

# Individual Adopter School Case Study: HCA

## Harpswell Coastal Academy, Region 7 – Cumberland

### Background

Harpswell Coastal Academy (“HCA”), a public charter school about 30 miles north of Portland, is considered its own school administrative unit (SAU). Admission is available to any Maine student, but the charter provides for a “deliberately small” enrollment as part of its education model. During the 2021–22 school year, HCA is serving 79 5th–8th grade students at their middle school campus in Harpswell and 102 9th–12th grade students at their high school campus in Brunswick<sup>1</sup>. According to school administrators, the students come from a wide range of areas (approximately 20 towns). More than half of students are considered economically disadvantaged and 33 percent are identified as students with disabilities (Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

TABLE 1: SOCIOECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

	SAU	Maine
<b>Number of Students</b>	181	178,860
<b>Locale Classification</b>	Town	N/A
<b>Students Identified as White</b>	94%	88%
<b>Students Identified as Economically Disadvantaged</b>	57%	41%
<b>Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Price Lunch</b>	59%	44%
<b>Students Identified with Disabilities</b>	33%	18%
<b>Median Household Income</b>	N/A	\$57,918
<b>Adults with a Bachelor’s Degree or Higher</b>	N/A	32%
<b>Adults in Labor Force</b>	N/A	63%

**Sources:** Maine Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, and U.S. Census Bureau

### Development of pilot project

Since its founding in 2013, HCA has followed a standards-based model in which students complete projects to demonstrate proficiency in individual academic standards. The school is a member of the Expeditionary Learning network, which means students play an active role in conceptualizing and implementing projects driven by their own individual interests.<sup>3</sup> According to

<sup>1</sup> During May 2022, the Maine Charter School Commission approved consolidation plans for HCA’s two campuses, beginning Fall 2022.

<sup>2</sup> School data was collected from the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA Dashboard](#)) reported by the Maine Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) [Search For Schools](#) database. SAU information was collected from the Maine [ESSA Dashboard](#), the [NCES Search For Schools](#) database, and the NCES Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates ([EDGE](#)) database. Information about the State of Maine was collected from the [ESSA Dashboard](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau Maine Quick Facts](#) report. Note, the Students Eligible For Free/Reduced Price Lunch on a state level contains data from the 2018-2019 school year (the most recent publicly available data for the state), while both school and SAU contain data from the 2019-2020 school year.

<sup>3</sup> See [How We Learn at HCA](#).

HCA school leaders, in practice, students learn through four primary modes: workshops, investigations, electives, and community service opportunities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher turnover and changes in remote learning made participating in Expeditionary Learning challenging for teachers and students. In the winter of 2020, one HCA administrator and one teacher developed the Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) proposal through the Innovative Mindset Pilot Development (IMPD) course to address these challenges. HCA leadership and educators credited the IMPD course with helping them use design thinking, especially by being more intentional in seeking to understand teachers' and students' perspective and previous experiences. More specifically, as a part of the course, HCA leaders and teachers conducted "empathy interviews" with students, alumni, teachers, and community partners. Through these interviews, HCA administrators shared that they gained valuable insight into barriers and gaps within students' experiences. For instance, these interviews brought to light the need for a stronger connection between student internships and service-learning opportunities in the community and their classroom teaching and graduation requirements. Additionally, HCA identified the need to support teachers with incorporating fieldwork and service learning into their regular practices.

## Program description

In August 2021, HCA received a RREV award (\$210,660) to further develop and implement their Community-Based Learning program beginning in the 2021–2022 school year. The model is focused on strengthening and expanding community-based learning opportunities for all students, with an additional focus for students in 11th and 12th grade, which is rooted in a desire to help the students build connections in the community and prepare for life after graduation. The range of CBL opportunities available to HCA students are described below.

Opportunities for all students include:

- **Fieldwork**, which consists of course-based activities outside the classroom that are directly connected to specific core content areas. For example, fieldwork includes activities such as collecting specimens from tide pools in support of a biology course.
- **Service learning**, which includes stand-alone and ongoing support to community organizations. These events are related to students' coursework, but more indirectly than fieldwork. For example, students have supported a local land trust through invasive species removal.

Opportunities for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students include:

- **Internships**, which are unpaid positions with community partners where students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade obtain hands-on experience in a topic of their interest.
- **Seminar courses**, which are offered to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, as well as students participating in internships. Each seminar is offered once per trimester. These courses allow students to engage in career exploration, as well as share and reflect on their internship experiences and explore how these experiences connect to life after graduation.

- **Early college/vocational courses**, which allow students to earn credit through local institutes of higher education, such as Southern Maine Community College. Vocational courses are currently offered through Region 10.

Key uses of RREV funding to support the model include<sup>4</sup>:

- **Hiring a Community-Based Learning Coordinator (CBL Coordinator).** The CBL coordinator is responsible for strengthening the overall community-based learning program at HCA, and is engaged in coordinating opportunities in the community for fieldwork, internships, and service projects. The CBL Coordinator actively engages teachers in identifying fieldwork experiences and service opportunities that connect to curriculum content and provides the necessary logistical support. The CBL Coordinator also designs curricula for and instructs two seminar courses which are key components of the model. In addition to engaging with teacher and students in CBL activities, the CBL Coordinator also actively communicates with local organizations to not only strengthen existing relationships, but also develop new community partnerships and identify future CBL opportunities for students.
- **Purchasing two transportation vehicles and hiring buses and drivers to transport students to community-based learning opportunities.** Prior to implementation, HCA identified transportation as an important component of their learning model in order to assure that students have access to a range of community-based learning activities. The expansion on transportation options is intended to provide HCA students more equitable access to off campus experiences and internships.

Through RREV, HCA improved and expanded their current transportation systems by purchasing two vehicles and exploring additional, midday bus routes.

FIGURE 2. LOGIC MODEL FOR HCA'S COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING PROGRAM

Resources	Strategies and Activities	Outputs	Short-Term Outcomes	Long-Term Outcomes	Impact
RREV program \$\$  HCA staff (Head of School, teacher leaders, CBL Coordinator, School Counselor, Dean of Studies,	Hire a Community-Based Learning (CBL) Coordinator  Articulate how CBL fits into the HCA Strategic Plan	CBL Coordinator hired  Revised Strategic Plan  Revised fieldwork processes and expectations	<b>Students:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop routines for journaling during and after fieldwork</li> <li>• Choose service opportunities</li> <li>• Articulate the purpose and expectations</li> </ul>	<b>Students:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased ability to develop meaning from fieldwork</li> <li>• Increased community engagement</li> <li>• Increased student voice and</li> </ul>	Academic engagement, growth, and achievement will remain stable or increase for students in grades 11 and 12.

<sup>4</sup> Details about the how the RREV funding supports these positions was obtain during phone interviews and during our site visit with the school administrator and the CBL coordinator.

<p>students, School Secretary)</p> <p>Local partners</p> <p>Expeditionary Learning</p>	<p>Clarify fieldwork processes and expectations for teachers and students, grades 5–12</p> <p>Develop processes, routines, and structures for the CBL Program</p> <p>Design and schedule professional development on fieldwork and service-learning with EL Education</p> <p>Identify community partners</p> <p>Identify transportation options (school, public, bikes, etc.) for students doing CBL</p> <p>Work with students to build CBL into their schedules and long-term academic plans</p> <p>Hold regular check-ins with students, teachers, and community partners</p> <p>Create and administer</p>	<p>Processes, routines, and structures for the CBL Program</p> <p>PD on fieldwork and service learning</p> <p>List of community partners</p> <p>Identified transportation options</p> <p>Survey data on the program</p> <p>Revised school policies</p> <p>Alumni network</p>	<p>for service</p> <p><b>Teachers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use inquiry journals to make curricular connections from fieldwork</li> </ul> <p><b>HCA:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies, routines, transportation, and structures support CBL</li> <li>• Partners and alumni support CBL</li> <li>• Data inform CBL</li> </ul>	<p>agency</p> <p><b>Teachers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate fieldwork and service learning into their regular practice</li> </ul> <p><b>HCA:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CBL is infused across the curriculum</li> </ul>	<p>Students will have more meaningful experiences that help them choose postsecondary options that support their goals and interests.</p>
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	<p>surveys for formative and summative feedback on the program by trimester</p> <p>Develop and revise school policies on passage, graduation, and fieldwork</p> <p>Conduct year-end review</p> <p>Establish alumni network</p>				
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## Innovativeness and responsiveness of learning model

HCA's program is innovative and responsive for three main reasons:

- 1. The program seeks to build long-lasting connections between the school and the community.** HCA educators emphasize that their pilot is not a “one-off field trip model.” Instead, the pilot aims to integrate learning in the community as a normal part of how students learn. One educator explained, “We’re an Expeditionary Learning school so our pedagogical model is to have students learn through experiences and work with project- and problem-based learning. And I think working in the community is a good way to achieve those two things.” Another HCA educator said, “One of the things that we really want to do with this [model] is build those connections between the community and classroom so that it’s more of a regular practice, that we know how to learn in both places, and we see how they’re connected.”
- 2. It provides built-in opportunities for students to reflect on their program experiences and cultivate meaning.** HCA staff explained that even though community-based learning has been a component of their educational model from the time the school opened, a key point of the pilot program is to provide students with more structure and opportunities to reflect on these activities and draw explicit connections to what they learn in the classroom. For students participating in internships, HCA’s pilot model requires students

### INNOVATIONS

#### HCA *Community-Based Learning*

- Grows connections between the school and the community
- Encourages student reflection on program experiences
- Engages students in unique local community contexts

to engage in reflective journaling and complete a reflective project that examines their experiences more deeply throughout the course of their internship and seminar participation. One HCA staff member noted there has already been some “really meaningful reflection done by students” this fall, and that these projects act as a way for students to document the impact the community-based learning program has had on them. The CBL Coordinator also encourages all who engage in CBL or class-based fieldwork to incorporate reflective practices.

- 3. Connections with community partners and curriculum content engages students in real, local community contexts.** The community-based learning model at HCA allow students to gain exposure to experiences, as well as real problems within their communities. For example, when introducing the subject of climate change in the Gulf of Maine, one middle school teacher noted that she was able to bring in three different community partners who work directly on the water (in industries such as an oyster farming, lobstering, and tuna fishing) to speak with her students about their experiences with the warming water temperatures. This teacher reported that these conversations with community partners “gives [students] that evidence... like what does climate change mean for your industry and giving those first hand accounts...instead of doing solely research online.”

## Implementation of learning model<sup>5</sup>

### *Staffing*

A key component of the program was hiring the CBL Coordinator at the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year. An HCA educator said the CBL Coordinator has been successful in “laying a foundation for a long-term relationship between HCA and the organizations in the community that we’re working with.” The CBL Coordinator also teaches and designs the curricula for the two seminar courses.

### *Internships and seminar coursework*

HCA began their internships during trimester 2 (with two students in December 2021), which lasted through March. During Trimester 3, an additional XX number of students engaged in internships through June. Through interviews with students who participated in internships this year, several noted that they would spend about three hours twice a week at their internship sites. Examples of internships include:

- A student who works with a luthier, a local artisan who designs, builds, and repairs guitars
- A student who works at a local Habitat for Humanity and assists with fundraising planning as well as designing and evaluating volunteer training
- A student who for the Harpswell Heritage Land Trust and engages in local forestry and ecology work

Through interviews with HCA educators, teachers expressed excitement for more students to participate in these internships, especially those with transition goals in their individualized

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<sup>5</sup> Updates about the implementation of the model were captured through interviews (phone and in-person) with the school administrator, CBL Coordinator, HCA educators and students, and partners.

education program (IEP) relating to career readiness and exploration. One educator said, “I definitely want to see that end result of more students individually and independently going out into the community.”

In addition to internship opportunities, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade HCA students are also able to participate in two seminar courses, Community-Based Learning 1 and Community-Based Learning 2.

- Community-Based Learning 1: This seminar course is available for any 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and focuses on values, personality, interests, skills assessments, and career exploration. Through this seminar, the CBL Coordinator gets to know the students, understand their interests and goals, and help finding suitable community partners where students can learn and thrive through their experience.
- Community-Based Learning 2: This seminar is specifically designed for any 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade student enrolled in an internship. This course invites students to reflect on and share their experiences, and then consider how these experiences can help shape post-secondary goals. Students also described their experience engaging in reflective journaling while interning, reporting that it not only helped them remember only the work they engaged in, but also how they felt while doing it. In addition to internship reflection during their CBL-2 seminar course, students also reported that their seminar coursework included the exploration of workplace issues, such as safety, leadership qualities and management styles, and employee rights and violations.

Prior to starting their internship, one student noted that they participated in the CBL-1 seminar course, which helped them explore their personalities and work/workplace values. HCA leadership noted that around 57% of their students have participated in one or more of the seminars during the 2021-2022 school year.

### *Other Community Based Learning Experiences*

As mentioned, class-based fieldwork is embedded in HCA’s school model as an Expeditionary Learning school. As part of their RREV model, HCA has expanded their Community-Based Learning program among their 5<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade students. For younger students, the pilot provides resources for continued class-based fieldwork, whole-class service projects, and reflective journaling, with the intent of building the capacity of students to engage in focused internships and work-study opportunities as juniors and seniors. Additionally, these experiences are designed to enable students to not only gain hands-on experience connected to their academic program, but also an understanding of their potential role and importance in the community at large. According to HCA school leadership, nine out of eleven 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and nine out of ten high school teachers engaged in course-based fieldwork during the 2021-2022 school year. Additionally, over 100 course-based field work experiences occurred during the school year.

One example of the fieldwork activities that HCA middle school students engaged in during the 2021-2022 school year was with Growing to Give, a local community partner and organic grow-for-donation farm that utilizes climate friendly farming practices. In the fall, a group of HCA middle school students visited the farm weekly to engage in activities such as harvesting and mulching and learn about the farming process. During the spring, students returned to the farm to engage in plant propagation. During an interview, an organization staff member noted that a



benefit of these weekly visits was that staff were able to build on students' knowledge each week, enabling students to gain an in-depth understanding of the work on the farm and regenerative practices.

One teacher who regularly engages students in fieldwork shared excitement over these expansions of CBL activities for 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades students, sharing that

*“These [community] partnerships that we’re building and getting kids integrated with starting in Grade 5 all the way up through their [high school] classes...they have repeated exposure to the work that those groups are doing and what purpose they serve in the community and what it could look like for them to be a part of it.”*

This teacher's experience aligns with the intention behind expanding CBL opportunities for all HCA students to build their capacity to contribute to these community organizations through focused internships as juniors and seniors.

### *Professional development*

Another activity of the program is facilitating professional development for teachers. According to a school administrator, HCA will use assessments to examine the status of fieldwork, teacher, and student competencies to determine what their “organizational entry point” is for introducing and engaging teachers in professional development opportunities. Professional development for teachers will start in Year 2. A core focus of this professional development will be how to engage students in learning from experiences. This will focus on the use of field journals, and HCA will train staff on how to use writing to help students document and process their experiences. HCA leadership noted that next year, professional development will focus on supporting teachers in the use of field work to support instruction and make it an integral part of the learning that happens at the school.

## Outcomes

Outcomes of the first year of the RREV implementation are based on survey results from twenty-seven parents and sixteen students, as well as interviews with students, teachers, and administration. The outcomes are described in the sections below.

**Surveyed parents/caregivers in Harpswell and surrounding areas report having access to the responsive educational activities they want.** In a parent/caregiver survey (Exhibit 3), 100% of those surveyed reported it was very important or moderately important that schools offer responsive education activities, and 89% reported they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with such activities offered by HCA<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, nearly three-quarters (74%) of parents agreed that HCA offered more responsive educational activities in 2021-22 than in the past school year. All of those surveyed stated they would recommend the community-based learning program to other parents. When asked to explain why they would recommend this program, one respondent reported that “there is so much learning to be done and it doesn't

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<sup>6</sup> A survey was sent to parents/caregivers of 181 HCA students. There were 27 parents/caregivers who responded to the survey. It is possible that multiple parents/caregivers from one household responded. Additionally some parents/caregivers may have more than one student enrolled at HCA. With this low response rate, interpret the findings with caution.



need to always happen in a classroom. CBL affords our students opportunities to learn outside the classroom and outside the traditional modalities of teaching.”

### EXHIBIT 3. SUMMARY OF PARENT/CAREGIVER STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS (N=27)

Question	Results
How important is it to you that schools offer responsive educational activities?	Very important – 96% Moderately important – 4%
How satisfied are you with the availability of responsive education activities offered through your child’s school?	Very satisfied – 74% Somewhat satisfied – 15% Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied – 4% Somewhat dissatisfied – 4% Very Dissatisfied – 4%
Compared with last school year (2020-21), how much opportunity has your child had to participate in responsive educational activities this year? <sup>7</sup>	A lot more opportunity – 54% Slightly more opportunity – 19% About the same as last year – 23% Slightly less opportunity – 4%
Would you recommend this program to other parents? <sup>8</sup>	Yes – 100%

**Surveyed students report positive views about opportunities and experiences with the community-based learning program.** In spring 2022, a survey was administered to high school students at HCA.<sup>9</sup> Of students who responded, most indicated that they were glad they participated in the opportunities this year, that the program helped them learn, and that they liked their overall experience with the CBL opportunities this year (Exhibit 4). When asked about their favorite part of the CBL experience through an open-ended question, one student noted “being able to take a step out of the classroom and help the community whilst learning about real world experiences.” While most students responded that they would not change anything about the program, several students noted that they would enjoy more hands on CBL learning opportunities.

### EXHIBIT 4. SUMMARY OF STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS (N=16)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements	Strongly or somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat or strongly disagree
I am glad I participated in the community-based learning opportunities this year.	79%	16%	5%
The community-based learning opportunities helped me learn this year.	63%	26%	11%

<sup>7</sup> Some parents did not respond to this survey item. N=26.

<sup>8</sup> Some parents did not respond to this survey item. N=23.

<sup>9</sup> Interpret results with caution as only 16 of 102 high school students responded to the survey.

Overall, I liked my experience with the community-based learning opportunities this year.	68%	21%	11%
This year, I had more opportunities to learn outside a traditional classroom than in the past.	58%	21%	21%

**Students who engaged in internships and participated in site-visit interviews shared that they were able to reflect on and refine their post-secondary goals.** One of the goals of the CBL program at HCA is to increase their students' academic and community engagement and awareness and access to post-graduation work and study opportunities. Although only a few students (n=3) participated in interviews, all three of them reported that their internship and seminar experiences enabled them to think about their future career goals. For instance, one student who engaged in an internship with Harpswell's Heritage Land Trust noted that his internship allowed him to gain experience in local forestry. Upon graduation, this student intends take a gap year before exploring additional education in forestry or ecology. Another student who interned at an animal hospital also expressed interest in pursuing veterinarian work post-graduation. While these two students' internship experience confirmed their career interests, another students' internship experience helped him refine his career field. This student, who interned with a luthier (a craftsperson who builds and repairs guitars and other string instruments), explained that his internship experience helped him realize that although he does not want to be a luthier himself, he would like to continue to pursue a career in the music industry, stating, "I think my career in music, which is want I want to do, would be more on the side of studio work. I met a lot of session players and studio people at that internship that would walk in. So it gave me a cool idea of all the different things you can do in music."

## Future Plans

**Campus consolidation.** In May 2022, HCA received approval to consolidate two campuses, with their 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students in Brunswick joining their 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school campus in Harpswell in Fall 2022. HCA administration reported that this consolidation will positively impact their community-based learning program, as this central location will allow for easier communication and consistency of implementation for all 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade community-based learning activities. Additionally, leadership noted that the consolidation will provide more access to coastal ecology and additional learning opportunities for all students.

**Teachers interviewed plan to continue to engage students in community-based fieldwork and encourage internship experiences.** During interviews, teachers reported their goals to continue engaging their students in CBL activities during the next school year. For instance, a teacher at the middle school reported that plans to amplify a major theme within her curriculum for the year (e.g., sustainability) and then "find people in the community to support that [theme] as the winter and spring curriculum evolves." Additionally, a high school teacher noted that she is excited for the consolidation and believes it will allow for the school to build on the successful connections established with their Harpswell partners this year, as well as share opportunities for CBL across grade levels. Teachers also noted that they will continue to encourage internship experiences with students next year, and explained that, although fewer students may have engaged in internships this year than originally hoped for, students had really

successful experiences that will be able to act as a model for other students interested in internships out in the community.

## Lessons learned

**Developing community partnerships and securing student internships demands substantial time and energy; having a staff position dedicated to this role can ease the burden on classroom teachers.** A key component of this model has focused on internship opportunities with local organizations. Through interviews with HCA leadership, it was noted that the process of fully establishing these partnerships (or re-connecting with previous partners) takes time. One interviewee noted, “There can be a lot of excitement on both of our parts about it. But then actually making it materialize into something happening I think has proven more complicated than I initially expected.” The CBL Coordinator supports teachers in developing fieldwork and service-learning opportunities. One educator explained the effect of the CBL Coordinator in supporting these experiences: “Before we hired the CBL Coordinator, it was teachers trying to do it on their own. It was difficult...It’s a lot of phone calls and lot of getting back to people. A lot of effort and energy and time that it takes to build those relationships. So, I’ve just been impressed with the CBL Coordinator’s energy in implementing the program.”

**Providing sufficient transportation is essential for student participation in community-based internships and learning activities.** In addition to utilizing the vans purchased through RREV funding, the CBL Coordinator herself also provided transportation to students to ensure equitable access to internship opportunities during the 2021-2022 school year. HCA administration also anticipates the addition of a midday bus loop for the 2022-2023 school year.

**Covid-19-related limitations could continue to pose a challenge to fieldwork and in-person CBL opportunities.** Reflecting on the CBL activities that occurred during the 2021-2022 school year, HCA leadership noted that the pandemic was a significant obstacle to engaging students out in the community during the current schools. For instance, certain places and organizations would only meet with students virtually. Although HCA incorporated virtual learning opportunities with community organizations and partners, school leadership explained that these experiences did not provide the same “richness” as other in-person CBL opportunities.