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Introduction

The Maine Virtual Academy (MEVA) is one of two virtual public charter schools authorized by the Maine Charter School Commission. MEVA enrolls seventh through 12th-grade students and is open to any student in these grades who resides in Maine. As with all public brick-and-mortar schools, students must meet eligibility guidelines. The major difference between enrollment at public brick-and-mortar schools and MEVA is the number of available spaces. Public brick-and-mortar schools accept all eligible students with no capacity limits. In contrast, enrollment at MEVA is limited by the number of spaces allotted by the Maine Charter School Commission. All eligible applicants may enroll in the school if there is adequate capacity. If the number of applicants exceeds the available slots, a lottery system selects which applicants can enroll.

A requirement of virtual public charter schools is a third-party evaluation each year. The school administration determines the intent of the evaluation. This report documents the purpose, methodology, findings, and recommendations of the 2022–2023 academic year evaluation for MEVA. The evaluation was designed and administered by Mary Madden, Ph.D. of Dr. Madden and Associates. Dr. Madden also conducted the 2021–2022 evaluation, and this report includes follow-up on those results. (Appendix A consists of a copy of the Executive Summary of the 2021–2022 evaluation report.)

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

Based on the recommendations provided in the 2021–2022 evaluation of the enrollment processes, both the new student enrollment and re-enrollment processes were revised. This 2022–2023 evaluation assessed the parent/legal guardian (hereafter referred to as parent) experience with the revised procedures. The 2021–2022 evaluation had limited student response on the onboarding process, so additional efforts were initiated to hear from students on the topic. The following questions framed the 2022–2023 evaluation:

1. How well did revisions to the new enrollment process address concerns raised by parents in the 2021–2022 evaluation?
2. How well did revisions to the re-enrollment process address concerns raised by parents in the 2021–2022 evaluation?
3. How did students experience the onboarding process and acclimate to MEVA?

Revised Enrollment Process for New Students

The new student enrollment process occurs twice a year: once for mid-year enrollment and once for fall enrollment. The process is the same for both periods.

Revisions to the process included the following:

1. Parents were provided with a checklist of steps to demonstrate completion of the enrollment process.
2. Parents were reminded to contact school staff if they were experiencing challenges with the re-enrollment process.

Once the enrollment processes were complete, emails with a link to a survey were sent to parents. Several reminders were sent subsequently. The only difference between the two surveys was that the mid-year enrollment survey included questions about onboarding, while the fall enrollment survey did not. At mid-year, 49 new students were enrolled, and 10 parents responded to the survey. For the new student enrollment in the fall, 169 enrolled, and 29 parents responded to the survey. The return rate for the combined surveys was 18%, which is considered low, and thus, the findings may not be representative of all parents who enrolled their child at MEVA for the first time.

Revised Re-enrollment Process

The re-enrollment process began in February 2023 when parents were emailed the request to re-enroll their child if they planned to continue at MEVA for the upcoming academic year starting in the fall of 2023. Revisions to the process, which were made based on recommendations from the 2021–2022 evaluation report, were as follows:

1. The guided walk-through of each step in the process was revised to ensure that it mirrored what parents would encounter.
2. Re-enrollment was consolidated from a two-part process to a one-part process.
3. Parents were provided a checklist of steps for re-enrollment.

To assess the challenges parents experienced with the re-enrollment process during the 2021–2022 academic year, staff disseminated a survey to 324 parents who re-enrolled their child in MEVA. A total of 101 parents responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 31%. This rate is considered average overall.

Onboarding Process

Historically, MEVA has provided all new students and their parents with an orientation session done virtually. The typically well-attended session includes information on navigating online classes through the cloud-based learning management system Brightspace. It also outlines the expectations of students and parents and gives instructions for logging student attendance. Students and parents receive a PowerPoint presentation of the information and the phone number for the onboarding coordinator at MEVA. The session is also recorded to give those unable to attend access to the information. Upon beginning at MEVA, students are encouraged to ask for help from teachers as needed. A help desk is also available to answer student questions.

Last year, a limited number of students responded about their onboarding experience. For this evaluation, an effort was made to hear more students' reasons for selecting MEVA and their experience onboarding at the school. Two methods were used to collect data. First, a survey was sent to students a few weeks after the start of a semester to learn about their experience with

onboarding and acclimating to the school. The survey consisted of 12 multiple-choice questions and four open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were analyzed to identify themes, and student responses were coded into one or more identified themes. A total of 69 students responded, 25 of whom entered middle school and 43 who entered high school. Most students who responded were in seventh through 10th grade. One student did not identify their grade.

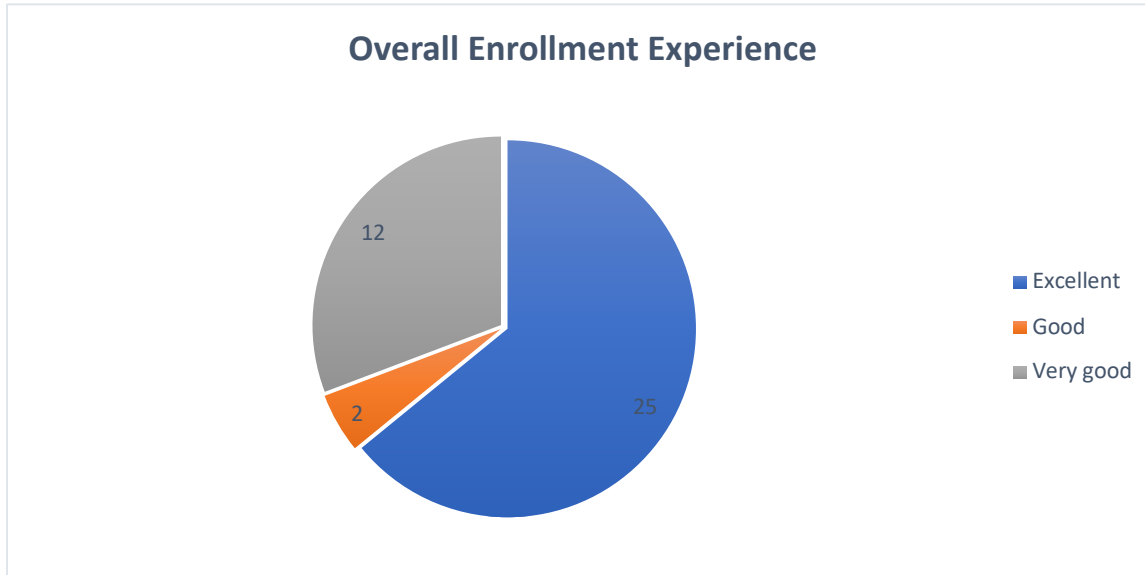
The second data collection method entailed interviewing parents and students. The school asked parents with children who had newly enrolled in the fall for the start of the academic year or mid-year for the spring semester if they would be willing to participate in an interview regarding enrollment and onboarding. Once a parent agreed, their email and telephone number were provided to Dr. Madden as the evaluator. She contacted them to introduce herself and set up an interview. Of the parents referred to her, four responded and set up times for discussions. In these interviews, she spoke with two parents individually, one parent and son together, and one student alone (with the parent's permission). Three interviews were conducted via Zoom and one by telephone. Each interview was completed a few weeks into the student's first semester at MEVA. The interviews, which lasted 20–30 minutes, were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. While the proposed plan was to briefly interview parents and students at the end of the year to check in, Dr. Madden could not set up final interviews despite several outreach attempts.

Findings

Revised Enrollment Process for New Students

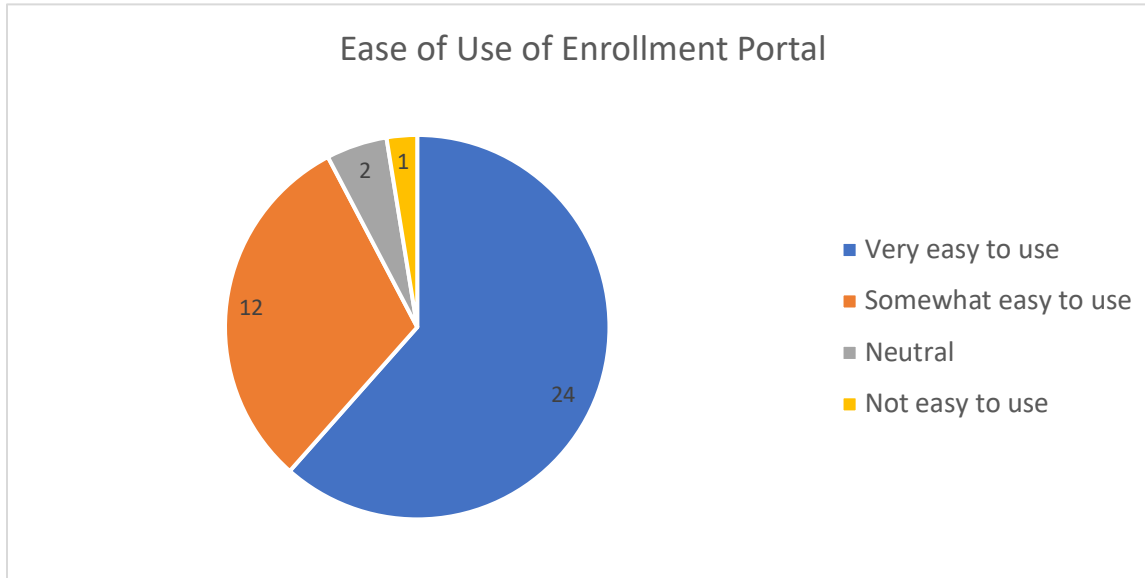
Parents were asked to rate their overall experience with the enrollment process on a five-point scale that ranged from “Excellent,” “Very good,” “Good,” “Fair,” and “Poor.” Most parents n rated the experience as “Excellent” or “Very good.” No parent rated the experience as “Fair” or “Poor.” Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 1: Overall Enrollment Experience



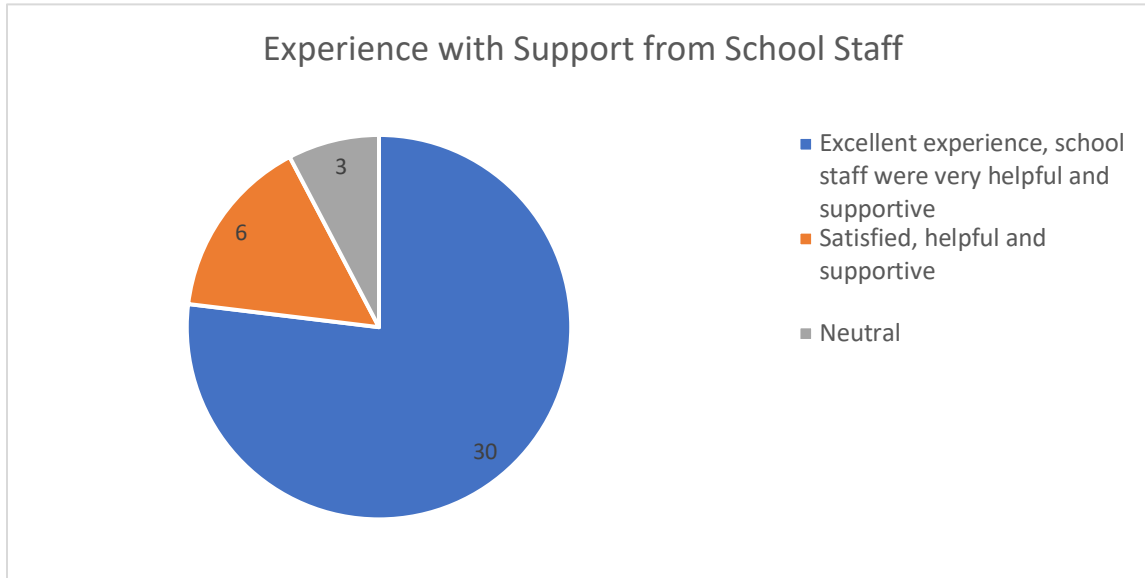
Parents were asked to rate their ease of use of the Enrollment Portal using a five-point scale that ranged from “Very easy to use,” “Somewhat easy to use,” “Neutral,” “Not easy to use,” and “Very difficult to use.” The majority (n=36) said the portal was either “Very easy to use” or “Somewhat easy to use.” The one parent who indicated the portal was “Not easy to use” commented, “I am not great with computers, but Meaghan [a staff member] talked me through the issues that I couldn’t figure out. She is a lifesaver!” Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 2. Ease of Use of Enrollment Portal



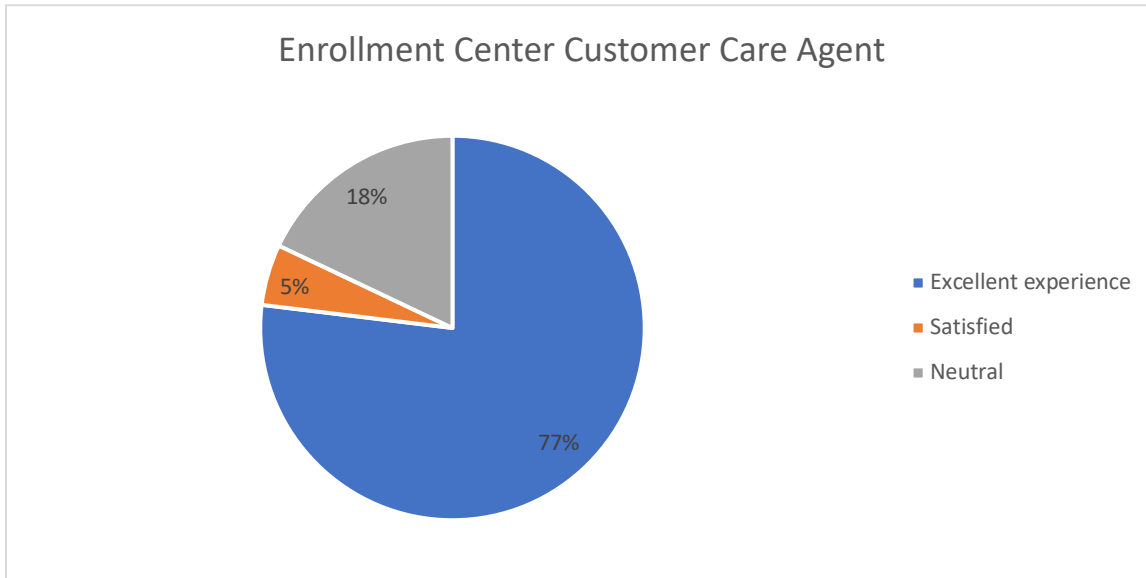
The revised instructions for parents enrolling a new student emphasized that parents should contact MEVA staff for help with any challenges. All parents who responded to this survey received the support offered. They were asked to rate the staff’s helpfulness and support on a five-point scale that ranged from “Excellent experience...,” “Satisfied...,” “Neutral,” “Not fully satisfied...,” and “Poor service.” Most parents (n=30) indicated they had an “Excellent experience.” Figure 3 illustrates the full text of the response options and the breakdown of responses.

Figure 3. Experience with Support from School Staff



In addition to contacting the school, revisions included the option for parents to contact the Customer Care Center of Stride Learning Solutions, host of the online Enrollment Portal. Parents were asked to rate their experience with the Stride’s Customer Care agents using a slightly abbreviated version of the same five-point scale on which they rated their experience with school staff. All parents who responded to this survey had contacted the Customer Care Center. As with support from staff, most (n=30) rated their experience “Excellent.” Figure 4 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 4. Enrollment Center Customer Care Agent

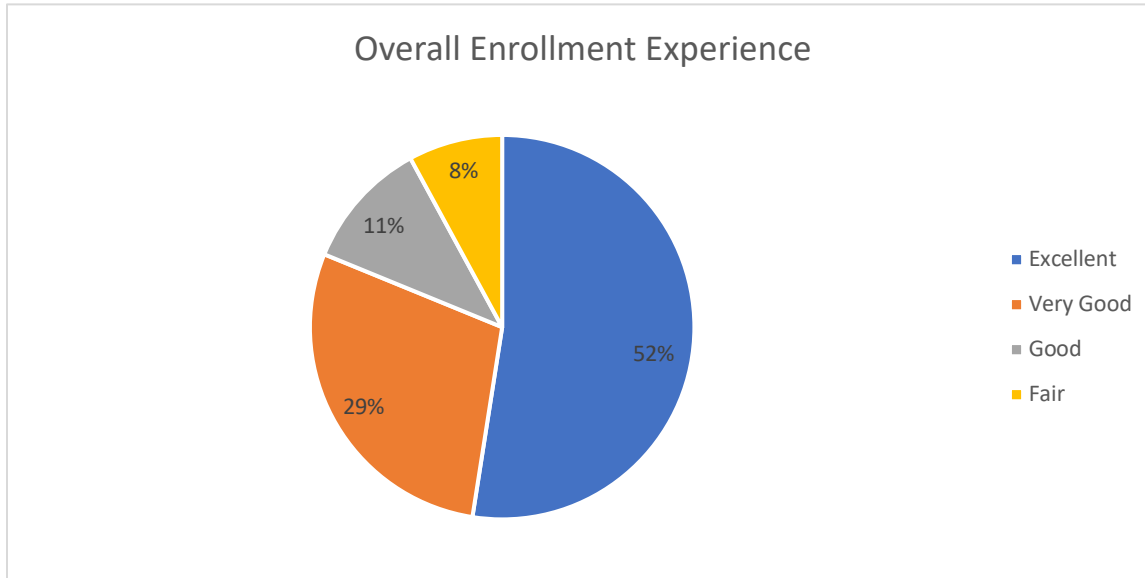


Finally, parents were asked if they received an acceptance letter or email. All respondents replied that they had received notification of their child’s acceptance to the school.

Revised Re-enrollment Process

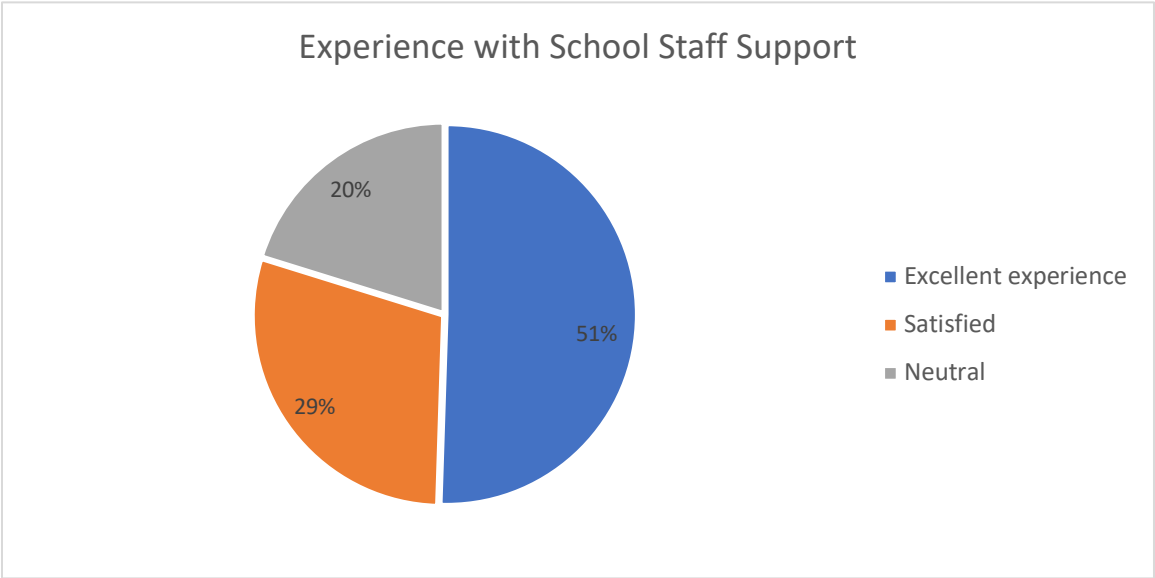
When asked to rate their overall experience with the re-enrollment process using a five-point scale that ranged from “Excellent,” “Very good,” “Good,” “Fair,” and “Poor,” slightly more than half rated it as “Excellent.” No respondent rated it as “Poor.” Figure 5 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 5. Overall Re-enrollment Experience



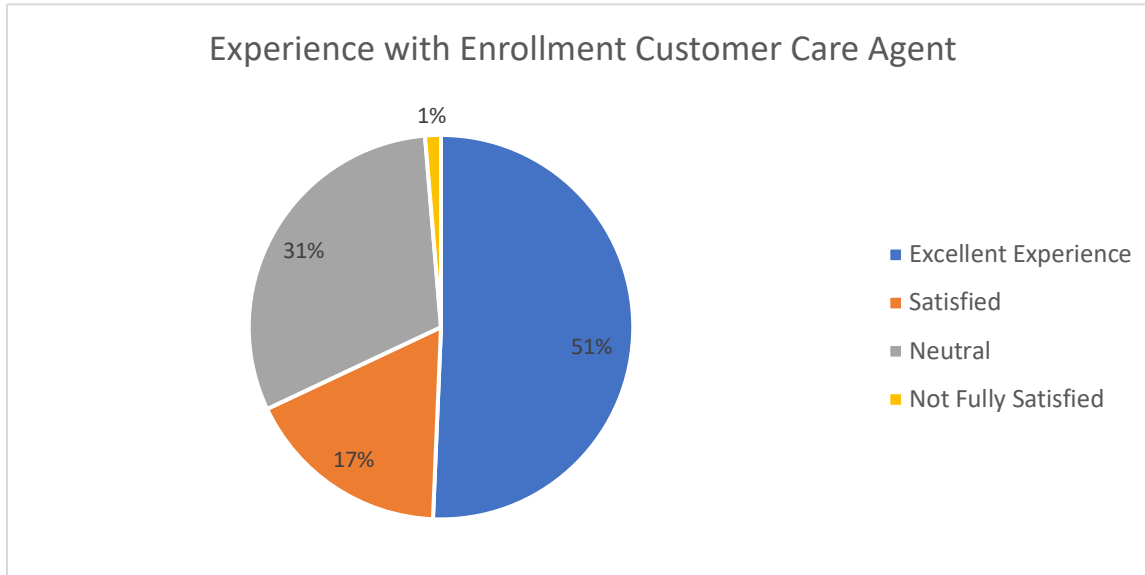
As with the new enrollment process, parents can contact school staff or the Customer Care Center for Stride Learning Solutions, the company that supports the registration process at MEVA. Eighty-two parents indicated that they contacted school staff for support. They were asked to rate the staff’s helpfulness and support on a five-point scale that ranged from “Excellent experience...,” “Satisfied...,” “Neutral,” “Not fully satisfied...,” and “Poor service.” Of those, 80% reported an “Excellent” or “Very good” experience. Figure 6 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 6. Experience with School Staff Support



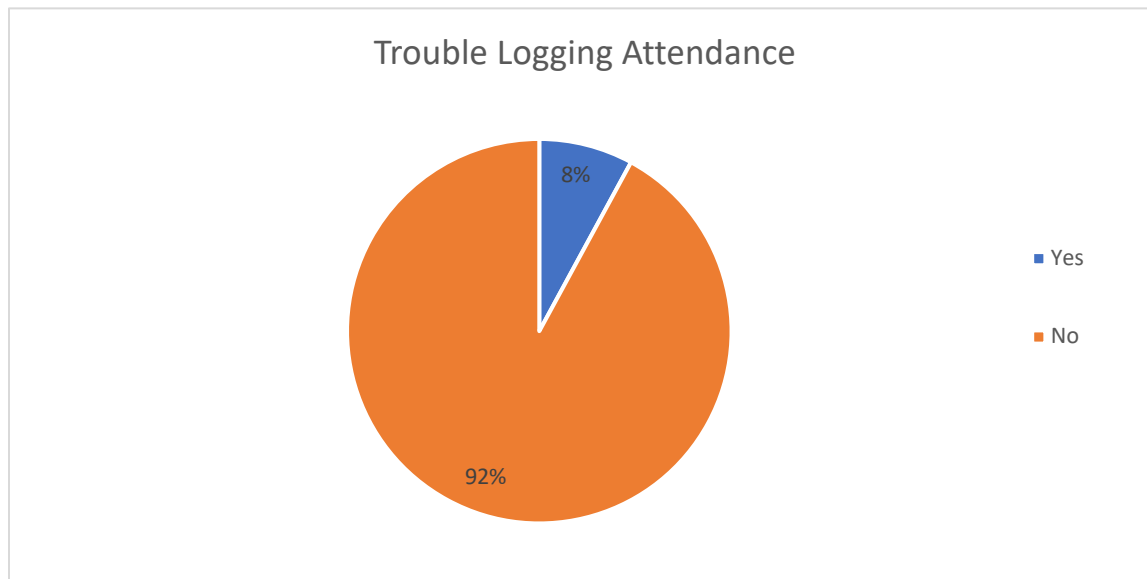
Of the 75 parents who indicated they contacted the Customer Care Center, 68% reported an “Excellent” or satisfactory experience. Figure 7 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 7. Experience with Enrollment Center Customer Care Agent



Parents of MEVA students are responsible for logging their child’s daily attendance using an application named Pulse. The survey asked if they had begun logging attendance. Response options were “Yes,” “No,” and “I am experiencing difficulties with logging attendance or difficulty navigating to where I need to log.” Most parents (92%) did not have difficulties logging attendance for their child. Three parents reported having problems. One parent could find where she needed to log in, but the logging function failed. One parent said that Pulse is “very glitchy on an Apple computer.” Figure 8 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 8. Trouble Logging Attendance



All students enrolled at MEVA are entitled to a loaner computer from the school. The survey asked parents whether they had requested the use of a computer. If the parent received a school computer, they were given eight options to describe their experience with the hardware and software, an option for “Other,” and space to write details of their experience. All five parents who requested a computer for their child reported that it was working properly and could access the necessary sites.

Finally, parents were invited to share any additional comments. No themes were identified among their responses, which are below.

Thank you all for everything you do. I have never met a more caring and dedicated staff.

MEVA really needs more school events and functions or a PTO to try to bring the kids together a little more. I believe they could learn a lot from one another.

I really don't like the way that people are essentially telling my daughter that she could just do the work if she can't do it. If she can't understand it, then I feel a different approach needs to be taken, as she has disabilities and special needs. I understand about giving a gentle (push) here and there, but it's being taken a little too far, in my opinion. When we don't listen to our children is when there's problems, and rather than a solution, I feel it's more of a hindrance.

Competence is lacking. Ms. Browne sets rules that teachers ignore, and there are no results or consequences. Students pay a price for teachers who flout rules and disrespect students and coaches. Communication is sadly lacking.

Onboarding Process

Parent Survey

Ten parents who enrolled students mid-year for the spring semester responded to questions about the onboarding experience. These are the results:

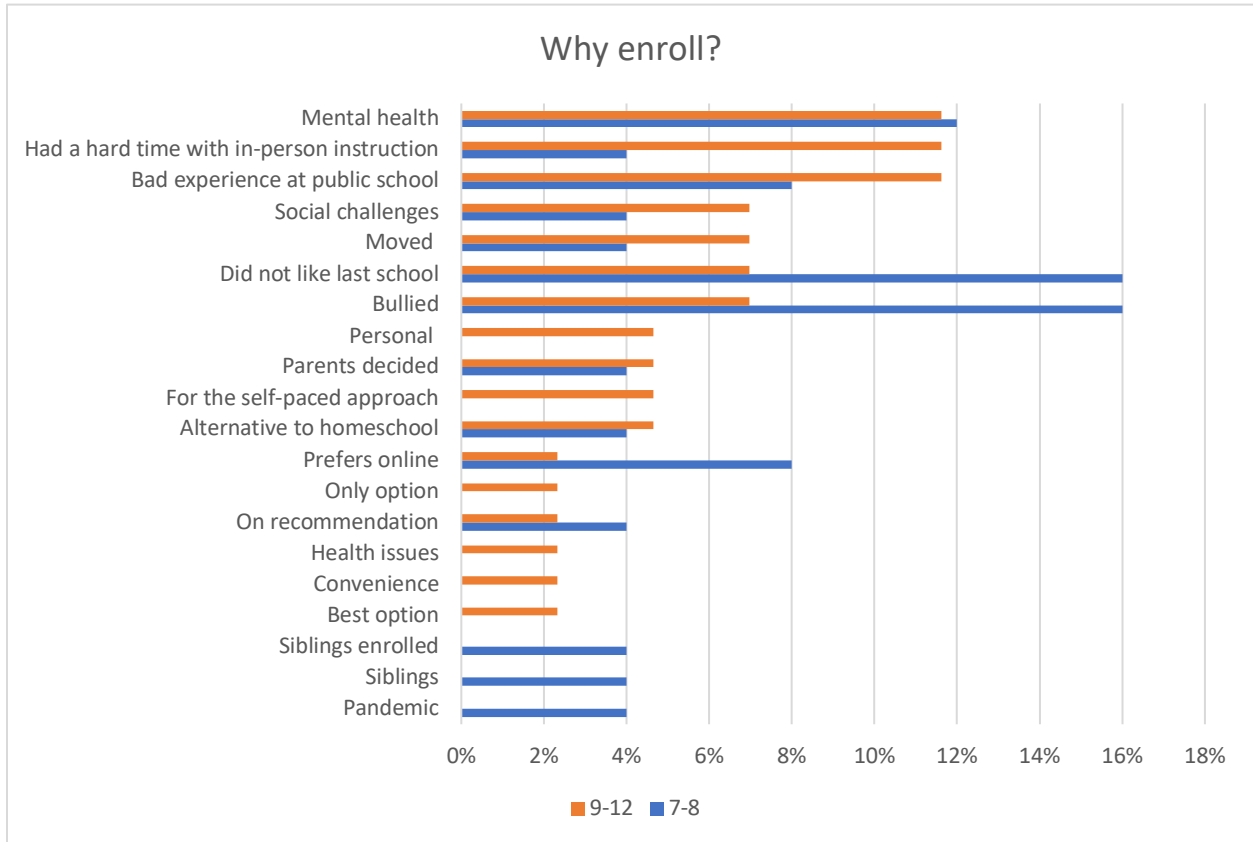
- All found the overall experience to be either “Excellent” (n=6) or “Very good” (n=4) on a five-point scale that included “Good,” “Fair,” and “Poor.”
- All reported that their experience with the onboarding team at MEVA was “Excellent” or “Good” on a five-point scale that included “Neutral,” “Fair,” and “Poor.”
- Nine parents reported attending the orientation session, while one parent watched the recording.
- All parents had begun logging their child's attendance.

Student Survey

A few weeks into their first semester, students were asked to respond to questions about their selection of MEVA and their onboarding experience. When asked why they enrolled at MEVA, most middle school students did not like the last school they attended, had personal reasons, or had difficulty with in-person instruction. High school students were most likely to indicate that

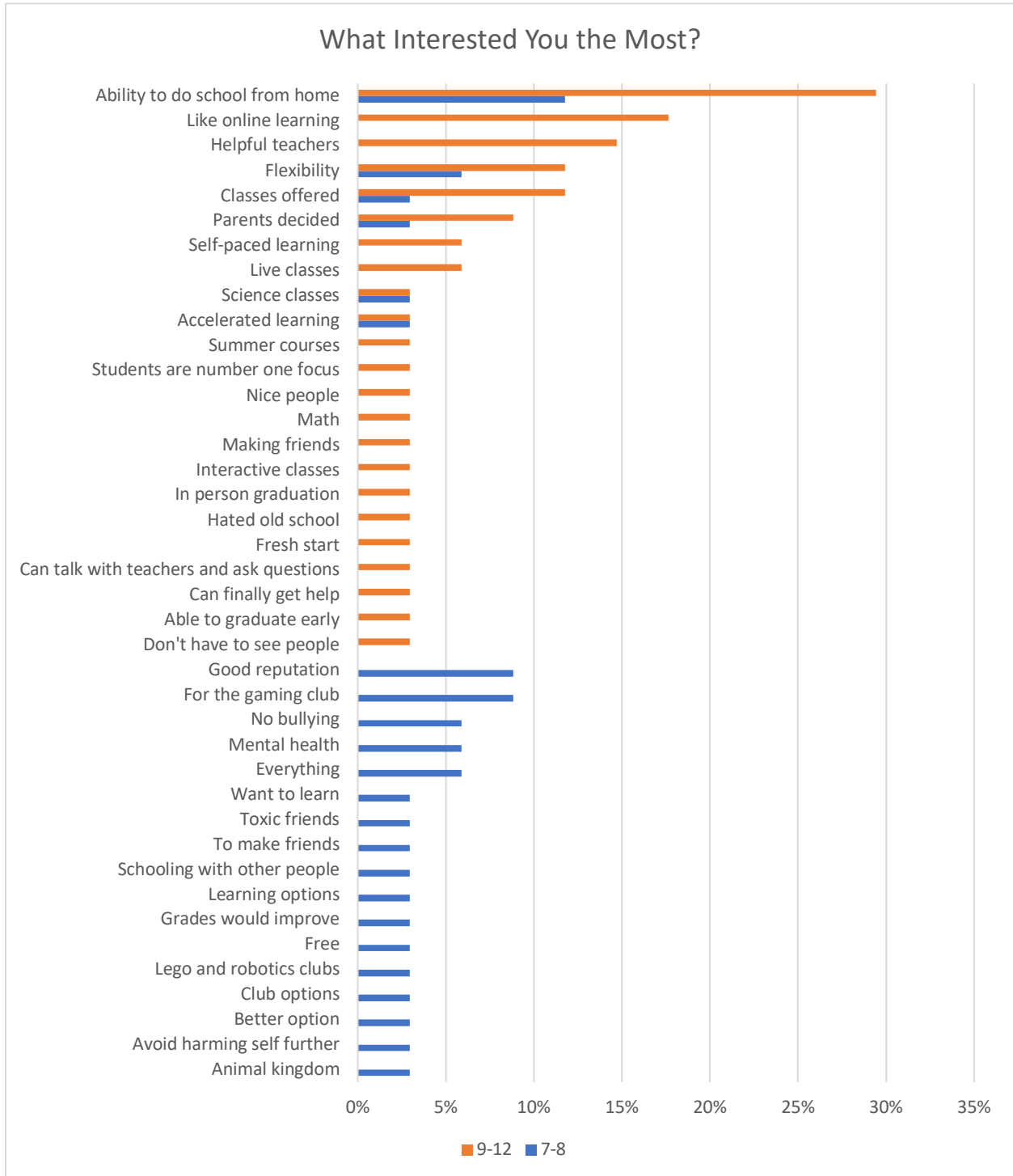
they had a hard time with in-person instruction, had a bad experience at their last school, or experienced mental health challenges. Figure 9 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 9. Why Enroll at MEVA



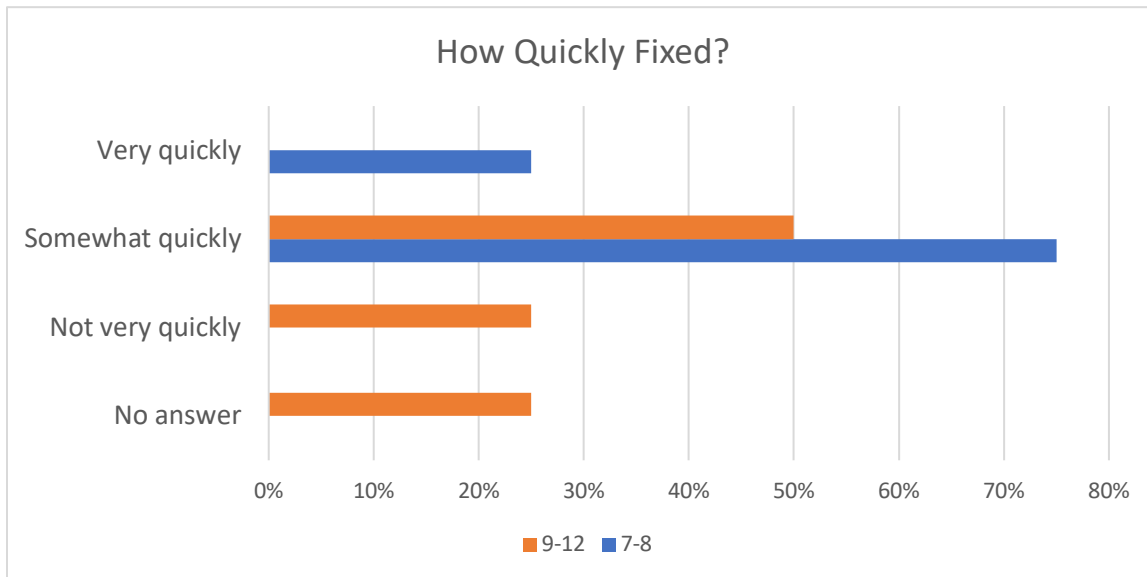
Students were asked what interested them about MEVA. Responses varied widely, and analysis did not reveal specific themes. High school students were most likely to say they liked the ability to do school from home, while middle school students liked online learning. These may or may not have the same meaning. Figure 10 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 10. What Interested You the Most?



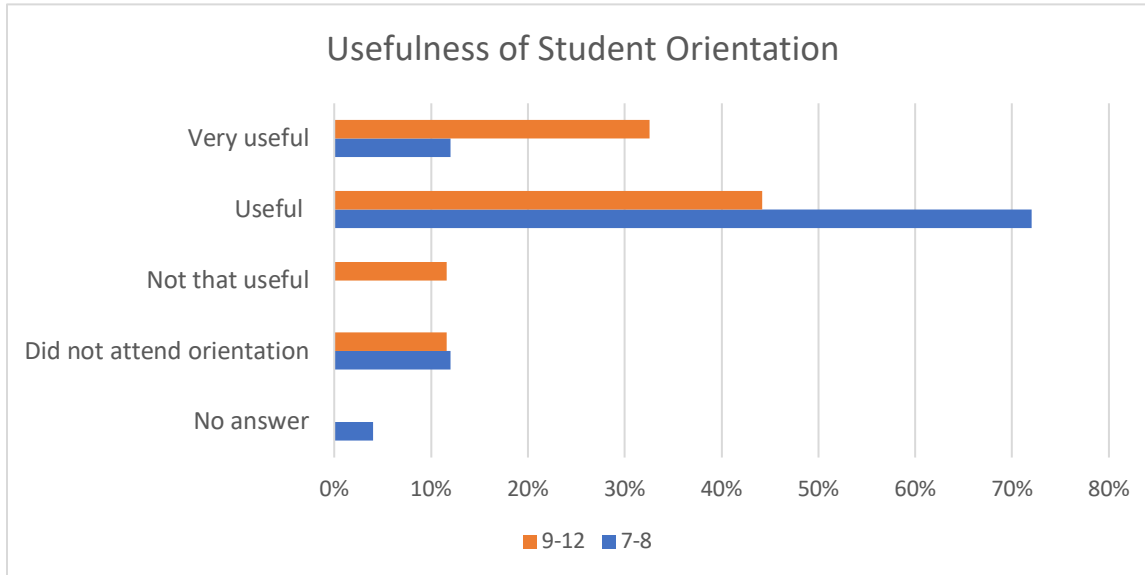
A total of 47 students (17 middle school and 30 high school) reported using a school computer. Eight of the students (four middle school and four high school) indicated that they had a problem with their computer. Six students reported their computer was fixed “Very quickly” or “Somewhat quickly,” with the other option being “Not very quickly.” Figure 11 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 11. How Quickly Fixed?



Respondents were asked how useful they found the student orientation. All middle school students who attended the orientation found it “Very useful” or “Useful.” Of the 38 high school students who attended orientation, 33 found it “Useful” or “Very useful.” Other options were “Not that useful” and “Not at all useful.” Figure 12 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 12. Usefulness of Student Orientation



Four high school students offered suggestions for changes to orientation. The following is a list of changes, each offered by one student:

Give clearer explanations.

Have schedules.

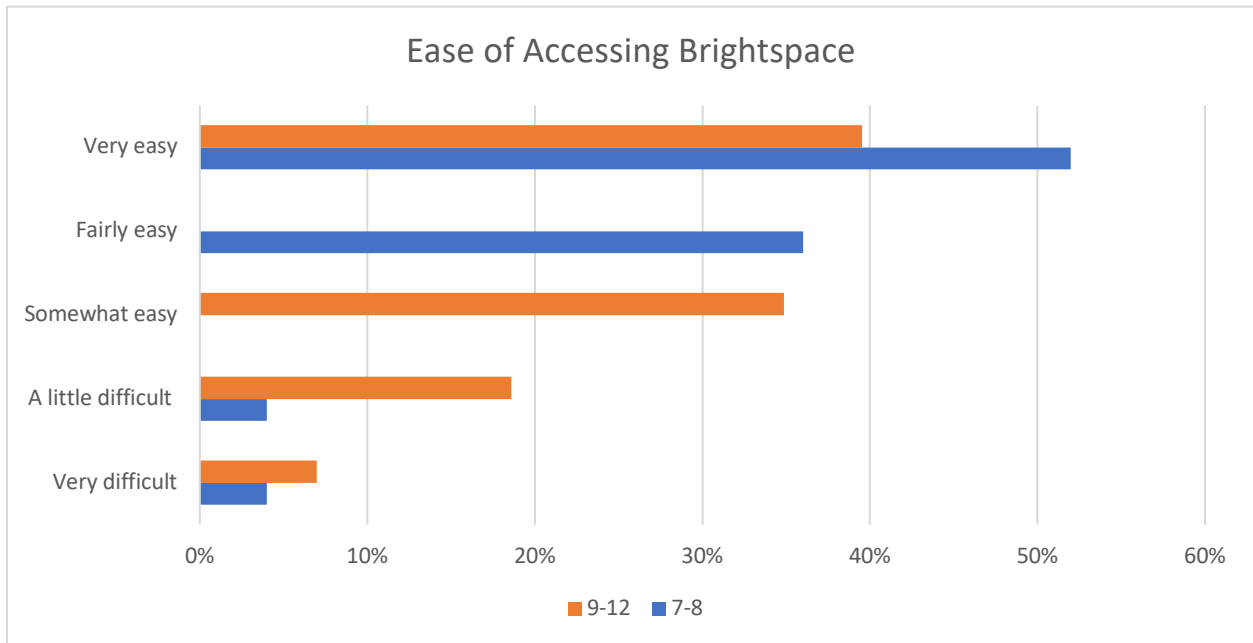
Make it shorter.

It was good but could have been a little more in deep about the classes and how to play back a class that is missed.

When asked about the ease of accessing Brightspace, students were given a five-point scale that ranged from “Very easy,” “Fairly easy,” “A little difficult,” and “Very difficult.” Most middle school students reported that accessing Brightspace was either “Very easy” or “Fairly easy.” Approximately 75% of high school students indicated that it was either “Very easy” or “Fairly

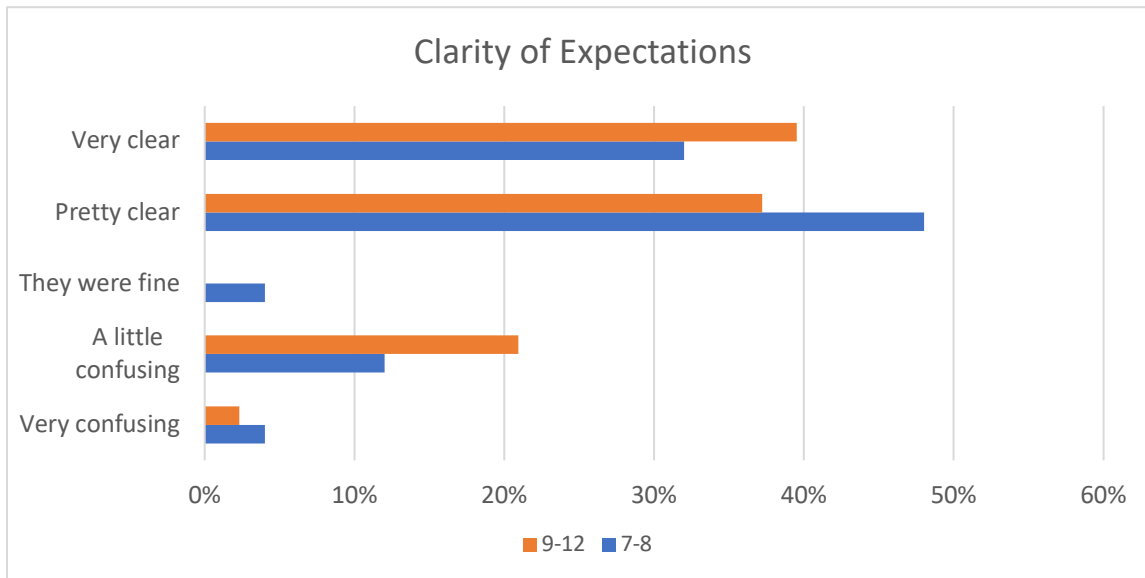
easy,” but 26% reported that it was “A little difficult” or “Very difficult.” Figure 13 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 13. Ease of Accessing Brightspace



Students were asked about the clarity of the expectations at MEVA based on a five-point scale that ranged from “Very clear,” “Pretty clear,” “Fine,” “A little confusing,” and “Very confusing.” Most of the students found them to be “Pretty clear” or “Very clear.” Three middle school students and nine high school students found the expectations “A little confusing,” while two students (one middle school and one high school) found the expectations to be “Very confusing.” Figure 14 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 14. Clarity of Expectations



When asked for their thought on how to make the expectations clearer, the following suggestions were offered:

Clearer schedule, expectations, and more organized.

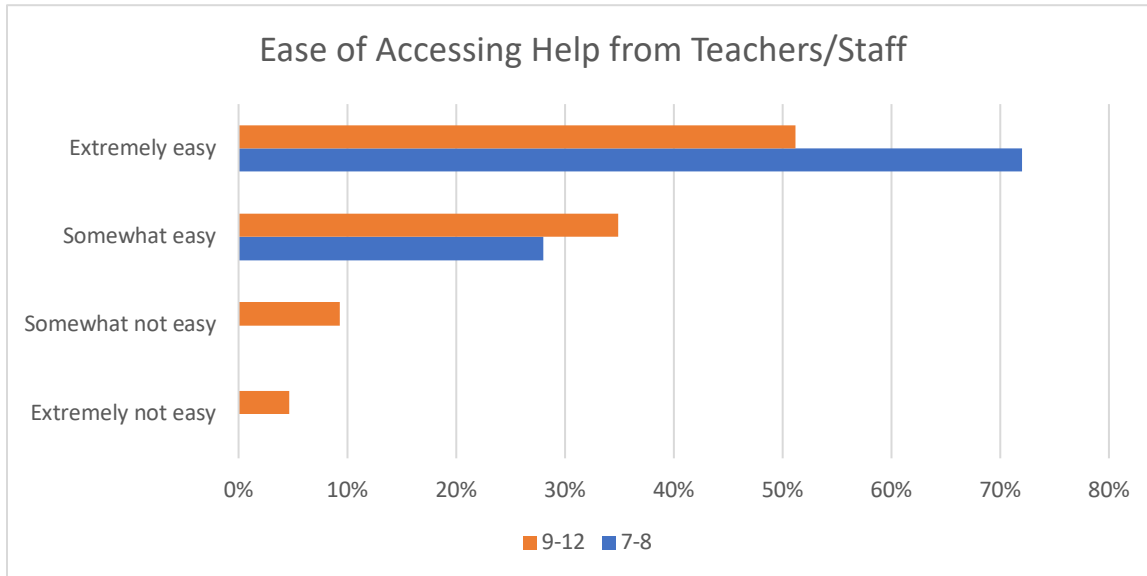
Clearer instructions on how to navigate the classes and play back the videos.

Offer demonstrations of the expectations.

Provide more instructions on navigating Brightspace.

Students were asked how easy it was to get help from teachers or staff. One hundred percent of middle school students and 86% of high school students found it “Extremely easy” or “Somewhat easy.” Six high school students found it “Somewhat not easy” or “Extremely not easy.” Figure 15 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 15. Ease of Accessing Help from Teachers/Staff

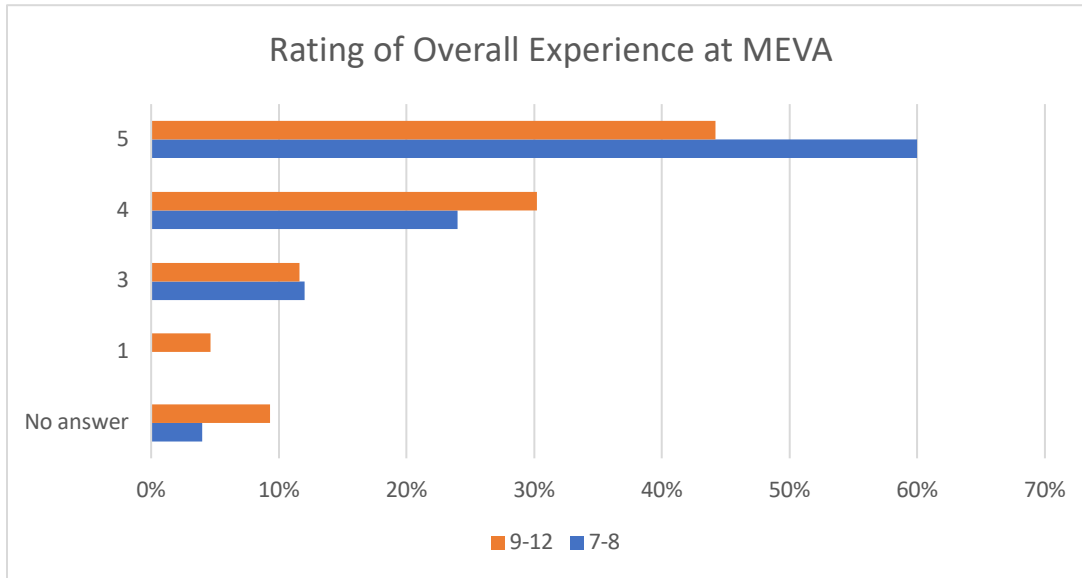


When asked for additional comments on accessing help, nine students said teachers and staff were very helpful, while 22 had nothing to add. The following themes were identified in the comments of those who said it was not easy to access help:

- Teachers or staff delayed their responses or ignored their questions (n=4)
- Vague responses to question (n=1)
- Help desk was unhelpful (n=1)
- Need an easier way to find the right person to answer questions (n=1)

Students were asked to rate their overall experience at MEVA using 1 to 5 stars, with one being low and five being high. Fifty percent of students rated their experience as 5 star, while 28% rated it 4 star. As seen below, middle school students were likelier to rate their experience as 5 star than high school students (60% versus 44%). Figure 16 illustrates the breakdown of responses.

Figure 16. Rating of Overall Experience at MEVA



Finally, students were asked, “If a friend were considering enrolling at MEVA, what advice would you give them?” The following separates the responses into three categories—positive reviews, constructive advice, and negative reviews. Four students gave an outright positive review, while only one gave a negative one. Most student responses provided constructive advice for succeeding at MEVA. The following are direct student quotes, but spelling and punctuation were corrected.

Positive reviews

Four students endorsed the school and added the following comments:

It’s a good school, so I would do it.

Do it.

I would say give it a try. The teachers and students are very nice.

I would tell them it’s a great school, and they should give it a try.

Constructive advice

Starting something new and talking to new people is challenging, but it will get easier over time—like breaking in a new bike. It might be weird at first but is comfortable after time of use.

I would say don't be afraid to ask questions because everyone has questions.

I wish my friend enrolled here. The real school's not very nice to her. She has friends and all, but the staff is extremely unhelpful, and most of the kids behave terribly. I would tell her it's different here.

To pace yourself with the work, and if you can't figure out the set-up of Brightspace, it takes a little to get used to, but ultimately, it is an incredibly easy-to-use source for school.

Just pay attention to your schedule.

That they need to ask the teacher about what times/days they are able to do school related stuff and check emails and such.

To try to keep up with the work because once you're behind it is difficult to get caught up.

It's challenging but gets easier over time.

Don't be afraid to ask for help.

It's different here. Better than old school, where staff was unhelpful, and kids behaved terribly.

Negative Review

It's really confusing here. I am in the fifth week, and I still have no idea what's going on.

Case Studies

Student 1

Student 1 is a male in his junior year. He decided to leave his brick-and-mortar school due to “unrelenting bullying” from staff and administrators about his political beliefs. He also found the academics at his school to be lacking. He commented, “Most classes were just like hanging out.” Neighbors had children who had attended and graduated from MEVA and had nothing but great things to say about the school. This high praise led to his decision to enroll.

The student's mom was very impressed with the enrollment process. She was particularly happy that the school personnel listened to her son's needs. She recognized the need for him to have a 504. Despite trying to have an assessment at his brick-and-mortar school, the administration had not responded. A 504 meeting came together quickly at MEVA, and everyone who should have been there was there. The suggestion was made that this student had ample credits and would be able to graduate early. Also, he would be given credit for his work experience. He was able to participate asynchronously in his classes.

This student did express concerns about himself and the lack of socialization. MEVA suggested he could participate in extra-curricular activities at his district school. However, when Mom requested that he be able to join sports, the administration at the brick-and-mortar school denied the request, indicating they had just passed a rule that required students to be enrolled at the school to join extra-curricular activities.

The student said he was enjoying being a student at MEVA. A person at MEVA suggested that this student could take classes at the community college, but the student was uninterested.

The student's mom especially liked the school but had one challenge. She serves as her son's learning coach and finds this difficult as he is a “procrastinator,” according to her. He does not

disagree with her assessment. She would like him to have a coach other than her. Her ideal situation would be for him to have a teacher or staff person to whom he must report daily. She commented that when you are not self-motivated, there needs to be someone other than Mom for daily accountability.

Mom would recommend MEVA to other parents. She believes they care about students, work hard to meet their needs, and try hard to provide a good learning environment. She believes MEVA could market itself to students who have selected a career path but need a high school diploma to make their choice a reality. She also suggested that more people at Maine schools need to know about MEVA as a choice for struggling students. Lastly, Mom strongly believes that local public schools must make some classes, such as those in the trades, available to MEVA students and should allow students in their district to join extra-curricular activities.

This student reports that he has especially enjoyed his time at MEVA. He finds the teacher and staff to be the nicest people and says it is 100% better than his brick-and-mortar school. He “definitely would recommend the school to a friend, especially one that needs a 504 accommodation.”

Student 2

Student 2 is a female who entered MEVA as an eighth grader mid-year for the spring 2023 semester. She has Asperger's and was “constantly bullied” by her peers at her brick-and-mortar school. The student's mom attempted several times to get the administration to address the bullying but received no response. After doing some research, they chose to apply to MEVA. The student registered for the fall semester but decided to give public school another chance. She instead began at MEVA in the spring. Mom found the staff, particularly Meaghan, to be very helpful in activating her daughter's application and enrolling her. Overall, she found the enrollment process to be very easy with the support of the staff.

The student has been at MEVA for about a month. Mom reports that she feels listened to when communicating with staff about her daughter's needs. She “always gets prompt and helpful responses” when communicating with them.

According to Mom, her daughter is settling in quickly. The student communicates regularly with teachers and is doing especially well academically, enjoying school, and making friends.

“Making friends is a big deal for my daughter because of her Asperger syndrome.”

Mom would like to see upgraded computers, but she also stated that she understands budgets are tight and computers are expensive. Her advice to other parents considering MEVA is, “Do it. It will change your child’s life.”

Student 3

Student 3 is a female who entered MEVA as an eighth grader. I interviewed this student by herself, with her mother’s permission. The student described that she experiences anxiety. She describes her brick-and-mortar school as “socially and academically bad.” The student explained she did not want to move to a virtual school, but her parents wanted her to try it, so they enrolled. When asked if being at a virtual school had helped her anxiety, she replied, “It’s about the same as it was at her last school.”

The student described orientation as “a little helpful,” but said she basically figured out how to navigate classes herself. She explained that the toughest part was learning to upload her assignments to Brightspace, but then a teacher showed the class how to do it.

The student reports that she has good communication with her teachers and advisors. She commented that a couple of teachers will put her in a breakout room and give her one-on-one help when she is struggling. She said, “There is always someone there if I need help. They have done really good.” She reports that her academic progress and performance are approximately the same as at her last school.

The student also reports that she doesn’t like the virtual experience because of the lack of communication with her peers. When asked if she would recommend MEVA to a friend, she said, “If you are a really social person, don’t do it. But if you have really bad anxiety, then do it.”

Student 4

Student 4 is a female who entered MEVA in the seventh grade. She has an older sibling currently attending the school. Both students have special needs. I interviewed the student's mom, but the daughter was offscreen in the background, listening and occasionally commenting. Mom said her daughter was "uncomfortable with some topics" at her brick-and-mortar school. The daughter did approach the administrator to share her discomfort. According to Mom, her child then found herself subject to locker searches, to which the daughter added in a yell, "for no reason." Mom explained that her daughter felt violated and asked if she could go to MEVA with her brother.

Mom found the enrollment process easy with several staff members' help. She commented that if she had questions, all she had to do was call. She said the staff were always very helpful. She found orientation helpful but remarked that there are simply some things you need to do to figure them out.

Mom is very impressed with the school. She likes that students are not pushed forward if they are confused. If her daughter does not understand something, they help her until she gets it. She sees the teachers helping her daughter to think critically and believes that will make her successful. Mom also noticed neither of her children could spell very well. After she raised this issue with the school, MEVA provided support to help her children learn spelling.

Mom is very happy with both her children's progress at MEVA. She says they figure out how they learn best and then use strategies specific to their learning style. She intends to keep both children at MEVA through graduation.

When asked what advice she would give other parents considering enrolling their child in MEVA, she said they should do it. She commented that there is no bullying even though everything is online and that parents have more input into their child's education. One of her concerns is the lack of connection with other students. She advises other MEVA parents to ensure their child is involved in out-of-school activities with other kids regularly and monitor for signs of depression or other mental health concerns.

Key Takeaways

While the cases are different, they have some similarities and important takeaways. All the students had some type of special need. At their previous school, two became the target of peer bullying, and the administration targeted two for expressing their views or concerns.

The three parents who participated in the interviews said the staff were extremely helpful and responsive during enrollment. All felt heard by the staff. They believed their child's needs were being well met, and accommodations of varying kinds were implemented to support their child's success. Both parents and students experienced that staff and teachers were always there to help them understand their lessons and accomplish the goals of classes.

Regarding the onboarding process, parents and students generally found it helpful. One student said that Brightspace presented some challenges, particularly with uploading assignments. However, once a teacher showed the class how it worked, the student could do it. Both parents and students commented on how accessible and helpful staff and teachers are to students.

One area where the two students expressed concern was the lack of social connection with other students. They experienced isolation. One student requested to be enrolled in extra-curricular activities in the local district school they had attended, but the administration denied the request. One mom advised other parents to ensure their child had regular connections with other youth through out-of-school activities.

The parent of the one high school student who participated, while happy with most aspects of the school, felt that being her child's learning coach was not a good situation. She and her son agreed with her assessment of him as a procrastinator. She thought it would be best if he were accountable daily to a staff or teacher in the school.

Perspectives on the overall experience with MEVA were obtained by asking parents and students if they would recommend MEVA to a fellow student or another parent. The responses from the three parents were positive. As for the two student participants, their perspectives varied somewhat. The one student I interviewed alone was missing social connections, which colored

her experience. The other student was able to recognize the benefits of the experience at MEVA but still felt he would have benefited from peer interaction.

Overall Summary

The 2021–2022 evaluation report made six recommendations to improve enrollment processes for new students and re-enrollment for continuing students. These recommendations were largely built upon the overwhelming comments about support staff offered to parents who reached out for help and parent suggestions. The following is a shortened version of the recommendations, the full text of which can be found in Appendix A.

1. Reinforce for parents that staff are available to assist them if they encounter challenges in the enrollment process. Remind them of the general help sessions available.
2. Provide a checklist of enrollment steps for parents to help them feel confident that they have completed the process.
3. Inform parents that they should reach out for technical assistance if they have challenges submitting compliance documents or photographs.
4. Review the re-enrollment email with instructions and screenshots to ensure they match the online process exactly.
5. Survey parents directly after re-enrollment to determine whether issues have been resolved.
6. Encourage student participation in the new student survey regarding onboarding.

The design of the 2022–2023 evaluation, in part, was to assess if the changes in the enrollment process made by Stride Learning Solution’s Customer Care Center and the MEVA staff addressed parent challenges with the enrollment processes. The results of parent surveys on new enrollment and re-enrollments provide evidence, sometimes by lack of comments about

challenges, that the changes implemented positively impacted parents' enrollment experience and addressed the concerns expressed during the 2021–2022 academic year.

First and foremost, parents in either enrollment process were encouraged to contact staff for assistance when they met various challenges, including trouble logging in or uploading required documents. A few surveyed parents reported problems but shared that staff members were very helpful in resolving issues. They were also reminded of general help sessions, which also offered assistance with the process.

Last year, some parents, especially those enrolling new students, had difficulty knowing when they had completed the process. The recommendation was enacted to provide parents with a checklist of steps for the applicable enrollment process. Given that there were no comments about the uncertainty of completion of the new or re-enrollment process, this revision was a success.

One frustration the parents who re-enrolled their students last year experienced with the process was that the written walk-through guide did not match the steps on the Enrollment Portal. Staff revised the walk-through guide to ensure that it matched the steps online. Again, the lack of comments on this issue suggests that the revised walk-through guide matches the online process well. The second issue some parents found frustrating last year was that the re-enrollment was divided into two parts. This year, those parts were redesigned and combined into one. Again, there were no comments on this aspect of the process.

Next, a survey was emailed a couple of weeks after the start of the fall and spring semesters to gather information about students' onboarding experience and acclimation to MEVA. Students were asked about their reasons for enrolling in MEVA, including the most enticing aspects. Responses varied widely, but doing school from home or the online learning experience were the most common.

Most students found the school's expectations of them, introduced during orientation, clear. The few students who found the expectations confusing mentioned issues such as navigating classes,

watching videos of the class, and using Brightspace. When they needed help, most found it easy to access assistance from a teacher or staff person.

The final question asked students what advice they would give to a friend considering enrolling at MEVA. Most students offered constructive advice, which they likely learned from their own experiences. Advice included assuring prospects that while MEVA is different and has some challenging aspects, one gets used to it. Students also emphasized that asking for help is okay. They advised others to be responsible by knowing their schedule, keeping up with the work, and pacing themselves.

Finally, a limited number of case studies (four) explored students' reasons for enrolling at MEVA and their experience with onboarding and acclimating to MEVA. In addition to the small number of case studies, the results are limited because only two students participated directly, while parents represented the other students' experiences. Furthermore, zero parents or students responded to the request to participate in an end-of-year interview, leaving the outcome and perspectives of the academic year unknown. Despite these limitations, these case studies provided a glimpse into student and parent experiences and highlighted some important issues.

Overall, parents were highly satisfied with their child's experience enrolling in and onboarding at MEVA. All the students had special needs, and all parents felt that the school met their child's needs. All the students did well in their academics at the outset. Both parents and students felt that teachers and staff were readily available for help.

The two students who participated in the interviews expressed that the lack of peer connections was problematic. A parent of another student commented on the importance of ensuring her child was involved in community activities to provide that peer connection. One student struggling with the lack of peer connection was told he might be eligible to join extra-curricular activities at his local school. However, when he and his parent requested that he be allowed to enroll in the activities, the request was denied by administrators. Unfortunately, the local school's decision is out of the control of MEVA.

One concern raised is worth further investigation. The only parent of a high school student stated that she did not feel that she was the most effective coach for her son. She concluded that her son would benefit from a staff person from the school to whom he could report daily. The only way to know if this experience is more widespread is to ask a wider pool of parents.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this report, I offer the following recommendations to MEVA.

Recommendation 1: Continue the changes implemented in the new and re-enrollment processes.

Recommendation 2: Continue to administer the new student survey and consider including more specific questions about aspects of onboarding that students might find challenging (e.g., playing back videos of classes).

Recommendation 3: Explore whether having parents as coaches of their own children is challenging for more than just the parent who raised the issue. Seek to identify if there are commonalities among students whose parents are experiencing this challenge.

Recommendation 4: Explore ways to create connections among students who desire more peer interaction.

Recommendation 5: Explore ways to increase participation in the annual evaluation process. Consider incentivizing parents and students to complete written surveys and participate in in-person interviews with the evaluator.

The last recommendation is not within the control of MEVA but might be considered by the Maine Department of Education and the Charter Commission.

Recommendation 6: Consider a regulation that students enrolled in a public charter school be eligible to participate in extra-curricular activities at their district public school.

Appendix A

2021–2022 Executive Summary

The Maine Virtual Academy (MEVA) is one of two virtual public charter schools authorized by the Maine Charter School Commission. MEVA enrolls students in seventh through 12th grade and is open to any student in these grades who resides in Maine. All eligible applicants may enroll in the school if capacity limits allow. A requirement of virtual public charter schools is a third-party evaluation each year. This evaluation focuses on parent experiences with the enrollment processes, which were modified during the past year.

Surveys were conducted with three groups of parents, including those who (1) enrolled their child mid-year, (2) enrolled their child for the first time for fall 2022, and (3) re-enrolled their child for fall 2022. The survey included both multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. Response rates ranged from 32% to 50%. Since the process was the same for mid-year and new enrollments for fall 2022, data from these two surveys were analyzed together. Re-enrollment survey responses were analyzed separately.

The following are the key findings of the mid-year and new fall enrollments:

- The three top ways parents learned about MEVA were through an online search, a parent whose child attends MEVA, and staff from the student’s previous school.
- Important considerations for parents searching for an alternative to the local brick-and-mortar school included a public option, a strong success rate, strong academics, supportive staff, inclusion, innovation, an individualized approach, flexibility, a strong curriculum, and ease of access.
- Most parents found the enrollment process “Very easy” (N=21), while 16 parents found it “Somewhat easy.” The average rating for the enrollment process was 4.6 out of 5, with 5 being the highest score.
- Most parents found the clarity of the next steps provided in the enrollment process “Very clear.”

- Challenges in the enrollment process identified by parents included difficulty obtaining or uploading the required documents and knowing if they had completed the process. Those who experienced obstacles and reached out to staff found the staff very helpful.

Parents who enrolled their child mid-year were also asked about the onboarding process. Most found the new student orientation “Somewhat beneficial” or “Very beneficial.” When asked how their child was settling into MEVA, parents rated their child’s experience as 4 or 5 out of 5. Only one parent who requested a computer for their child had technical difficulties when the computer arrived, and support from staff easily fixed the problem.

A total of 391 students enrolled for the academic year beginning fall 2022. Of the 24 students that enrolled in January 2022, 21 have re-enrolled. In addition, 249 students who entered the school before fall 2022 have re-enrolled, and 121 are new. Student addresses span 169 different Maine towns and cities.

Parents were asked what factors they considered when they decided to re-enroll their child. In addition to enthusiasm about their child’s experience at MEVA, they identified the following considerations:

- Child’s desire to re-enroll
- A strong curriculum
- Child’s academic success
- Staff support of students and families
- Child’s improved mental or emotional health
- Flexibility and class schedules, including the ability to complete school early.

When asked about the ease of the re-enrollment process, 75% of parents found it “Very easy.” While 56% of parents found the clarity of each step of the enrollment process “Very clear,” 42% found identifying the next steps “Fairly clear” or “Unclear.” Many stated that the entire process or the order of steps was confusing and inconsistent with email instructions. A few mentioned technical issues.

Parent's suggestions for improving the process can be summarized as follows:

1. Make the process "cleaner," "clearer," and "simpler."
2. Ensure directions are consistent.
3. Communicate better between steps.
4. Create a checklist for parents to make the process more concrete.
5. Create a better system to track submitted documents.
6. Provide an updated course selection for the upcoming year.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

Recommendation 1: A strength of MEVA is the staff. Noted were their friendliness and the helpful technical assistance they provided. Reinforce for parents that staff are available to assist them if they encounter challenges. Encourage them not to spend time struggling and to reach out for help instead. Remind them of the general help sessions available.

Recommendation 2: Once parents complete the enrollment process, they receive a pop-up message thanking them for completing registration. However, a checklist of the steps for initial enrollment and re-enrollment, emailed to parents, could serve as an additional assurance to parents as they progress and confirm upon completion that they have completed all the steps.

Recommendation 3: Inform parents that they should reach out for technical assistance if they have challenges submitting compliance documents or photographs. Staff can load documents into the system on parents' behalf.

Recommendation 4: Review the re-enrollment email with instructions and screenshots to ensure they match the online process exactly. Once staff complete this review and make needed

modifications, other staff should conduct user testing by acting as parents enrolling or re-enrolling their child to verify consistency between the written instructions and actual steps.

Recommendation 5: Survey parents directly after re-enrollment to determine whether issues have been resolved. Furthermore, it is recommended that parents receive an email with a link to the survey immediately upon completing the re-enrollment process.

Recommendation 6: Despite initial attempts to survey students who enrolled mid-year, data collection was unsuccessful. It is recommended that staff examine why communication with students about the survey was unsuccessful and develop a plan to reach students more effectively and encourage their participation. Data from newly enrolled students for both mid-year and fall can provide important information on their experiences with onboarding and settling into the school.