



18 Maplewood Avenue
Biddeford, ME 04005
207.282.8280
www.smacschools.me

Dear Members of the Maine Commission on Charter Schools,

It is my pleasure to present the Commission with a copy of this year's Third Party Evaluation of the Maine Connections Academy (MCA). It has been a privilege to collaborate with the dedicated MCA team in assessing the school's performance and making informed recommendations for its continued growth.

I must commend Principal Wallace and his team for their proactive engagement with various stakeholders this year. At your request, they went above and beyond to involve a multitude of voices in the evaluation process, a testament to their commitment to transparency and continuous improvement. Stakeholder engagement and participation in this year's TPE increased exponentially, shoring up the data and expanding the number of voices I heard.

The findings from our evaluation reaffirm that Maine Connections Academy remains at the forefront of delivering an exceptional academic program tailored to the unique needs of remote learners. MCA distinguishes itself as a responsive institution, placing individuals at the core of its mission. The passion and positivity exhibited by the MCA community are truly exceptional, setting it apart from conventional online schools.

Notably, MCA has embraced recommendations for academic enhancement, resulting in significant progress in addressing concerns related to academic outcomes, student assessment, and Board-faculty relations. The Pearson environment has provided valuable longitudinal insights, aiding in identifying students' strengths and areas requiring support.

Reflecting on last year's recommendations, I applaud MCA for their diligence in addressing these suggestions. Achieving an increased enrollment cap of 500 students, enhancing parent engagement, and improving the "customer service experience" are all notable achievements that demonstrate the school's commitment to excellence.

I look forward to meeting with the Commission again in the coming months, and answering any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Indorf".

Chris Indorf
Consultant for the SMAC

Maine Connections Academy

Third Party Evaluation

2022-2023 School Year

September, 2023 • Chris Indorf, M.S., M.Ed., C.A.G.S.

Agreement

At the conclusion of the 2019 school year, the Maine Connections Academy principal contacted the Southern Maine Administrative Collaborative (SMAC) to solicit a request for an external audit of certain functions of the school. Principal Wallace had previously met with the Executive Director and consultants of the Collaborative on several occasions, and following the work performed by the SMAC in 2020, 2021, and 2023 proffered a contract renewal for this year. Mr. Wallace communicated regularly with the evaluator and stakeholders.

The Maine Connections Academy, as required by charter, engaged the SMAC to conduct a wholly independent, third-party evaluation (hereafter, “TPE”) to assess the execution of the program as detailed in its charter application. Again this year, the ESP Pearson¹ program, curricula, assessment, and back office functions was assessed. Having longitudinal data allows school leaders and the Board to better assess the efficacy of program function. Four years’ worth of alike quantitative and qualitative data provides program leaders with trendlines.²

Research, survey development, and stakeholder feedback collection continued through the last Spring and Summer of 2023.

Maine Charter Schools & MCA

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

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

² The TPEs completed for the MCA during the pandemic may have influenced stakeholder feedback, but determining how, and to what extent, would be sheer speculation, and the TPE’s author and editors did not venture an estimate.

to confirmation by the Senate, for 4-year terms. According to the Commission’s website, there are no current vacancies on the Board.³

Maine Connections Academy (MCA) is Maine’s first full-time, virtual public charter school. The school offers a rigorous academic program to students in grades 7–12 and operates under the authorization of the Maine Department of Education and Maine Charter Commission. MCA was founded during the 2014-15 school year and graduated its first 12th grade class in June 2015. The school has an enrollment of 470 students⁴: one-quarter middle school, grades 7-9 and three-quarter high school, grades 9-12. MCA’s catchment area is billed as “from Kittery to Fort Kent.” Two-thirds of MCA teachers hold master’s degrees or higher.

MCA is fully accredited by Cognia (it was formerly accredited by the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement). Cognia Performance Standards are at the heart of continuous improvement and accreditation. They define the characteristics of a good education institution and provide guidelines for efforts that will “energetically and visibly grow learners, teachers, leaders, and organizations.” Cognia accredits schools K-12, postsecondary, and Early and Extended Learning programs.

MCA’s canon is comprehensive in nature and is aligned with Maine Learning Results including Common Core State Standards.

Requirement

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

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

³ There was one vacancy when the 2022 report was submitted to the Commission.

⁴ A ~1% increase over 2022.

Introduction

This TPE contemplates the current state of the school, as well as progress toward recommendations made in last year's TPE. In order to be a practical and usable tool for decision makers at MCA, the report largely mirrors last year's inquiry. The 2022 report was expanded in scope to include questions specific to the functioning of the Academy's largest software provider, Pearson, which provides services ranging from reporting and recording to academics to human resources. The objective for this report is to address the degree to which Maine Connections Academy continued to function well during the school year 2022-2023, and to explore how the MCA Board and leadership addressed lead consultant Chris Indorf's 2022 report, and to assess stakeholders' satisfaction with the Pearson platform. Several questions in the survey instrument were verbatim⁵ over 2022 so that decision makers can make an at-a-glance, apples-to-apples analysis.

Methodology and Rationale

The assessment utilizes a Qualitative Research framework, which is instrumental in providing an intricate portrayal of a program or organization. This approach facilitates a comprehensive analysis of how the program or organization operates and the extent to which it attains its desired objectives.⁶

Qualitative methodologies are often closely associated with techniques such as interviews, survey design, focus groups, and individual case studies. Conversely, quantitative methodologies typically involve rigorously designed experiments featuring control groups when applicable, alongside meticulously controlled dependent and independent variables. Qualitative research design stands out as the most adaptable and inclusive among widely accepted approaches for program evaluation. In the context of this evaluation, "quantitative" specifically pertains to survey data.

The insights gathered from stakeholders should and must guide various aspects such as program design, institutional decision-making, budget planning, staffing requirements, and more. It's worth noting that qualitative research methods have a venerable history, tracing their roots back to ancient Greece. They are in no way less rigorous than their quantitative

⁵ Study after study, across fields, disciplines, and industry find shorter surveys were reliable and produced higher response and completion rates than long surveys, and that consistent language and format year-over-year yields more reliable, statistically valid results.

⁶ Reacher's Note: Qualitative Research, in addition to being a cost-effective strategy, is an open-ended process that more fully incorporates the human experience. It can provide actionable insights and accounts for the nexus of the art and science of education. Bias inherent in the data is contextualized.

counterparts and, in fact, offer a deeper understanding of organizational planning and behavior. Both the evaluator and the MCA principal concurred early in the process that qualitative analysis would align more effectively with the Academy's needs and resonate more meaningfully.

Process

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

Administration and Faculty
Families⁷
Board of Directors

These groups were similarly surveyed in years past. The surveys were based on an established body of work from the field, including self-study tools from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges⁸ (an organization which accredits Maine public schools, Private Schools, most of Maine's Independent ["60/40"] schools⁹, and colleges), as well as emerging tools like the Perceptions of the Blended Learning Environment Questionnaire.¹⁰ In addition, MCA-specific questions designed to specifically probe its relationship with Pearson were crafted.

Letters of introduction explaining the Third Party Evaluation process were emailed to stakeholders, or sent via USPS to nonrespondents¹¹ prior to the administration of the survey instrument. Surveys were administered electronically, and all respondents were afforded up to 20 minutes each for follow-up interviews.

⁷ In previous evaluations, Parents and Students were surveyed separately. While the results were typically consistent, the roughly 20% deviation between parents' and students' perceptions led the Principal and Evaluator to agree to combine these groups into one, unified "family" survey. Beside prompting dialogue between parents and students, a secondary goal of this consolidation was to more finely tune responses and not have parents' perceptions negate students' perceptions. After all, faculty and students are the primary users of the Pearson suite of products. Parents' perceptions and how they deviate from those of their students are grist for a formal accreditation process.

⁸ <https://cis.neasc.org/sites/cis.neasc.org/files/Manuals/Manual%20for%20School%20Evaluation%20Complete%20rev073117.pdf>

⁹ So-called "60/40" schools are private schools where at least 60% of their students are publicly funded and come from towns without their own high schools. The schools are: Erskine Academy, John Bapst Memorial High School, Washington Academy, George Stevens Academy, Liberty School, Lee Academy, Foxcroft Academy, Maine Central Institute, Lincoln Academy, Fryeburg Academy, and Thornton Academy. These schools receive Insured Value Factor funds in addition to the state average secondary tuition.

¹⁰ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0734282919834091>

¹¹ For this TPE, a "nonrespondent" was one who did not complete the questionnaire, or whose email was returned as undeliverable.

In previous years, students, faculty, parents, and Board members were selected at random from a slate assembled from the Principal. The Commission bewailed limited participation from certain stakeholder groups in the past, and Principal Wallace cast a much wider net: in all, responses received from parents, faculty, student, and board members approached 300 total.

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

Inquiry

The survey instruments featured varying lines of inquiry tailored to specific stakeholder groups, thereby serving as a quantitative complement to the qualitative analysis. For instance, students and their parents were queried about their interactions with teachers and the significance they attributed to academic connections within the Pearson online product. In contrast, Board members were surveyed regarding their roles in governance, financial stewardship, and their perceptions of Pearson.

Despite these distinct lines of questioning, both the Principal and Evaluator agreed that each survey should incorporate a set of consistent “throughline questions.” These are questions that share identical wording or thematic content across all stakeholder groups.¹²

“Throughline questions” are a specific type of survey or research questions that are intentionally included across multiple survey instruments or data collection methods within a research study. These questions share identical wording or a common theme and are used to gather consistent data from different groups of respondents or across various phases of the research. Throughline questions serve several important purposes in research:

Consistency. Throughline questions ensure that certain key aspects of the research are consistently examined across different groups or at different points in time. This consistency allows researchers to make meaningful comparisons and draw conclusions based on uniform data.

Cross-Validation. When the same question is asked of multiple stakeholder groups or in various survey instruments, the responses can be compared to validate findings and identify patterns or discrepancies. This can enhance the reliability and credibility of the research.

¹² See, e.g., <https://www.pewresearch.org/our-methods/u-s-surveys/writing-survey-questions/>

Tracking Change. Throughline questions are valuable when researchers want to track changes or trends over time. By asking the same questions in multiple survey waves, researchers can assess how perceptions, attitudes, or behaviors evolve.

Benchmarking. Researchers can use throughline questions as benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions or programs. By consistently measuring specific aspects, researchers can assess whether improvements or changes have occurred.

Comparative Analysis. Throughline questions can facilitate comparative analysis between different stakeholder groups. For example, they can help identify disparities or similarities in the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers.

Prioritization. Researchers may prioritize throughline questions as the most critical aspects of their research, ensuring that these questions are consistently addressed even if other aspects of the research vary.

In practice, throughline questions are carefully crafted to be clear, unbiased, and relevant to the research objectives. They are typically designed to elicit specific information or insights that are essential for the research's overall goals. By incorporating throughline questions into surveys or data collection instruments, researchers can ensure that key aspects of their study are thoroughly explored and analyzed across various dimensions or groups

Furthermore, questions were customized to suit their intended recipients. Careful consideration was given to whether a question should be open-ended, allowing respondents to provide their own responses (as was the case with the Board and Faculty), or closed-ended, presenting respondents with a list of answer choices (as was the approach for families).

Why a comprehensive assessment of Pearson is mission critical

Pearson, a renowned educational publishing and assessment company, offers a suite of services to virtual charter schools to support their educational programs and goals. Here is a general overview of the types of services that Pearson typically provided to virtual charter schools:

1. **Curriculum and Instructional Materials:** Pearson often offers a wide range of curriculum resources, including textbooks, digital courseware, and other instructional materials. These resources are designed to align with educational standards and provide engaging content for virtual charter school students.

2. **Online Learning Platforms:** Pearson may provide virtual charter schools with access to online learning platforms and Learning Management Systems (LMS). These platforms facilitate the delivery of educational content, assessments, and interactive activities in a digital format.
3. **Assessment and Testing Services:** Pearson is known for its expertise in educational assessment. They may offer virtual charter schools a suite of assessment tools and services to measure student progress, including standardized tests, formative assessments, and digital assessment platforms.
4. **Professional Development:** Pearson often provides training and professional development opportunities for educators and administrators in virtual charter schools. These sessions aim to enhance teaching and leadership skills in an online learning environment.
5. **Data Analytics and Reporting:** Pearson's services may include data analytics tools that help virtual charter schools track and analyze student performance data. These insights can inform instructional decisions and support personalized learning.
6. **Teacher Support:** Pearson may offer resources and support for virtual charter school teachers, including lesson planning assistance, access to teaching materials, and online communities for collaboration and sharing best practices.
7. **Student Support Services:** Some offerings may include resources to support students, such as tutoring services, academic counseling, and access to additional learning resources.
8. **Customization and Adaptation:** Pearson may work with virtual charter schools to customize their services to meet the specific needs and goals of the school. This can include tailoring curriculum materials, assessments, and platforms.
9. **Technical Support:** To ensure a smooth online learning experience, Pearson often provides technical support and assistance to virtual charter schools, including help with platform issues and troubleshooting.
10. **Compliance and Accountability:** Pearson may offer services to help virtual charter schools meet regulatory requirements and maintain compliance with educational standards.

It's important to note that the services provided by Pearson can vary depending on the specific needs and goals of each virtual charter school. Virtual charter schools often collaborate with educational companies like Pearson to enhance their offerings and provide a high-quality online learning experience for their students. MCA's relationship with Pearson is extensive, and represents a significant annual investment of the school's resources.

Themes

The evaluator embarked on a comprehensive assessment of Maine Connections Academy, aiming to gauge the institution's overall well-being while placing special emphasis on the intricate dynamics of its partnership with Pearson. Pearson plays a pivotal role in the school's operations, delivering a wide spectrum of services encompassing online curriculum management, student information systems, and essential back-office functions. Maine Connections Academy stands as a distinctive educational entity, setting itself apart from the majority of schools in Maine due to its unique educational offerings and approach.

In the realm of assessing the learning environment, it's imperative to recognize that students' perceptions are a fundamental component of the educational journey. Nevertheless, a significant challenge arises when attempting to measure students' perceptions in the context of blended and online learning, as valid assessment instruments for this purpose are notably scarce. Within the framework of this third-party evaluation, the evaluator embarked on a multifaceted exploration, with three overarching themes at the forefront of inquiry.

Firstly, the investigation delved into the perceptions of integration between face-to-face and online learning. This critical aspect of the educational experience was thoroughly examined to understand how students navigate the synergy between these two modes of learning. Additionally, the assessment ventured into exploring students' perceptions of their contributions in the online environment, shedding light on their roles, responsibilities, and engagement levels within the digital realm.

Moreover, the evaluation sought to uncover the diverse spectrum of challenges and opportunities that online learning presents. It delved into the nuanced landscape of students' perceptions regarding the hurdles they encounter and the prospects that emerge in the online learning sphere. Within the Maine Connections Academy program, a notable hallmark is the substantial degree of student autonomy. Research studies, including meta-analyses conducted by scholars like John Hattie,¹³ consistently affirm the significance of "student control over learning"¹⁴ as a potent factor influencing student achievement. This autonomy underscores the unique character of the MCA program, aligning with broader educational research findings.

¹³ Hattie, J. (2010). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement ; Reveals Teaching's holy Grail. The Times Educational Supplement*. Routledge.

¹⁴ Effect of student choice and control over learning is somewhat higher on motivation outcomes than achievement outcomes, but neither have major consequences on learning and too many choices can be overwhelming.

Ultimately, there is a tremendous amount of student autonomy in the MCA program; researchers such as John Hattie have conducted meta analyses of research finding that “student control over learning” is a significant factor in student achievement.

Findings

I. Faculty Abstract - Quantitative Results

- 22 respondents participated in this year’s study. This is a fourfold increase, and is responsive to a request from the Commission following last year’s report.
- Overwhelmingly faculty and staff report that they “strongly agree” with propositions such as, *To what degree do [they] feel the school...*
 - provides a program that is sufficiently broad to meet the needs of all students;
 - encourages teachers to shape programs/classes to include a variety of experiences which reflect the needs of the students enrolled;
 - supports teachers’ desire to take into consideration the individual needs, learning styles and characteristics of students by providing developmentally appropriate programs and activities to help students achieve their potential;
 - treats teachers with respect;
 - supports teachers’ professional development;
 - gives teachers the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process; and,
 - provides teachers with adequate resources for you, as a teacher, to meet the needs of students.
- Faculty and staff are generally positive about Connections Academy (hereafter *CA* or *PCA*) content, both in terms of engagement and alignment with student interests.
- One faculty member consistently gave the school consistently low marks across the board. This is an aberration.
- Assessments of how “engaging” and “relevant” the Pearson content is has improved over the last 3 years; assessments of the usability (defined the

survey instrument as “intuitive and reliable) and “tech support required of instructional personnel and students” remain stable.

II. Faculty Abstract - Qualitative Results

For those who elected to address open-ended questions and invitation for comment, a few consistent themes emerged. These themes revolve around flexibility, individualized learning, strong teacher-student relationships, and a student-centered approach.

One prominent theme is the ability to customize education for individual students. Respondents appreciate that MCA allows students to complete their classwork at their own pace and choose when to engage with the curriculum. Teachers also offer one-on-one support to help students grasp challenging concepts, tailoring their approach to individual needs. This customization ensures that each student receives a personalized learning experience.

Flexibility emerges as a key benefit, both in terms of scheduling and technology. Students can work on their classwork at times that suit them, and the school employs relevant technology to enhance the learning process. This flexibility extends to the robust advisory program, which aids students in setting and achieving their academic goals.

Faculty and staff highlight the strong relationships between students and staff at MCA. Teachers are described as “competent,” “compassionate,” and “invested,” going above and beyond to support their students. This positive rapport extends to administrators, who are supportive of teachers and families. It's evident that MCA places a high value on building a sense of community and fostering relationships among students, staff, and families.

The school's commitment to student success is clear. It uses strategies like welcome calls to get to know students and families, offering individual or small group meetings to enhance understanding. MCA also collaborates with families and other staff members to meet student needs, ensuring that every student has access to educational options they may not have elsewhere.

When asked where the school could improve, responses ranged from addressing tech issues to state retirement, but few clear themes emerged. Some crave more in-person learning opportunities for students, two cited compensation that, from their perspective, lags local public schools, and one chided a requirement to return

to the office. Others called for fine-tuning of the schedule, and three bewailed not having “enough time.”¹⁵

Specific to the Pearson product, which is the focus of this TPE, respondents generally express satisfaction with the service provider, highlighting several key points:

1. **Fast Response and Support:** Many respondents appreciate the provider's quick response when help is needed. They find this aspect of the service valuable and time-saving.
2. **Abundance of Resources and Opportunities:** The service provider offers a wealth of professional development opportunities, resources, systems, and support. This is seen as a major advantage, indicating a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement.
3. **Inclusivity and Platform:** Respondents mention that the provider's platform is inclusive and aligned with their needs, particularly in terms of professional development opportunities. It appears that the provider is responsive to the evolving requirements of users.
4. **Community and Regular Trainings:** The provider offers a sense of community through regular training and opportunities for professional development. This ongoing support is highly appreciated.
5. **Flexibility in Teaching:** Pearson's academic suite offers flexibility in teaching, allowing educators to adapt their methods to better suit their students. This adaptability is seen as a positive feature.
6. **Overwhelming Resources:** While the abundance of resources is praised, some respondents express that the sheer volume of data and reports can become overwhelming. Respondents indicated that the provider has made efforts to streamline certain processes, making them more efficient.
7. **Alignment with Student Tracking:** Pearson tools and features that align with the needs of student tracking. The ability to access reports and create logs is seen as valuable for this purpose.
8. **Effective Communication:** Respondents note that the service provider communicates effectively, offering good training and communication channels. This contributes to a positive experience with the provider.

¹⁵ The researcher has accredited nearly 30 schools spanning four continents and without exception faculties express concerns about 3 of the 4 following issues: time, communication, compensation, decision-making.

In summary, MCA excels in providing a flexible, student-centered, and highly supportive learning environment. The school's emphasis on customization, strong teacher-student relationships, and community building contributes to its reputation for caring about the success of each student. These survey results underscore MCA's commitment to meeting the unique needs of every learner.

III. Family/Parent Abstract - Quantitative

- Last year's report suffered from insufficient parent and student participation. The Commission provided feedback to the evaluator and the Principal that efforts should be redoubled in this area. I commend Principal Wallace; 236 responses were gathered in the Quantitative research.
- Few parents and students don't feel that the Pearson Academic suite is aligned to their/their child's interests (4.8%), or that the content is "engaging" (9.9%). This remains unchanged from previous reports that have been presented to the Commission.
- Parents were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the MCA's program offerings, and generally pleased with their child(ren)'s experience with the Pearson product. Parent responses largely mirrored those of faculty; interestingly, parents were more desirous of in-person contact between instructors and students than the students were. This reverses a three year trend.
- In spite of the primacy of online learning, parents reported feeling that their children were well connected to the faculty and that their student(s) were engaged.
- Unlike many public schools, MCA is functionally in a choice environment--a competitive environment. As such, interrogating why families choose MCA is critically important. Those choices reveal to the MCA what families disliked about a public or private school enrollment prior to coming to MCA, and what they seek in programming and personnel from MCA. Asked why they chose MCA, respondents were presented the following options: anxiety or health; teacher quality or program quality at previous school; poor quality of special education at previous school; bullying or unhealthy climate at previous school; or the generalized "previous school 'didn't work' for [my] family, in general." In 2020, each respondent chose the latter.¹⁶ This unanimity was a marked departure from previous surveys which revealed that parents' motives for selecting MCA varied wildly, from special student needs to

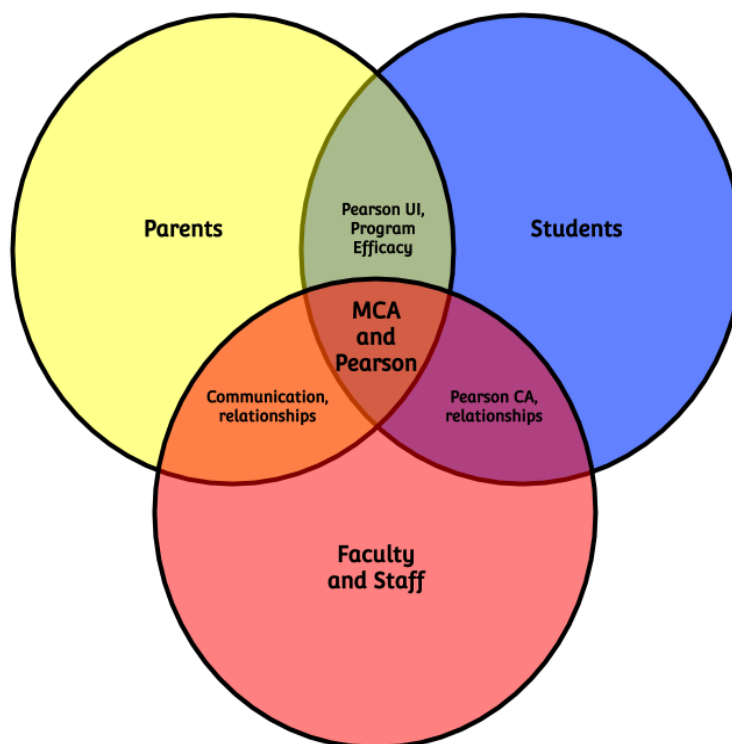
¹⁶ Recall the markedly smaller sample size.

bullying in previous school environments. In 2021, parents returned to the “MCA-as-safe-alternative” to a previous school setting, where special education was considered poor, or the climate unsafe. In 2022, parents reported anxiety and health issues motivated MCA enrollment at the same rate as previous academic settings being poorly suited to the needs of their child(ren).

This year’s data, however, marks a shift worthy of the Commission’s attention. Anxiety and health issues motivate interest in MCA more than any other category. By a wide margin. This is new. The second most frequently cited reason for families’ interest in MCA is to escape bullying or an unhealthy school climate. Taken together, these two represent the lion’s share of what motivated families to choose MCA. Third: poor teacher or program quality. Fourth (which, prior to 2019, and again in subsequent years was more important) families reported that the special education services they were seeking were subpar.

IV. Parent/Family Abstract - Qualitative

Throughline questions triangulated parents, students, and faculty.



MCA's Strengths: Survey respondents consistently praise MCA for its flexibility, effective communication, and dedicated teachers. They appreciate the ability for students to work at their own pace and customize their schedules. The MCA is seen as caring and supportive, offering a safe learning environment. Teachers are commended for their willingness to adapt and focus on individual student needs. Overall, the school's commitment to education, the availability of resources, and its strong teacher-parent communication are key strengths that resonate with respondents. Additionally, the flexibility to work independently while still having support is highly valued.

In the past, vaguely articulated concerns about "fairness" and "assessment validity" found their way into the previous researcher's reports as being pressing issues at MCA. Having not conducted the study myself, even having reviewed the reports it was unclear how this became a "P1 issue" at MCA. Whatever its cause, and whatever awareness the Commission might have about this issue, it has disappeared. Respondents were unanimous in their assertion that the MCA and its Pearson partner "use fair and accurate assessment methods to assess school work." Given this sea change, this throughline question will be eliminated from next year's report.

MCA's Opportunities to Improve: Parents and students shared their feedback on how the school could improve, and common themes emerged. Communication was a recurring concern, with some feeling overwhelmed by emails and others suggesting clearer communication channels. Socialization in an online environment was seen as challenging, and there were requests for more opportunities for students to connect and engage with each other. Some respondents were unsure about improvements as they were new to the program, while others highlighted concerns related to technology, such as difficulties with the learning management system and the need for better tech support.

Additionally, there were calls for more variety in courses, particularly hands-on classes, and sparse requests for more flexibility in scheduling. Some parents expressed the desire for increased support for special education programs. Overall, the feedback emphasized the importance of effective communication, technological improvements, and a more diverse curriculum.

MCA recognizes its unique opportunity to offer highly customized academic programming for its student body. Indeed, parents both recognize and value the hyper-customized program options for their children, and the important role that

differentiation (especially for students with special learning needs or mental health issues) plays. One parent said it best:

“[I] cannot say enough about the caliber of teachers at MCA. They are amazing, always working hard to make the learning engaging, meaningful, and fun. They work to help students who want more challenges, as well as take a great deal of time to help struggling students. I have not experienced a more individualized educational experience.”

V. Board Abstract

The Board of the Maine Connections Academy has five active members (down from six one year ago) whose governance and fiduciary responsibility mirrors that of most nonprofit organizations. The school’s charter qualifies the role of the board as having responsibilities for all functions of the school. The Board’s full charge is detailed in section 2 of the MCA Charter.¹⁷

As with other stakeholders, Board members were asked about MCA’s strengths and opportunities for improvement. Separately, the Board was queried about matters of governance, resources, mission, and its perception of students’ experiences. For the third year in a row, it is noteworthy how remarks from the Board largely parroted those from parents and students.

As in 2020, 2021, and 2022, all respondents praised the ability of MCA to differentiate and meet the needs of families. Board members cited “flexibility and engagement.” Others cited “high quality, vested [sic] teachers;” it should be noted that the Board’s sentiments toward instructional personnel has been transformed under Principal Wallace’s tenure. A previous report by Dr. Nave called the relationship “toxic.” The Board regards the faculty and school leadership warmly, and readily heaped superlatives like “solid” “competent” “well-functioning” when describing the schools’ employees.

The Board members displayed a high degree of confidence in the operational efficacy of the school. This has been the case year-over-year.

Asked about obstacles and areas of improvement, Board members in previous years discussed improving academic outcomes, social work, and professional

17

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

development. Those concerns--along with prior gnashing of teeth regarding rigor, mathematics curriculum and outcomes, and the Pearson product--have abated. New this year is an emphasis on growing enrollment and providing more opportunities for students and teachers to connect in person.

The Board unanimously reported that MCA had adequate resources to carry out its mission, as it was last year, and was pleased with the school's relationship with Pearson. One board member called Pearson MCA's most important "silent partner."

Summary

- A. **STUDENTS** The themes that emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative information gleaned from the evaluator did not depart significantly from previous TPEs conducted by me or my colleague Dr. Nave. Students' reasons for choosing MCA were similar, though not exactly the same, as in last year's cohort. Post-pandemic, students are yearning for more in-person opportunities to connect with teachers and each other. Students feel less connected to the curriculum provided by Pearson this year than last, but not by a statistically significant amount.

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

- B. **FAMILIES** MCA's strengths, as acknowledged by survey respondents, include flexibility, effective communication, dedicated teachers, individualized pacing, and strong teacher-parent support. Concerns regarding "fairness" and "assessment validity" mentioned in previous reports have disappeared, with unanimous agreement on fair assessment methods; indeed, this was the only area of the survey instrument with unanimity. MCA is viewed as a safe haven for students for whom a traditional (or parochial, or home school) setting doesn't work. From the student in a traveling dance troupe who needs online classes to the autistic student who was mercilessly bullied at his last high school, MCA truly offers customized learning opportunities for everyone.

However, opportunities for improvement were identified. Some respondents found communication overwhelming and suggested clearer channels. Socialization in an online environment was challenging, and there was a desire for more student interaction. Technical issues, course variety, scheduling flexibility, and special education support were areas highlighted for enhancement. MCA acknowledges the value of customization in addressing diverse student needs.

- C. **TEACHERS** The teaching faculty and leadership group at MCA is as diverse and innovative as the students they serve. The faculty appreciates about MCA what students appreciate about Pearson: flexibility, a recognition of their interests and expertise, and a great deal of support, technical, pedagogical, and in the realm of professional development. Said one teacher,

“MCA has consistently demonstrated growth and evolution. We have high expectations for ourselves, just as we have for our students. These first few weeks have been our most successful start by far. I’m glad to have more ‘face time’ with my colleagues. I appreciate the support of our leadership group. Together, our entire staff/organization is deeply committed to the overarching mission of nurturing our students, helping them achieve academically, and meeting each where they are. It’s a unique and special place.”

Principal Wallace summed it up nicely.

“I can’t imagine a better place to work. The faculty and students here create a magical environment. We offer education tailored to various student needs, whether they come from homeschooling, struggle with anxiety in traditional schools, or require a customized program. Our dedicated faculty and staff, united by our mission, impress me with their care and innovation.”

- D. **BOARD** The board is generally pleased with the operations of the Academy. In a review of my and Dr. Nave’s raw data and notes, the sentiment of the Board in the past (membership has certainly changed, and time has certainly passed) is markedly different than today. The Board was quick to compliment the school’s leadership and heap praise on its teachers. Administrators and staff alike commented on the support they felt from senior leadership; this isn’t always the case.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Maine Connections Academy continues to excel in delivering a robust and comprehensive academic program, meeting the needs of students seeking a remote and highly customized educational experience. Contrary to common perception, MCA isn't just an ordinary "online school"; it operates as a flexible, responsive institution that places people at the center of its mission. Having assessed educational institutions across the globe for 25 years, I can confidently assert that the passion and positivity exhibited by the MCA community surpasses that of the average school.

Notably, MCA has embraced my recommendations, particularly in the realm of academic enhancement. What were once pressing concerns regarding academic outcomes, student assessment, and Board-faculty relations have now taken a backseat, signaling substantial progress.

In the last decade, Maine has conducted various state assessments, though their quality remains debatable. Nevertheless, the shift in assessment methods has made it challenging for conventional schools to analyze normed data effectively (more about which overleaf). MCA benefits from the Pearson environment, offering educators and administrators a unique longitudinal perspective, aiding in identifying students' areas of strength and areas needing support.

The bulk of my research has been dedicated to scrutinizing MCA's operations, relationships, and programs, which form the bedrock of its mission. This effort has focused on understanding stakeholders' perceptions of the Pearson suite of products, a significant component of MCA's annual expenditures exceeding \$1 million. While no product is perfect, my informed conclusion is that MCA's association with Pearson is functional, widely appreciated by stakeholders, and represents a prudent investment in the school's digital infrastructure. It's fair to say that stakeholders overwhelmingly approve of the Pearson suite of products; none suggested abandoning the product or exploring a different vendor or approach.

Reflecting on last year's report, I made several recommendations, including a continuous improvement process for enhancing the "customer service experience." Additionally, analyzing vertical student data to inform decisions and fostering increased parent engagement were advised. Furthermore, the addition of Live Tutor and attention to students' mental health needs were suggested.

After consulting with Principal Wallace and his leadership team, I've found that some of last year's goals have been achieved, while others are still in progress. I commend the MCA team for diligently addressing the 2022 recommendations, going beyond mere checkboxes to thoroughly tackle these issues. These ongoing efforts demonstrate their commitment to continuous improvement and the welfare of their students.

Specific to last year's recommendations, the MCA applied for and was granted an enrollment increase by the Commission. Enrollment is now capped at 500 students, which is the maximum allowable student body. Parent engagement (separate from *communication*) has increased with a moderated Facebook group that has exploded

in popularity, as well as parent engagement sessions that are in the works for each Academic Summit.

Based on interviews and survey data, in the School Year 2023-2024 the MCA Administration and Board are recommended to:

1. Use NWEA and Throughyear assessments to inform instruction and help teachers tailor the Pearson product and “home grown” curricular resources to better meet the needs of students;
2. Continue to shine a light on the social-emotional health of the student body. The MCA the evaluator’s 2022 recommendation for “equitable attention to the mental health needs of students” through the addition of a full-time social worker. Monthly SEL advisory luncheons and the inclusion of mental health awareness with Parent Advisory Councils and in parent engagement sessions are critical; and,
3. To gather more reliable data to inform the practices articulated above in #2, participate in the Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey and assemble a team of stakeholders to examine the data. Use the data to inform program and staffing positions related to student health and support.