



Great Expectations School

Annual Report for FY11

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Great Expectations School

2010-2011 Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2010 - 2011 (FY11) witnessed further growth at Great Expectations School (GES), both in terms of student population and organizational maturity. This Annual Report will recap many of the year's events and outcomes as GES continued to pursue its vision.

Elemental to our vision is the school's mission, which remains unchanged:

The mission of the school is to develop in each child:

- *A love of learning*
- *Critical and creative thinking skills*
- *Mastery of the academic building blocks*
- *The ability to nurture family, friends and self*
- *A strong commitment as a contributing member of community*
- *Open-heartedness toward others*
- *A passion for life-long learning*

To keep this mission statement in the forefront of all our planning and decision-making, we continue to read it at the beginning of each board meeting. We have also summarized the spirit of it into a more concise tagline: Growing Hearts and Minds, One Child at a Time.

“One Child at a Time” is a key component of our educational philosophy. It manifests itself primarily in Differentiated Education, where the entire class addresses the same subject area, but the process, content, or deliverable is modified to the abilities, interests, or needs of the individual student. We also reflect the concept of Multiple Intelligences, as put forward by Howard Gardener. This approach guides us to better understand how each child learns most effectively and to creatively tailor teaching methods and activities to develop opportunities for learning. Here, everyone learns and everyone teaches.



Authorizer Information

Our mission is also supported by our sponsor, Audubon Center of the North Woods (ACNW). We have partnered with ACNW since our inception in 2003, and are pleased they were certified by the state as a charter school authorizer during FY11. As a part of their oversight, ACNW has required evidence supporting our existing situation, goals for the future, and strategies and plans to achieve success. As we continue to grow, we look forward to working with ACNW on the planning, organizing, and programming necessary to fulfill our mission.



The North Shore of Lake Superior is rich with natural and cultural history, providing tremendous opportunities for GES. Our instructional approach involves connecting educational content with a child's environment – including aspects of both natural and social systems – in a meaningful way. When a student can relate directly to the material and its application -- by solving problems and collaborating on projects -- learning becomes more relevant and true understanding is achieved.

Our authorizer can be reached via:

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Board of Directors Information

Leading GES in pursuit of our mission is the Great Expectations School Board of Directors. In order to represent all school constituents, it is comprised of educators, parents and community members. Board members are elected by parents and staff every November at the Annual Meeting and serve three-year terms. The terms are staggered for continuity. Changes in charter school law initiated changes to our board configuration, which no longer has an educator majority. However, we continue to have strong representation from our educator members complementing our parent and community members. We believe this provides a broad range of important perspectives while not creating an undue burden on our educators.

The following is a roster of our FY11 board, updated since the election in November, 2010:

Chair: Jon Hedstrom, parent
Vice Chair: Sara Hingos, parent
Treasurer: Baiers Heeren, community member
Secretary: Suzy Schweig, educator
Members at Large: Susan Miller, educator
Jeff Kern, parent
Andrew Ashcroft, community member (resigned mid-year)
Amanda Hand, parent member (appointed to fill term above)

All of our board members can be reached via P.O. Box 310 Grand Marais, MN 55604.

The board continues to move from an operating/management focus toward a strategic/oversight one. Additional delegation to committees has been a key part of this shift. While there remains a challenge in soliciting and developing committee members to flesh out this approach, we have already seen benefits from engaging committees more effectively. One important initiative related to a review and update of our enrollment strategy. After soliciting parent and staff input, the board decided to restructure the classroom configurations and increase the capacities for each grade level. This change sought to balance the educational goals and financial realities of the school, and will have implications for our facilities in future years.

The GES school board completed comprehensive formal board training last winter, and continues to promote on-going board development and recruitment of new members to bring enhanced skills, knowledge, and breadth of experience to the board. It has established a development plan for the school Director that includes growth in educational leadership, community outreach, and strategic planning.

The majority of the input on school direction continues to come from our educators. This is in keeping with the spirit of the charter school law empowering educators. We are fortunate to have committed and competent teachers, who are also growing in their understanding and effectiveness in school governance. (A complete listing of GES staff for FY11 can be found at Appendix A.)

Fiscal 2011 Accomplishments

In FY11 we continued our focus on developing the key components of our educational philosophy: multi-aged classrooms, an integrated curriculum, the Responsive Classroom approach to classroom management, differentiated instruction, and project based learning. As a result, we've developed a reputation for strong academics, excellent special education, and intentional social/emotional education.

Opportunities for social/emotional education are created throughout the day and throughout the year. One of the "core" elements of GES, social/emotional development is supported through Responsive Classroom, an approach which shares responsibility for establishing and maintaining a strong learning community with each student. Students create rules of behavior and support their implementation. Individuals see themselves connected to one another and thus support one another.



Students have achieved academic success as measured by standardized tests and other assessments, as well as anecdotal evidence of students reaching their potential. Students continue to graduate from GES and prosper in other learning environments, including on-line, alternative, and traditional high school settings.

We have seen continued enrollment benefits from our media, outreach, and recruitment initiatives. Even with expanding our enrollment limits, we have been operating at or near capacity in every classroom. This is especially evident in our K-1 classroom where we have been attracting new families and even developing a waiting list. This, combined with a high rate of current student retention, is a very positive sign for our future stability.

The school continues to strengthen financially, using conservative budgeting and effective monitoring to achieve our goals. FY11 saw another increase in our fund balance which, while still relatively small, is growing steadily. Through our successful implementation of our financial plans, policies, and procedures, GES earned the Minnesota Department of Education's Finance Award for FY11 and anticipates another "clean" audit.

The number of outreach initiatives, such as parent conferences, newsletter articles, after-school activities (including our very successful annual Science Fair), community lunches, media contacts and publications, and fundraising events has increased and fostered stronger relationships between staff, students, parents and community.



Broadly measuring GES student achievement on standardized tests remains a challenge. Due to the limited number of students in any one grade, our populations are statistically insignificant and our compiled results are often not representative. In addition, our focus on the importance of individual learners is incompatible with the idea of summary results. In spite of our philosophy and the unique environment we have, GES is accountable to state and federal requirements for traditional standardized testing and has met its AYP proficiency standards in reading, mathematics, and attendance in each year of its operation.

We do, also, have academic goals for standard achievement tests that are geared toward individual, not group improvement. As a result, each year we use the Measures of Academic Progress test as our primary standardized assessment of student performance. We compare student scores to their scores from the prior year to assess progress on an individual basis. For second graders or students new to GES, we pre-test in the fall and base progress on scores achieved the following spring. For FY11, students showed progress on over 90% of the tests taken (each student takes tests in Reading, Math, and Language Usage), just exceeding our goal of 90%. Of all the tests, nearly 60% showed above average growth for the period tested -- exceeding our goal of 50%. For FY11, we are once again targeting 90% demonstrating progress and 50% above average growth for this assessment.

Of course, we use additional means of assessing student achievement, including portfolios, developmental checklists, projects, and work sampling. Students of all levels continue to demonstrate academic success, building or extending their knowledge and understanding. As the state and federal governments review and revise the accountability standards for public school districts, we hope they will consider growth-oriented, student-centered methods of assessment, and support the efforts of schools to innovate, adapt, and develop them.

All our success was accomplished with great support and volunteerism from our parents, board, and community partners. Our doors remain open to the community and we continue to encourage new connections. There is a wide variety of skill, knowledge, and experience in our community and we will continue to tap into this resource to improve our student's learning. In FY11 we had over 60 different volunteers supporting the school, with over 2700 hours contributed. Although parents and board members continue to be our strongest supporters, GES was fortunate to have a large number of community members commit to regular volunteering in such areas as mentoring, tutoring, classroom and administrative support, hot lunch programming, facility development, and fundraising.



GES has connected with a wide variety of community and regional partners to provide a broad spectrum of experiences for our students. What would traditionally be “extra-curricular” activities are coordinated by GES educators and local volunteers to ensure good integration with the curriculum components presented in the classroom. The result is an expanded and enriched curriculum, which engages the students through exciting, fun, and interesting activities, while continuing to address state learning standards.

Volunteering helps bring many of the GES parents and families together, building community as they provide valuable services to the students. As we continue to work to connect our students to one another, opportunities for developing broader connections are always welcome. The intentional social/emotional development we strive for is modeled effectively when the adults in our school community commit themselves to work together for others.



Challenges and Plans

As we continue our work to improve GES, the board has identified the following key concerns:

Foremost, we are concerned about consistently obtaining adequate financial resources to offer a high-quality program while faced with declining school-aged population in the county, uncertainty of state and federal aid, and rising operational costs.

There are several near-term steps we have taken and plans we continue to pursue to address the financial uncertainty. These include focusing and expanding our fundraising efforts and reconfiguring our classes in order to expand the total number of students without sacrificing the small class sizes necessary to achieve our educational goals. In addition, we are exploring alternative methods of financing the shifts in payments from the state.

To support the increased enrollment projected for FY13 and beyond, the board is considering how to expand or modify our facility. There are several important tradeoffs to be considered, as well as both short-term and long-term financial implications. This effort will incorporate input from families, staff, our authorizer, and various community members.

We continue to refine our plan for staff development, board education, and staff licensing for a dedicated K-8 school which incorporates adequate funding for both subject area and school-specific training.

We need to continue refining our framework for student assessment, particularly as a means for communicating student performance clearly to parents. This will include expanding the role of project-based curriculum, technology, and alternative assessments.

We are undertaking a more comprehensive and strategic approach to our technology planning, as the next few years are likely to bring some significant changes to our options.

As we continue to evolve, we must also consider the normal concerns about our ability to sustain the successes we have achieved. In addition, having the staff time to identify, develop, and implement plans supporting our overall strategy is on-going challenge.

Conclusion

Fiscal 2011 saw GES growing and maturing. We continued to refine and renew the ways our mission translates into action, and to expand the opportunities for student learning. As a result, we saw strong student achievement, both academically and socially, improved our staff's ability to align their efforts with our vision, and broadened the school's connections in the community.

This development occurred because we continue to reflect on our commitment to what we believe and what we are doing:

"Growing Hearts and Minds, One Child at a Time".



APPENDIX A – STAFF OVERVIEW for FY11

Chris Bautch: Office Administrator. Chris joined GES this year, bringing several years of experience working in school administration.

Sue Butter: Educator. Sue completed her fourth year as a full-time elementary educator responsible for the K-1 classroom. Sue brings several years' experience in early childhood and non-traditional education, and is currently licensed pre-K-6.

Robyn Ekroot: Paraprofessional. Robyn completed her third year as a full-time special education paraprofessional, working with a variety of students. Robyn has received continuing education related to issues affecting her students and job responsibilities.

Emily Forseth: Paraprofessional. Emily completed her second year as a full-time special education paraprofessional, working with a variety of students. Emily has received continuing education related to issues affecting her students and job responsibilities.

Carolyn Fritz: Paraprofessional. Carolyn joined GES this year as a full-time special education paraprofessional, working with a variety of students. Carolyn has experience teaching in non-school settings, and has received continuing education related to issues affecting her students and job responsibilities.

Mary Haussner: Educator. Mary completed her second year as a full-time elementary educator responsible for the 2-3 classroom. Mary is currently licensed K-6.

Amy Henrikson: Business Manager. Amy expanded her role supporting the accounting and administrative systems at GES this year as a part-time Business Manager. She has also been a GES parent and volunteer for 7 years.

Peter James: Director. Peter completed his sixth year at GES and, in addition to his education and experience in administration, is licensed in Special Ed (K-12 SLD & E/BD).

Cheryl Johnson: Paraprofessional. Cheryl has over 18 years experience as a teacher and paraprofessional, having been trained and licensed in Special Education. No longer licensed, Cheryl brings her experience and expertise to our K-1 classroom.

Susan Miller: Educator. Susan completed her seventh year at GES as a special education teacher. She is licensed for K-12 SLD & E/BD, and 7-12 English/Language Arts.

Anne Mundell: Paraprofessional. Anne joined GES this year as a full-time special education paraprofessional, working with a variety of students. Anne is a licensed educator, and also has teaching experience in non-traditional educational settings. Anne has also received continuing education related to issues affecting her students and job responsibilities.

Rachel Murrin: Paraprofessional. Rachel joined GES this year as a full-time special education paraprofessional, working with a variety of students. Rachel has experience teaching groups in non-school settings, is a licensed substitute teacher, and has received continuing education related to issues affecting her students and job responsibilities.

Carrie Otis: Educator. Carrie completed her second year at GES as a middle school educator leading the 7-8 classroom. Carrie currently holds licenses for 5-8 Science and 9-12 Life Science, and a MN Board of Teaching waiver for teaching an Experimental Program.

Kathryn Nelson-Pedersen: Educator. Kathryn completed her eighth year at GES, this year leading the 5-6 classroom. She is licensed for 7-12 English/Language Arts and has also received MN Board of Teaching waivers for teaching an Experimental Program.

Suzy Schweig: Educator. Suzy completed her eighth year at GES as a full-time elementary educator responsible for the 3-4 classroom. Suzy brings several years' experience of charter school instruction, and is currently licensed K-6.