EVALUATION REPORT: MAINE VIRTUAL ACADEMY (MEVA)

Prepared for the Board of Maine Virtual Academy
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Maine Virtual Academy (MEVA), an online charter school that is part of the K12 Education Inc. network, opened its doors to students in September 2015. Commissioned by the Maine Virtual Charter School's Board in May 2018, this evaluative report reviews various components of Maine Virtual Charter School's practices and performance. Through both quantitative and qualitative data collection, this report seeks to create a portrait of the school for the Board, the Maine Charter Commission, and the State.

Findings address the following major topics: demographic profile, school culture, enrollment trends, exit trends, outside school supports, operational challenges, organizational & pedagogical issues, and test performance outcomes. Based on the analysis of the data collected, this report highlights the following major findings:

Major Findings

1. MEVA is helping to meet the social/ emotional needs of a high-need student population. Many families and students indicate that the teachers are supportive and connected with their children. Many families feel the school has been a great outlet for their child. It can be argued that MEVA serves as an "alternative" program in the State.

2. MEVA has substantially higher rates of absenteeism, chronic absenteeism, and dropouts than the state of Maine, overall. The school also has a significantly lower graduation rate than the State.

3. MEVA faces challenges adapting policies and practices from K12 Education Inc. to meet the needs of its students, including course attendance flexibility, class sizes, curricular programs and pacing, etc.

4. Findings suggest that MEVA has a practice of exempting students from outstanding course assignments at the end of the semester in order to facilitate student passing rates.

5. MEVA students show poor test performance outcomes. The majority of MEVA's students are not meeting standards on state assessments (MEA). On NWEA tests, students are not making Growth Index targets, because of little Observed Growth, on average.

ABOUT MAINE VIRTUAL ACADEMY & THIS REPORT

Maine Virtual Academy (MEVA) opened its doors to students in September 2015, becoming the second virtual charter school in the state of Maine, and one of the first charter schools in the state overall. MEVA is part of the K12 Education Inc. network of schools. K12 is a for-profit educational management organization (EMO) that offers virtual schooling as its primary platform. It is the largest virtual charter networks in the country, followed by Connections Academy. In its application to the Maine Charter Commission, MEVA seeks "to develop each student's full potential with learner-centered instruction, research-based curriculum and educational tools and resources to provide a high quality learning experience for grade 7-12 students who are in need of alternative educational options" (Maine Charter Commission, 2018). MEVA's enrollment is capped at 390 students, and it serves students from all over the state of Maine.

Although the school operates a virtual learning platform, the school maintains a physical, "brick-and-mortar" facility in Augusta, Maine, from which the teachers and administrators work. Students participate in online courses, but also have access to occasional in-person field trips around the state.

Commissioned by the Maine Virtual Charter School's Board in May 2018, this report reviews various components of Maine Virtual Charter School's performance. Through both quantitative and qualitative data, this report seeks to create a portrait of the school, so that the Board, the Maine Charter Commission, and the state of Maine can better-understand the structures, activities, and outcomes of the school.

METHODS & DATA SOURCES

For this analysis, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a variety of sources. Table 1 lists the sources by type, year, and provides brief descriptions of the data.

Table 1: Data Sources

Data Source	Time Period Collected	Number/ Description
QUANTITATIVE DATA:		
Maine Educational Assessment (MEA)	2016-2017	Student-level 7th, 8th, 11th grade scores Math, Reading, and Science
NWEA	Spring & Fall, 2016-2017 & 2017-2018	Student-level 7th-10th grade scores Math & Reading
Attendance Data	2016-2017 & 2017-2018	Student-level
Withdrawal Data	2016-2017 & 2017-2018	Student-level
Dropout Data	2017-2018	Student-level
Graduation Data	2017-2018	Student-level
Sending District Data	2018-2019	Student-level Number of students from "home" SAUs
MDOE Data Sets	2016-2017	School-level Chronic Absenteeism, Grade-level Enrollment, Graduation Rates, Dropout Rates
Parent Survey (Administered by Panorama Education)	Spring 2018	233 Responses
Student Survey (Administered by Panorama Education)	Spring 2018	269 Responses
Teacher Survey (Administered by Panorama Education)	Spring 2018	23 Responses
QUALITATIVE DATA:		
Open-Ended Parent/Guardian Questionnaire	Fall 2018	131 Responses
Parent/Guardian Interviews	Fall 2018	17 Interviews ~45 minutes each
Teacher & Staff Interviews	Fall 2018	22 Interviews ~45 minutes each
Class Observations (Recordings)	Fall 2018	10 Lesson Recordings Variety of Subjects

Head of School, Dr. Melinda Browne, primarily supplied quantitative data sets, although data were also collected the Maine Department of Education. In addition, parent, teachers, and students raw survey responses were collected from Panorama Education. These surveys were administered in the Spring of 2018. For the quantitative data analysis, all data sets were cleaned, and analyzed using combinations of the statistical software SPSS

and Excel. Where possible, data were disaggregated by grade level or student demographic profile. Using SPSS, trends or differences were evaluated for statistical significance.

Qualitative data were collected in a variety of ways. Teachers and staff were invited to participate in phone interviews, and those who agreed were interviewed via phone during the Fall of 2018. While guided by interview protocols, these interviews were open-ended, and semi-structured. Interviews were not recorded, but detailed notes were taken. Teacher/staff interviews lasted, on average for 45 minutes. Notes from interviews were coded by themes, and salient examples and trends for each theme are included, where pertinent, in this report.

In addition to teacher interviews, all parents/ guardians/ Learning Coaches were sent an open-ended questionnaire via Survey Monkey. These questions were entirely comment-based, allowing the researcher to gather open-ended, qualitative feedback from a wide range of families. Responses to these comments were coded for content, and salient examples of each theme were selected. In addition, in these parent questionnaires, volunteers for follow-up, additional interviews were solicited. In total 35 parents volunteered to be interviewed. Of those 35, 17 were successfully contacted and interviewed via phone. Like the teacher/ staff interviews, these were semi-structured and open-ended. Interviews were not recorded, but detailed notes were taken, which were grouped thematically.

Finally, class session recordings were provided by Melinda Browne, allowing for observational data to be collected. During these class sessions, notes were taken on class participation and content. Notes from courses were coded, and included, where applicable in this report.

FINDINGS

Rather than report findings from these data by source type, this report is organized around significant topics that arose in the analysis by combining qualitative and quantitative data to triangulate common themes, where applicable. Findings address the following major topics: demographic profile, school culture, enrollment trends, exit trends, outside school supports, operational challenges, organizational & pedagogical issues, and test performance outcomes.

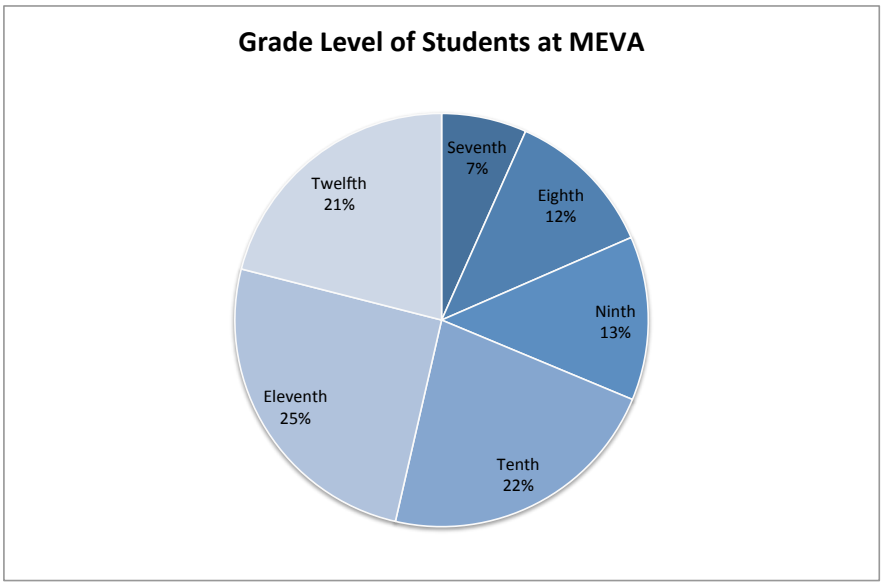
Demographic Profile

Student Demographics

MEVA's students come from 105 different districts around the state of Maine. The SAUs with the most sending students are Bangor, Lewiston, Sanford, RSU 49/ MSAD 49, and Waterville, which combined make up a little over 10% of the student population. The majority of towns have just one sending student enrolled in MEVA. As of 2017-2018, Maine Virtual Academy has 390 students enrolled from grades 7-12.

The majority of students enrolled in MEVA are in the upper grades, according to Figure 1.

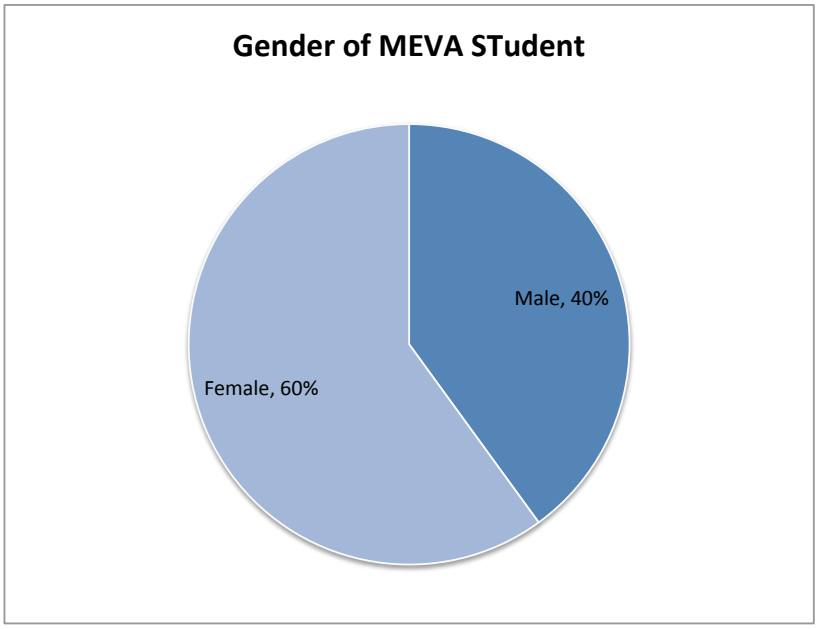
Figure 1. Grade of Students at MEVA, 2017-2018



Nearly half of the students in MEVA (46%) are in eleventh and twelfth grades, according to these data. Only 19% of students are enrolled in what is considered traditional middle school grades of seventh and eighth grade.

Data in Figure 2 indicate that the majority of students enrolled in MEVA are female.

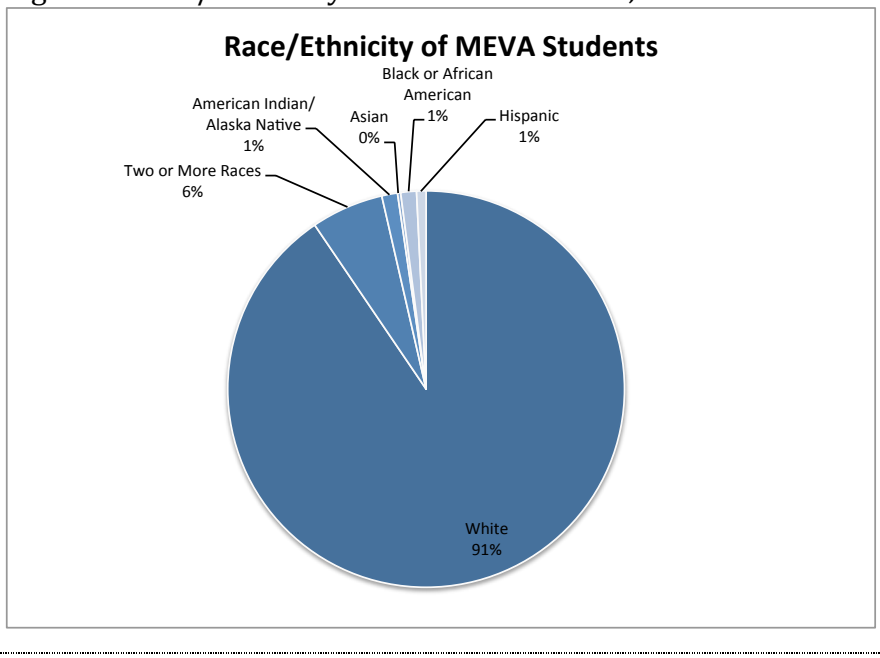
Figure 2: Gender of Students at MEVA, 2017-2018



According to the data in Figure 2, just 40% of students enrolled in MEVA are male. This rate is different than the state of Maine overall, in which slightly more male students (51.59%) were enrolled in 2016-2017.

In addition, the majority of students enrolled in MEVA identify primarily as racially 'White,' according to Figure 3.

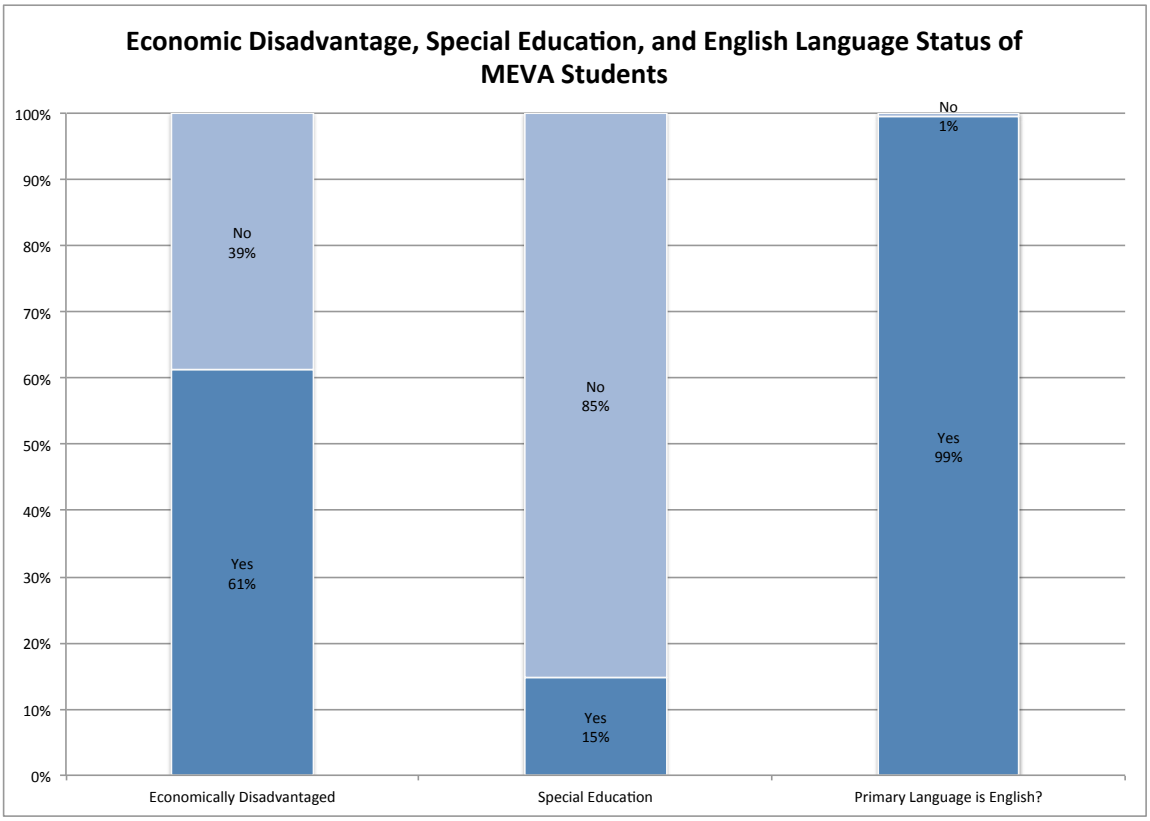
Figure 3. Race/ Ethnicity of Students in MEVA, 2017-2018



According to Figure 3, in 2018-2019, ninety-one percent (91%) of students enrolled in MEVA identified as White. Although somewhat unsurprising because Maine's public schools are generally racially homogeneous, MEVA's portion of White students is slightly higher than that of the state of Maine overall (89.25%) in 2017-2018.

Finally, enrollment data were disaggregated by economic disadvantage, special education status, and language (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Economic Disadvantage, Special Education Status, and Language of Students at MEVA, 2017-2018



According to these data, over half (61%) of students at MEVA are considered economically disadvantaged. This rate is higher than for the state overall (44.38%). In addition, fifteen percent (15%) of MEVA students are identified as having special needs, which is lower than the state average of 17.59%. Finally, nearly all of MEVA's students speak English primarily. Only 1% speak a language other than English primarily, whereas, statewide between 3% and 4% of students at each grade level receive English Language services.

Overall, students enrolled in MEVA are slightly more likely to be White, English-speaking, female, and economically disadvantaged than the average public school in Maine.

Student Learner Profile

While the quantitative demographics illustrate one component of the school's enrollment, qualitative data collected from parents and teachers/staff paint a picture of the students as learners, as well as their reasons for enrolling in MEVA. Interviews with parents indicated that parents chose MEVA initially because either they were unhappy with their local school, helping their child to leave a challenging social situation or escape bullying, supporting their child with medical issues, or continuing with homeschooling. Echoing the responses from parent interviews, Table 2 shows a summary of the parent/ guardian questionnaire responses about their reasons for choosing to enroll in Maine Virtual Academy.

Table 2. Parent Questionnaire Responses, Macro Codes

MEVA Parent Responses: "Why did you choose Maine Virtual Academy for your child(ren)?"	
Public school alternative	23.0%
Bullying at public school	13.5%
Homeschool	11.9%
Other	7.9%
Student anxiety or depression	6.3%
Flexibility	6.3%
Individuality of courses	6.3%
Recommendation from family or friend	6.3%
Illness/Health Issues	5.6%
Wanted online schooling	2.4%
Safety	2.4%
Student has special needs	2.4%
Wanted more challenge/ advanced	1.6%
Social concerns at public school	1.6%
Wanted more support	1.6%
Private school alternative	0.8%

Overwhelmingly, Learning Coaches, parents, and guardians reported that they and their child chose MEVA as an alternative to their local public school, frequently to avoid specific social and bullying issues. In the comments, one parent reported, "My [child] was miserable

in middle school…because of mean [students] and social stress. [My child] also felt the teachers did not care," while others reiterated, "[Our] local public school was not working socially." Quite a number of parents also indicated that they chose MEVA for their child because of their child's own "anxiety" or "stress." In interviews, one parent stated, "Her anxiety means that it's helpful for her to have a choice about what she's working on – tackling easier things when stressed and harder ones when she's feeling more robust." In all these cases, MEVA served as an alternative, and an exit, from the local school.

Parent interviews and questionnaire responses outlined in Table 2 were echoed in descriptions of the student body given throughout teacher/staff interviews. Teachers/staff reported that, for the majority of MEVA students, their impression is that the school is functioning as a "safe haven" or "last resort." In general, teachers/staff confirmed parent accounts of the student body: more than half of students were using MEVA as an alternative education program, reporting that students were commonly "escaping school," "had bad experiences with school," or were "high anxiety." Many teachers/ staff related that, for these students, MEVA allows them to reconnect with school and their education.

In addition, qualitative data from parents and teachers/ staff confirmed that another substantial portion of their students come from homeschooling backgrounds. On the questionnaire, nearly 12% of parents (Table 2) cited a desire to homeschool as a reason for choosing MEVA. One parent commented, "We are a homeschooling family, and I felt this would be the best of two worlds. Being homeschooled yet getting an education with certified teachers. As well as the social aspect, through chatting online, and going on field trips." Many of these families were looking for flexibility, some social interaction, and academic support that they possibly could not provide as well at higher levels of education.

Finally, a third, and smallest, group of students was either seeking a more flexible schedule to support unusual scheduling conflicts (such as sports or illness/health issue), or wanting to access classes or advanced curriculum that was not offered at their public school.

Because of this student profile, these findings begin to suggest MEVA's role as an alternative education program—like the R.E.A.L. School, for example. Rather than functioning primarily as a choice program for students who have success in their public

school, it has begun to provide education for students for whom traditional schooling is not working.

School Culture

In general, parents, teachers, Learning Coaches, and staff were united in reporting the supportive culture between teachers and students, in particular, at MEVA.

The majority of teachers/staff reported that they have a strong connection with the students. Teachers/ staff stated things like the "students are the best in the world," they have a "family atmosphere," that the teachers are "very supportive," and that the school generally has "warmth and personal connection." Teachers/ staff felt very strongly about supporting their students, and fervently believed that there was a need for virtual learning for many of these students. Many teachers/ staff gave examples of the ways in which they had developed strong bonds with students, and seen students grow and re-engage with school as an institution. For example, one teacher/ staff reported that a student, who had severe social struggles in his/her prior school for several years, had become "the coolest kid" in the virtual platform, having "reinvented" him/herself using the social safety of the virtual interactions. Teachers/ staff also lauded their inclusive culture, stating, "everyone is included… we don't marginalize students."

Parent responses in interviews and to the open-ended questionnaire about MEVA echoed the strength of the connection between teachers and their children. Half of interviewed parents discussed the supportiveness of MEVA teaches and administrators. One parent stated, "The school is extremely attentive. The teachers have called to discuss how [the student/child] is doing in class. The teachers are more than willing to do one-on-ones with her. They call if she misses class," while another confirmed, "The MEVA teachers work with you to make sure your child gets their education. It's heaven-sent."

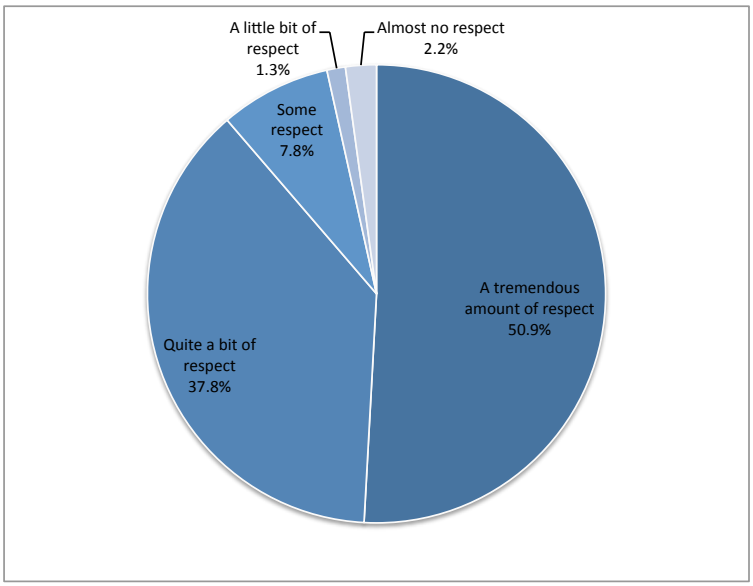
Questionnaires from parents support the interview data. Table 3 shows the responses to parent questionnaire.

Table 3. Parent Questionnaire Responses, Macro Codes

MEVA Parent Responses: "What are Maine Virtual Academy's strengths? What has worked well for you and/or your child(ren)?"	
Teachers/ People	27.9%
Flexibility	26.2%
Curriculum	9.8%
Communication	9.0%
Other	6.6%
Supportive environment	6.6%
Convenience	3.3%
Special supports	3.3%
Online	2.5%
Challenge	1.6%
Individual	0.8%
Involvement	0.8%
No bullying	0.8%
Strong Academics	0.8%

In their comments, over a quarter of parents cited connections with and quality of teachers as one of the strengths of MEVA. Also highly valued were communication (particularly with teachers), and the school's supportive environment. Parent survey responses indicate a similar feeling (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Parent Survey Question: "Overall, how much respect do you think the teachers at your child's school have for the children?"



According to Figure 5, the vast majority of parents report that MEVA teachers respect their children, with just over half of parents (50.9%) reporting that they respect them a "tremendous amount."

Students also report a positive school climate. In survey responses, students indicate that the "energy" of the school is "very positive" (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Student Survey Response: "How positive or negative is the energy of the school?"

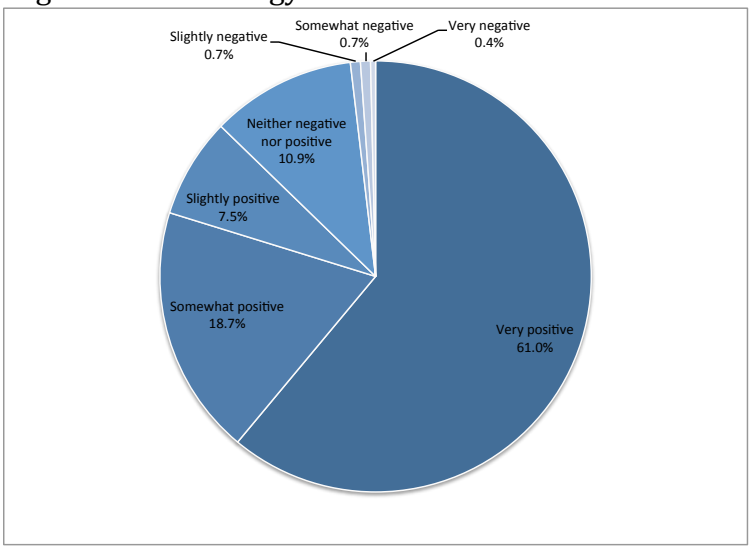
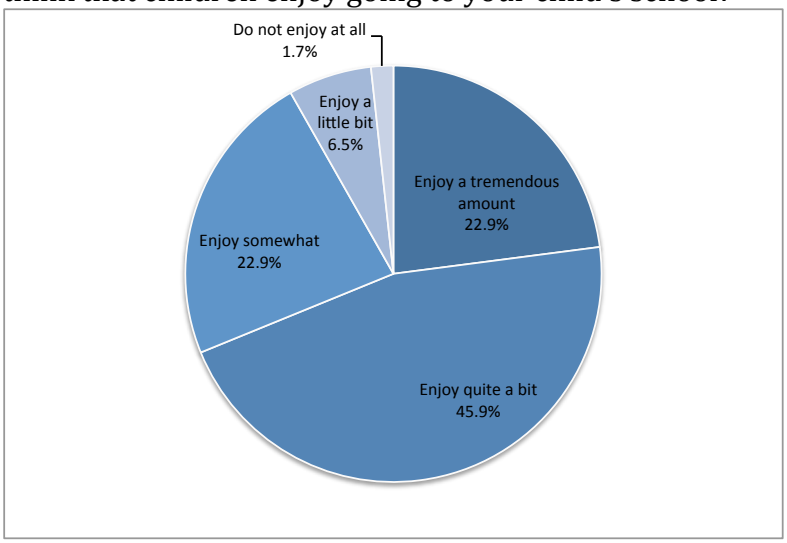


Figure 6 shows that 79.7% of students indicated that school "energy" was either "very positive" or "somewhat positive." In disaggregating this survey question by student demographics, we see that there is a statistically significant difference between economically and non-economically disadvantaged students. Students considered economically disadvantaged indicate that the "energy" is more positive than those students who are not economically disadvantages (p=.000).

Parent and students were more mixed about the degree to which MEVA students enjoy school, however. In Figure 7, parents primarily report that their children enjoy school, but are slightly more reserved than responses to the question about respect in Figure 6.

Figure 7. Parent Survey Response: "To what extent do you think that children enjoy going to your child's school?"



Students, also, seem more reserved about their overall enthusiasm for participating in school (Figures 8 & 9).

Figure 8. Student Survey Response: "In your classes, how eager are you to participate?"

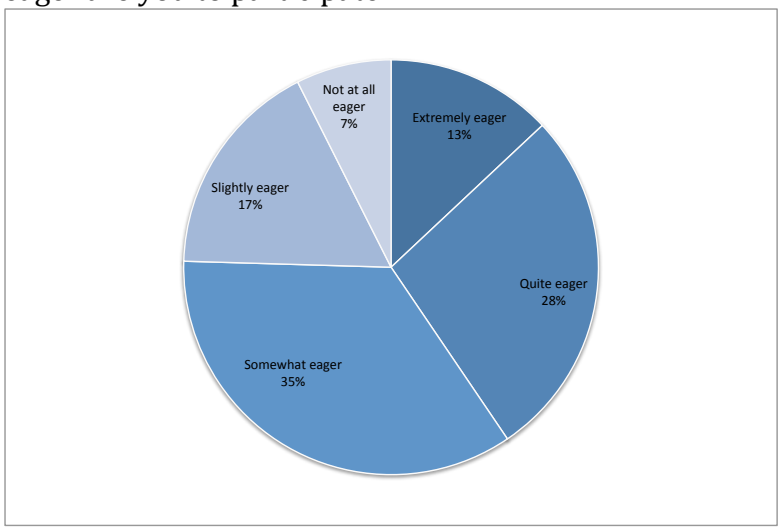
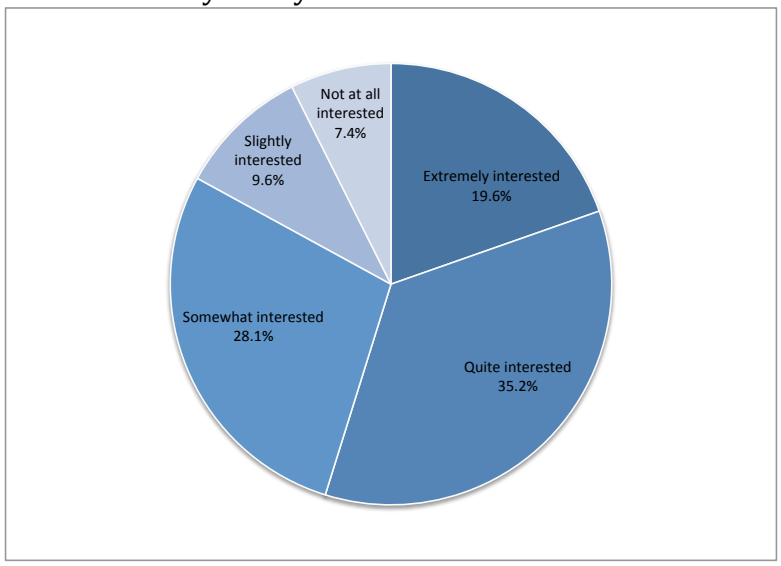


Figure 9. Student Survey Response: "Overall, how interested are you in your classes?"



Figures 8 & 9 show a similar breakdown: many students are "interest in classes" and/ or "eager to participate," but a notable portion of respondents is not. In Figure 8, nearly one quarter (24%) indicate that they are less eager to participate, and in Figure 9, 15% are not particularly interested in their classes.

Disaggregating the student responses to these questions by grade level yields more detailed trends (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Student Survey Response: "In your classes, how eager are you to participate?" by Grade

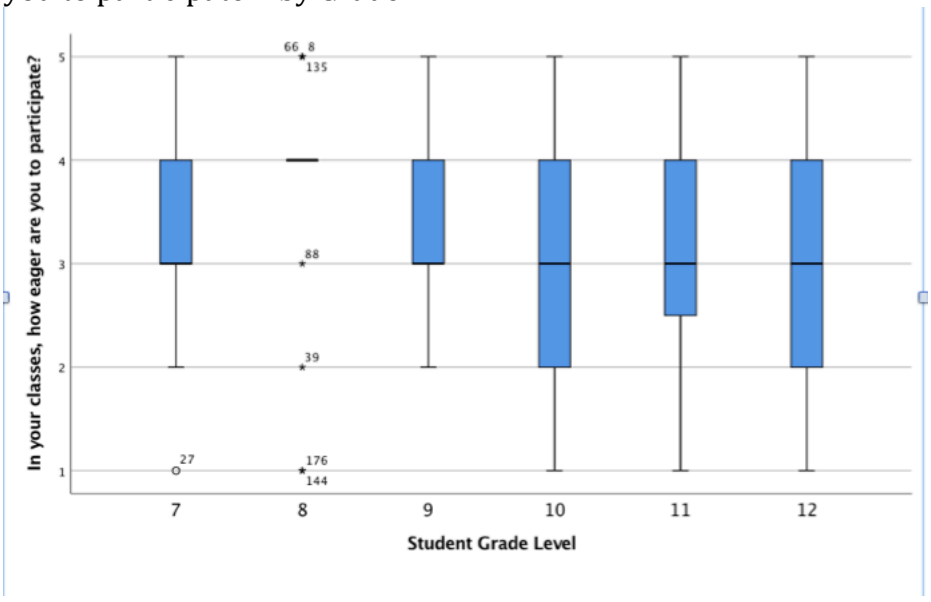


Figure 10 shows a less positive response to the question "In your classes, how eager are you to participate?" at higher-grade levels—a difference that is statistically significant between the three upper grades and seventh and eighth grades. In short, upper grade students appear to be less eager and interested than students in lower grades.

Qualitative responses to interviews and questionnaire comments indicate an overall support for the school from parents and teachers/staff. In reporting challenges they had experienced since enrolling in MEVA, the largest proportion of parents (27.5%) indicated that they had no concerns or had faced no challenges as a family. Several teachers/staff indicated that, although the school has challenges, that they have been working hard to overcome many of those: "We've come a long way."

Finally, many teachers/staff reported that they are supported in developing their teaching practice, stating that they are encouraged to "grow constantly as an educator," and that the professional development opportunities are excellent.

Enrollment Trends

Attendance & Flexibility

According to research, attendance is a critically important indicator of school success. In general, MEVA faces multiple and complex challenges with regard to attendance. Some of these hurdles are wrapped up in inherent peculiarities of online learning—not least of which is potentially needs and desires of the student body that is drawn to enroll in virtual schooling in the first place, as discussed above. Many of these students appear to be re-establishing their sense of connection with "school" as an institution. In addition, attendance at MEVA is intertwined with discussions of class flexibility. This analysis of attendance begins by examining the quantitative data.

Attendance Rates

Attendance data from MEVA points to some concerning trends. Table 4 shows the school-level rates of absenteeism and chronic absenteeism in comparison with the State average.

Table 4. Attendance & Chronic Absenteeism at MEVA and in Maine in 2017

	Maine Virtual Academy	State of Maine (Average)
Absent Rate	12.73%	6.01%
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	36.34%	15.72%

It is clear in Table 4 that MEVA has a lower attendance rate than the state (on average) in both measures of absenteeism and chronic absenteeism. Both the absent and the chronic absentee rate are statistically significantly higher than the state as a whole (p=.000).

In examining the trends by grade, it appears that attendance decreases steadily throughout the grades (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Average Attendance Rates, by Grade

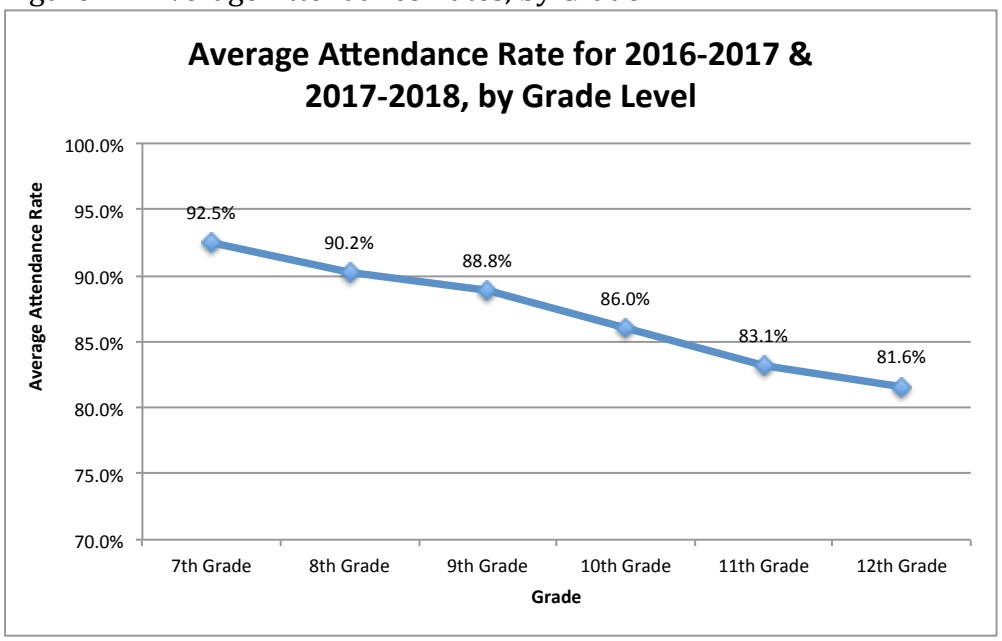


Figure 11 shows a steady decline in the attendance rate from seventh to twelfth grade. Statistical analysis shows that there is a moderate statistically significant negative relationship between grade level and attendance rate (r= -.182, p=.000), meaning that as the grade level goes up, the attendance rate goes down. This indicates that students in the older grades are increasingly not attending classes.

Chronic absenteeism, or truancy, in each grade follows a similar trajectory, according to this analysis (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Percent of Students Absent for Seven Consecutive Days, by Grade

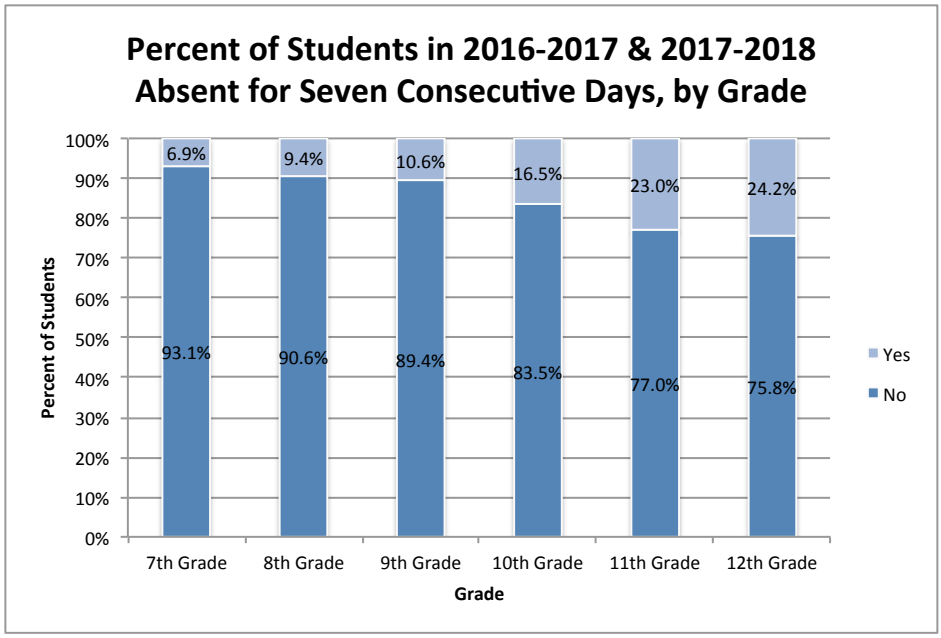


Figure 12 shows that students in higher-grade levels at MEVA are more frequently absent for seven consecutive days than students in seventh grade. The difference in chronic absenteeism between seventh and twelfth grades is statistically significant. According to this analysis, in 12th grade, nearly one quarter of students (24.2%) have been absent for seven consecutive days during a school year.

The quantitative trends identified in Figures 11 and 12 were supported by interviews with teachers and staff at MEVA, who indicated that younger students were more likely to attend, while older students—primarily 12th graders— had "severe" attendance issues. According to teachers and staff, student attendance and absenteeism has been a "significant" and persistent problem. Interviews also indicated that the numbers shown in Table 4 and Figures 11 and 12 might be an improvement over the school's rates historically. One interviewee reported that over the last two years, attendance has "improved to about 88%" this year, whereas several years ago it was "well below 50% attendance." In addition, teachers reported that chronic absenteeism was down significantly in the last year or so. Another teacher stated that "attendance had been neglected" in years prior. This indicates that although these attendance rates are low, they may show improvement from prior years.

Finally, some teachers/ staff raised questions about the accuracy of the attendance records. Interviews indicated that there were instances of students signing onto the course platform, being counted as "in attendance," and yet they did not stay logged in for the class session. These teachers raised questions about what counts as "attendance," and whether data were accurately representing class attendance.

Flexibility and Attendance Questions

According to interviews, part of the challenge with attendance was related to organizational policies and practices. Until recently, MEVA allowed flexibility with regard to attendance in "live" class sessions. As an organization, MEVA's parent organization, K12, has a flexible attendance policy at most of their schools around the country. Although "live" classes were conducted during more traditional school hours, students were not required to attend the live sessions at MEVA synchronously until recently. Instead, as at other K12 schools, students were able to watch the video recordings of the classes. One teacher reported that "that kind of model didn't work" because "kids were confused" about whether they should watch the live class sessions.

While those videos are still available, the expectation for MEVA students has changed to require live session attendance. Students are now strongly discouraged from using videos as their primary class session. One teacher/staff reported that now the "general expectation is that you go to class every day." Thus, now the video recordings are provided as a secondary means of review for students after the synchronous class sessions during the day. In some cases, students are still granted permission to rely primarily on class recordings—but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Several teachers reported, however, that despite this policy shift, attendance is still a major challenge. Several teachers/staff stated things such as, "kids aren't going to class," but rather "going straight to the quiz" or the video. Another teacher/staff indicated that attendance is a "huge problem" and "we are getting flack about it." Other teachers said, "We don't have someone who is dragging them to class." Prompted by ongoing attendance challenges, the school has recently dedicated several staff members to addressing the attendance issues, by providing time for tracking down students who have not logged in in several days.

This policy shift towards synchronous classes has come with other challenges. Because K12 maintains a policy of class attendance flexibility, organizational messaging for the school can be conflicting. One teacher/ staff indicated that advertising for MEVA still indicates in places that there is flexibility in course attendance. In addition, students who enrolled in MEVA several years ago may have entered when the policy was, indeed, different. One teacher/staff stated that for the "initial group" of students, the "selling point was flexibility," but "now that's not true." Even for some teachers and staff, the attendance and flexibility policies are "confusing."

This shift is evident in the parent questionnaire responses and interviews. As shown in Table 3, more than one-quarter (26%) of parents indicated in open-ended questionnaire responses that they valued the "flexibility" of class scheduling at MEVA. However, over 8% of parents stated that an increasing lack of flexibility was a challenge for their families. One parent stated, "It isn't very flexible schedule wise. It is still just like a normal school schedule that isn't really working out. It is not what we were looking for when we were thinking home school," while another echoed, "Structured class times is challenging. Students spend 4-6 straight hours in front of the computer every day. Would like to see flexible schedule using recorded lectures." Several parents noted the shift in flexibility from prior years, for example: "Attendance while MUCH clearer this year still poses as a cumbersome task."

Whether the school should have a flexible schedule is a question that needs to be addressed. One teacher/staff asked, "Why should we require them to come to class?" contending that it was "kind of counter-intuitive of what online education is supposed to be." Conversely, other teachers/staff argued that students should be removed from school if they are not attending, while others stated "its not a homeschool" or "we're not going to let them off the hook."

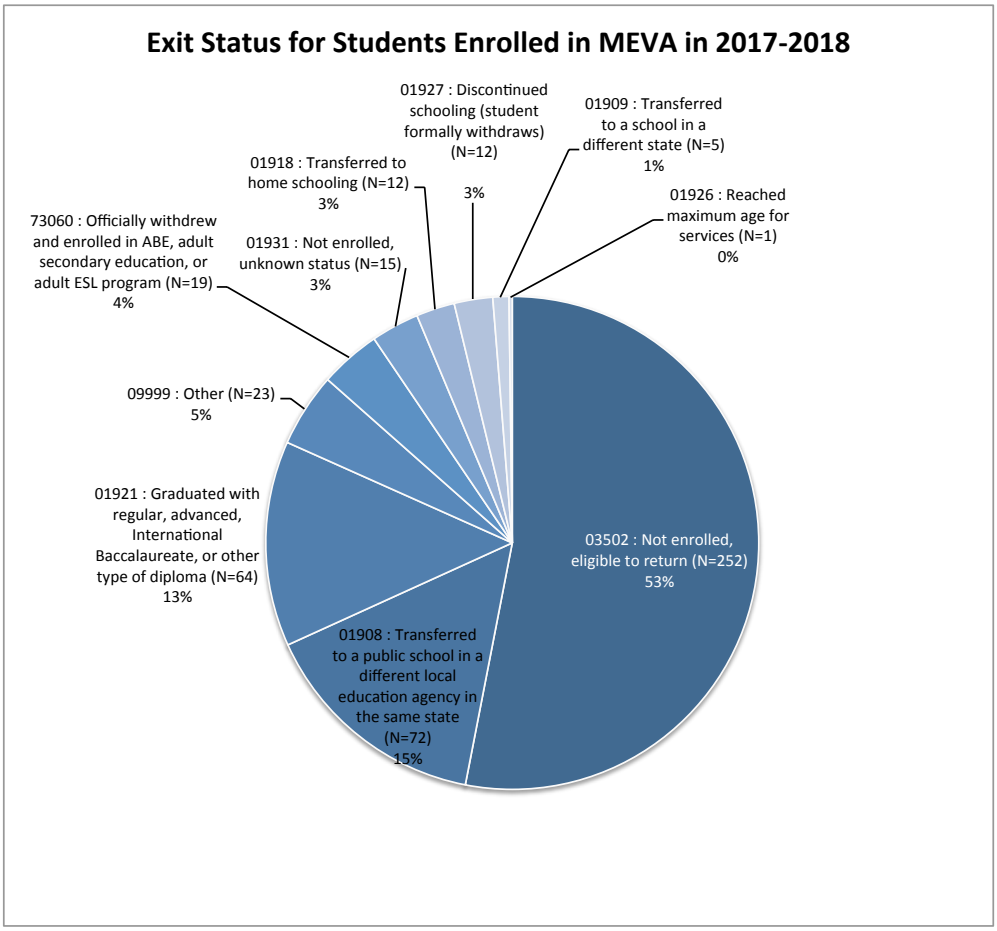
Exit Trends

Students leave MEVA for a variety of reasons, and in different manners. This section reviews student withdrawals, dropouts, graduations, and the post-secondary plans of students at MEVA.

Withdrawal

At the end of the 2017-2018 academic year, students were categorized into a variety of exit statuses. Figure 13 provides an overview of these exit statuses.

Figure 13. Exit Status for MEVA Students in 2017-2018.

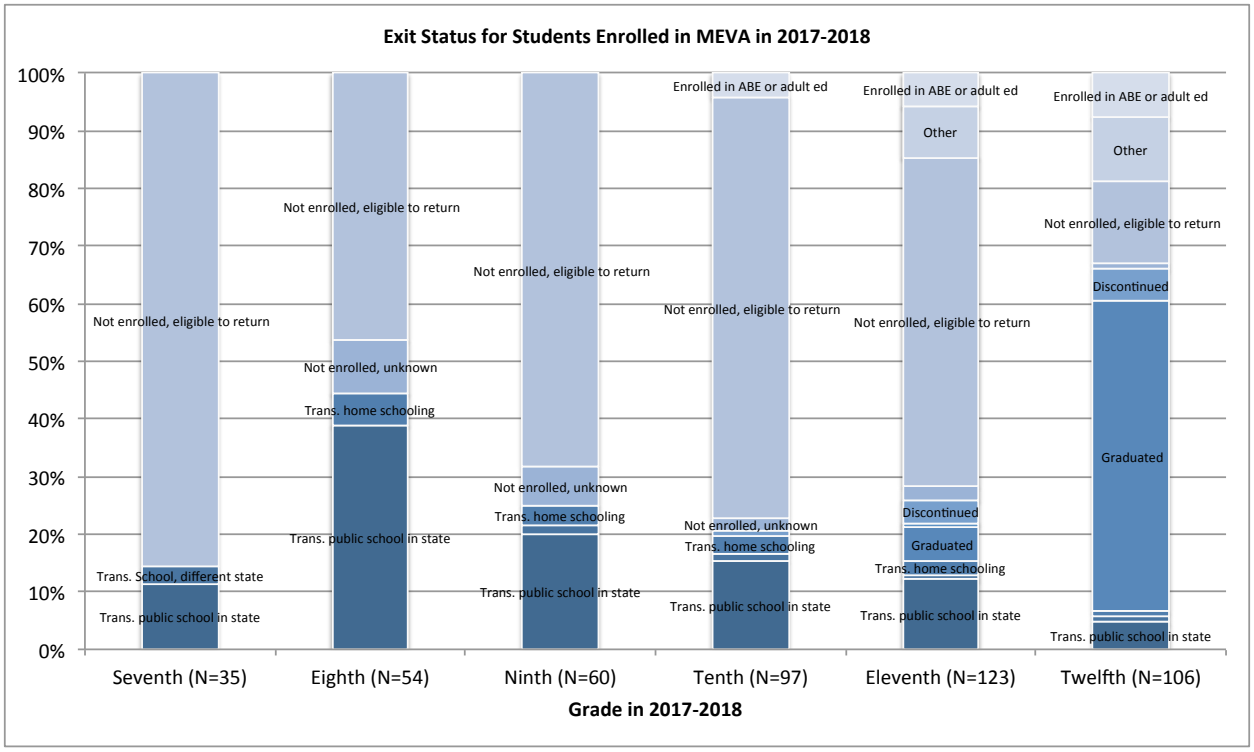


The majority of students (53%) shown in Figure 13 were categorized as "not enrolled, eligible to return." According to the National Forum on Education Statistics (2006), students who are classified as "not enrolled, eligible to return" are defined as follows: "[This category] contains students temporarily not in school, but not considered to be dropouts. Students in this category are not currently able to enroll in school, but are expected to return. (If students do not return when they are able, they are considered dropouts.)" (p.9). This indicates that for a substantial portion of students at MEVA, they are not clearly enrolled, but neither are they un-enrolled. Part of this uncertainty could be due

to the nature of charter schools, which are inherently opt-in institutions, leaving some room for uncertainty about enrollment from year to year. However, these data raise questions about enrollment numbers and also the attendance trends noted above.

In order to better-understand these exit trends, statuses were disaggregated by grade level (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Exit Status, By Grade



As expected, a substantial portion (53%) of students in twelfth grade exited as graduates, according to Figure 14. While students transferred out to a public school or to homeschooling in every grade level, they tended to do so less often in the later grades, indicating that there is an initial period of movement in and out of MEVA, possibly as students determine whether virtual schooling and/or MEVA is a fit for them. Beginning in 10th grade, a gradually increasing portion of students withdraws to enroll in adult education or GED programs. Finally, in eighth and ninth grade, there is a notable percent of students who are categorized as "not enrolled, unknown." This indicates that a number of students are clearly unaccounted for.

In further disaggregating exit trends by student demographic groups, a slight divergence between students in different economic groups emerges (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Exit Status of MEVA Students in 2017-2017, by Economic Disadvantage

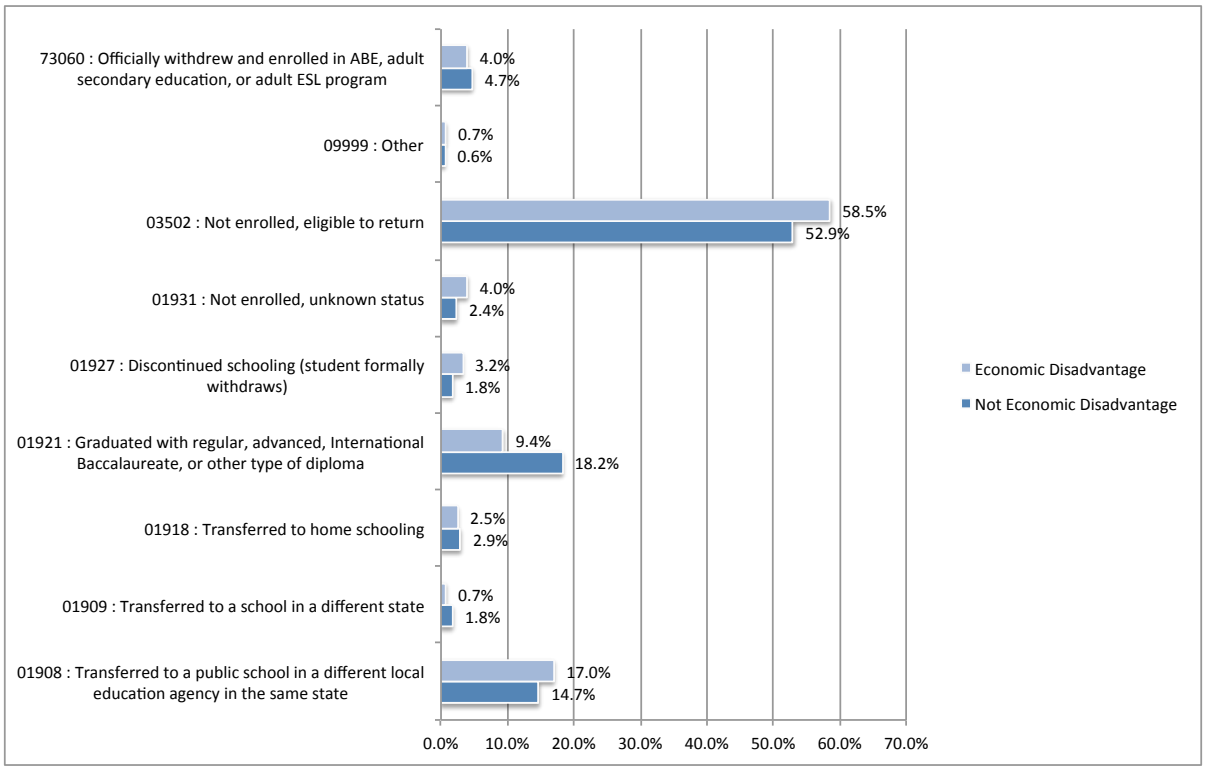
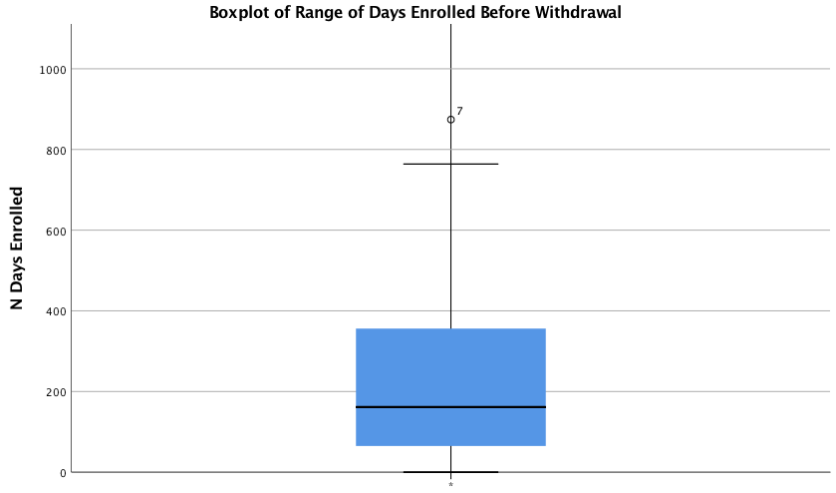


Figure 15 shows that students classified as having economic disadvantage at MEVA are more likely to discontinue their schooling, but not to graduate. The rate of graduation for students without economic disadvantage is nearly twice that of students with economic disadvantage. This is an important trend to note as the majority of students (61%) at MEVA are classified as having economic disadvantage, raising questions about equity of outcomes.

Given that, as a virtual school, MEVA expects a certain amount of turnover after initial enrollment as students determine whether online schooling is appropriate for them or not, it is important to examine the length of time students were enrolled before withdrawing. Figure 16 shows the average range of days that students in throughout school were enrolled before withdrawing.

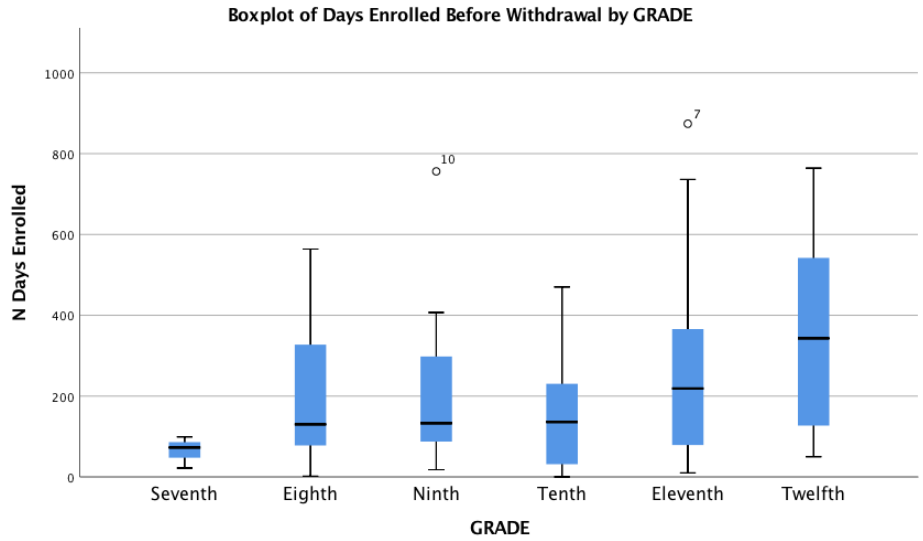
Figure 16. Range of Days of Total Enrollment Before Withdrawal



According to these data, most students (more than three-quarters) were enrolled for fewer than 400 days, on average, before withdrawing fro the school. One-quarter of them were enrolled for 0-100 days, which echoes the exit patterns of transferring out in earlier grades seen in Figure 14 above. A notable proportion of students who withdrew (nearly one-quarter) of students were enrolled for more than 400 days, however— with some approaching 800 days enrolled. These numbers are significant because they may indicate one of two things: either students are withdrawing at the very end of their education at MEVA (for example, in eleventh and twelfth grade) or MEVA has a certain number of "ghost" students—students who are enrolled and not attending, but have not been withdrawn for periods of time. The numbers of students who are categorizes as "not enrolled, eligible to return" may support the latter pattern.

Disaggregating these data by grade sheds a little more light on this trend (Figure 17).

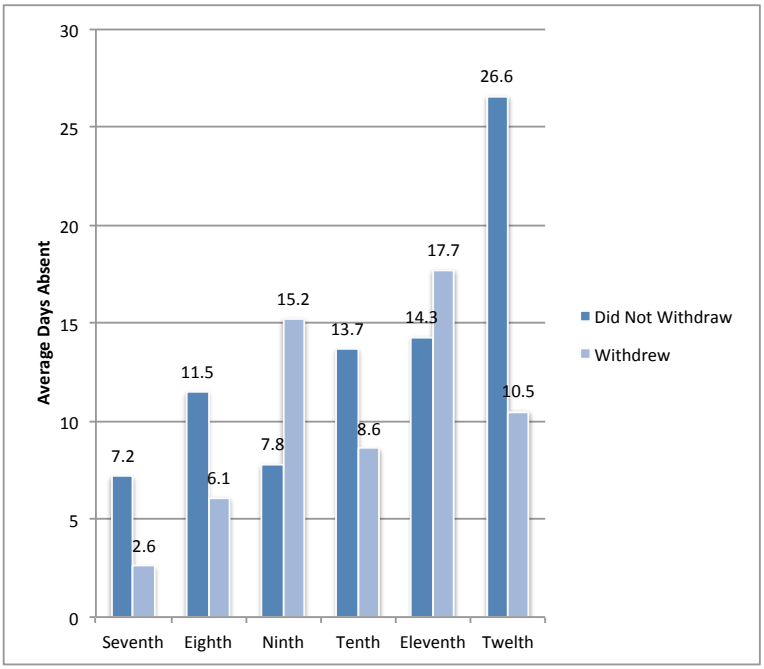
Figure 17. Range of Days of Total Enrollment Before Withdrawal, by Grade



On the one hand, Figure 17 shows us something not surprising—students who withdraw at later grades have been enrolled in MEVA for a greater amount of time. It also shows that seventh graders tend to withdraw quickly, if they do so. Conversely, there appear to be have been a number of eighth and ninth graders who had been enrolled for long periods of time before withdrawing—longer than two academic years. In general, we do not see a direct increase of days enrolled related to grade level in this figure, which, again, potentially raises questions about the presence of "ghost" students and attendance patterns.

In general, there does not appear to be a statistically significant relationship between attendance and withdrawal. Figure 18 shows the differences in average rates of absenteeism between students who withdrew or did not withdraw at each grade level.

Figure 18. Average Days Absent, by Grade and Withdrawal



Interestingly, the largest within grade gap in Figure 18 appears to be in twelfth grade, where students who did not withdraw were absent for, on average, 26.6 days. This potentially indicates that, despite absenteeism, students are persisting. In fact, analysis in SPSS shows that there is no statistically significant difference in attendance rates between students who withdrew and those who did not. In addition there is no statistically significant increase in likelihood of withdrawing for students who were absent more than seven consecutive days. This indicates that attendance is not a strong predictor of student withdrawal at MEVA. These patterns could be due to quick student withdrawals happening soon after a student enrolls (for example, see the seventh grade trends in Figure 17), serve as an indicator of a general attendance problem for the school, or reinforce questions about whether the collected attendance data is representing actual class participation.

In addition to understanding how and when students withdrew, exit data shows us why students decided to exit MEVA. Table 5 disaggregates the primary exit reasons.

Table 5. Exit Reasons for Students at MEVA

Exit Reason	Percent
Lack of Socialization	20%
Student Not Motivated to Complete Work in This Environment	19%
Health Issues in Family	7%
Curriculum Too Challenging	7%
Pace of Program is Too Fast for Student	6%
No Answer/ Blank	5%
Lack of Support for Student Special Needs	5%
Number of Required Live Class Connect Sessions	4%
Lack of Course Choices	4%
Time Required for Student Being Online	3%
Too Many Non-Online Lesson Requirement	3%
Technical Issues that Prevented the Student From Accessing School	2%
Encountered Problems with Specific Courses	2%
Problems with School Staff	2%
Too Much Time Commitment for the Learning Coach	2%
Our Computer was Not Working	2%
Other (All 1% or Less)	8%

Table 5 shows that the two top reasons for a student withdrawing were "lack of socialization" and "student not motivated to complete work in this environment." This first, largest category, related to socialization is reflected in the parent interview and questionnaire responses, as we will see.

It is not immediately clear from the second largest response ("student not motivated to complete work in this environment") what is meant by individual parents. It does point to a potential mismatch between virtual education and a certain number of students who enroll in MEVA.

The fourth- and fifth-ranked category responses are worth noting. Both refer to curricular challenges ("the pace of the program is too fast for the student" and "curriculum too challenging"). These responses echo notes from teacher/ staff interviews that indicated

that students who enroll in MEVA are often several grade levels behind, and in need of basic remediation in coursework. Yet, K12 has a provided curriculum, which teachers/ staff reported having to adapt for students who needed extra support, as will be discussed.

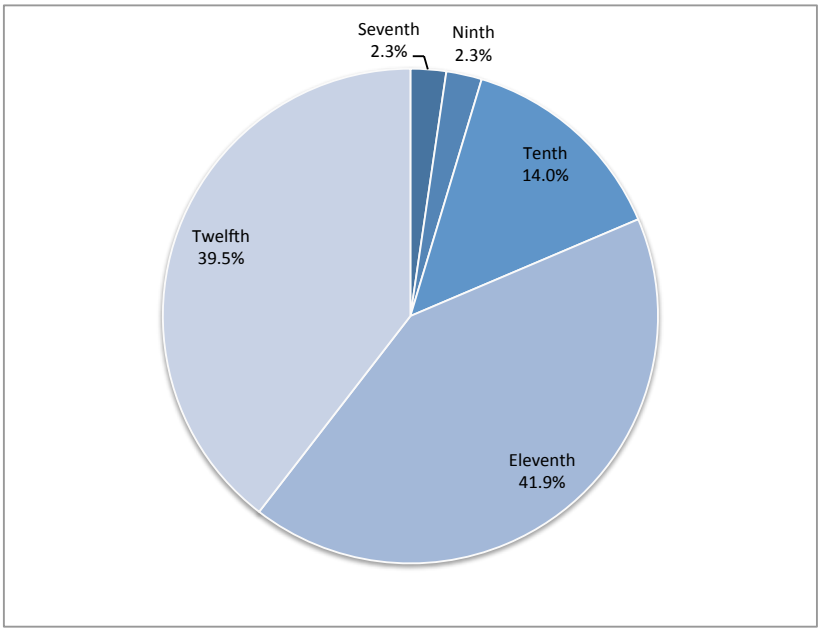
Finally, despite the fact that parents complained about technological issues frequently, "technical issues that prevented the student from accessing school" only resulted in 2% of the withdrawal cases.

Dropping Out

Dropping out is a type of withdrawal that is defined by the student electing to discontinue their education. According to State data, in 2017, the dropout rate for Maine Virtual Academy was 11.36%. This is statistically significantly higher than the statewide average dropout rate of 2.2% (p=.000).

According to data provided to the Maine Department of Education, MEVA had 43 students dropout in 2017-2018. Of those students, a larger portion (63%) was female.[1] The majority of students (81.4%) who dropped out were in eleventh and twelfth grades (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Grade Level of Students who Dropped Out in 2017-2017



[1] Gender is assumed based on student names, and therefore may be slightly off.

It is notable that, according to Figure 19, a portion (18.6%) of students who dropped out did so before eleventh grade.

Graduation Rate

According to State data, in 2017, Maine Virtual Academy's graduation rate was 49.35%. This is statistically significantly lower that the statewide average graduation rate of 86.92% (p=.000). The majority of graduates in 2017-2018 (77%) were 4-year graduates, completing with their initial cohort. A small portion of the graduates in 2017-2018 (14%) graduated in advance of their cohort. More than half of the graduates (66%) were female[2], which is consistent with the overall school gender enrollment rate.

Post-Secondary Plans

Of the students who graduated in 2018, 40% were accepted to post-secondary schools, while 15% were entering the workforce and 5% enlisted in the military. A number of students were pursuing careers in technical or trade industries. In interviews, a few teacher/ staff discussed post-secondary transitions and planning for MEVA graduates. Many indicated that college advising and post-secondary planning is really just beginning to take shape at the school. Some teachers expressed concern about a lack of transitions, particularly for students with special needs.

Outside School Supports

Learning Coach

According to school and K12 policy, all students under the age of 18 who are enrolled in MEVA are required to have a Learning Coach with them to support their work. According to written sources and qualitative findings, the role of the Learning Coach is intense. The MEVA Student & Parent Handbook, 2017-2018, outlines that in addition to logging daily hours, "Learning Coaches are expected to check their student's progress at least weekly via the learning coach account." Learning Coaches are given a contract to sign upon student enrollment, agreeing to monitor and document their student's activities in

[2] Gender is assumed based on student names, and therefore may be slightly off.

school. According to questionnaires and interviews with parents, the continuous documentation and monitoring can be a challenge, with several describing it using the word "cumbersome." Multiple parents in questionnaires noted that they find it a challenge to keep track of their child's progression through courses and attendance. In parent interviews, two parents spoke about the "cumbersome" task of recording work time.

Interviews with teachers/staff indicate that, despite policy, not all students have proper Learning Coaches at home with them. One teacher/staff reported that this was a "huge issue," and another acknowledged, "If there is not a dedicated Learning Coach… then it may not go well."

Requiring home-based support presents challenges for equity for enrollment and performance for those students for whom either parents or guardians are not available during the day, for example. In addition, some Learning Coaches are inherently going to be more or less capable of providing support. Having a Learning Coach at home also raises particular concerns with regard to students with special needs, as many of their IEP goals extend beyond academic requirements.[3]

Parent Involvement

Interestingly, despite the requirement of a Learning Coach, many parents reported not being involved at MEVA on a variety of questions regarding parent involvement (Table 6).

Table 6. Parent Survey Responses Regarding Involvement (from Panorama Education)

Survey Question	Most Frequent Response & Rate
"How often do you meet in person with teachers at your child's school?"	Almost never (54.3%)
"How involved have you been with a parent group(s) at your child's school?"	Not at all involved (75.4%)
"In the past year, how often have you discussed your child's school with other parents from the school?"	Almost never (65.9%)
"In the past year, how often have you helped out at your child's school?"	Almost never (89.6%)
"In the past year, how often have you visited your child's school?"	Almost never (44.8%)
"How involved have you been in fundraising efforts at your child's school?"	Almost never (92.2%)

[3] Specifics regarding students with special need are discussed in detail later in this report.

While many of these questions are phrased in a way that would be better suited for a brick-and-mortar environment (for example, the phrase "at your child's school" implies at the location), these data serve as an overall indicator of lack of involvement on the part of many parents at MEVA. They also raise questions about training or regulations for Learning Coaches.

Socialization & Field Trips

Socialization and social connection is an issue that comes up frequently in relation to virtual schooling. Maine Virtual Academy is no different from many other virtual schools in this way.

Maine Virtual Academy organizes field trips, both virtual and in-person. Part of the purpose of the in-person field trips is to allow for interpersonal interaction among students and families. Teachers/ staff reported the high quality of the field trips in recent years, with one teacher/ staff described their field trips as being "brag worthy." However, interviews indicate that given the size, geography, and weather in Maine, it is challenging to create trips that are meaningfully accessible to all students. Many teachers/staff reported wanting to increase the field trips, and social opportunities for students.

In general, parents echoed this desire for more social interaction for their children. For example, in Table 5, the primary reason for student withdrawal (20%) was cited as "lack of socialization." Parent interviews often cited lack of socialization as the primary negative aspect of MEVA for their families. Several parents spoke about the need for more field trips. Echoing these requests, according to parent questionnaire comments, 11.9% of families want more socialization and field trips. One parent stated, "I think my [child] misses having friends. I was thinking that maybe along with field trips, MEVA could offer in-office days where the teachers could have projects/activities for their students to work on with their classmates. Then students wouldn't be missing any work and have to make it up." Another parent echoed, "My [child] does have some struggles with being home and not having the social interaction."

Operational Challenges

Facilities

There appears to be a common acknowledgement that the school facilities are not conducive to teaching. Teachers/ staff reported that they are "not crazy about their open cubicles," and many requested for "more options for office space." Teachers/staff indicated that students can see and hear other classes in session, which distracts from their time. According to interviews, this issue is currently being resolved with some construction efforts on campus.

Technology

Throughout the qualitative data collection, questions and concerns were raised about technology. According to interviews, K12 provides students with computers (laptops), and is primarily in charge of trouble-shooting when technological issues arise. In addition, MEVA provides an Internet subsidy to support online connections at homes. At the start of the school year, MEVA provides orientations that include information for students and learning coaches about how to use the technology and access online content for coursework.

Many teachers/ staff and parents report that students enjoy the online learning platform. Teachers/staff report that virtual environments reduce the need to manage behavioral issues and disruptions during class, as students can be "muted" from chat if they are exhibiting disruptive behavior. One teacher/staff reported that it is "easier to talk about things without distractions." Multiple teachers/ staff and parents reported that the virtual platform can allow students to "reinvent" themselves in relation to their peers and school. Some parents indicated that their children were excited about classes because they "don't have to prove themselves socially." In addition, many teachers/ staff spoke highly about the ways in which technology can be used and adapted for classroom instruction.

Despite supports for the potential of online learning model, both parents and teachers/staff indicated that students and families were experiencing a variety of technological problems that inhibited their learning. In parent interviews, multiple parents pointed to challenges with technology. However, one interviewee indicated it was their sole

problem with MEVA: “There are no real downsides [to MEVA] other than the technology when it fails, which isn’t often.”

In the open-ended parent questionnaire, 14.7% of parents indicated that one major challenge for their family with MEVA was technology. Some parents were critical of the usability of the learning technology, itself: “The actually technology is stable, but not easy to use. My [child] is quite literal, so sometimes [s/he] misses things [s/he] isn't expecting, but this is beyond that. I have [an advanced degree in computer science] and have worked [in technology] for more than 20 years, and sometimes I just cannot figure out what [s/he’s] supposed to do sometimes for a given class or assignment.” Other parents cited lack of Internet connectivity as being a complication: “[One challenge is] being able to connect to the Internet.”

Teachers/staff echoed these concerns, citing both gaps in technological understanding and comfort among families in Maine, as well as software/hardware challenges. Many teachers contend that families frequently not only have a lack of familiarity and comfort with technology, they find the MEVA introduction “overwhelming.” One teacher/ staff member spoke about the paradoxical challenges of “teaching them virtually to do virtual education.” In addition, despite the availability of multiple, extended orientations, many MEVA teachers/ staff reported that some families and students “don’t attend orientations” and so “don’t know what to do.” For the most part, teachers/ staff indicated that many students do get over this learning curve eventually, but others contended that it contributed to other problems, such as attendance and course completion.

In addition to challenges with adapting to the practices of online learning, teachers/ staff and parents indicated that the quality of hardware/software has been a persistent challenge. Many reported that laptops provided by K12 are work inconsistently, particularly this academic year. In addition, there have been challenges with microphones, and Internet connections. K12 provides support for these issues, and both parents and teachers reported that problems are usually resolved quickly.

Finally, BlackBoard, while a functional online platform, is not a fluid or technologically advanced platform for online course delivery. One teacher/staff contended about BlackBoard, “There should be a better way.”

As noted earlier, these technology problems contribute to other areas of concern, such as attendance. Many reported that technological challenges allow students "to have one million excuses" about attendance or course assignments.

Organizational & Pedagogical Issues

Courses

One issue that repeatedly referenced during teacher/ staff interviews was class size. According to interviews, K12 has very high student-teacher ratio in its schools around the country—sometimes as high as 300 students per teacher. By comparison, MEVA has substantially smaller classes, averaging between 80-100 students per class. This is a large number for a single class session, however.

Two issues arise from the class sizes: grading and personal supports/ interactions. In terms of grading, teachers/ staff reported that for courses with higher reading and writing content, the workload is substantial. Where possible, many teachers have begun to "depend on tools like quizzes that automatically grade"— a practice that lends itself more readily to quantitatively oriented subjects, like math.

Larger class sizes create barriers for personal interaction and support. Although in traditional public schools, teachers generally have multiple classes which can equal a similar total student load for each teacher, a larger class can, in-and-of-itself, inhibit personal interactions. Although the total head count may be similar, it stands to reason that breaking students into smaller groups allows teachers to find moments to connect with individual students. While it is clear from qualitative data that teachers are working hard to connect with students, and often successfully do, they also acknowledge that this is a persistent challenge, stating, "Part of why they [students] are here is to have a better experience," or, "I don't get to know them," or, "It'd be nice to have more staff."

In addition to the overall course size, many teachers/staff were concerned about the amount to time scheduled for classes, and the challenges of finding small group time for supports. Many teachers/ staff reported that courses were too short, and that some subjects got priority over others for allotted time. In addition, small group and 1-on-1 instruction scheduling was hard.

Finally, many teachers/ staff pushed for differentiation in courses, which they argued would allow them to better address the wide range of needs of students in their classrooms.

Special Education

As indicated above, 15% of students at MEVA receive special educational services. According to Johnson et al. (2016), in 2015, of the students with special needs, 56% were enrolled in a general education classroom fulltime, 28% required supports, but were in the general education classroom from 40-80% of the times, and 15% were in self-contained classrooms, or participating in general education for less than 40% of the time. For these students, there is a number of support staff who primarily do push-in support, small group instruction in breakout rooms, or 1-to-1 supports, depending on the needs of the student.

Virtual education provides a unique setting for students with special needs. For some students, parent indicated that the online format is more conducive to their learning styles and needs: "The flexible learning schedule is beneficial for my [son/daughter] because of [his/her] ADHD. S/he can get up and walk around. S/he doesn't feel pressure to perform for six straight hours." In this case, the virtual platform is more appropriately adaptive for the student's learning needs than being in a physical classroom. For example, the student noted above can address the academic component of school without worrying about his/her behavioral needs interfering with classroom routines or management.

As mentioned earlier, the school is primarily supporting the academic needs of students with special needs, while, as one teacher/staff stated, "the parents do the behavioral." Learning Coaches discussed challenges of providing in-home supports for their students. One parent directly referenced this: "[My child] needs therapy to help his/her A.D.D. impulses and I need to change work hours to assist better." One teacher reported that they "had a special education student at home alone." This returns to the earlier discussion of the role of Learning Coaches, and potentially, questions about whether MEVA is adequately providing for not just academic, but behavioral supports, required by law for students with special needs.

Parents indicated that they sometimes faced challenges in accessing or providing supports for their children with special needs. A small portion of parents overall (2.8%) indicated that they wanted more 1-to-1 support for their child.

Work Completion & Grading Policies

One persistent question that arose during teacher/staff interviews surrounded the relationship between work completion and grading policies at the school— particularly the end-of-semester deadlines and requirements. Multiple teachers and staff reported that there is flexibility on deadlines throughout the semester, or at least a lack of formal consequences for not submitting work. Interviewees stated, "We have a lenient work submitting policy" in which students can "wait until the last week" to submit their coursework without penalty.

Parents confirmed that their children had challenges completing assignments. In open-ended questionnaires, 9.2% of parents indicated that consistently completing work was a problem for their child. One parents reported simply that her child has trouble "turning things in on time." Other parents attributed the level of independence that students have to challenges completing work. Some parents indicated they wanted more feedback when work is not completed: "Immediate feedback when grades are slipping or work not completed." Lack of work motivation and completion was a major reason for student withdrawal, according to Table 5.

According to teacher/staff interviews, the practice of not having penalties for late work combined with challenges for students of completing assignments sets into motion several consequences: First, and at a minimum, teachers are inundated with grading in the last weeks of school. In addition, because of attendance challenges combined with the lack of content completion, teachers/ staff reported that many students are not learning the course material. Thus, at the end of the semester, a notable portion of the student population is on track to fail their courses with little time remaining to complete assignments. As one teacher/ staff member put it, "my failure rate is high" because "kids aren't doing the work." Yet, interviews indicate that teachers/staff feel "pressure" to produce "passing rates."

At this point, multiple teachers/staff reported that they are encouraged to develop "back-on-track plans" for students who are failing. These plans are designed to exempt students from enough coursework deliverables to enable the students to pass the course, regardless of how much work was outstanding: "the most bang for your buck," as a teacher/ staff put it. Many interviewees referred to this policy of reducing assignments, and all indicated that the pressure to engage in this practice was not official policy, but that it was made clear to them that it was expected.

Teachers and Administration

As noted earlier in this report, teachers/staff reported a positive school culture overall. There were, however, tensions between teachers/ staff stemming largely from organizational concerns that are worth noting.

First, there is a lack of consistency about teachers working from home. As mentioned earlier, teachers are required to work in a brick-and-mortar office in Augusta. According to interviews, new teachers are not allowed a "flex day" in which they can work from home, while older teachers are allowed this. However, interviews indicate that a handful of teachers work from home at least frequently, if not all the time. It is not clear why some of these exceptions were made, but it is clear from interviews that the inconsistency causes tension among the teachers/ staff.

In addition, there have been issues with teacher consistency, experience, and turnover over the years. According to interview data, there was an initial wave of teacher turnover as the school became more inflexible about working from home, and other policies, such as following up on absent students. One teacher/staff report that the school was "more demanding now" and teachers are "busting their tails." Multiple teachers are new to teaching in general as well as online teaching. Most teachers at MEVA had no experience teaching online before coming to the school.

Finally, there were a few reports of a "lack of morale" amongst teachers/staff. Part of this seemed to be due to tensions surrounding the two issues cited above— substantial teacher requirements and inconsistencies in policy (such as with working from home). Teachers/ staff reported concerns about workload, including tracking down absent students, class sizes, completing home phone calls, etc. Some teachers stated that there was

not enough support or understanding from administration about the workload. Another teacher/ staff noted that some of the tension arose from pressures from above (see next section, as well) that were "driven to work toward metrics." Some teachers/staff were apprehensive about teacher rights, stating that teachers do not want to speak up when they have questions or concerns.

K12 Relationship

MEVA is overseen by K12 Education Inc., which runs a network of virtual schools throughout the country. The expansion of charter management organizations (CMOs) and educational management organizations (EMOs) nationwide has been rapid for the last decade. Maine is somewhat unique in the national charter landscape in that it has been later to adopt charter policy, and has very few charters managed by outside organizations. Only the two virtual charter schools fall into this category, including MEVA.

Being part of a charter management network can have advantages. Starting a school is a challenge akin to "building a plane while flying it," and having a pre-determined model to build off of helps mitigate that. In addition, larger management networks can provide supports for teachers and students. For example, one teacher/staff noted that K12 "provide[s] a lot of great resources." As noted earlier, as well, K12 gives technological supports to students in Maine who would not otherwise be able to enroll in a virtual school due to lack of Internet or computers.

Yet, nationwide, charter schools have faced challenges in adapting standardized, network models from their charter networks for local implementation. MEVA is no exception. Throughout this report already, several instances have arisen that highlight some of these tensions. As noted above, K12 has an open attendance policy, allowing students to have flexibility in participating in "live" course sessions. MEVA has made a change to move away from this model, with one teacher/ staff noting, "following the K12 model was a problem." In addition, the challenges related to courses sizes noted above stem, in part, from K12 policies and practices.

Following K12 also creates curricular restraints. Several teachers/ staff and parents noted that the prescribed coursework "very rigorous and fast-paced," and that "teachers want to be able to teach their way." For families, this was a major reason for withdrawal

(Table 5). Many teachers reported that they spent a great deal of time trying to adapt the K12 practices to their own classes, as well as, conversely, "integrating what we're doing into the [K12] system." Other teachers/staff felt that there was a "disconnect" between K12 and MEVA with respect to the needs of their students with one noting it was a challenge to work with high-need students with "the curriculum we've been given."

More broadly, however, teachers/ staff spoke of their concerns about K12 as being "a business" model. Some teachers noted that some of the challenges the school faces potentially stemmed from tensions between K12's financial priorities as a business, and providing better pedagogical and social/ emotional supports for students.

Finally, multiple teachers/ staff noted the intense scrutiny felt as a school through the combined, multi-faceted management/oversight structure (K12, MEVA, the Board, and the Charter Commission), oftentimes resulting in confusion, and misaligned incentives and messages. Concerns were expressed about a lack of MEVA autonomy in decision-making, with teachers/ staff noting, "[we] can't control K12 just like we can't control the weather," with some expressing a desire to "take the reigns back" from K12 or to "make our own decisions." Several interviewees felt there were "too many people in charge," while others noted that decisions were sometimes a "power struggle."

Test Performance Outcomes

In order to evaluate test-based performance outcomes, both Maine Educational Assessments (MEA) and NWEA results were analyzed. The former allows for a view of MEVA vis-à-vis state standards and outcomes, and the latter test provides a glimpse into student growth.

Maine Educational Assessments (MEA)

Maine Educational Assessments (MEA) scores are categorized into four groups: "well below state expectations," "below state expectations," "at state expectations," or "above state expectations." Scores that are categorized as "at" or "above state expectations" are considered meeting standards. Table 7 shows MEVA's average MEA performance score for 2016-2017 academic year, disaggregated by grade level and subject, and highlights whether this is meeting state standards or not.

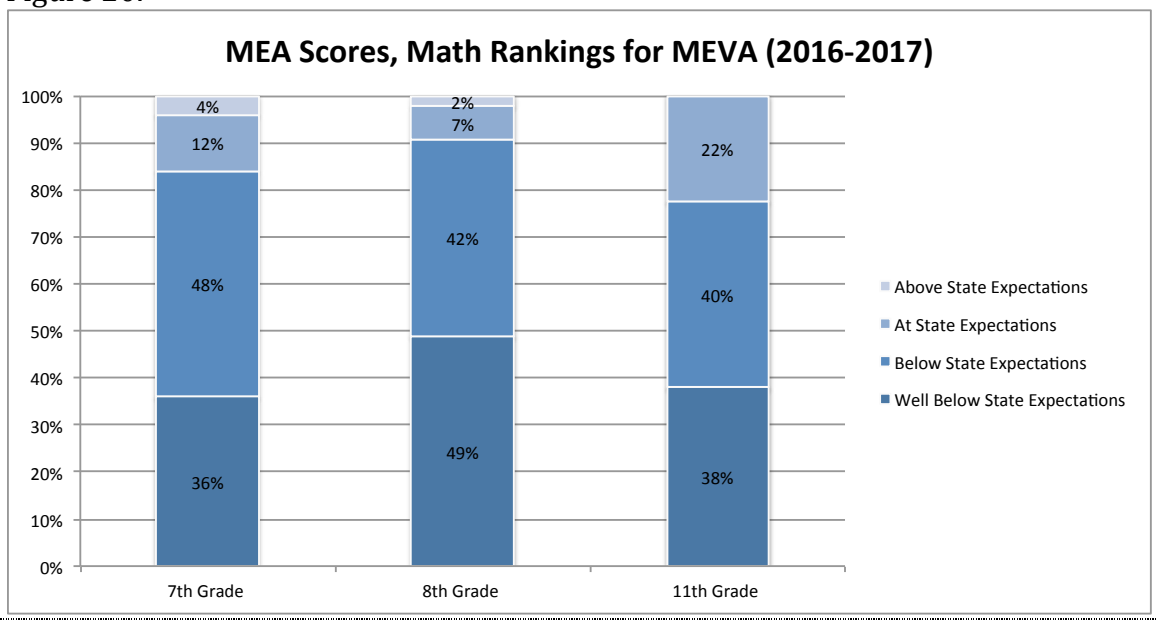
Table 7. Average MEA Scores

Average MEA Scores (2016-2017)			
Grade Level	Math	ELA/Literacy	Science
7th	748	758	N/A
8th	847	862*	848*
11th	443	477	1138
*Score is At or Above State Expectations			

Based on these average scores, Table 7 indicates that the majority of MEVA students performed "below" or "well below" state expectations in this academic year. In only two subject areas (in eighth grade ELA/Literacy and eighth grade science) did students, on average, score "at" or "above" state expectations.

Further examinations shown in Figures 20, 21, and 22 show the proportion of students scoring in each of the four categories, by subject grade level and subject. Figure 20 shows math performance over three grade levels in 2016-2017.

Figure 20.

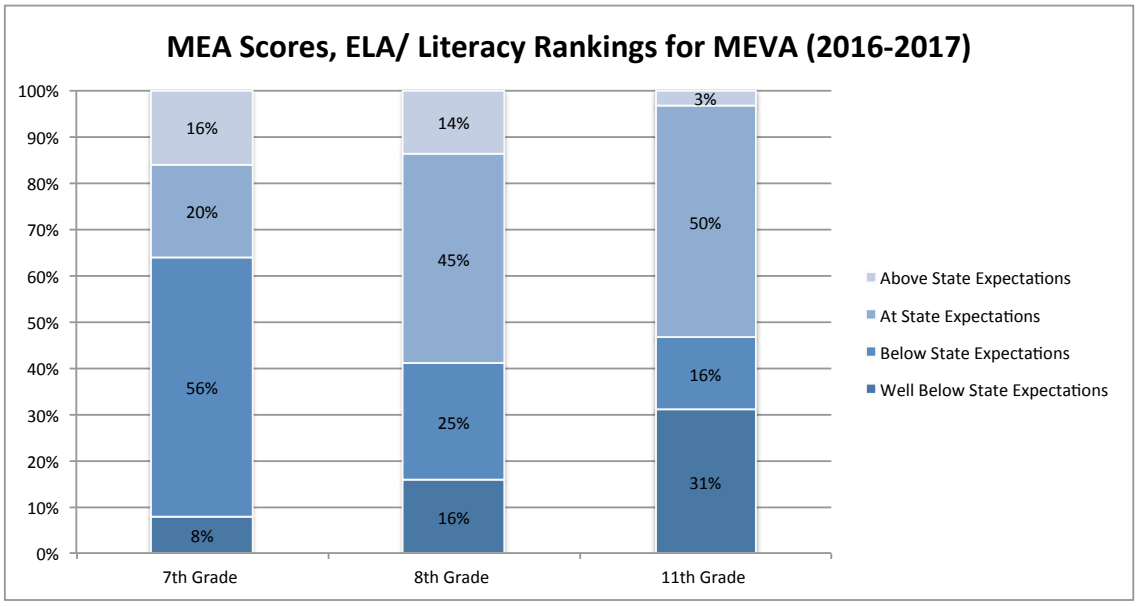


Notably, the majority of students (from 78-91%) scored at least "below state expectations" in 2016-2017 in math. A substantial portion of students in each grade level scored "well below state expectations," including in eighth grade where nearly half of the students fell into this category. It is also notable that while the overall portion of students scoring at

least “at state expectations” in eleventh grade is higher than in seventh or eighth grade, the percentage of students scoring “above state expectations” decreases in each grade level, with 4% in seventh grade, and no students in eleventh grade in this top category.

In general, MEVA students performed better on ELA/ Literacy tests than on the math exams in this year, as seen in Figure 21.

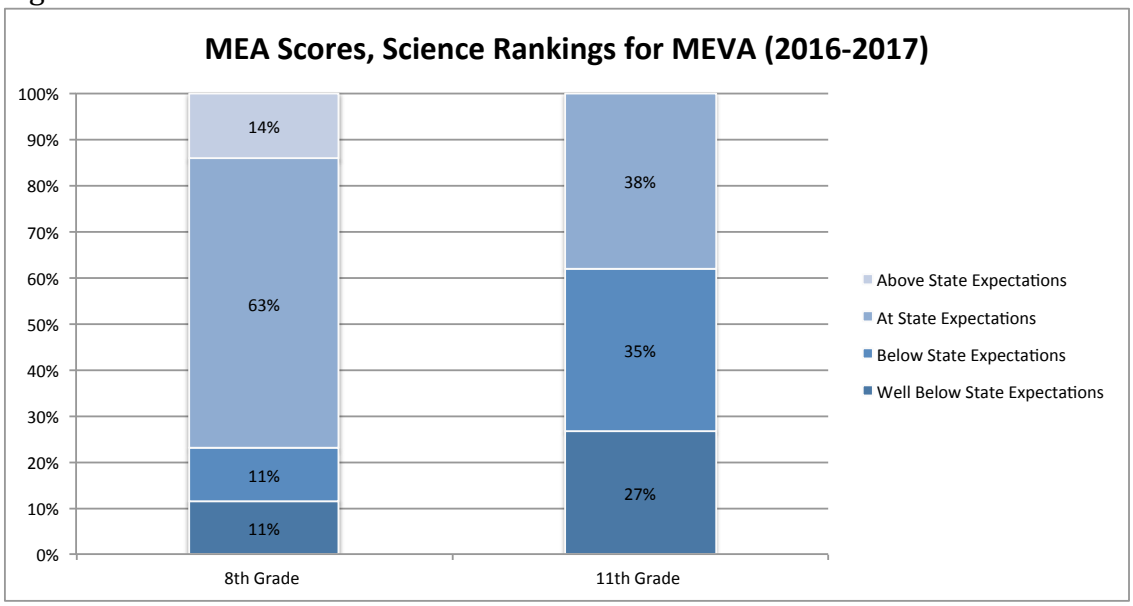
Figure 21.



Overall, students at MEVA did better on ELA/ Literacy MEAs than Math in 2016-2017. Yet, despite the better performance, two trends are worth noting. Similar to the math scores, while the portion of students scoring at least “at state expectations” increases after seventh grade, the percentage of students who scored “above state expectations” decreases by grade level. In addition, the percentage of students who scores “well below state expectations” nearly quadruples by the eleventh grade.

Finally, Figure 22 disaggregates the MEA Science scores from eighth and eleventh grades.

Figure 22.



MEA Science scores from 2016-2017 show the vast majority (77%) of eighth graders achieving at least "at state expectations" or better. Conversely, the majority (62%) of eleventh graders scored "below" or "well below state expectations" in science in this year.

In examining these data is critical to note two caveats. First, we are not looking at cohorts of students over time, but rather snapshots of individual grades. This means that although it is tempting to infer trends, scores can simply be reflective of different student compositions in each grade. Second, of the eleventh graders who had a science MEA test score, over 18% of students were missing a math and reading MEA test score among the state records. This is a large gap in the analysis.

NWEA Tests

In addition to MEA performance data, NWEA outcomes in Math and Reading for 2017 and 2018 were collected. Records for both Fall and Spring for 7th-10th grades were analyzed. For this analysis, in order to build on the MEA data reviewed in the previous section, the focus was on individual student growth. In short, although students at MEVA may be generally performing at a certain level relative to state targets, it is critical to also examine progress made by individual students.

In order to examine growth, first, the average Observed Growth (which is simply the raw difference between Fall and Spring scores) was compiled. Table 8 examines the Observed Growth for each grade, organized by 2018 cohort. Those scores that made positive growth are highlighted in grey.

Table 8.

Average Observed Growth on NWEA				
Grade in 2018	**2017**		**2018**	
	Math	**Reading**	**Math**	**Reading**
Seventh	N/A	N/A	1.25	-5.27
Eighth	2.21	2.56	-0.50	-4.77
Ninth	0.16	-0.85	5.76	-0.11
Tenth	-0.35	3.25	1.85	-1.23
Eleventh	5.16	4.12	N/A	N/A

Table 8 shows that, on average, MEVA students made small to medium gains in Observed Growth in a little over half of the subjects. In few areas, students scored worse in the Spring than in Fall, most notably in 2018, in reading, where students universally had negative Observed Growth, on average.

In addition, because a certain amount of annual student growth is expected, NWEA sets growth targets for each student, and reports on whether or not the individual student met the target each year. The Growth Index is measured by calculating the difference between the NWEA's projected Spring score for a student (based on the amount of growth expected from their Fall score) and their actual Spring test score. Table 9 shows the average percentage of students who met their Growth Index in 2017 and 2018, by grade. Those averages that are above 50% are highlighted in grey.

Table 9.

Percent of Students Who Met Projected Growth Index on NWEA				
Grade in 2018	**2017**		**2018**	
	Math	**Reading**	**Math**	**Reading**
Seventh	N/A	N/A	20%	22%
Eighth	38%	47%	38%	38%
Ninth	37%	38%	62%	49%
Tenth	44%	55%	52%	43%
Eleventh	66%	59%	N/A	N/A

As Table 9 illustrates, the majority of students did not meet their NWEA Growth targets in either year. This pattern is due to the smaller gains shown in Table 8. While the portion of students in seventh grade who met their growth targets was below one quarter of the grade in both math and reading, with each grade level, more students are meeting growth targets. Nevertheless, a substantial subset of students is not reaching the targets NWEA projects.

Unpacking the growth target data further, Table 10 shows the average annual Growth Index in each subject by grade level. These number shows how far above or below students scored relative to their Growth Index target.

Table 10.

Average Annual Growth Index on NWEA				
Grade in 2018	**2017**		**2018**	
	Math	**Reading**	**Math**	**Reading**
Seventh	N/A	N/A	-5.08	-8.86
Eighth	-3.79	-1.22	-5.47	-7.37
Ninth	-4.45	-3.27	2.45	-2.44
Tenth	-3.38	0.91	-0.72	-3.61
Eleventh	2.86	1.89	N/A	N/A

Echoing the table above, we observe a consistent trend. On average, in most grades, in both math and reading, on average, students are scoring a gap below their Growth Index. Referring back to Table 8, this does not necessarily mean that individual student scores in

the Spring are below their scores from the Fall. Because of how the Growth Index is calculated, it means that even while some students are improving their scores, they are falling short of the NWEA project score for growth. On average, the majority of students are scoring below their Growth Index targets.

Teacher/ Staff Reflections on Test Performance

Interviews with teachers/ staff support the test performance findings and indicate that the school is aware that their students are not performing well on standardized tests. One teacher/staff noted that there were "lots of students below basic." However, another teacher/ staff projected, "We're going to turn it around."

DISCUSSION

This analysis shows several things. First, there is a need for supports and outlets for students who are experiencing social anxiety, bullying, or stress at school due to social issues. MEVA is filling this particular need for some students effectively. Clearly, the teacher supports and student environment have resonated with many students for whom traditional public school is a challenge. For these students to find an educational institution in which they feel "at home" is a major success. In addition, many students want or need more flexibility during the day, and MEVA is one way through which they are able to find it. Finally, virtual education provides an interesting means of creating student autonomy and independence in taking charge of learning. Taken together, these findings that are supportive of the work of MEVA are also partly a critique of the existing system of public education, suggesting either a need for more "alternative" educational programs to support the students of the type who gravitate towards MEVA, or increasing social/ emotional support and flexibility within the existing public system.

Yet, despite its successes at supporting and connecting with many students, MEVA shows a high rate of absenteeism and truancy. Other students are withdrawing or are not clearly accounted for at some point after enrolling. Although it appears that, for some students, MEVA has forged a connecting, supportive community, there is a portion of students whom MEVA teachers have not been able to reach. An already slightly more disconnected student population, a lack of ability to track students in a virtual setting,

unclear policies around attendance, and large class sizes are likely contributing to this problem. In addition, the pattern of increased absences at later grades and low graduation rates point to a gradual disconnect occurring throughout an average student's tenure at MEVA. These findings call into question the degree to which the school is actually effectively connecting and re-engaging the student body as a whole.

In addition, multiple questions have been raised in this report about the efficacy of the school in serving students academically. In particular, test scores frequently show an average of negative growth, and are not meeting state expectations. Related to this, the issues that arose regarding attendance, grading, and test scores seem potentially inter-related. If, for example, students are not attending classes (thus, not completing coursework or possibly learning the content), and then being exempted from assignments at the end of the semester in an effort to allow them to pass the course, these decisions could result in the lack of growth and proficiency reflected in the test scores. These are problematic trends.

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