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Principal of South Portland 'virtual' charter school up for national prize

By [Alex Acquisto](#) on Feb [@AcquistoA](#)

SOUTH PORTLAND — [Maine Connections Academy](#) Principal Karl Francis has been nominated for National Life Group's [LifeChanger of the Year](#) award.

The annual award is given to K-12 educators around the country who make a “significant difference in the lives of students by exemplifying excellence, positivity and leadership,” according to a Feb. 12 press release from the academy.

Nearly 250 teachers and faculty were nominated this year across the country. Out of those nominations, 15 winners will be selected for the award. Ten of those will receive a \$1,500 personal cash prize and \$1,500 for their school; four will receive a \$2,500 personal cash prize and \$2,500 for their school, and the National Grand Prize Winner will receive a \$5,000 personal cash prize and \$5,000 for their school.

The academy's teachers and governing board nominated Francis for the award. Winners will be announced in the spring.

The nomination is “incredible and humbling,” Francis, 47, said Tuesday morning. “I couldn't believe it when I heard it. It is truly, truly appreciated.”

Those who wish to endorse Francis for the award by leaving a comment on his nomination page can do so at [lifechangeroftheyearnominees.com/karl-francis/](http://lifechangeroftheyearnominees.com/karl-francis/).

Maine Connections Academy is the state's first virtual public charter school. It serves nearly 400 students in grades 7-12 across the state, and is based at 75 John Roberts Road.

Francis, of Cape Elizabeth, accepted the position of principal just months before the academy opened in September 2014. Previously he was a counselor at Westbrook High School for nine years, where he also played various administrative roles, including serving as the Response to Intervention coordinator.

“I spent most of my time in a traditional setting creating non-traditional plans,” Francis said.

When he saw the ad for the Maine Connections job before applying in 2014, he was in the process of designing his own virtual school.

“(Maine Connections) was a perfect match,” Francis said.

According to the school's announcement, Francis quickly worked to set up an office, enroll 290 students "and hire and train staff who not only work well together, but who truly care for students on an individual basis."

About a year later, in [August 2015](#), one month before the start of its second year, the academy had added 100 new students, effectively maxing out its capacity, and added five faculty members.

Next year the academy anticipates enrolling at least 420 students. Francis said a second campus closer to Bangor could be possible.

MCA also now offers students the opportunity for dual enrollment at the University of Maine at Fort Kent.

The purpose of offering a virtual way of attending school is not to compensate for deficiencies in the traditional school setting, Francis said Tuesday.

The key is giving students a choice, he said. Many students function very well in traditional settings, while others have barriers, whether it's for health reasons, anxiety, the schedule itself, or the fact that some students have passions that require time and energy outside of the school day.

"I feel very strongly about our brick-and-mortar schools; they're top-notch in traditional public settings," Francis said in August. "But for some students, it just doesn't work. They needed a non-traditional option."

"Under Francis' leadership, MCA has become an environment of collaboration and student-centered learning," state Sen. Amy Volk, R-Scarborough, a member of the academy's governing board, in the press release.

"Over the course of any given day, he can be seen ... writing a personal congratulatory note for a student's academic perseverance, speaking to a parent about a student's unique academic needs, and continuing his efforts to increase the school's enrollment cap," Volk said.

Even just being nominated "speaks volumes to how far we've come as a school," Francis said. "I'm really, really happy that they're finding our experiences to be valuable."

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