



CHILDREN'S COLLABORATIVE

*A division of Southern Maine
Administrative Collaborative*

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1 September, 2020

Re: Third Party Evaluation – Maine Connections Academy

Dear Principal Wallace, MCA Board of Directors, and the Maine Charter Commission:

It is my pleasure to present this year's TPE of the MCA. I wish to express my gratitude to the faculty, staff, students, parents, and board members who were generous with their time in interviews, phone calls, and by completing the survey instrument. Thank you also to Principal Wallace for being a thoughtful partner in helping me ask the right questions for the purposes of improving the school's relationship with Pearson.

Enclosed is my full report. The survey instruments are the intellectual property of the Southern Maine Administrative Collaborative, but are available upon request.

Should the Board or Commission have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

In service,

Chris Indorf
Project Manager
Southern Maine Administrative Collaborative

ABOUT SMAC: Southern Maine Administrative Collaborative (SMAC) is an educational support agency committed to providing specialized services for young children. Here at SMAC we understand that developing and executing individualized education plans and interventions are invaluable at a very young age. With the collaboration of central Management services, our program not only provides substantial efficiencies and cost savings to tax payers; but focuses on increased readiness for Kindergarten students. Administrative collaborations and a school-based model approach promote the success of children both academically and socially thus resulting in positive lifelong learning. The SMAC is a registered 501 (c) (3) organization.

Maine Connections Academy
THIRD PARTY EVALUATION
September 1, 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Agreement	1
Maine Charter Schools	1
Requirement	2
Introduction	2
Methodology and Rationale	2
Process	3
Inquiry	4
Themes	4
Findings	4
Faculty Abstract, Quantitative	4
Faculty Abstract, Qualitative	5
Parent Abstract, Quantitative	6
Parent Abstract, Qualitative	6
Student Abstract, Quantitative	8
Student Abstract, Qualitative	8
Board Abstract	9
Summary	10
Conclusions and Recommendations	12

Maine Connections Academy

Third Party Evaluation

2019-2020 School Year

September, 2020 • Chris Indorf, M.S., M.Ed., C.A.S.

Agreement

The Maine Connections Academy Principal contacted the Southern Maine Administrative Collaborative (SMAC) to solicit a request for an external audit of certain functions of the school. Mr. Wallace met with the Executive Director and consultants of the Collaborative on three occasions, and communicated regularly with the evaluator and stakeholders.

The Maine Connections Academy, as required by charter, engaged the SMAC to conduct a wholly independent, third-party evaluation to assess the execution of the program as detailed in its charter application. New this year, the ESP Pearson¹ and the efficacy of its program, curricula, assessment, and back office functions was assessed.

The Maine Connections Academy and SMAC mutually agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not necessitate the exercise of a *force majeure*, and the research, survey development, and stakeholder feedback collection continued through the last Spring and Summer of 2020.

Maine Charter Schools & MCA

The Maine Charter Commission consists of seven (7) members. Three commissioners must be members of the State Board of Education, appointed by the State Board for 3-year terms, and the other four (4) members are appointed by the Governor, subject to review by the Joint Standing Committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over education matters and to confirmation by the Senate, for 4-year terms.

Maine Connections Academy (MCA) is Maine's first full-time, virtual public charter school. The school offers a rigorous academic program to students in grades 7–12 and operates under the authorization of the Maine Department of Education and Maine Charter Commission. MCA was founded during the 2014-15 school year and graduated its first 12th grade class in June 2015. The school has an enrollment of 429 students: one-quarter

¹ Pearson is one of the United States' largest Academic Services vendors. It markets its Connections Academy product as a grade-leveled program where "students take core courses in math, science, language arts/English, social studies, and electives, and work from a state-approved, high-quality curriculum with support from certified teachers."

middle school, grades 7-9 and three-quarter high school, grades 9-12. MCA's catchment area is billed as "from Kittery to Fort Kent." Two-thirds of MCA teachers hold master's degrees or higher.

MCA is fully accredited by the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), an accrediting division of AdvancED. MCA's canon is comprehensive in nature and is aligned with Maine Learning Results including Common Core State Standards.

Requirement

The requirement to conduct an annual independent third-party evaluation (TPE) can be found in Exhibit B (#13) of Maine Connections Academy's charter contract, and reads as follows:

The school shall hire a mutually agreeable independent third-party to evaluate the schools execution of the educational program contained in the charter application, including an evaluation of the performance of the ESP. The evaluation report shall be provided to the Commission annually no later than September. Upon request the Commission shall have access to the underlying data and information. In addition, the individual(s) who prepared the report shall be made available to the commission, at the sole expense of the School, to present and discuss the report at a commission meeting.

Introduction

This TPE considers the current state of the school, as well as progress toward recommendations made in last year's TPE. This report largely mirrors last year's inquiry, but expands its scope to include questions specific to the functioning of the Academy's largest software provider, Pearson, which provisions services ranging from reporting and recording to academics to human resources. The objective for this report is to address the degree to which Maine Connections Academy continued to function well during the school year 2019-2020, and to explore how the MCA Board and leadership addressed Dr. Naves' 2018-19 report, and to assess stakeholders' satisfaction with the Pearson platform.

Methodology and Rationale

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.

Qualitative methods are often closely associated with interviews, survey design techniques, focus groups, and individual case studies. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, usually entail formally designed experiments with control groups (if appropriate) and carefully controlled dependent and independent variables. The design of qualitative research is the most flexible and encompassing of widely accepted methods and structures for program assessment. For the purposes of this evaluation, “quantitative” refers to survey data.

The information garnered from stakeholders can and should inform program design, institutional decision making, budget development, staffing needs, etc. Qualitative research methods are probably the oldest of all scientific techniques, dating back to the ancient Greeks. Qualitative methods are not less rigorous than quantitative ones and can provide a greater depth of understanding for organizational planning and behavior. The evaluator and MCA principal agreed early on that qualitative analysis would be more resonant and useful to the Academy.

Process

The evaluator developed a suite of surveys in collaboration with MCA’s leadership team over the course of several weeks. The collaboration yielded four distinct instruments for each stakeholder group:

- Administration and Faculty
- Students
- Parents
- Board of Directors

The surveys were based on an established body of work from the field, including self-study tools from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges² (an organization which accredits Maine public schools, Private Schools, Independent [“60/40”] schools, and colleges), as well as emerging tools like the Perceptions of the Blended Learning Environment Questionnaire³. In addition, MCA-specific questions designed to specifically probe its relationship with Pearson were crafted.

Letters of introduction explaining the Third Party Evaluation process were emailed (parents, faculty, students) or sent via USPS (Board) prior to the administration of the survey instrument. Surveys were administered electronically, and all respondents were afforded up to 60 minutes each for follow-up interviews.

Students, faculty, parents, and Board members were selected at random from a slate assembled from the Principal.

² <https://cis.neasc.org/sites/cis.neasc.org/files/Manuals/Manual%20for%20School%20Evaluation%20Complete%20rev073117.pdf>

³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0734282919834091>

Participants were queried on various matters related to the health and performance of the school, and each had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions and were invited to participate in follow-up Zoom interviews in an “open forum” format.

Inquiry

The inquiry line of the survey instruments (the quantitative measure that supports this qualitative analysis) varied based on stakeholder group. For example, students were asked about relationships with teachers and how meaningful they felt academic connections were with the Pearson product online, where Board members were asked about their role in governing, financial stewardship, and their *perceptions* about Pearson.

Even with that level of differentiation, the Principal and Evaluator agreed that each survey ought to include several so-called throughline questions--questions which are identically worded or themed in the survey of each stakeholder group.

Questions were also tailored to their intended audience; consideration was given whether the question is posed as an open-ended question, where respondents provide a response in their own words (Board, Faculty), or a closed-ended question, where they are asked to choose from a list of answer choices (Parents, Students).

Themes

The evaluator sought to gauge the health of MCA in a broad sense, with specific attention given to the question about the organization’s relationship with Pearson, a vendor that provides a host of services to the school ranging from its online curriculum and SIS to back office functions. MCA is, of course, a unique institution in that its product differs appreciably from most Maine schools. Although students’ perceptions of learning environments are a key element in the learning process, there is a dearth of valid instruments to assess students’ perceptions in blended and online contexts. There were three overarching themes the evaluator sought to interrogate in the process of conducting the TPE: the perceptions of integration between face-to-face and online learning, the perceptions of online contributions, and the perceptions challenge and opportunities afforded by online learning.

Findings

I. Faculty Abstract - Quantitative Results

- The faculty at MCA strongly agree that the school provides a program that is sufficiently broad to meet the needs of all students.

- Teachers and administrators feel that the school encourages teachers to shape programs and customize curriculum and student experiences. They feel respected and supported in professional development endeavours.
- Faculty and staff have mixed feelings about the efficacy of Pearson Connections Academy (hereafter *CA* or *PCA*) content, both in terms of engagement and alignment with student interests.

II. Faculty Abstract - Qualitative Results

For those who elected to address open-ended questions and invitation for comment, a few consistent themes emerged. When asked what MCA does well, faculty and staff addressed a spirit of professionalism and engagement to which they were unaccustomed in previous school employment. They also lauded the flexibility afforded to staff *and* students. One member of the instructional faculty said it nicely:

“MCA provides a welcoming place of learning to all students, provides opportunity for students to succeed where they have struggled in prior experiences--the online environment can significantly reduce school-related anxiety [based on the teacher’s] prior schools/districts I’ve worked in.”

When asked to identify opportunities for improvement, multiple staff members talked about the desire to modify and customize curriculum, but held out hope that expanding multiple pathways toward graduation might expand the margins of the course material. While on its face an online curriculum should allow for highly customized pacing or assessment choices, some teachers felt “locked in” to the Pearson model.

When the evaluator probed deeper into the faculty’s experience with--and expectations of--the Pearson CA product, all were satisfied, generally speaking, but were more likely to turn to an MCA supervisor if a need arose. On the “business office”/back end side, staff were satisfied overall with the company’s HR product. Faculty and staff reported mixed results: some reported that HR is “responsive” and “helpful,” others bewailed long wait times and partially-answered questions. The same held true for tech support.

In the realm of professional development, faculty and staff used only the most perfunctory and routine of the platform’s offerings (e.g., suicide prevention training, OSHA training, etc.). Several reported an appreciation for Pearson’s education

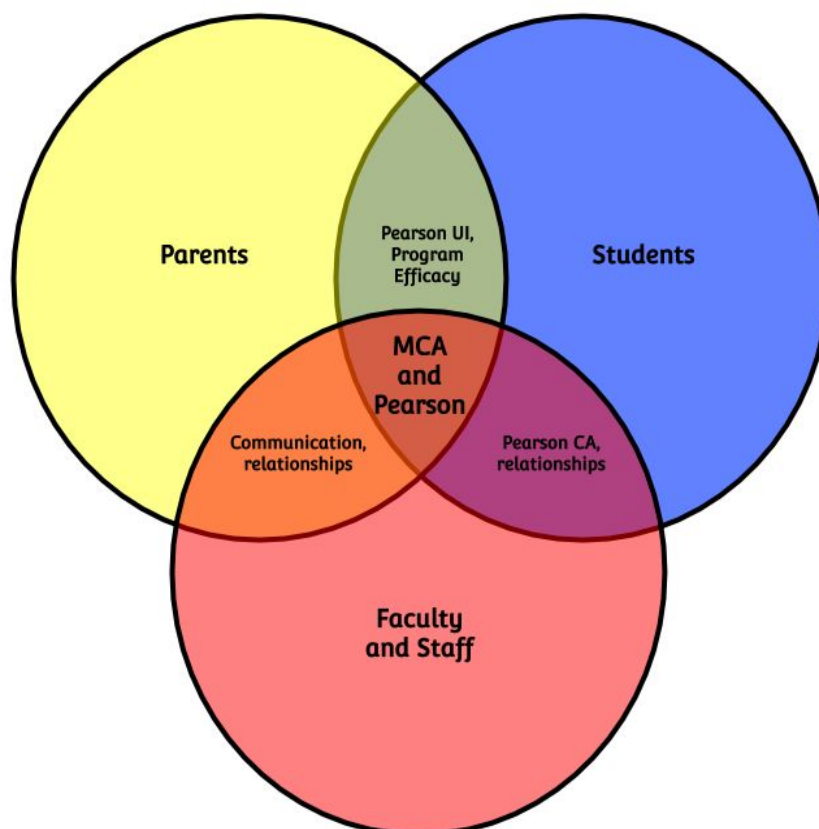
benefit and the tuition reimbursement it offered for enrollment in graduate education programs.

III. Parent Abstract - Quantitative

- Parents were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the MCA's program offerings, and generally pleased with their child(ren)'s experience with the Pearson product. Parent responses mirrored those of faculty (and notably, closely tracked student feedback) on program quality.
- In spite of the primacy of online learning, parents reported feeling that their children were well connected to faculty to whom their child could "turn for advice in both academic and personal issues." The wording of this question was intentional; the evaluator wanted to probe the nature of faculty-student relationships, and by all measures they appear warm and more meaningfully connected than one might expect from a largely offsite relationship.
- Parents felt that communication from both MCA and the UI of the Pearson product was effective.
- Asked why they chose MCA, respondents were presented the following options: anxiety or health; teacher quality or program quality at previous school; poor quality of special education at previous school; bullying or unhealthy climate at previous school; or the generalized "previous school 'didn't work' for [my] family, in general." Each chose the latter. This unanimity was a marked departure from previous surveys which revealed that parents' motives for selecting MCA varied wildly, from special student needs to bullying in previous school environments.

IV. Parent Abstract - Qualitative

Throughline questions triangulated parents, students, and faculty.



Parents report warm feelings about the faculty and staff, and general approval of the Pearson CA product. They are slightly more likely than students and staff--both critical consumers of educational products!--to report an understanding of the “what” and “why” of Pearson’s academic product. Of those who needed to access support functions in the CA product, all at least “agreed” that their children could access content and assessments with limited or no technical support. They also felt that the assessment methods were “fair and accurate.” CA materials, parents report, are aligned with their child(ren)’s interests.

When asked to identify opportunities for improvement for MCA, parents cited some very specific desires that are more typically associated with in-person day programs: everything from paper texts to field trips. There was no sweeping condemnation from parents about any facet of operations or program, nor a call for a reconsideration of MCA’s relationship with its primary content provider, Pearson.

Parents believe that what makes MCA great is the clear path for students. One parent praised the rigor of the program, and all respondents addressed their appreciation for the faculty, using words like “amazing” and “attentive” to describe them.

Two comments that stood out among parent participants addressed meeting students’ needs. More than one recognized the unique position of the school to render a program to students regardless of the global pandemic.

Parent A: “The staff is approachable and works hard to meet the needs of my son. The current climate requires tools that MCA already have knowledge of and this means that my son has a disruption-free education.”

Parent B: “As a parent of two very different learners, I am incredibly happy with the school’s focus on meeting each learner where they are - and getting them the resources they need. Whether that is a more challenging course or resources, or if they need more supports [sic] and extra help. The school is really good at helping each student succeed.”

V. Student Abstract - Quantitative

- Student participants were split evenly between male and female, and sophomore and seniors. Neither was by design.
- Students agreed or strongly agreed that the MCA helps them meet their potential by accounting for their individual needs, learning style, and characteristics.
- Students agreed that the school’s program and CA’s content met their interests, however, they were less likely than both teachers and parents to report agreement with the proposition.
- Engagement and alignment to student interest is not the same, and our survey instrument probed the difference. Students were more likely to interface with content that *interested* them, but slightly less likely to feel engaged by it.

VI. Student Abstract - Qualitative

The evaluator and Principal considered the effect of what is called *the response burden* in surveys. In overly simplistic terms, the longer a person is asked to engage with a survey, the less likely the instrument will elicit a thoughtful response. In

general terms, a survey must check to see that respondents of any age--but especially students--aren't simply selecting "option A" each time by asking the same question in a different way twice, without frustrating or exhausting the participant. Most of the information collected from students was quantitative, and in much larger proportions than the faculty and Board surveys.

When afforded the opportunity to share thoughts on the school's strengths, weaknesses, or any other comments they felt moved to share with the evaluator, students were firmly on the side of brevity. Answers about student perceptions on what MCA does well ranged from "helping kids," full stop, to "the teachers and their willingness to go above and beyond for ALL students, giving some extra help and giving some [others] more challenging opportunity." When asked what MCA needed to do to improve, responses ranged from "nothing" to crediting work that was in progress, such as with this comment:

"Normally I would have said something about improved STEM...however over the past year all of the teachers have worked hard to improve it from changing Java to a [sic] MCA class to AP bio being MCA instead of Pearson to creating completely new opportunities..."

VII. Board Abstract

The Board of the Maine Connections Academy has five active members, whose governance and fiduciary responsibility mirrors that of most nonprofit organizations. The school's charter qualifies the role of the board as having responsibilities for all functions of the school. The Board's full charge is detailed in section 2 of the MCA Charter.⁴

As with other stakeholders, Board members were asked about MCA's strengths and opportunities for improvement. Separately, the Board was queried about matters of governance, resources, mission, and its perception of students' experiences. The evaluator was struck by remarks from the Board that largely parroted those from parents and students: the school has high quality faculty, the faculty do an excellent job fostering relationships with students, and the offerings are rigorous and diverse.

Asked about obstacles and areas of improvement, Board members discussed improving academic outcomes, promoting the good work that the school does with some of Maine's highest-need students, and intractable issues ranging from

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<https://www.maine.gov/csc/sites/maine.gov.csc/files/inline-files/FY19%20Maine%20Connections%20Academy.pdf>

COVID-19 to unspecified historic tensions with the union (which predate Mr. Wallace's tenure) and other "branding" woes, including public perceptions of the efficacy of online learning.⁵

The Board felt it had adequate resources to carry out its mission, and was pleased with the school's relationship with Pearson, calling the vendor "supportive" and lauding communication and expertise, technical and pedagogical.

Asked about its functioning, there was some sentiment that the board could benefit from "more active members," but that generally "everyone [is] paddling in the same direction and pulling hard on the oars."

"One of the great things about Maine Connections Academy is that the administration and teachers are continually focused on how to improve instruction, student progress, and support. Of all of the schools that I have worked in, MCA is by far the most flexible, motivated, and action oriented staff that has a common goal to challenge students and provide personalized support to help them achieve academic success. It is a motivating and inspiring place to work." -MCA Teacher

Summary

- A. **STUDENTS** The themes that emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative information gleaned from the evaluator did not depart significantly from Dr. Nave's report from 2019. Students' reasons for choosing MCA were similar, though not exactly the same, as in last year's cohort (for example, none of the students in this year's TPE selected MCA because of the scheduling of elite sports training.)

Year-over-year trends within different student sets were around the flexibility and structure of online education. Further (and equally important) was how much value students placed on relationships with teachers at MCA. In 2019 and again in 2020,

⁵ One board member astutely noted, however, that during widespread public school closures there was a "growing recognition [in the general public] of students' ability to learn online...[which] probably makes the staff feel more expert since they...know how to do it well." One area public school Superintendent with whom I spoke said, "maybe my third or fourth call after we dismissed school [in March, during the budding public health crisis] was to MCA. We needed their expertise, and [Mr. Wallace] and his academics director came in and met with building Principals and teacher-leaders. Everyone [in public education] wishes they were [MCA] right now."

open-ended responses yielded words like “supportive,” “nice,” “caring,” and “helpful.”

- B. **PARENTS** Fewer parents reported choosing MCA to escape poor service at previous schools as in past evaluations dating to 2017. While “bullying” and “anxiety” were not cited specifically, there was year-over-year agreement on the positive attributes of MCA that made it a good choice for families. Teacher quality, a trustworthy and dedicated faculty, and (new to this year’s evaluation) a parent respondent who had enrolled a second child at MCA because of the program’s quality wrote, “As a parent of two very different learners, I am incredibly happy with the school's focus on meeting each learner where they are...I also have been incredibly happy with ALL of the teachers my girls have had while at MCA - they go above and beyond frequently.”
- C. **TEACHERS** The teaching faculty and leadership group at MCA is as diverse and innovative as the students they serve, and appreciate about their employer what the CA product offers their students: flexibility, a recognition of their interests and expertise, and a network of support--whether it’s from MCA’s leadership or Pearson’s tech support. Whereas labor relations and compensation peppered teacher comments in evaluations completed in the past, there is very much a sense of a “fresh start” after Mr. Wallace assumed the mantle of leadership. One residual concern of teachers is that they (or their students) may be perceived as castoffs or abberants by the public writ large. That is, just as some MCA students are seen as those who “couldn’t cut it” in traditional school, so too are staff members. “That is simply not the case,” Principal Wallace said in an interview. “These teachers are some of the best I’ve worked with in my two-plus decades in education. I liken them a bit to Google employees who enjoy the freedom to innovate and be responsive to their ‘customers’ needs and their personal interests within the framework of the larger ‘product,’ the product being Pearson, not education itself. They are working to make critical selections of relevant parts of the Pearson platform to fully align and integrate with the Maine Learning Results. I’m extremely proud of the work that we’ve done and am excited for the future.”

The effort to utilize Pearson within the framework of the MLR was evident to the evaluator. In the social sciences, for example, instruction was intentionally framed in the MLR’s “enduring themes” for the social sciences:

- Freedom and Justice
- Conflict and Compromise
- Technology and Innovation

Unity and Diversity
 Continuity and Change Over Time
 Supply and Demand

- D. **BOARD** The board is generally pleased with the operations of the Academy and its improving relationship with the teacher's union. Concerns about tenuous staff positions, a move to a new space, and other initiatives--some of which came to fruition and others scuttled or paused due to COVID-19--seemed to have largely abated since Dr. Nave's previous evaluation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Maine Connections Academy continues to provide a rigorous, comprehensive academic program to students who, for various reasons, desired a remote education setting. Contrary to public perspective, the MCA is not merely an "online school," rather, a flexible, responsive institution run *by* people, *for* people. The evaluator has participated in the accreditation of no fewer than twenty schools on three continents, and the feedback from all stakeholders is more positive and passionate than most.

It is clear that MCA took Dr. Nave's recommendations to heart in the academic realm, especially in the area of improving mathematics outcomes. Indeed, even a student observed changes and improvements in the broader STEM tent.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be premature to attempt to gauge the effectiveness of the school's efforts to improve academic achievement and reduce student truancy; indeed, schools across the globe had their plans scuttled or delayed by the disruption. The impact on data is clear: schools aren't able to compare apples-to-apples, and more time will be needed for MCA to have a viable pre- and post- dataset. In research circles, consumers of reports like this are admonished to remember that *the plural of anecdote is not data!*

Approximately 60% of the evaluator's research was dedicated to interrogating the operations, relationships, and programs that undergird MCA's mission. New this year was a concerted effort to assess stakeholders' perceptions of the Pearson suite of products, which accounts for more than \$1 million in MCA's annual expenditures. No product is perfect, and no Human Resources office or academic assessment will meet the expectations of all users, but on balance it is the evaluator's informed conclusion that the MCA's relationship with Pearson is functional, generally

appreciated by all stakeholders, and represents a prudent investment in the school's digital workspace.

The MCA Administration and Board are recommended to investigate the most frequent complaint of the ESP to enhance and improve the customer service experience.