**Maine Connections Academy**

**Third Party Evaluation**

**2016-2017 School Year**

May 2018

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*This is the first job you’ve had that you don’t come home complaining.*

Husband of MCA teacher

**Preface**

This third party evaluation for school year 2016-2017 is exceedingly late, which the evaluator sincerely regrets and humbly apologizes. As the analysis of the evaluation interviews conducted near the end of the 2016-2017 school year began in June 2017, the evaluator’s wife began a new round of chemotherapy with weekly all-day infusions. The result was that the evaluator’s role evolved from “dutiful husband helping out around the house” while not engaged in evaluation tasks with his several projects, to, in essence, operating a one-bed assisted living facility. The treatments continue, with additional related treatments added in December, and to which a new set of treatments have just been added in May, which will also continue.

This reallocation of time commitments substantially slowed the progress across all evaluation projects, with observations of project events taking precedence. The evaluator is grateful for the continued support and trust of the Board of Directors of Maine Connections Academy.

**Introduction**

The report begins where the first evaluation report, that of school year 2015-2016, ended: that is, with that report’s conclusions and recommendations. The framework for this present report is therefore, in part, to address the degree to which Maine Connections Academy (hereafter MCA) continued to function well during school year 2016-2017, and to explore how the MCA Board addressed the three recommendations from the initial evaluation report.

Here is the *Conclusions and Recommendations* section from the first report:

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

In general Maine Connections Academy is functioning well. Teachers are caring and dedicated and unwilling to allow any student to fail. The potential for the multiple authorities that are connected with the school to hinder a smooth running set of systems has not materialized, and many of the teachers and parents attribute this outcome to Doug Bourget’s leadership.

One issue that the school acknowledges and is working to address is the issue of students whose attendance is not good and therefore whose academic progress is not satisfactory. Both teachers and the parents of these students note that the teachers don’t give up and that they keep trying to reach out and encourage and support the students, but that MCA is not always successful with some of these students. One line of conversation the school is having is about the enrollment process. How can that process be more explicit and specific about the responsibilities and commitments necessary on the part of parents and students in order to make enrollment in MCA a successful experience? On the other hand, MCA is a public school and is therefore cannot turn away families who wish to enroll.

This evaluation did not explore the question of whether this is a bigger issue with MCA in terms of the percentage of students who are frequently absent than it is with regular public schools. In one way this may not be an immediately relevant question, because as noted above, MCA is consistently working hard to support each student’s success, especially those for whom keeping up with their coursework is a challenge.

The major issue that the evaluation data confirmed is that of teacher compensation and benefits. The initial discussion with the Board acknowledged this as an issue, and the Board supported the evaluation question that explored this issue in depth (Question 2 and sub-questions). This stance on the part of the Board would seem to signal a commitment to address the issue head-on, as it were.

The evaluator encourages the Board to do so, with these recommendations.

1. The teachers perceive that the requirement that the work only from the office is a mandate from the Charter School Commission. The teachers’ suggestions supporting an option of working outside the office a day or two a week seem, to the teachers, quite reasonable and easy to implement, and it’s clear from the Fort Kent teacher that off-site residence is not a detriment to the students. I would recommend that the Board address this internally, and then with the Charter Commission. The teachers consistently expressed the fact, based on their research, that they are at a substantial disadvantage in terms of salary and benefits when compared with teachers in the surrounding school districts, and this option would be a modest step to acknowledge their commitment to MCA and its students.

2. The evaluation data strongly supports a recommendation to explore how to bring the teachers’ salaries and benefits more in line with other public schools in the area. The teachers’ responses noted in the body of the report provide ample rationale for attending to this recommendation. These teachers compare favorably with educators in other contexts that this evaluator has observed in terms of their commitment to their work with students, and the MCA teachers are doing so at a financial disadvantage when compared with their colleagues in the surrounding school districts. It’s not surprising that only 5 of the original 12 staff members from just three years ago have stayed on, when “the grass is far greener” elsewhere.

3. The Board should begin planning to add an assistant principal to the staff before burnout catches up with Doug Bourget, the current principal.

The findings section below will note how the 2016-2017 data illustrate MCA’s attention to these recommendations.

**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*

The evaluator conducted in-depth interviews with MCA teachers, administrators, Board members, and with a sample of students and their parents (selected randomly as described below).

*The Student and Parent Sample*

The evaluator asked MCA principal, Doug Bourget, to create a list of ten students from each grade level of students enrolled in MCA. For each grade level, five of the students were to be male and five female. For each group of five male or five female students, one was to be a student who was struggling and another was to be a student who was receiving special education support. The students were listed by grade level and by gender using their initials, but the struggling students and special education students were not identified in any way. The evaluator used a table of random numbers to select one of each group of five students, resulting in a sample of twelve students, one male and one female at each grade level. The evaluator sent principal Doug Bourget the initials of the students selected, asking him to first check to see if at least one struggling student and one special education student was included in the sample of twelve students. After that condition was verified, Doug sent the contact information for the parents, and the evaluator sent email invitations to each parent to schedule an interview with the parent and the student. A few of the students and their parents were interviewed at the annual MCA picnic/field day at the YMCA camp in Winthrop, just a few miles from the evaluator’s home. In all, the evaluator was able to interview ten parents and eleven students.

*Other Interviews*

Via emails the evaluator arranged to interview the teachers, principal, administrative assistant, special education director, and Board members. Some of these interviews were conducted in person at the school in South Portland, and some were conducted by phone. The evaluator typed contemporaneous notes during all interviews, most nearly verbatim.

*Data Analysis*

All interview notes were analyzed using an inductive coding process, which identifies emerging themes that are common across the interviews, as noted in the several tables in the *Findings* section below. In addition, the qualitative coding identifies concerns that are unique to any particular interviewee.

The table below displays the interviews conducted for this evaluation.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Interviews Conducted for MCA Evaluation, 2016-2017 School Year (N=46) | |
| Interviewee | N= |
| Students | 11 |
| Parents | 10 |
| Teachers | 14 |
| Principal | 1 |
| Administrative Assistant | 1 |
| Special Education Director | 1 |
| Board members | 5 |

**Findings**

The report presents the findings in three sections: student and parent commentary on the MCA experience; teacher commentary on teaching at MCA; Board and other personnel commentary.

*Student and Parent Commentary on their MCA experience*

The report describes the data from interviews with students and parents in three categories: reasons for enrolling in MCA; students’ descriptions of their MCA experience; and parents’ descriptions of the MCA experience.

Reasons for enrolling students in MCA

The table below summarizes the reasons that students and parents shared during their interviews for enrolling in the Maine Connections Academy.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Reasons for Enrolling in MCA, from Parents and Students | |
| Reasons | N= |
| Anxiety and health issues | 4 |
| Poor teacher quality in the former school | 3 |
| The special education support was poor | 2 |
| Too much bullying | 2 |
| School not working in general | 2 |
| It was a bad peer group of kids | 1 |
| Home schooled in elementary grades | 1 |

Parents of four of the students cited concerns about their children’s physical or emotional health that their local school did not seem to understand, and that did not offer to accommodate in any meaningful way.

He was missing a lot of school because of anxiety and migraines.

The school just did not understand health issues.

She had a lot of anxiety about going to school.

The parents were not satisfied with the lack of action by the local school in addressing their concerns about their children’s health issues. As a result, these parents enrolled their children in MCA. The parents noted during the interview that the MCA staff listened to their concerns, made accommodations as necessary, and maintain close contact with the parents to assure that their children are responding well to the support the teachers are providing.

Three parents described their frustration with the local school when they tried to engage the teachers in a cooperative parent-teacher team kind of relationship to better support their children’s learning. The parents were disappointed with the teachers’ responses to their overtures, sensing what they described as a poor attitude, or as not caring, or both.

The poor attitude of the teachers at the local school was so obvious.

The teachers at the school didn’t care.

These parents describe that the MCA teachers care deeply and genuinely about their children, and that the teachers are always upbeat and positive and completely supportive of their children’s learning and general well-being.

Two parents described their frustration with the special education staff at the school, sharing a lack of consistent communication or a disregard for their input.

The support for my special ed son was not good.

Two parents, and their children, said that there was just too much bullying at the school, and that the school did not address the issue even after the parents shared their concerns.

I pulled him out because there’s too much bullying in the middle school.

These two students were in different schools, one of which was cited for its bullying issues during a student interview for last school year’s MCA evaluation report. Both parents and their children told the evaluator that they were very happy with MCA and its teachers, and that the culture among teachers and students is very positive and supportive.

Two parents described the local school as just not working for their children, and one went on to describe daily contact with the school to try to fix the situation, and she shared her extreme frustration when her concerns were totally discounted and dismissed.

The traditional school just was not working.

I fought with the school on a daily basis and got nowhere.

One parent described his discomfort with the peer group that his child was immersed in.

The kids were awful at the school.

The final reason a mother gave for selecting MCA was because she had homeschooled her daughter through sixth grade and was not confident that she had the skills to continue homeschooling through middle school and high school. She expressed complete satisfaction with how well her daughter is doing at MCA.

Student Commentary on the MCA Experience

The table below summarizes the comments that the students shared about their experience at MCA.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Students' Comments about their MCA Experience, 2016-2017 School Year (N=11 students interviewed) | |
| Student Comment | N= |
| The teachers care | 11 |
| The teachers are supportive | 11 |
| The teachers have time for me | 9 |
| The school is flexible | 8 |

The teachers care. All eleven, 100% of the students interviewed, said that they knew that the MCA teachers cared about them.

These teachers care and are always there for me.

The teachers work with you well.

These teachers are more personal than the teachers in public school.

The teachers like to work with us.

The teachers are supportive. Likewise, all eleven, 100% of the students interviewed, described ways in which they felt strong support from the teachers.

I never get no for an answer when I ask for help.

If in have a question they get right back to me.

The teachers are always reaching out to me.

“The teachers have time for me.” Whereas a common student comment about the teachers in their former school was that the teachers did not have time for them, nine, (82%), of the students interviewed, commented that their MCA teachers always had time to help them and respond to their questions and concerns.

The MCA teachers have time to focus on me.

When I send a webmail I get an answer in just a few minutes.

The teachers are always available.

I have more time with these teachers than any teachers in my other school.

The school is flexible. Eight of the students, 73% of those interviewed, described various ways in which the flexibility of the MCA approach was an important reason that they were glad they were MCA students.

I have the ability to get my work done from my own house.

This is way more convenient than the public school was.

I love it that I can take some classes that I want.

Parent Commentary on the MCA Experience

The table below summarizes the variety of reasons parents shared about why they were glad their children were enrolled in MCA.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Parents' comments about their child's experience at MCA, 2016-2017 (10 parents interviewed) | |
| Parents' Comment | N= |
| The teachers are supportive | 8 |
| The teachers are flexible | 5 |
| The teachers are caring | 4 |
| The communication from the teachers is good | 3 |
| It's a good curriculum | 3 |
| The special education services are excellent | 3 |
| The teachers develop good relationships | 2 |

The teachers are supportive. Eight parents, 80% of those interviewed, appreciated how supportive the teachers were for their children.

The teacher makes sure he gets it. She doesn’t let him move on without learning the material.

The teachers are always right there spending the extra time [my son] needs.

The teachers stay right with her when she’s struggling with something.

The teachers are flexible. Five parents, 50% of those interviewed, were pleased with the flexibility MCA provided for them and their children.

The teachers work with kids of all skill levels.

The teachers let the kids begin with their strong suit.

The school went with us to Florida.

The teachers are caring. Four parents, 40% of those interviewed, were impressed with the ways they could see that the MCA teachers cared about their children.

The teachers really care and they want all their kids to succeed.

The teachers are all energetic and caring.

I can hear and feel the caring when they reach out to check in about [my daughter].

The communication from the teachers is good. Three parents, 30% of those interviewed, mentioned specifically how much they appreciated the frequent check-in’s by the MCA teachers. These parents contrasted this outreach with the lack of communication from the teachers in the former school, and in a couple of cases, the near impossibility of reaching the teachers.

The teachers are very responsive. They get right back to me that day or the next day when I have a question about [my daughter].

The teachers take the time to reach out and check in.

Three parents (30%) expressed appreciation for the MCA curriculum.

Three (30%) were deeply appreciative of the special education services that MCA provided, noting how starkly this contrasted with their experience in their former school.

Finally, two parents (20%) noted how surprising it was that the teachers were able to develop such good relationships with their children without seeing them face-to-face.

In sum, data from MCA parents and students indicates that the first conclusion from last year’s report, “Teachers are caring and dedicated and unwilling to allow any student to fail,” continues to be the case.

*Teacher Commentary on Working at MCA*

The table below summarizes themes that emerged from the teachers’ interviews.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| MCA Teachers' Comments and Concerns, School Year 2016-2017 (N=14 teachers interviewed) | | |
| Teacher Comment |  |  |
| *Positive Aspects of Working at MCA* | N= | % |
| The professional culture at MCA is a very positive one | 11 | 79% |
| We are very collaborative as a staff | 10 | 71% |
| I am able to build positive relationships with my students | 9 | 64% |
| Teachers are inventive in ways to work with students | 7 | 50% |
| The curriculum is flexible enough for me to be fully student-centered | 6 | 43% |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| *Challenges of Working at MCA* | N= | % |
| The pay is not commensurate with teachers' skills and experience | 13 | 93% |
| It would be appreciated if I could work from home a day a week or more | 12 | 86% |
| Health insurance not satisfactory | 10 | 71% |
| Retirement benefit inadequate | 5 | 36% |
| Questions about other benefits that may be available | 3 | 21% |
| Questions about expectations, evaluation data source, relevancy of metrics | 2 | 14% |
| Requests from Connections seem irrelevant and are time wasters | 1 | 7% |

*Positive Aspects of Working at MCA*

The professional culture at MCA is a very positive one. (79%)

This is a positive place to work, There’s no gossip here.

It’s great culture. We created this.

We have good working relationships. It’s a really positive culture here.

There’s a high degree of collegiality here. It’s nice to be able to focus on the kids.

Workplace culture at a school is an important factor in supporting teachers’ focus on doing what’s best for their students. All but three of the teachers spontaneously commented on the positive culture among the teaching staff at MCA.

We are very collaborative as a staff. (71%)

We are a cohesive faculty that support one another. We are all willing to work with each other. My husband said to me last night that this is the first job you’ve had that you don’t come home complaining. We are hugely collaborative here. We know what’s going on throughout the school. In a regular school such collaborating does not happen.

It’s the most collaborative place I’ve ever worked. We all want the best for kids so we work together.

I have never have experienced such a collaborative working group and so dedicated to students.

I’m very happy here. I enjoy my colleagues. We work well together. There’s no feeling of isolation.

One way the positive collegial culture at MCA plays out is in the collaboration among the staff, collaboration that operationalizes the commitment that all the students are **all** **their** students – there’s no such thing as *my students and your students*.

I am able to build positive relationships with my students. (64%)

It’s amazing what you can do over the phone. I make my calls personable so I can get to know them on a personal level. I know what they are doing outside of school.

I work hard to build relationships. I start my live lessons fifteen minutes early and I turn on my video so the kids can see me. I have no academic agenda then. We have conversation and small talk and chat on screen.

As noted above in the student commentary section, 100% of the students interviewed said they believed the teachers cared about them and supported them. This feeling of being cared for is a direct result of the MCA teachers making it a priority to develop supportive personal relationships with each student, treating each as an individual worthy of respect. This is in sharp contrast with the feelings of some students and parents when they described their former school as uncaring and unsupportive.

Teachers are inventive in ways to work with students. (50%)

I want the best for my students, so I respond to text messages even on the weekend.

I build relationships with kids based in their comfort level. Many of them are socially anxious. Some I work with on the phone. Some on speakerphone. Some are more comfortable with webmail. It’s different with each kid.

The teachers acknowledge that each student is unique and her or his preferred way of communicating may be different from other students. Rather than treating all students the same as typically happens in the batch-processing model in regular public schools, the MCA teachers work to find and then use the mode of communication that is most comfortable for each of their students.

The curriculum is flexible enough for me to be fully student-centered. (43%)

I can individualize and personalize the curriculum based on each kid’s needs.

It’s easy to modify and customize assignments to support each student’s needs.

No one slips through the cracks here. We follow up with students frequently, focusing extra support on struggling students.

One potential challenge for an online charter school is deciding among the several online curriculum vendors and organizations which one would be best for students in Maine, and which one would allow teachers to personalize for the needs of each of their students. This is another way in which MCA differs from typical one-size-fits-all model that can be seen in some regular public schools. MCA teachers assured the evaluator that they have no problem modifying the curriculum materials for each individual student.

*Challenges of Working at MCA*

The pay is not commensurate with teachers' skills and experience. (93%)

I expected higher. It’s lower than I would have liked coming in.

It’s ok for a brand new starting teacher. But for experienced teachers, not so much.

There’s no way to predict future income. I don’t know how our income is calculated.

In public school I had come control over my salary. I could plan ahead and I knew how to move up the scale.

The salary information needs to be transparent. It feels disrespectful.

Only one teacher did not comment on their salary as an MCA teacher, and that was a new teacher for whom this was the first teaching job. All the others commented on how aware they were that their pay was not commensurate with that of their regular public school peers. This commentary on the part of the MCA teachers is unchanged from the first annual evaluation report.

It would be appreciated if I could work from home a day a week or more. (86%)

It would be good to be able to work from home.

There’s no reason I can’t do everything from home that I can do here.

I can do live lessons better from home and I can do grading and feedback more efficiently from home.

At the time of the interviews for this report a work-from-home policy had not been established, although the teachers were expecting such a police in the near future. The school year 2017-2018 evaluation may reveal that this policy is firmly in place.

Health insurance not satisfactory. (71%)

I was shocked to learn that the health insurance does not cover Maine Med.

The health insurance is too expensive. It would be nice if we got additional salary to cover that expense – especially for all we do for our students, all our time with them outside of school as well as inside school.

The health insurance is terrible.

I wonder if there’s some kind of deal between national Connections and Cigna.

The dissatisfaction with the health insurance benefit continues to be a concern among the majority of the teachers (75% of the teachers in the previous annual evaluation expressed this concern).

Retirement benefit inadequate. (36%)

I wonder why we can’t participate in the Maine State Retirement System.

I loved my retirement benefit where I was before. I was in the State Retirement System.

As with the comments on the issue of the health insurance benefit, the number of teachers commenting about the retirement benefit is little changed from last year’s 38%.

Questions about other benefits that may be available. (21%)

I don’t know about any other benefits like childcare or something. It’s hard to find stuff like that on the Connections virtual library.

Three teachers wondered aloud whether other benefits might be available that they did not know about.

Questions about expectations, evaluation data source, relevancy of metrics. (14%)

What the expectations are for us is not clear. Sometimes it feels like the expectations are different for different teachers.

There’s some kind of a closed system but there’s no way of knowing what I’m being judged on.

Two teachers thought that some sort of merit system or point system existed that was used to judge their work, but they did not know anything about such a system if it existed.

Requests from Connections seem irrelevant and are time wasters. (7%)

One teacher expressed frustration with what felt like frequent and frivolous requests from Connections central office for information. The teacher said the time spent on responding to these requests could have been better spent working with students.

*MCA Board Commentary on MCA*

The table below summarizes comments offered by each of the five Board members during the open-ended interview asking them to comment on how they believed the schools was doing.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| MCA Board Members' Comments, School Year 2016-2017 (N=5 Board Members Interviewed) | | |
| Board Member Comment | N= | % |
| We run Maine Connections Academy | 5 | 100% |
| We work well together as a Board | 4 | 80% |
| Teachers are working hard for our students | 3 | 60% |
| The school is working well for most students | 2 | 40% |
| We're doing well as a school, maturing, improving | 2 | 40% |

Beginning an interview with a broadly open-ended question such as the one that opened these interviews with MCA Board members, “How do you think MCA is doing?” invites the respondents to tap into what’s most salient to them about the topic at hand. In this case, the topic at hand was their school, Given the larger context in which Maine Connections Academy was approved as the first fully online charter school in Maine, it comes as no surprise that the question of MCA’s independence and local control remains on the minds of the Board members. Each Board member said in her or his own way that we, the MCA Board, run our school, not the national group from whom we buy the curriculum.

We run Maine Connections Academy (100%)

We run the school, not Connections.

Connections is very supportive of what we do here.

Connections shares with us what has worked in other places.

Connections has accommodated everything we wanted.

Some Boards this evaluator has observed have distributed the responsibilities and decision-making authority unevenly. Such is not the case for the MCA Board.

We work well together as a Board (80%)

We all work together to do what we need to do.

We have the big picture in mind all the time.

I was accepted and supported on the Board from the very first.

I have worked on a local school board and they did not focus on education the way we do.

Each of us contributes from our own personal expertise.

The majority of the Board acknowledged that it is the hard work of the teachers that is the reason the students are doing well and that the school is doing well.

Teachers are working hard for our students (60%)

Our teachers give their all for the kids.

It’s important to have local Maine-based teachers, and we have them.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

***Conclusions***

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.

These conclusions focus tightly on the core of a school and schooling – on the teachers and students and their working relationships, which are all positive and productive. One primary focus of the conclusions from the first year evaluation was that of reaching students who are not engaging with the learning. Teachers did not raise this issue during the interviews for this 2016-2017 report, which suggests it was not a salient issue because they had collaboratively worked to engage most of their students in the MCA experience during the school year.

The recommendations from the first year evaluation report focused on three issues: the option to work from home a day or two a week; the compensation and benefits package; and the need for administrative support in addition to the principal.

How were these issues addressed?

At the time of the interviews, additional administrative leadership and support positions had been created and filled. The teachers understood that the option for work-at-home days was in the works, and they were expecting a positive outcome. One Board member had confirmed to the evaluator that the Board was addressing the issue of compensation and benefits.

***Recommendations***

The data support one recommendation. The Board should continue to address the issue of compensation and benefits. This is especially important to maintain the high quality and commitment of the MCA faculty. This evaluator can attest that the MCA faculty compares favorably with the faculty of any of the schools that have been involved in projects that he has evaluated. Indeed the MCA teachers are among the most collegial and mutually supportive, and their commitment to their students’ learning is among the best he has observed, both in Maine and elsewhere.

One cannot contend glibly that “Teachers are a dime a dozen” as some have said in public pronouncements, and such a statement, clearly made out of ignorance with regard to the cognitive and social-emotional skills that characterize a good teacher (as the MCA teachers are), egregiously demeans and disrespects teachers and the teaching profession.

Broad consensus exists in the education research literature that students who are taught by more experienced teachers and those with additional degrees, do, on average, exhibit better learning as measured by achievement data. It’s a disincentive for teachers with more experience and advanced degrees to receive the same salary as a brand new teacher, as is the case with a flat salary schedule, which assumes that all teachers are interchangeable – new, experienced, one degree or advanced degrees.

Therefore, this evaluator strongly recommends that the Board explore the creation of a salary schedule that acknowledges and honors experience and additional learning on the part of the teachers. At the time of the interviews for this report, the Board did not have a member who had a background in education. This is a shortcoming that should be addressed in order to have a degree of appreciation and expertise for how to address this recommendation.