development in the area of effective classroom-level assessment. The Honey Creek staff appears to be respectful of MEAP test results, but maintains a healthy skepticism regarding their overall usefulness.

D. Professional Development

According to Honey Creek Director Al Waters and those teachers who offered comments, the school continues to provide staff with high quality, focused professional development (PD). For instance; they recently received training in differentiated instruction and in curriculum mapping, and in child and adolescent development; all highly relevant to the school's mission and its current needs. In keeping with school improvement goals, there have been recent targeted development opportunities in math and language arts instruction. Additionally, the entire staff was trained and certified in Non-Violent Crisis Intervention, CPR, and First Aid in 2008-9. Mr. Waters also indicated that staff are now provided regular development opportunities in the area of technology "in an effort to fully prepare our students for the twenty first century workplace."

During interviews, several teachers commented that they felt that professional development has steadily become more focused and aligned with school needs over the years. (Several interviewees in 2005 had described professional development activities at Honey Creek as "hit-and-miss.") This purposeful, focused certainly reflects best PD practice.

The 2005 Report offered the suggestion that, "Using results of the professional learning survey and the curriculum, instruction and assessment audit, Honey Creek should

continue to move toward a purposeful, fully articulated, student-centered professional development program.” The school appears to be moving in that direction, and indeed may have “arrived.”

Summary: Honey Creek appears to have an focused, purposeful professional development program, aligned with its mission and with its current school improvement goals.

E. General operating policies and procedures, including finances

It is a common and reasonable expectation that public and private schools have well organized and meaningful sets of written polices and procedures, thoughtfully produced. In additions to providing guidance in all school matters, such policies and procedures provide some degree of protection for schools in cases of legal action. Furthermore, they represent a form of written institution memory. A review of Honey Creek policy and procedure history is instructive:

The 1996 Honey Creek Evaluation Report noted that “The area of policy and procedures needs much work.” The 2001 Report stated that “With assistance of the WISD, progress had been made in this area.” The 2005 Report noted that “A slow movement toward clearly articulated (written) policies and procedures at Honey Creek appears to be picking up steam. During interviews, a parent noted that ‘Policies and procedures were at [the Director’s] whim, especially according to parents’ needs and requests. Now, things are streamlined, there are standards, although there is still work to be done. Sarena [Director Sarena Conaway] is trying to keep a balance.’”

Although an thorough analysis of Honey Creek polices and procedures as given in the book (appropriateness, reasonableness and legality of policies and procedures, etc.) is beyond the scope of this report, Honey Creek now has such a set of policies and procedures over 1000 pages long. Sheer length proves little, but is suggestive of an

attempt at thoroughness. For the first time, its organization appears to parallel that of other, long-established public schools.

The inherently legalistic nature of carefully delineated policies and procedures is in no way at odds with the Mission, Belief and Philosophy Statements of Honey Creek. As in the past, the Honey Creek community does not appear to make “checklist compliance” with Board policies its focus. Rather, the school’s Mission Statement is the primary source of guidance. Nonetheless, it is important that the school has taken seriously the need to have written policies and operating procedures in place.

During an interview session, a parent noted that “It just seems like the whole place is more organized and as if everyone is working out of the same playbook.” This may indeed be an unintended reference to school’s well-organized policies and procedures handbook.

Funding and Finance notes:

As noted elsewhere in this report, Honey Creek receives per-pupil funding which is lower than the state average for non-charter public schools. It is the evaluator’s subjective opinion that there is a high return on investment at Honey Creek. Student and parental satisfaction is high, as evidenced by survey data, by interviews, and by the existence of an enrollment wait list. The school consistently meets annual Adequate Yearly Progress requirements under NCLB. A sampling of teachers discloses generally high job satisfaction. Interviews reveal staff, parental and student approval of school leadership. Director Al Waters offered this comment regarding school quality and financing:

“Honey Creek, like most schools in the state, is constantly in the process of looking for ways to provide the highest quality educational experience for our students, while at the same time looking for ways to reduce costs.

However because of our small size and lean budget, we find ourselves uniquely prepared to face these challenges.”

Mr. Waters also noted that “An additional area of concern is our ability to meet the health insurance needs of employees.”

Interviews with Honey Creek parents and staff members revealed a universal longing for additional school funding, although individual “wish lists” were unique. One parent commented that “We really need lots more music here, but I know that’s expensive.” Another: “Regular full-time, on-site counselors would kind of round out the picture.” Simultaneously, most parents and staff members offered that the school showed “good stewardship of public money.” A staff member commented that “I don’t think everyone knows how far we stretch dollars here. People are really getting way more for the dollar here than in public schools.”

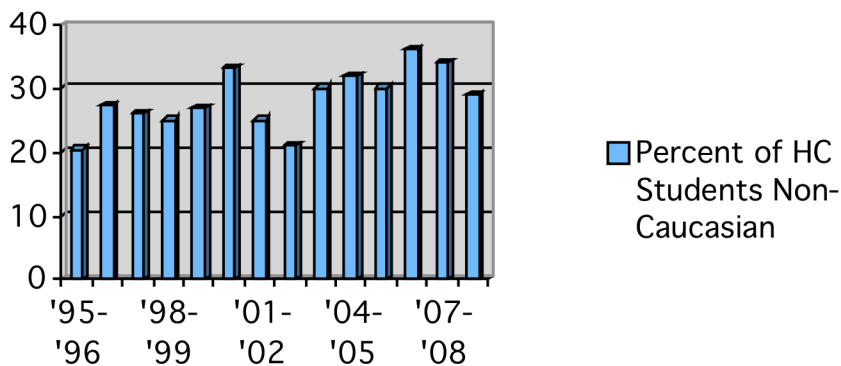
Honey Creek’s financial statements are “in conformity with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America” according to the latest Independent Auditor’s Report from the accounting firm of Yeo and Yeo. The report also noted that it “...did not identify any deficiencies in internal control over financial reporting that we consider to be material weaknesses...” Honey Creek finances are also monitored by the chartering agency, the Washtenaw Intermediate School District. “Clean finances” (as one parent put it) allow the school staff—especially school leadership—to concentrate on Honey Creek’s mission.

Summary: Honey Creek has a set of clearly written policies and procedures which are aligned with its Mission, Belief and Philosophy Statements. Financial auditing and monitoring by an independent accounting firm and by the WISD help to insure quality budgeting protocol at the school.

G. Enrollment policies and procedures and student demographics

In that enrollment is open, it is important that Public School Academy enrollment policies and procedures are consistent and fair and that they be perceived as such by all constituents, particularly parents. To this end, Honey Creek Community School continues to utilize clearly articulated student enrollment policies and procedures. The student enrollment application form is clear and concise. A “Pre-Enrollment Meeting Questionnaire” (filled out by parents) is a document useful to school staff and to the Board. Prospective parents must attend an enrollment meeting before receiving an application, and children and parents new to Honey Creek are required to spend a morning in the classroom with teachers.

Michigan Public School Academies must, by law, utilize a lottery system for student enrollment if enrollment requests exceed school capacity, and Honey Creek indeed uses such a system annually. As noted elsewhere in this report, the school always has a waiting list. Still, in keeping with the school’s vision, the Enrollment Application Form notes that the Honey Creek “may enroll specific applicants to represent the diversity of Washtenaw County’s same age population.” Honey Creek Community School serves a student population which has been consistently diverse, although the majority of students are and historically have been Caucasian. (See the chart below. “Non-Caucasian” includes African-American, Native American, Hispanic, multi-ethnic students, or those of Asian ancestry.) Average daily attendance is high (95%).



While diversity is clearly valued by school staff and by parents, establishment of rigorous student racial or ethnic enrollment quotas or goals at Honey Creek would be problematic. Even if the school community were able to come to consensus regarding the advisability of hard-and-fast racial and ethnic quotas and goals, the relatively small size of the school would present difficult—if not insurmountable—practical difficulties. Furthermore, there is overwhelming anecdotal evidence that the Honey Creek staff is scrupulously non-discriminatory regarding enrollment protocol and in daily practice. Themes of tolerance and appreciation of differences seem inherent at Honey Creek, and school staff members appear to be true to the words of the mission statement, which states that school personnel will strive to “foster an understand of difference and diversity.”

Honey Creek Community School is in a unique position regarding opportunities for interaction with and inclusion of students with special needs, to the benefit of all. The school’s location within the High Point School building sets the stage for inclusion of students with special needs, and allows Honey Creek students to participate in various High Point School activities. Numerous collaborative student activities—some part of daily routines, others, special initiatives—are indicative of the relationship. The all-campus Boundless Playground epitomizes the bond between High Point and Honey Creek. As in the past, parents, staff members and students interviewed for this evaluation were universally positive about the High Point connection. One parent commented that “These children [from Honey Creek and High Point] learn so much from each other.” A student said that “I was nervous at first about doing stuff with the High Point kids, but now they’re my friends, and usually they don’t even seem different.” The relationship between Honey Creek and High Point schools is unique, mutually advantageous and exceptionally valuable.

As noted in the 2005 Report, and as is still the case: For all of the purposeful efforts at tolerance, inclusion, and appreciation of those who are different, Honey Creek staff members do not wish for the school to be seen as specifically a special education—or even special *needs*—institution. They strive, rather, to provide the students and parents

with a general education alternative which is respectful of individuality, and which promotes the values of inclusion and tolerance.

A self-identified concern at Honey Creek is that 17% of students are identified as having special needs; this is considerably higher than the state average, and higher than other charter schools in Michigan. An issue is not the presence of special needs youngsters per se; rather, it is that 10% of Honey Creek expenditures after WISD and state reimbursement are for special education. As noted by Mr. Waters, “This is up from 6% two years ago, and it challenges our ability to meet the needs of those students who seek greater academic challenge.” A teacher was blunt about this issue: “Maybe we have too many special needs kids...what, 18%? How do we attract non-special ed kids too?”

Summary: Honey Creek Community School enrollment application procedures are clearly articulated, and appear fair. The student population is diverse, although the majority are Caucasian. Students with unique needs are fully valued. There exists a special and mutually beneficial relationship between Honey Creek and High Point Schools.

8. School leadership

Honey Creek Community School continues to be characterized by collaborative decision-making and numerous opportunities for constituent input. This is in keeping with the school’s Mission, Belief, and Philosophy Statements. While distributive leadership is a reality, Honey Creek currently benefits from the leadership skills of Director Al Waters and Assistant Director Shellee Almquist.

During interviews with teachers, parents and students, Mr. Waters was most frequently characterized as someone who strongly supports the Honey Creek vision, a man “with no hidden agendas.” He is generally seen as sincere in his desire to seek input from all constituents. One teacher commented that “Al understands our mission.” Interviewees from all groups offered comments to the effect that he “get things done”, but “never in a

pushy way.” “He really seems to understand people”, said one student. Several individuals commented that Mr. Waters brings “a sense of security and stability” to the school. A teacher noted that “Al has been a good listener; he’s made balanced decisions; he’s smart; he came here to learn.”

One way in which Mr. Waters reinforces Honey Creek values and expectations for students is by way of the monthly school newspaper, Honey Bunches of Notes. In a recent edition, the Director’s Notes section reminded students to “Believe in yourself”, to “Exercise respect”, and to “Never give up.”

Several parents, staff members, and students made positive comments regarding Ms. Almquist’s wide knowledge base and her ability to “get things taken care of”, as one student put it. A parent noted that Ms. Almquist “. . .has been around a while, and this is good, because she really knows how things work, and probably even knows which closets have skeletons.”

Recently, there has been an explosion of research regarding distributive leadership and teacher leadership in schools. Emerging theories point toward the effectiveness of practices which grant fairly high levels of autonomy to staff members, and which empower teachers to be agents of change. It is the evaluator’s opinion that Mr. Waters brings an intuitive understanding of the benefits of distributive leadership to Honey Creek. Several teachers indicated that Mr. Waters encouraged innovation among the school staff. One commented that “Al is so supportive of us, even when we go out on a limb for our kids. His attitude is never obstructionist; it’s always ‘OK, let’s give that a try . . . let’s make it work.’” Mr. Leyshock of the WISD added that “Al pays attention to compliance.”

Summary: Current school leadership provides welcome stability, and is characterized by competency, transparency, child advocacy, and staff empowerment.

Observations regarding Honey Creek and several of the WISD’s “Common/High Expectations”

1. **Personalized learning** continues to be a foundation of Honey Creek Community School, and is integral to its Mission.
2. The staff at Honey Creek appears to use a variety of **effective instructional practices**. Still, teachers must constantly compare their pedagogy with recognized best practice and research.
3. Honey Creek teachers favor alternative/performance assessments, but use **multiple assessments**, including traditional assessments such as tests. The staff should move toward universal understanding of best assessment practice and assessment consistency.
4. As part of the commitment to personalized learning, the Honey Creek community has recognized the positive potential of **teaching and learning teams**, and use of such teams is fundamental at the school.

Additional Observations and Recommendations

The 2005 Evaluation Report noted that, according to The Michigan Association of Public School Academies, charter schools are intended to “revitalize public education” and that charter schools have an obligation to “inform the public of charter school principles, possibilities and successes.” To that end, the evaluator recommended that the staff of Honey Creek Community School—in partnership with the WISD—consider the development of a formal “visibility program”. Such a program could highlight Honey Creek’s exemplar status, and could provide various constituents with the opportunity to learn from Honey Creek’s experiences. These constituents might include the staffs of other charter schools, staffs, administrators, parents, and School Board members of traditional public schools, members of the higher education community, and researchers.

It is unclear if Honey Creek and the WISD have attempted to undertake such a formal initiative, but it is again recommended.

Honey Creek may be described as a niche school, serving its students and parents well. Interesting and as yet unanswered questions include these:

1. To what degree is Honey Creek's success replicable?
2. If the school does not offer a wholly replicable school model, yet successfully serves its population, are there aspects of Honey Creek which other schools would be wise to emulate? If so, what are they, and how might they be identified?

Conclusion and Recommendation

The evaluator has found Honey Creek Community School has an articulated curriculum which is being effectively implemented, and that the school appears to be adhering to its stated policies, as called for in its charter. Re-authorization of the charter is recommended.

Addendum 1
Documents Examined

School charter.

Recent school newsletters (1 year).

Curriculum guides, associated lesson plans or suggested learning activities, etc.

Summary of student assessment program, including common
assessments/sample formal assessments.

Board minutes from Sept. 2005-present.

Any school “white papers”, policy papers, etc., emerging from school initiatives.

Summaries of any school improvement projects, formal or otherwise, esp. how goals
were chosen.

What is status of NCA work? Documents?

Documents related to HC “extras” (after school, athletic, etc.)

Service learning documents...summaries of activities, etc.

School mission, belief, philosophy statements.

Operating policies and procedures.

Parent handbook.

Student handbook.

Important memos to staff, 2005-present.

Key budget documents, 2005-present.

Teacher selection protocol.

PA 25 reports, 2005-present. (Do these include AYP reports? Points of Pride?)

MEAP reports, 2005-present.

Student demographic information; historic and current.

Staff demographic summary.

Continuous Progress Chart samples.

Addendum 2

Interview Prompts for Staff, Parents, Students, and Board Members

At the request of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, Dr. Nelson Maylone of Eastern Michigan University is conducting a limited evaluation of Honey Creek Community School. His specific charges are:

1. to determine if the school is adhering to its stated policies, and
2. to determine if an articulated curriculum is being effectively implemented, as called for in its charter.

You've been invited to participate in a one-hour roundtable discussion with Dr. Maylone at which he will ask you to respond to several open-ended prompts concerning Honey Creek. Your candid comments will be helpful to him as he conducts the evaluation.

Although Dr. Maylone will take notes at the session and will record many comments verbatim, participants' names will not be used in his final evaluation report.

The discussion will be wide-ranging, but Dr. Maylone is most interested in your views on these topics/themes:

The Honey Creek curriculum

Instructional practices; esp. instructional/curricular alignment

Assessment practices; esp. assessment/curricular alignment

Staff development

Parental involvement

Points of pride at Honey Creek

Challenges facing the school

Your willingness to participate is appreciated.

Addendum 3

Questions for Director Al Waters and for Assistant Director Shellee Almquist

Honey Creek Community School 2009 Evaluation

1. From current website: “One of the unique aspects of Honey Creek Community School is that our curriculum is entirely teacher-created.”

Given this, what is the status of HC curriculum alignment with state GLCEs?

When was the current curriculum developed? Over time? Ongoing? Is there a refresh cycle?

2. How familiar would you say individual teachers are with HC curricular expectations? Do any teachers denigrate the academic curriculum as non-aligned with school mission and vision?

3. HC instruction is theme and project-based. What challenges to delivery of curriculum does this present, and how are they met?

4. Have there been any follow-up surveys/interviews of students (high school or beyond) to see how they are doing academically and otherwise? If not, how do you know that your desire to produce “successful, life-long learners” and “successful adults in our changing democracy”?

5. In 2005, a self-identified curricular weakness at Honey Creek was the lack of a “map” linking learning from one grade level to the next. Is this still considered an issue, and if so, how has it been addressed?

6. What is the status of the Curriculum Fair?

7. From 2005: “The lack of organized sports offerings at the middle school level may be a factor in the school’s inability to fully retain its middle grades students.” Can you comment?

8. Are Continuous Progress Charts being used?) In 2005, Dr. Conaway identified what she saw as numerous constraints on the effectiveness of the CPCs. These included lack of updating as grade configurations have changed, internal document format inconsistency (especially grade-to-grade), lack of clarity, lack of alignment with state Grade Level Content Expectations, insufficient longitudinal record-keeping, and lack of teacher consistency regarding performance level definitions. If they are still being used, what is their status? If not, why not?

9. Are traditional student assessments used at HC? (The 2005 eval suggested better use of quality traditional assessment.

Addendum 4

Letter of Recommendation of Charter Re-Authorization

Dr. William Miller, Superintendent
Washtenaw Intermediate School District
1819 S. Wagner Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI. 48106

May 10, 2009

Dear Dr. Miller,

Over the last four months, I have acted as an outside evaluator of Honey Creek Community School for the purpose of offering a charter re-authorization recommendation. I wish to inform you that I have found that the school is adhering to its stated curriculum and policies, as called for in its charter, and that re-authorization is recommended. You will receive a full Charter Re-Authorization Evaluation Report. Shortly.

It has been a pleasure to work with members of the Honey Creek community and with Mr. Rick Leyschok of the WISD. I thank you for the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Dr. Nelson Maylone
Associate Professor of Educational Psychology
Eastern Michigan University

cc R. Leyschok
A. Waters