Plimpton
R E S E A R C H

Maine Virtual Academy External Evaluation: Final Report
March 2020

Executive Summary

This report presents our external evaluation of Maine Virtual Academy (MeVA). This study included a review of MeVA's Maine Charter School Commission (MCSC) application, a literature review of research on virtual learning and previous studies of MeVA, and interviews with a range of key informants to gather observations and insights. Our overall goal was to identify areas of improvement.

MeVA's mission is "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 need alternative educational options." We examined academic program delivery, instructional time, career pathways, special education services, the intervention model, assessment, extracurricular activities, professional development, and middle school and high school curricula.

The key informant interviews drew out four key themes, and many insights on the areas of inquiry:
- MeVA is a supportive community.
- MeVA has an entrepreneurial culture.
- Student self-motivation and Learning Coach support are critical to student success at MeVA.
- Recent staffing additions have made a positive difference.

Recommendations are detailed on the last page of the report and include:
- In marketing MeVA, be transparent about the need for students to be self-motivated, to regularly attend classes, and the importance and time commitment of the Learning Coach role.
- Expand the orientation and onboarding process for Learning Coaches. Create a mandatory class session that describes their daily and weekly responsibilities, offers tips and advice from current LCs, etc.
- Continue to expand the teaching staff to reduce class sizes.
- Offer summer school English and math courses to increase credit recovery and on-time graduation rates.
- Offer an introductory foreign language course in middle school to introduce students and prepare those who wish to continue for K12 or Dual Enrollment high school foreign language courses.
- Provide more training in the NWEA MAP assessment results to all teachers, so that those data can be fully utilized to guide instruction and student support.
- Special services: Improve internal communications with all staff by holding quarterly roundtables to discuss students with IEPs, Title IA, and other special services students. Develop a recommended set of teacher practices for identifying and engaging these students during class periods.
- Explore a partnership with Career and Technical Education at the state level to facilitate more MeVA students' access to CTE courses and ultimately improve graduates' career readiness.

I. Introduction

Maine Virtual Academy (MeVA) hired Plimpton Research to conduct its 2020 third-party evaluation, and we worked together to design an implementation evaluation. The goal of implementation or process evaluations is to determine whether a program's activities have been implemented as intended and have resulted in intended outcomes. We sought to address the questions: How does the school today compare with the plan submitted to the Maine Charter School Commission (MCSC)? Is MeVA offering the courses, partnerships, and services that were promised? How and why has the school's mission and vision changed? What barriers has the school faced? How could the school improve?

This study included a review of MeVA's Maine Charter School Commission (MCSC) application, a literature review of research on virtual learning, and interviews with a range of key informants to gather observations and insights. Our report also discusses the findings from last year's graduate study conducted for the Maine Charter School Commission.

II. Document and Literature Review

MeVA's MCSC Application

Maine Virtual Academy's application to the MCSC stated that the school's "mission is 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 need alternative educational options."

The school expected students to choose MeVA "for a variety of reasons including but not limited to: flexible schedule, relief from an environment of bullying, relief from an environment that intensifies student anxiety, a placement for students with medical needs that impact their ability to attend school more individualized learning opportunity, parents wanting a more active role in their child's education, more robust course offerings for rural students, students working at their own pace, etc."

The following excerpts from the charter application guided our research questions:

- The MEVA **academic program** will combine online technology with traditional instruction and materials. Instruction will be provided by certified teachers who will work in conjunction with learning coaches (usually parents or guardians but can be any caring adult that the parent or guardian selects) to ensure student success. Teachers will communicate

with the students and learning coaches through e-mail, telephone, online web meetings, and physical meetings.

- **Instructional time** will occur both during weekly synchronous sessions where the student and the teacher are online together and asynchronous sessions when the student is working more independently off-line or on-line. Students will study from home or other locations of their choosing.

- **Intervention**: For "at-risk" students, we are proposing an intervention model to be included as part of a student's Individualized Learning Plan. These interventions will include both online and offline approaches to ensuring that struggling "at-risk" students are provided with structured efforts to address gaps in their knowledge or skills. The online approaches include targeted synchronous tutoring sessions via a web-based conferencing platform like Blackboard Collaborate where the student and teacher are working together at the same time, detailed use of NWEA Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments, Study Island benchmark assessments for identification of standards needing remediation, instruction of study skills, and other interventions.

- MEVA will provide a **Career Pathways** program designed to achieve high academic performance that meets the rigorous Maine Learning Results, Common Core Standards, and Next Generation Science Standards as well as prepares all Maine students for college, career, and citizenship by providing them with the vision, motivation, and the practical and technical skills they need in a rapidly changing workplace and society. MEVA's Career Pathways program is modeled on the Maine Career and Technical Education framework as well as the national Career Cluster model designed by the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium.

- **Students with disabilities** will participate in the general education program to the greatest extent possible. A special education teacher will support students with disabilities and provide specially designed instruction. Academic services provided through web conferencing could be presented within a co-taught online classroom, small group, or individual session with the special education teacher. MeVA will employ highly qualified special education teachers to maintain appropriate student/teacher ratios based on Maine regulations and student needs to provide special education services. Maine Virtual Academy administrative staff will include a Special Education Manager, a special education teacher trained in case management, who will oversee the provision of services and special education compliancy at the school. The Special Education Manager will receive the support and oversight from the K12 National Special Education Director.

- **Assessment**: Among the most important assessment is the NWEA Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment which is administered in the fall of each school year. The scaled score will identify those students at risk for not scoring proficient on the Maine state assessments. The NWEA MAP is given again in the winter and spring in order to ensure that all students are making one year's growth in one school year based on scaled score gains comparisons.

- **Extracurricular Activities:** Student extracurricular activities will focus on developing a strong sense of "community" among our students. We plan to offer a school council, a community service club, and additional clubs depending on student interest (e.g. Arts, Debating, Chess, Computer and Network Repair, Robotics, Model United Nations, etc.)

- **Professional Development:** Professional development opportunities will be a combination of K12's best practices and training along with our school specific goals and required annual professional development for all teachers and other staff. Professional development will be a year-long pursuit focused on providing teachers with the skills and competencies to meet the needs of students and their families. Each teacher will have an Individual Development Plan (IDP) that is a combination of required professional development as deemed appropriate by their tenure or as identified by an administrator as an area where development is needed, and other optional offerings particular to their areas of interest.

The application described **middle school** at MeVA as follows:
- In 7th and 8th grade, courses are categorized into six core areas: Language Arts/English, Mathematics, Science, History, Art, and Music. Courses in Health and Physical Education, and Career and Education Development will also be offered to meet the standards of the eight Maine Learning Results.

- The teacher will provide direct instruction and support based on the students' individualized learning plan in "Class Connect" sessions using Blackboard Collaborate, a web-based conferencing platform. Students will attend Class Connect sessions by logging in on Blackboard Collaborate, using chat, an interactive whiteboard, Voice-Over IP (VOIP), and other features to further explore and discuss lesson topics synchronously with teachers and fellow students. The frequency and specific use of Class Connect is based on the specific needs of students and the school instruction model. Schools are using Class Connect sessions as part of the implementation of the fall and spring testing of all students. Teachers are able to interact and build relationships with students, assess skill level and provide student specific instruction.

- Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) designed for each grade 7-8 child ensures a customized program that fits each child. The development of the ILP is a collaborative team process involving all parties—the high school student, parent, teachers, guidance counselor, and advisor. unique strengths, weaknesses, learning styles and aptitudes. The ILP developed for each high school student also maps out multi-year personalized learning strategies for each student. The ILP is designed to organize and properly sequence the high school student's course work while helping articulate the student's academic strengths and weaknesses. It includes academic objectives, specifically post-high school goals.

High School at MeVA was characterized in the application as follows:
- Will offer six levels of Math, English, Science, and History courses:
    - Core courses are similar to the standard courses offered by many other programs. They meet all academic requirements for each course area both for graduation as well as for potential admission into a wide range of colleges.
    - Comprehensive courses are designed for students entering with a strong foundational knowledge and aptitude in the subject area being covered, as well as solid study skills. Students do more extensive writing and research projects, and tackle problems that require more analytical thinking. Course projects and activities also demand more independent thinking and self-discipline than projects in core courses.
    - Honors courses hold students to a greater degree of accountability, and demand even greater independence and self-discipline than their Comprehensive counterparts. Students synthesize and evaluate information and concepts from multiple sources and read texts typically assigned in college level courses.

- o AP courses are college level courses that follow curriculum specified by the College Board. These courses are designed to prepare students for success on AP exams, providing students the opportunity to earn credit at most of the nation's colleges and universities.
- o Two levels of courses for struggling students, "at risk" students, and students who have not successfully completed courses required for graduation:
  - ▪ Remediation courses bring students up to grade level in math and English—guiding them through the skills and knowledge needed for success.
  - ▪ Credit recovery courses allow students to gain credit for courses they have previously taken and not completed successfully. These courses include diagnostic unit tests that assess students' understanding of fundamental content and direct them to review or move ahead accordingly.

- MEVA will offer multiple levels of World Languages in Spanish, French, German, Latin, Chinese, and Japanese.

- Science: Options exist to take these courses using virtual laboratories that reflect actual laboratory experience in a virtual setting.

- The high school teacher will be responsible for conducting weekly live online sessions in all core courses and discussions using Class Connect, holding office hours, validating student attendance and course activity, curricular mastery, setting and grading assignments, providing instructional feedback, and assigning course grades through K12's online Learning Management System. High school students are regularly involved on a course-by-course basis in threaded, teacher-monitored discussions about key topics.

Literature Review on Virtual Education

Most studies of virtual education and online learning have been conducted at the postsecondary level. A meta-analysis from 2010 synthesized 45 studies, and only five were conducted in elementary, middle, or high schools. The report concluded that students in online courses performed moderately better on learning assessments than students learning the same material through face-to-face instruction. Instruction combining online and face-to-face elements (blended learning) was the most effective model for student learning. Collaborative or instructor-directed online learning was more effective than online learners working independently. Learning advantages of online and blended learning stemmed from students being able to spend more time on their courses and environments with more opportunities for embedding instructor feedback. Overall, the researchers concluded that students in grades K-12 do not appear to perform better in online environments than in physical classrooms, on average (U.S. Department of Education).

The Brookings Institution asserts that the promise of virtual education lies in: 1) making more curricular options more widely available to more students, and 2) removing the downsides of learning in a physical classroom such as rigid timeframes for coursework, disruptive student behavior, and physical challenges. "Online courses have the potential to improve instruction at every level of education. Adaptive online courses can allow students to learn at their own pace, with material adjusting to fit the needs of both advanced and remedial learners. Online courses can also open up more curricular offerings in schools that lack specialists, such as those in rural areas." However, research suggests that academically challenged students do worse in online than in face-to-

face courses. The existing evidence suggests that online coursework should be focused on expanding course options or providing acceleration for students who are academically prepared, rather than shoring up the performance of those who are lagging" (Brookings Institution).

An article examining online learning for disadvantaged community college students reviewed evidence that students taking in-person classes—or blended online and face-to-face courses—are more likely to pass and complete their courses than are students in online only classrooms. The authors conclude that for underserved students to succeed in online education, schools must ensure that "instructional design is at its best, that online students make reasonable decisions about their course load, and that [the school] recognizes its obligation to provide serious, high-touch services for its remote students. Colleges need to remain as mindful for their online students—if not more supportive—than what it offers its residential students" (EdSurge).

III.   Findings from Other Studies of MeVA

2019 Third-Party Evaluation

Last year's MeVA evaluation by White Barn Center for Research evaluated test scores, student attendance and graduation data, and included surveys and interviews of staff and parents.

Key findings from the evaluation report include:
- The top three reasons parents chose MeVA for their children are: they wanted an alternative to public school; their child experiences bullying at public school; they wanted to transition from homeschool.
- Parents name MeVA's top three strengths as: Teachers/staff, Flexibility, and Curriculum
- Teachers/staff report that the school is functioning as a safe haven or last resort for the majority of students.
- Average class size is 80-100 students. This causes high workload for teachers.
- Teachers and parents report that MeVA has a positive school culture
- Teachers and parents characterize K12 coursework as "very rigorous and fast-paced."

The report raised concerns that:
- MeVA has high absenteeism and truancy rates.
- Large class sizes contribute to a pattern of increased absences in later grades and low graduation rates.
- Test scores show an average of negative growth, and many MeVA students are not meeting state expectations.

Maine Charter School Commission Study of Graduates

In 2019, Plimpton Research began a study of graduates of Maine charter schools. The research includes high school transcript analysis and college enrollment tracking. Plimpton Research gathered graduation data and student demographic data from the Maine Department of Education, collected and analyzed transcripts from each of the charter schools with graduates, and submitted graduate records to the National Student Clearinghouse for college enrollment information.

We compared Maine charter school graduates' transcripts with a rigorous benchmark of college- and career-readiness developed by the national education advocacy organization Education Trust. This is a standard to which other Maine public schools have not been held. We do know that 87% of Maine public school students complete high school within four years, but only about 35% meet state math expectations and 60% meet state reading expectations when they are tested in 11th grade.

The Education Trust study found that 39% of 2013 high school graduates nationally completed a college-ready curriculum and 21% completed a career-ready curriculum. Only 8% of graduates nationwide completed both a college- and career-ready curriculum. Among Maine charter schools, 35% of the 2018 graduating class completed a college-ready curriculum (four points below the national average); 40% met the career-ready benchmark (nearly double the national rate); and 22% met both the career- and college-ready benchmarks, well above the national rate of 8%.

In MeVA's 2018 class, only 16% met the college-ready benchmark, 7% met the career-ready benchmark, and 3% met both. The elements of the Education Trust benchmarks are presented in the following table. Preliminary analysis of MeVA's 2019 graduates' transcripts suggests that:
- More graduates met the math, social studies, and foreign language components of the college-ready benchmark in 2019 than 2018
- The career-ready proportion of the graduating class tripled from 7% in 2018 to 21% in 2019
- The proportion of graduates achieving mastery by earning a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher increased from 66% in 2018 to 76% in 2019.

2018 and 2019 MeVA Graduates' Transcript Analysis

Benchmark	Class of 2018	Class of 2019*
4 English credits	100%	100%
3 math credits (Algebra 2+)	52%	65%
3 social studies (US/world history)	50%	82%
3 science (lab biology and chemistry or physics)	45%	38%
2 years of the same foreign language	25%	29%
College-ready (All of the above)	16%	15%
Career-ready = 3 career/technical courses in the same field	7%	21%
College- and career-ready / Neither	3% / 80%	3% / 71%
Mastery (GPA 2.5+)	66%	76%

*Preliminary analysis to be refined later in 2020

Maine Virtual Academy students have some important differences from the average Maine charter student, as shown in the following chart. MeVA serves the highest proportion of economically disadvantaged students of the Maine charters (67% of the 2018 graduating class compared with 43% on average across the charters). On average the class of 2018 spent only 2.0 years enrolled at MeVA, compared with a Maine charter average of 2.9 years enrolled. The transcript analysis showed that the 2018 class included many transfer students who struggled academically at one or more other public high schools before enrolling in MeVA.

We also tracked college enrollment and found that 28% of 2018 MeVA graduates enrolled in a two- or four-year college within one year, compared with an average of 45% at all the Maine charters and

about 60% at other Maine public high schools. One major concern is that 72% of MeVA graduates did not enroll in college and 95% did not complete a "career-ready" course of study, raising the question, "What are we preparing students to do after high school graduation?"

Graduating Class of 2018: Student Characteristics by School

School	2018 Graduation Rate	2018 Graduates	Average Years Enrolled	Female/ Male	FRPL Eligible*	Students with disabilities
Baxter	96%	73	3.8	30%/70%	16%	25%
Harpswell	67%	23	3.6	52%/48%	39%	16%
MEAA	87%	18	2.5[1]	67%/33%	9%	17%
MCA	57%	52	2.9	73%/27%	58%	13%
MeANS	69%	35	3.1	45%/55%	59%	24%
MeVA	49%	57	2.0	69%/31%	67%	19%
6 Maine Charters	65%	258	2.9	54%/46%	43%	20%

*FRPL (free and reduced-price lunch) National School Lunch Program eligibility is a common measure of economic disadvantage (signaling family income at or below 185% of the federal poverty level).

Our study concluded that "Maine educators and policymakers should engage in a conversation about how we define college-ready and career-ready high school courses of study, examine how many graduates are meeting these standards, and develop policies and practices to ensure that more students graduate well-prepared for success in college and/or the labor market."

IV.   Interview Findings

In January and February 2020, we interviewed two MeVA administrators, four teachers, two parents of current students, and two recent graduates. All but one of the staff interviews were conducted in-person, onsite at MeVA, and the other interviews were conducted by telephone. Three general trends emerged from the combined interview findings.

1. MeVA is a supportive community

Administrators, teachers, parents and graduates consistently spoke of MeVA as a supportive community for students, families, and staff.

Parents said:
- "I'm always raving about how great the teachers are. They're so respectful of him, responsive to his and our questions. As a parent that's what you want more than anything, is for your child to be respected and appreciated. It's just an amazing experience--he's challenged, and he says all the time, "I'd never go back to traditional school.""
- We encourage [our middle school student] to keep in touch with fellow MeVA students outside of class. They kept in touch over the summer, and they talk just about every day after

---

[1] Class of 2019 average

school. I really like the kids and the other parents. MeVA has been a really good experience as a community for us."

Alumni reported:
- "I had a lot of anxiety around math left over from private school. And I needed to take a lot of math. At MeVA, my math teacher was so thoughtful in his teaching and very invested in each student's learning style. He wanted to make sure that we were learning in a way that we could really digest it...I can't say enough about the teachers there. They are so kind, supportive, understanding, enthusiastic."
- I was a junior when I decided to become a teacher. Mrs. Hamilton inspired and encouraged me in that decision. I saw what a difference she made for me, and I thought that maybe I could become a teacher and do the same thing...Those connections [teachers] make with each student, their willingness to really be there for their students, it's so important to them."
- "People think that's funny, that you get closer to teachers you don't see face-to-face, but the connection really happens. There are actually more one-on-one interactions with MeVA teachers than there were when I went to the local high school."

Teachers also addressed the community at MeVA:
- "When I first started, some of our kids were very low functioning. One young woman with learning disabilities was probably at a kindergarten level of drawing, and I wondered what it would be like when she shared with the class. The other students were so kind and encouraging. There' the nicest kids ever. They're more empathetic than a lot of kids that age. They're really nice to each other. It feels like a little family."
- "Compared to a brick and mortar school, at MeVA being able to pull kids aside and give extra attention is easier. Our teachers can collaborate so much more. The English teacher will text me, What do you know about this kid? It's not so physically hectic. Kids are working on their own, they're not worried about who's doing what right next to them. I love it when they see each other's project. They truly get excited for each other."

2. MeVA has an entrepreneurial culture

Administrators and teachers at MeVA demonstrate a great deal of flexibility and willingness to experiment with the goal of improving the school. The Head of School points out that, "Everyone in Maine is new at virtual education. Even the people working here. We're learning, refining, and improving each year."

The Academic Advisor spoke about preparing students for life after high school. He felt that the K12 curriculum had limitations, so "I built a career and college prep Google website for our students to use…I think we could try anything at this school. We could make it work."

A math teacher said MeVA could serve any student well. "We have such a wide range of approaches. Our instruction is very individualized. Kids can get what they need."

MeVA's art teacher is one of the longest-serving staff members. She says, "At first I wasn't a fan of teaching art online at MeVA. We made a lot of changes and now I love it…I tried using the K12 curriculum, but it wouldn't have been good for our students. It was art history, reading, quizzes, and I wanted to offer a hands-on, away from the computer, let's make stuff. I use empty shelves; that means the school buys me an empty class and I put everything in it, within the same platform. My

classes are a lot like a YouTube video. I demonstrate on-camera in my studio. I have slide shows, I'll do a demo, I'm on camera instead of in a classroom. Kids will get on camera and show what they've done. We learn something, practice in class, do it together, then they can go do what they want with those skills on their own time. They post their art on the whiteboard, and they can look at everybody else's art. "If they're having a hard time, they can privately message me. I can bring them into a break room and talk to that one student. There's a lot of flexibility. It's easier than in a physical classroom to communicate with one kid without any other kids knowing. You don't inadvertently embarrass kids."

The high school English teacher came with experience working at K12 virtual schools in California and Nevada. She says, "I approach it as: This is the textbook. I use the readings, questions, tests, and then I get to also put my spin on it, adding my own activities and projects. I interpret it. We are offering Honors Brit Lit now. We went from Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes to Canterbury tales and Shakespeare sonnets. I add in informational/critical skills units. I incorporate things they'll see on the MEA and the SAT-- build that into the curriculum."

3. Student self-motivation and Learning Coach support are critical to student success at MeVA

We asked teachers what type of student is best served by MeVA. Responses included:
- "I would say a student that's going to show up. They can have challenges, struggles we can work with, as long as they're there. It's a real challenge if students aren't logging in to the live sessions. You can't help a student that's not there."
- "They have to be willing to work somewhat independently. We don't have classes every day [in high school] and they have to do a lot of work outside of classes. The Learning Coach has to input their time every day, online, offline, field trips, etc. And the classes can be very rigorous. We try to break it down as much as we can so they can understand it, but it does take a lot of self-directed work."

Parents also addressed this issue:
- "As a virtual student, managing time is a big challenge. It can be easy to procrastinate. It takes some adjustment and developing good habits, but ultimately it's a good lesson in time management for students."

Alumni observations include:
- "It's a great option for kids who do well staying on track and want to show up on time. I think MeVA works great for all learning styles. The teachers are so helpful and committed to all students' success. MeVA is also good for any kid who doesn't do well in peer settings, whether it's shyness or bullying or health challenges. It's perfect for any situation like that. The one thing students need, especially if they aren't self-directed, is someone to be an active Learning Coach. It isn't a big time commitment, but that is really important. A student who didn't have that might struggle at MeVA."
- "The one thing for students is to be self-motivated. Having the motivation yourself is important to succeeding at MeVA. Everyone who works there is so supportive, but you have to be motivated to do the work."
- "You need to be motivated and self-directed as a student. At traditional public school, the teachers are there encouraging you to do your work and reminding or even hounding you. It's not like that at MeVA. In between lessons, it's on you to make sure you are keeping up with all your class work and doing it right."

The Learning Coach (LC) role is critical to student success, but not all students have engaged LCs. Teachers said:

- "Parents involvement is so clear. Those who are involved, their kids do well. It's great at MeVA that teachers should and can communicate with parents… I would rather talk to parents 10 minutes once a month than have a conference once or twice a year… It's an area we can grow on. It needs to be pitched like, You're an Ed Tech."

- "With seniors, [LC engagement] is lower than it should be. In middle school, the vast majority of kids have a Learning Coach, then by high school, most seniors don't. In grades 9-11, maybe 70% of the students have good LCs. Usually the kids without are MIA, maybe they're working. Many are seriously living in poverty; that's a huge issue."

Alumni also stressed the importance of active Learning Coaches:

- "I know that in the beginning my mom didn't feel prepared to be a Learning Coach. She didn't understand what her role would be. Maybe they could develop more resources to prep LCs to transition into that role."

- "MeVA students really need someone at home who is willing to help you with anything, just always be supportive, and go the extra mile. I think it takes at least a few hours a week to be a Learning Coach, but that would vary a lot depending on the student. I'm pretty independent, so it wasn't too hard on my mom. She logged my hours and checked in with me about doing my classes each week, and occasionally she would help me with an assignment. It depends on the student. It could be a lot more time and a lot more work if the student isn't self-driven."

4. Recent staffing additions at MeVA have made a positive difference

Among staff, the most common theme of the interviews was positive changes that the school has made this year. Everyone interviewed spoke highly of the new staff positions of Academic Administrator (Principal), Guidance Counselor, Family Academic Support Liaison, and Attendance Coordinator; and of the expansions in the teaching staff. The teaching staff has more than doubled in three years, from about a dozen to 27 teachers.

Staff reported:

- In response to policy changes they would like to see: "This was a huge year for change, so now they've addressed most of the things. Don is amazing, and he brings a whole element we needed. We have more teachers. The class sizes are better, but they're still too big to have enough personal connections. Sometimes I have 60 kids in the class, and it's hard to scroll and see who's missing. Smaller class sizes should be the next big change."

- Regarding student attendance: "Our team does an awesome job calling and following up. There are less and less overlapping class times now. That was messy when we didn't have enough teachers. There are some kids still hiding out and we don't know what they're doing. Now we know who they are. Three years ago, it was harder to get a handle on that. Our new Principal has made documents so teachers can share notes on kids. It's way more organized."

- "One of the biggest things, the most positive change has been our K12 Liaison. Our prior person wanted to run the academic piece of the school. Now our interim person has more of a helping mindset of: What does everyone need? That has been a huge change."

The interview questions were designed to shed light on the research questions from our document and literature review. The next section summarizes our findings.

Academic program delivery

As described in the charter application, MeVA courses are offered "live" online, and the interface includes audio lectures, slide presentations, and a chat feature for students. The sessions are recorded so students who miss a lesson or need extra review can watch them later. Middle school courses meet five days a week, and high school classes meet three days a week. Overall, this delivery methods are working for students and teachers, but delivery improvements and smaller class or group sizes could be beneficial.

A parent described a typical class as follows:

- "The class interface is mostly audio. Students see a white board, and sometimes kids can write on the board. I thought it would be more video. You see a still picture of the teacher, and students can also see if an administrator or another teacher joins. You can see what other kids are logged in, and they can chat off to the side even when they can't write on the board. It works great."

The art teacher explained how she uses the platform for a more hands-on class:

- "My classes are a lot like a YouTube video, and I demonstrate on-camera in my studio. I have slide shows, I'll do a demo, I'm on camera instead of in a classroom. Kids will get on camera and show what they've done. We learn something, practice in class, do it together, then they can go do what they want with those skills on their own time. They post their art on the whiteboard, and they can look at everybody else's art."

Alumni described MeVA courses as follows:

- "I loved the online platform. I didn't find it challenging, as long as I could find quiet spaces where I could focus on it. I knew what kind of environment I needed to be able focus. I wasn't used to doing everything on my computer, but I liked it. I helped me focus and have everything in one place, even my teachers…I'd never been in courses that were simultaneously so appropriately challenging and supportive as the classes are at MeVA."

- "Navigating the online platform is tricky. You have to sit down and invest the time to learn it. It became really easy for me after a few months. I never found it to be unusually difficult or unreliable, once I learned how to navigate it."

- "I had one teacher who would set up a camera, and we could see him teaching the lesson. Usually you can only hear the teachers, and you can type in the chat box to ask or answer questions. We really liked being able to see him. If they added video more, it would make the class experience better for students. It helped me pay attention better."

- "There's a lot of downtime in public school. At MeVA, the periods are shorter, but the classes are more intense. And there is a lot of homework, so that does even it out. It's

rigorous, and you need to put in the time every day to make sure you're doing well in all your classes."

Assessment

Teachers report using the assessments embedded within the K12 course curriculum as well as NWEA test results. The K12 assessments are used regularly to determine whether students have mastered course skills and concepts. Several teachers described how they use NWEA test results. MeVA students take the NWEA three times a year. Middle school teachers report that NWEA results are primarily used for grouping students for smaller group instruction, and for assessing learning growth.

NWEA score analysis and use seems to be an area for more staff development.

One teacher interviewed is well-versed in the full range of reporting available from NWEA, but needs help translating the information to students, assignments, etc.:

- "NWEA gives us Individual Learning Plans, gives us all their gaps and what they need to work on. It took me a while to get that. Students take NWEA in fall, winter and spring. We use it to set small groups, readjust small groups, and in the spring to assesses how we did this year. Now I'm trying to figure out how to communicate that to the kids, and what they need to do in IXL to improve. MAP [the detailed NWEA score reporting online interface] shows areas of growth for every student, where they need to work. We can pull it by standard, thread (e.g., just geometry or algebra). But I wish kids and Learning Coaches could see their own profile report. That's the communication. It would help put kids in charge of their learning. The MAP interface, in the student progress section, shows what skills they need to work on, and it can give us assignments to address skills where they need more work."

Other teachers mentioned using NWEA results for student grouping but did not mention accessing the full range of results available in the NWEA interface.

- "Everything is right in the content already. I pick and choose which quizzes to give. I don't always give the unit assessment, depending on what we cover in class. I can edit [K12] tests and quizzes…We use NWEA for grouping students. We try to challenge some students who are ready to give extra work and have them think more critically."

College and Career Preparation

The interview responses suggest that MeVA focuses primarily on college preparation. Alumni speak highly of the Achieving you College and Career Goals class and the online progress to graduation tracker. There is general agreement that more focus on career preparation would be a positive addition.

A middle school parent said, "I think the courses are age-appropriate. It is difficult work, but the way they're teaching it and all the outreach makes it doable. It seems like their goal is for each kid to succeed. It's great that students can retake quizzes up to three times. That really helps them learn, not get behind, and be able to succeed."

Alumni interviewed are now attending college and report feeling well-prepared by their education at MeVA: "Neither of my parents went to college, so it was a really daunting process. Having the MeVA teachers to walk me through the application and preparation process was so helpful. I don't think I would have made it into the college I go to without MeVA. I wouldn't have had the confidence to apply to any selective colleges. My goals were influenced and supported by MeVA. So far, I love college and I feel very well prepared. The teachers were so willing to help support me to prepare for college. They gave me great advice on how to achieve my goals."

One graduate added, "It would be cool if they had more job training or career related classes. Nursing, auto repair, other things like that you can study at public school, we didn't have those options at MeVA."

The Academic Advisor reports that, "I wouldn't say there's a ton of demand for CTE. Maybe one of fifteen kids have a specific career goal or course/certification they want to do. We have had students enroll in their local tech centers, but only about 10 students in the past few years." He added, "A huge thing for us would be a way to implement career and tech piece. We could use suggestions for how to do that at a school that's statewide. How can we realistically work with all the counties and CTE (Career and Technical Education) regions? Are there people who'd be willing to set up partnerships?"

Special Services

Special Services includes the separate programs of special education, Title IA, Section 504 and Gifted & Talented (GT). MeVA serves virtually all students in the same core courses and breaks them into smaller skills-based groups for instruction. Teachers can also provide extra support for individual students and Learning Coaches outside of class time. One teacher said, "As long as they show up and participate, students with disabilities can be successful at MeVA. Teachers have a flexible enough schedule that we can help students outside of class more than in a brick and mortar."

The Head of School explains that, "Our Special Services Department is integrated into every class. We have Title 1A students, and we keep adding more "title" teachers…It's a group effort and we're constantly working together. All the teachers come into intervention and IEP meetings for students. We do "Back on Track" plans…MeVA's an intervention type of school. Many of our students have failed or come close in the brick and mortars. There's a lot of meetings and working together, working to see how we can help students succeed…Our Special Ed referrals are done very scientifically."

Some teacher responses suggest that they are not always "in the loop" with which students have Individual Education Plans when they are developed. One teacher said: "We may not be aware immediately of those. We do have the meetings eventually. By talking to students or LCs we find out what's going on. And sometimes we change instruction or outside class review based on needs we observe in class." In some cases, this may be due to federal law that protects student privacy.

MeVA is continuing to develop its Schoolwide Title I program, approved in summer 2019. Federal Title I funds support reforms and innovations to improve educational opportunities for low achieving students. The schoolwide program designation permits MeVA to use Title I funds to support comprehensive schoolwide reforms.

Extracurricular Activities

Students, parents, and staff appreciate the field trips as a way to meet face-to-face. Parents of current students praised the opportunities students have to interact online and get to know their classmates. Teachers talked about student camaraderie and the online environment facilitating friendships that might never develop in a brick-and-mortar school.

Parents said,
- "We do almost all of the MeVA field trips. I love that they schedule the trips at different times of day and days of the week. We've gone to Fort Knox, the Maine State Aquarium, and we just went to the Maine Maritime Museum. They offer a good range of events. It's great for the kids. They do get to know each other in class, but at field trips they get to see and meet each other. It's also a chance to connect in person with their teachers…My only suggestion that each class get a color-coded t-shirt. I think it might help shyer kids to approach others if they can tell who's in their grade. A lot of parents go on the field trips, and it's open to siblings too. Our two younger kids can do it."

- "He does the Gay Straight Alliance through K12. We go on most of the field trips. MeVA sends a lot of challenges, and he likes to do those. Last term there was a paper airplane challenge with prizes for the best looking, whose flew the furthest… They had a photo contest and a gingerbread house challenge, too. Those are really fun."

- "I'm surprised how well the kids get to know each other. They can chat on the side during class, they play Cahoot, a lot goes on that gives them interaction. Now my niece has signed up and started middle school, and she is more social online at MeVA that she was at public school."

- "I'm not sure if this is happening in the upper grades, but I'd like to see them offer volunteer opportunities, for the students to do community service together."

Professional Development

Teachers uniformly spoke highly of professional development at MeVA, both orientation to the school and the virtual environment, and support for ongoing professional development:
- "New teachers have a K12 teacher mentor that they work with weekly. Get feedback and suggestions. Improve implementation of their lessons in the online platform throughout the year. Don, our new Principal, observes one class a week for each teacher. The kids love him too."

- "The school holds some training seminars regularly. We had face-to-face trainings here in November. Then, any other opportunities we find on our own, we can submit a proposal, and I think Melinda usually approves them. I did one on Growth Mindset in Math a few months ago. There are endless opportunities."

- "Melinda is really good about letting us go get professional development. They'll pay for any training we need. That's been good for me. I get to have a subscription to The Art of Ed website. That helps me virtually be able to collaborate with people, get resources and ask for help. I'm the only art teacher at the school, so it's good to have that professional community in my field."

V. Analysis and Recommendations

MeVA is committed to improving student outcomes and has been remarkably nimble in addressing challenges in its short history. The school is committed to serving the students who enroll and attend.

MeVA has a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students, and these students do not historically perform well in online learning environments. One recent study found that "Online charters don't serve very well the relatively atypical set of students that currently attend these schools, much less the general population. Academic benefits from online charter schools are currently the exception rather than the rule. Online charter schools provide a maximum of flexibility for students with schedules which do not fit the traditional public-school setting. This can be a benefit or a liability as flexibility requires discipline and maturity to maintain high standards. Not all families may be equipped to provide the direction needed for online schooling. Online charter schools should ensure their programs are a good fit for their potential students' particular needs" (CREDO).

Another academic article suggests that "online curriculum might be designed and employed to efficiently deliver content but combined with new ways of distributing human support (e.g., different teaching or mentoring practices) that could serve students more effectively. There is a critical need for future research that examines whether online schooling has differential effects on specific subpopulations and under what conditions" (Educational Researcher).

MeVA has made progress in tracking attendance and addressing absenteeism but does not have an effective way to handle students or families that are intentionally "hiding" and not engaging in their coursework. MeVA staff work to re-engage students and families and are committed to providing students and families with support, including temporarily reduced course loads and "back on track" plans.

Recent changes in the staffing structure and additional teachers seem likely to improve upon the concerns raised in last year's third-party evaluation. We conclude this report with the following recommendations to support continued improvement at MeVA.

Recommendations

We offer a range of recommendations for MeVA leaders to consider, with several caveats. First, many changes are already underway at MeVA, and it will take time to see the effects of those changes. Some of the issues we identify may be mitigated by recent policies and staffing additions. Second, MeVA is subject to the oversight of the MCSC, and some of our recommendations would require collaboration and policy changes at that level.

Policies:
1. In marketing MeVA, be transparent about the need for students to be self-motivated, to regularly attend classes, and the importance and time commitment of the Learning Coach role. Provide more school-specific information on the MeVA website, e.g., which courses are taught locally.

2. Develop policies and procedures for students who take more than four years to graduate. Add a section to the Student Handbook explaining the policy.

3. Special services: Improve internal communications with all staff by holding quarterly roundtables to discuss students with IEPs, Title IA, and other special services students. Develop a recommended set of teacher practices for identifying and engaging these students during class periods.

4. Continue to work with MCSC on a policy to address chronic absenteeism. Fairly and clearly define when a student will be withdrawn from MeVA if they don't attend despite repeated outreach.

Staffing and Course Delivery:

5. Continue to expand the teaching staff to reduce class sizes.

6. Review teacher workloads, salaries, and benefits to ensure fairness within MeVA and parity with Maine public schools.

7. Offer an introductory foreign language course in middle school to introduce students and prepare those who wish to continue for K12 or Dual Enrollment high school foreign language courses.

8. Facilitate tools and sharing of best practices for teachers to incorporate more video elements into live class sessions.

9. Offer summer school English and math courses to increase credit recovery and on-time graduation rates.

Student Assessment:

10. Provide more training in the NWEA MAP assessment results to all teachers, so that those data can be fully utilized to guide instruction and student support. Information on current proficiency as well as student growth should inform teaching and course enrollment.

Student and Family Support:

11. Expand the orientation and onboarding process for Learning Coaches. Create a mandatory class session that describes their daily and weekly responsibilities, offers tips and advice from current LCs, etc.

12. Create a Parent Teacher group to support new Learning Coaches; promote the importance of Learning Coaches throughout high school; and continually engage struggling Learning Coaches.

Career Pathways:

13. Explore a partnership with Career and Technical Education at the state level to facilitate more MeVA students' access to CTE courses and ultimately improve graduates' career readiness.

Sources

Brookings Institution (October 2017), *Online Schooling: Who is Harmed and Who is Helped?*
https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-should-take-online-courses/

Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) (2015), *Online Charter School Study*,
https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/online_charter_study_final.pdf

EdSurge (July 2018), *Does Online Education Help Low-income Students Succeed?*
www.edsurge.com/news/2018-07-17-does-online-education-help-low-income-students-succeed

Educational Researcher 46:1, 44-57 (2017), "Student Enrollment Patterns and Achievement in Ohio's
Online Charter Schools," https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/0013189X17692999

Maine Charter School Commission, https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/maine-virtual-academy
    MeVA Original Application:
    https://www.dropbox.com/s/hrat2uzxwpe38ly/MaineVirtualAcademyApplication.pdf?dl=0

Plimpton Research (November 2019), *Maine Charter School Commission Graduate Study
First Year Report*, www.maine.gov/csc/sites/maine.gov.csc/files/inline-files/MCSC%20Graduate%20Study%20Report.pdf

U.S. Department of Education (2010), *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies*, http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf

White Barn Center for Research (October 2019), *Evaluation Report: Maine Virtual Academy*.