**Maine Connections Academy**

**Third Party Evaluation**

**2018-2019 School Year**

May 2019

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**Introduction**

The MCA evaluation for school year 2018-2019 focuses first on students and parents, because a key idea for the creation of the *Maine Connections Academy* was that it should provide an opportunity for students for whom their regular public school was not working satisfactorily. The evaluation then focuses on the reflections of a sample of the MCA teachers.

The earlier evaluation report from school year 2016-2017 concluded with the following:

The data from the interviews that were conducted during the 2016-2017 school year yield several conclusions.

* The experience for students at MCA is a good one. Of the students interviewed, 100% feel the caring and support of their teachers.
* Likewise, parents are pleased with the support that the MCA teachers are providing for their children.
* The teachers find the working environment at MCA to be collegial and mutually supporting, allowing them to focus on developing positive and supportive relationships with their students.
* Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the salary and benefits package that MCA provides for them.

The present report provides data that describes the degree to which students and parents continue to report that their relationship with MCA is a positive one, and it also provides data with regard to teachers’ reflections on being a member of the MCA faculty.

**Methodology**

The evaluation employs a Qualitative Research design\*. Qualitative research and evaluation designs support a detailed description of a program or organization, and support a robust analysis of *how* the program or organization functions and how, and to what degree, it achieves its desired outcomes.

\*For an excellent overview of Qualitative Research and how to understand the validity of the findings from a program evaluation that employs qualitative research designs, please see the article by Joseph Maxwell of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The article’s explanations of *Descriptive Validity* and *Interpretive Validity* are particularly relevant for this MCA evaluation.

*Joseph A. Maxwell*

*Harvard Graduate School of Education*

*Understanding and Validity in Qualitative Research*

*Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 62, No. 3, fall 1992*

*Student sampling protocol*

Dr. Nave selected the students to interview using a stratified random sampling process as follows. MCA selected ten students at random for each grade level in the school, five males and five females. Once these selections were made, MCA examined the entire list to see if the list included at least one special education student and at least one student who was not doing well academically. When these criteria were met, the list was sent to Dr. Nave, identifying students by first and last initials only (and not identifying the students who may have been special education students or who were not doing well). Dr. Nave then used a table of random numbers to select one male and one female student from each grade level to invite to participate in a phone conversation about their MCA experience. Additional students were identified in a similar manner as back-ups in the event that any of the originally selected students declined to participate or did not respond to repeated email invitations.

Dr. Nave sent MCA the initials of the students selected, and MCA emailed the contact information for each of the students and their parents. Dr. Nave then sent each student and family an email explaining the evaluation, providing a brief background of his own extensive experience in education, and inviting the parent(s) and the student to select a time that would be convenient to have a phone conversation about their MCA experience. During the interview, students and parents shared their reflections about their experience with MCA, and in addition responded to Dr. Nave’s question about their schooling experience prior to enrolling in MCA. In all Dr. Nave interviewed students and parents from eleven families. These interviews were conducted between May 16 and May 31.

*Teacher interviews*

Dr. Nave spent a day at the MCA offices in South Portland, interviewing eleven teachers in person. Subsequently he arranged phone interviews with the rest of the teachers who were not interviewed during the in-person visit. These interviews were also done between May 16 and May 31. In total, all twenty-three MCA staff members were interviewed.

**Findings**

The findings are presented in two sections, beginning with the findings from the student and parent interviews, followed by the findings from the teacher interviews.

*Findings from the Student Interviews*

Dr. Nave designed the interview protocol for this year’s report to maximize the spontaneity of each student as she or he shared their thoughts about their experience as an MCA student. Specifically, the interview did not begin with a list of pre-determined questions, which typically limit the degree to which an interview subject talks about what is most salient to them about the context that’s the focus of the interview. During each interview Dr. Nave scripted the conversations, and he asked follow up questions for clarification if any of the student comments seemed incomplete, or if they raised issues that could further describe the student’s experience at MCA.

Each interview began with the open-ended question, “Tell me about your experience at MCA.” After the students seemed to exhaust their thoughts in response to this invitation, Dr. Nave asked what they liked most about their experience. The next question was, “Are there any ways that MCA could improve so it would be a better experience for you?” This question was typically followed by a long pause. The final question for each student was this: “What was your schooling experience like before you enrolled in MCA?” This question was never followed by a pause as each student launched into her or his reasons for enrolling.

The table below displays the demographic information about the eleven students who shared their comments about their MCA experience this year.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Student families interviewed for the MCA report, 2019** | | |
| Student grade level | Student gender | N= |
| Seven | Female | 2 |
| Seven | Male | 1 |
| Eight | Female | 1 |
| Eight | Male | 1 |
| Nine | Female | 1 |
| Nine | Male | 0 |
| Ten | Female | 2 |
| Ten | Male | 1 |
| Eleven | Female | 1 |
| Eleven | Male | 1 |
| Total | | 11 |

Reasons for enrolling in MCA

Students did not hesitate to share their reasons for enrolling in MCA. The table below summarizes their responses.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Reasons That Students Provided to Initiate their Enrollment in MCA** | | |
| **Issue at previous school** | \*N= | %= |
| Special education student, student perceived incomplete implementation | 5 | 45% |
| Anxiety issues, extremely shy | 4 | 36% |
| Perceived lack of teacher support | 4 | 36% |
| Bullying | 3 | 27% |
| Schedule of individual sport elite training | 1 | 9% |
| \*Total of eleven students interviewed; some students identified more than one issue |  |  |

Note that several of the students identified more than one issue that led to their family’s decision to enroll them in MCA.

Nearly half of the students interviewed identified themselves as having an IEP or being on a 504 plan, and each of these that did so expressed their sense that their IEP or their 504 plan was not being fully implemented.

More than a third of the students described themselves as being extremely shy, or being so anxious about going to school that they would become physically ill, and some of them described experiencing both of these issues.

More than a third of the students did not feel that they were receiving sufficient teacher support or attention to be able to learn in the context of their large classes.

Three students reported being bullied, and one of these students described the online bullying becoming much worse after the principal attempted to put an end to it.

Life has become so much easier for me. I was bullied a lot in the brick and mortar school.

Several students who have enrolled in MCA since its founding have done so to support their elite training regimen for their particular individual sport. This year’s random sampling procedure yielded one of these students to be interviewed.

Student descriptions of their MCA experience

When the students described their experience at MCA, they talked about the overall experience and they described the teachers in particular, describing the teacher characteristics that they appreciated. The table below summarizes these comments.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Themes from the MCA Student Interviews, 2019** | | |
| Theme | \*N= | % |
| *Regarding the School as a Whole* |  |  |
| I like the flexibility and that I can work at my own pace, and move ahead if I want. | 6 | 55% |
| I like the easy access to the curriculum from home. | 4 | 36% |
| I like the way the courses are structured. | 1 | 9% |
|  |  |  |
| *Regarding the Teachers* |  |  |
| The teachers are supportive. | 5 | 45% |
| The teachers are nice; they care. | 4 | 36% |
| I'm shy in general, so the friendly teachers help a lot. | 2 | 18% |
| The teachers are good about one on one. | 2 | 18% |
| The teachers are good at asking questions. | 1 | 9% |
| *\*Number of students who mentioned this topic during interview.* |  |  |

Student comments about the MCA experience in general

More than half of the students expressed appreciation for the flexibility of the MCA structure.

Some liked the fact that they could take a longer time with assignments if they needed to, and others were pleased that they could move ahead in the curriculum without being held back because the teacher had to keep the whole class together, as had been the case in their previous school.

I like the easy access to the curriculum. If I get done with an assignment early I can move on to the next lesson on my own.

I like going at my own pace, I can work ahead and not have to worry about other kids holding me back. It’s easier to stay motivated when I’m working for myself.

About a third of the students described their satisfaction that they could work on their courses from home, without having to travel to the local school, which they found to be an unsatisfactory experience.

I like this because it’s flexible and I can do it from home. The teachers are nice, and they are supportive.

I like that I can work from home, and I like the flexibility. I can decide what lessons I want to work on except for the live lessons when I do when they’re scheduled.

One student described appreciation for the logic and structure of the classes.

Student comments about the MCA teachers

Nearly half of the students described the teachers as being personally supportive, and more than a third described them as caring. The shy students noted that the friendly nature of the teachers helped them to be less shy in their interactions with these teachers.

In regular school I didn’t feel like the teachers cared. Here I know they [the MCA teachers] care. They really help with my IEP.

The teachers are so friendly and nice and supportive. I can tell that they’re happy to be doing what they are doing.

Two students specifically noted how helpful the teachers were in their individual conversations with them, and one added that the way the teachers used questions to support their learning was especially helpful.

The teachers here are different than the public school. They’re good about one on one, they reach out and are good at asking questions. It’s easier for me because I’m shy in general.

*Findings from the Parent Interviews*

The parents from the eleven families interviewed included seven moms and four families where both mom and dad participated in the interview. In addition, three of the moms are current or former teachers in regular public brick and mortar schools.

Like the student interviews, the parent interviews were open-ended, beginning with the invitation for the parents to describe their experience with MCA, followed by an invitation to suggest improvements, and finally the question about what the experience was like in the former school.

Not surprisingly, the parents were more expansive in their responses than were the students, as is seen in the table below summarizing the themes from the parent interviews.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Themes from the Parent Interviews** | | |
| Theme | \*N= | % |
| *Regarding the School as a Whole* |  |  |
| We like it a lot. | 4 | 36% |
| S/he is not bullied any more. | 3 | 27% |
| It's the best thing I ever did for my son. | 1 | 9% |
| MCA is totally student-centered. | 1 | 9% |
| The flexibility helps him a lot. | 1 | 9% |
|  |  |  |
| *Regarding the Former School* |  |  |
| Used to be absent a lot because of extreme anxiety. | 3 | 27% |
| The large classes in the former school were extremely distracting. | 3 | 27% |
| The teachers did not even try to follow the IEP. | 2 | 18% |
| His former teachers did not want to communicate with us. | 1 | 9% |
| The teachers could not give enough support because of large classes. | 1 | 9% |
|  |  |  |
| *Regarding the Teachers* |  |  |
| The teacher professionalism and communication are extraordinary. | 5 | 45% |
| The teachers provide all the individual help that's necessary. | 4 | 36% |
| The teachers are so supportive. | 4 | 36% |
| The teachers create personal relationships with the students. | 3 | 27% |
| The teachers work hard to get late enrollees caught up. | 2 | 18% |
| The teachers are extremely understanding. | 2 | 18% |
| The teachers care. | 2 | 18% |
| The teachers are very encouraging. | 1 | 9% |
| The teachers balance the opportunity to learn agency, to self-motivate. | 1 | 9% |
|  |  |  |
| *Other* |  |  |
| Older siblings, MCA graduates, are doing well at USM, UMO. | 2 | 18% |
| Our son is more confident than ever before, even self-advocating. | 1 | 9% |
| *\*Number of parents who mentioned this topic during interview.* |  |  |

The school as a whole

The parents were pleased with their decision to enroll their children in MCA.

We really like it a lot. It took the first six months to adapt because he has an IEP, but the support was helpful.

We’re very satisfied.

It’s the best move I’ve ever made.

Among the reasons that the parents are happy with their decision is the fact that their children are no longer subject to bullying.

He’s not bullied any more.

Reasons for leaving the former school

The students were unable to attend because of extreme anxiety, sometimes to the point of physical illness.

He was not attending school because the stress and anxiety made him sick a lot.

The large classes in the former school proved to be too distracting for the student.

The noise in the classroom was so distracting.

Parents found the teachers in the former school did not seem cooperative.

My son has special needs and the teachers were not even trying to follow the IEP

I had to tip toe around the teachers not to offend them and make matters worse.

The Teachers at MCA

The parents were especially expansive in their comments of appreciation for the MCA teachers.

The level of professionalism and communication on the part of the teachers is extraordinary.

They have lots of energy and they are so understanding.

The teachers are always there for individual help as necessary.

They give all the individual help that my son needs.

These teachers have the time to give him the extra help he needs that he couldn’t get in the regular school.

The teachers are totally supportive.

The teachers are so supportive and so accommodating.

We love the support the teachers give her.

The teachers develop personal relationships with the students.

Here at MCA the teachers care. They work to get to know him. They ask him about his hobbies.

Late enrollees have all the help they need to get caught up.

She was accepted in October, and the teachers worked hard to help her catch up from the beginning of the year curriculum requirements – and they did it.

*Findings from the Teacher Interviews*

Twenty-three MCA staff members were interviewed, including the Dean of Students and the Director of Special Education. The principal was interviewed as well. Dr. Nave used a similar open-ended interview protocol to that used for the students and their parents. The interview opened by asking the teachers how MCA is working for them and for their students. This protocol allowed the teachers to begin their responses with whatever was most salient to them with regard to their MCA experience and that of their students this year.

The table below summarizes the topics.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Topics discussed by MCA faculty in the context of free-response interviews** | | |
| **Topic** | **\*N=** | **%=** |
| We build relationships with our students and their families | 14 | 61% |
| The culture at MCA is one of teamwork and mutual support | 12 | 52% |
| We work hard to bring our truants into active engagement with us | 10 | 43% |
| The curriculum is more rounded, robust, and challenging than my former school | 9 | 39% |
| The curriculum supports my creativity to keep my students engaged | 9 | 39% |
| I have broad flexibility in how I work with students | 7 | 30% |
| I have access to a wealth of data to support my work with students (e.g. RTI, NWEA) | 6 | 26% |
| Our data shows that the Math Interventionist initiative is working for students | 6 | 26% |
| Our students need this MCA option for a number of reasons | 5 | 22% |
| Our weekly professional development time is valuable and supportive | 5 | 22% |
| Our three academic summits were valuable for the students | 5 | 22% |
| Our professional learning community structure supports continuous improvement | 4 | 17% |
| Communication is occasionally incomplete | 4 | 17% |
| We work hard to help all our students succeed no matter where they start with us | 4 | 17% |
| The new family support and attendance coordinator next year will be a big help | 2 | 9% |
| Many students enroll because their school has given up on them | 1 | 4% |
| We listen to what our students and parents are telling us | 1 | 4% |
| We had improved success with our state testing protocols this year | 1 | 4% |
| The overall staff structure is better now | 1 | 4% |
| Next year we'll have a new schedule for in-office time | 1 | 4% |
| \*Twenty-Three staff members were interviewed |  |  |

More than half the teachers commented about relationships – building relationships with students (61%), and the culture of positive relationships among the staff (52%).

I love MCA. I teach the same kinds of at risk students that I supported in my old school. It’s all about building relationships with the students so they know they can trust you, and when they do, they work hard.

It’s a positive culture here. There’s a lot of teamwork. We work hard for to support each other with the students.

The teachers work hard to keep their students engaged, and when their individual efforts with multiple phone calls and webmails to students and parents fail to succeed in getting them re-engaged, the Dean of Students joins the effort, reminding the parents and the students of the expectations and the commitment they made when enrolling at MCA. These efforts have reduced MCA’s truancy rate this year.

We work hard to keep out students engaged so they can succeed.

When we can’t reach a student after several attempts, [the Dean] steps in to reach the student and parents and reminds them of their commitment.

With regard to the curriculum and the External Service Provider (ESP), the teachers report that the curriculum is better than what they were working with at their former schools, and that they have sufficient flexibility to make adjustments to meet the needs of their students and to support their own instructional creativity.

The curriculum here is more challenging than what I was using at my old school.

This curriculum is more rigorous than the one I was using, especially in math.

It’s a tough curriculum.

Teachers appreciate the access to a wide range of data from the ESP and from other sources (the NWEA and their own RTI data) that is immediately relevant in supporting their ability to individualize their work with every one of their students.

There was a lot of data at my old school, but it was not easy to access in a timely way so that I could use it meet my students’ individual needs. With the system here I have instant access to date to work with every student just where they need support.

The data this year shows that our work in the math department with our interventionist is showing results.

*School-wide Initiatives*

This 2018-2019 school year featured the initiation of two new faculty positions, a math interventionist and a reading interventionist. Both initiatives are a response to data showing that too few students were succeeding academically in these two subjects.

The principal describes the roles of the interventionists this year as ‘fluid,’ which is to say that they and the teachers in the respective departments, math and English, spent the year exploring various ways to collaborate in the service of improving student learning. For example, sometimes the math interventionist worked with students individually one-on-one, and sometimes she joined a live lesson for the first half hour, and then worked with subgroups of students in the breakout rooms during the second half hour of the live lesson. Sometimes she worked with the math teachers to share strategies for addressing specific student challenges in whatever math topic a student was stuck on.

After this pilot year with the interventionists on board and what they all learned from the experience, it’s been decided that next year the focus will be more on having the interventionists in a role of coaching and professional development for the math and reading teachers, while still helping out with live lessons and individual students, but to a lesser degree that was this case this year.

The data show evidence that the work of the interventionists yielded positive outcomes. For example, in math the mid-year retesting on the MWEA revealed that students beat their project growth by 5%, and on the SAT the percentage of students meeting the math standards increased by eight percentage points, moving from 17% of students meeting the standards last year to 25% of the students meeting the standards this year. The MCA staff and leadership find these data quite encouraging.

Another new staff position will be implemented during the next school year, that of attendance coordinator. This staff member will take over the intensive commitment of keeping chronically absent students in the loop and engaged, and in addition, she will conduct home visits when phone or webmail contact is not successful. MCA understands that some students who enroll come to the school with a poor attendance record in the past, which suggests that for some students, intensive outreach and relationship building is required to re-engage the student and the family in their education. The attendance coordinator will focus on this relationship building with these families.

Finally, MCA is moving into a new space for the 2019-2020 school year. The new headquarters moves away from the open concept that felt more like a call center with its maze of cubicles, and instead will have more quiet rooms for live lessons, faculty department offices, and a space that has generated considerable excitement in MCA-land, a bona fide science lab.

The vision for the science lab includes the science teacher having the capacity to demonstrate science phenomena during live lessons that are simply not possible using simple materials that might be available in the home setting. It’s also envisioned that on occasion students who live nearby (in the vicinity of Scarborough) might have the opportunity to be in the lab to conduct their own science activities under the direction of the teacher.

One very important set of lessons that students will learn, both the students viewing the streaming video of the live lessons, and those who may be visiting the lab in person, will be lessons about safety. The new science teacher comes to MCA with a long history of conducting HAZMAT training in the field to a range of first responders, both in Maine and nationally, including training in safety regarding radiologic materials, and so is acutely attuned to all the issues of safety that, in the experience of this evaluator, a science teacher for 25 years, are not always considered in middle school and high school science classrooms.

*A final word – what improvements did students, parents, and teachers suggest?*

As noted in the student findings section earlier, the students’ response to the question about how MCA could improve, was a long silence, and then something to the effect of “nothing, they’re doing just what I need”.

The parents were similarly mute, except for one parent who suggested that she sometimes cannot get through to MCA to get a live person on the general office line, and when she leaves a message the response is occasionally quite delayed. She suggested that it might be necessary to hire a second person to attend to the general office line, because she noted that she usually does not call unless it’s about a matter that carries some urgency for her.

The teacher suggestions for improvement all focused on some aspect of communication. Those who made these comments noted that they did feel as if they were always heard, but that sometimes they did not know what the disposition was with regard to their comment or suggestion. Some noted a bit of unevenness in the equity of timing when decisions or other information items made their way to various subgroups of the staff.

The configuration of the Wednesday schedule for next year for staff meetings, department meetings, and professional development, has the potential to address these concerns. Indeed, these concerns provided one of the reasons for the revised Wednesday format.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The Maine Connections Academy continues to provide learning support for students whose experience in their former schools was not working. The students and parents who participated in the conversations with the evaluator appreciate what the MCA experience is doing to support their learning.

MCA is addressing the issue of inadequate student achievement in math and reading by adding the two interventionists to the staff, and by using what they learned during this pilot year to modify how they will conduct the intervention work during next school year.

In addition, MCA is addressing the challenge of student truancy through the creation of the attendance coordinator, who will extend her outreach to families to include home visits in an effort to establish supportive relationships with the families, and to ascertain whether additional social supports might help the student to more fully engage in the learning experience that MCA offers.

The science lab at the new MCA facility is an exciting idea, and it has the potential to be a model for other Connections schools across the country.

*Recommendations*

The MCA leadership team should closely monitor how the revamped Wednesday in-office meeting day with its several purposes – department meetings, professional development, and staff meeting – successfully addresses the communication concerned expressed during some of the interviews with staff.

The leadership team and the Board members should also note that in-house surveys such as those conducted this year do not always yield reliable data. With a small staff such as exists at MCA, it is not unusual for survey responses to be less than fully candid because it’s too easy to identify individuals who may not always feel the same way that the majority feels. If individuals do not feel 100% safe in sharing their truths, the prudent response to surveys like these is to conform for the time being. It’s therefore very important for the entire MCA community – teachers, specialists, leadership team, and Board members – to be sensitive to this possibility and to work to maximize transparency, mutual support, and mutual trust. This is the necessary foundation for providing the best possible experiences for the students and their families that MCA is committed to serving.