



2023-24 Mid-Year Meeting Maine Connections Academy

On March 5, 2024, the Maine Charter School Commission staff completed a mid-year meeting in-person and via Zoom at Maine Connections Academy (MCA) with Connie Ronco, Board Member; Walter Wallace, Head of School; Joy Kiely, Special Education Director; Amy Trunnell, Business Manager; and Lauren Thompson, Assistant Principal. Topics covered included finances and facilities, academic proficiency and growth, student attendance, school climate, projected graduation rates, and student enrollment and recruitment.

Academics

Results from the Spring 2023 state assessment (Through-Year) were not available when reporting outcomes for SY2022-23. Schools were recently provided access to those results and MCA reports that 78% of its students are “at or above state expectations” in ELA and 33.3% are “at or above state expectations” in Math. The ELA results are above the state average (64.6%) while the Math results are below (48.7%).

While pleased with the ELA results, MCA reports that the math results “were surprising” especially when compared to Spring 2022 results where 92.3% of students were at or above state expectations, with the state average being 81.3%.

Staff are spending time exploring why the math results are low and looking at the curriculum to see how it relates to the assessment. Some things they have identified and steps they are taking to see improved results this spring are as follows:

- There has been learning loss and the development of poor study habits as a result of COVID. MCA added an Ed Tech to run a “Learning Lab” where students who are behind in work completion can go to get the support they need. They anticipate that 8-10% of the student population will benefit from this new program.
- They have added before and after school, weekend, and vacation tutoring to students. Current staff will cover those tutoring sessions and will receive a small stipend to do so.
- Incoming middle school students are coming into MCA “really needy” and need additional supports - essentially “they need support in everything”.
- They are looking at the curriculum. The math curriculum is a Pearson-developed curriculum which is aligned to state standards. Teachers are able to make adjustments as needed. As a result of lower than expected assessment results, not just in Maine but nationally, Pearson is adding an “Academic Impact Team” who will analyze data and look for trends.
- The school purchased IXL for all staff to use with students as needed (reading, math, and a social studies/science variation). IXL customizes learning plans based on students’ Through Year Scores in math.

Subgroup data is suppressed on the ESEA Dashboard, but the school reports that the special education population “did not perform well” on the assessments. As a result, they added a half time special education teacher and a half time social studies teacher mid-year.

Reportedly, the Fall 2023 assessment results “appear better” than the Spring 2023 results. Schools will report those results (and the results from Spring 2024) to the Commission during the end-of-year reporting period.

MCA issued the Accuplacer in November and reported that 83.1% of students met the College Readiness indicator target for ELA (239 or above) and that 85.25% met the College Readiness indicator in Math (226 or above). They will **exceed expectations** for ELA and **meet expectations** for Math on the Performance Framework. They will re-assess students who did not meet the target initially. At the time of the mid-year meeting, MCA had not broken down the subgroup data for the Accuplacer results.

The school requested a waiver for the administration of the NWEA MAP and will continue to not administer the assessment as long as the Commission allows for the waiver to be in place. Without that data, there are no growth results to be reported.

Student Attendance

At the time of the mid-year meeting, MCA reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 9.5% which would **exceed expectations** on the Performance Framework. Grade 7 has the highest chronic absenteeism (16.4%) while Grade 12 has the lowest chronic absenteeism (2.6%).

MCA has an active group that monitors attendance sharing that because they are a virtual school “we need to know where these kids are”. A weekly attendance report is distributed that flags students who are approaching chronically absent and the Advisor meets with those students who have been identified to attempt to resolve the attendance issue before they become chronically absent.

The school began using an attendance and absenteeism platform called DeansList at the beginning of the school year. This tool assists in getting students to Live Lessons - “kids who show up to class do better”. Teachers take attendance at the beginning of the class and after 8 minutes the program calls and emails parents of students who are not in attendance. The school has shown a marked increase in attendance since teachers started using the platform.

Special education students appear to have a higher rate of absenteeism than non-special education students and Joy reports that the school is “doing everything legally possible” to get the students re-engaged. Their approach is supportive, not punitive, unless there is no engagement from the student and/or the student’s family. They consult with their legal team to ensure compliance and conduct wellness checks and reports to DHHS when needed. The message to families is, “I’m liable for your student’s education”.

School Climate

MCA **exceeded expectations** in all categories of the Spring 2023 Panorama School Climate surveys. Family, student, teacher, and staff results show that all groups are happy with MCA with results in several categories in the 90th percentile or better compared to like schools nationally.

Walter reports that the school tries to be responsive to all staff needs. They monitor all contact with students/families (monthly) preferring a phone conversation or a Zoom meeting over text messaging. They have noticed a slight decline recently in the number of contacts but attribute that decline to staff traveling for three weeks because of state testing and a higher number of students this year than in years past.

Their goal is to increase student engagement and they offer stipends for teachers who take on extra responsibilities around student engagement. They have held two academic summits so far this year – one at the University of Maine at Orono and the other at Pineland in Gray.

Their custom goal on the Performance Framework is that “at least 80% of students will participate in one or more school sponsored field trips, activity day, special event, or club.” In SY2022-23, MCA **approached expectations** and reported that meeting the target this year will “be tough, but we’ve set a high bar for ourselves”.

Projected Graduation Rates

MCA reports that 88% of seniors are on track to graduate in 4 years. This would exceed the annual Maine Department of Education (MDOE) target and **meet expectations** on the Performance Framework.

The school has experienced a high number of 16 year old students who wish to drop out of school to attend an adult education program. Legally a student can withdraw when they are 17 years of age, but several adult education programs are accepting students at 16 years of age which puts the school in a “really tough position”. In order for a 16 year old to withdraw from school, both Walter and the Board have to agree to the withdrawal and Walter shares that he is “not going to let kids drop out of school at 16 years old”. The school has faced challenges, such as families claiming that “MCA is getting in the way”, and some adult education programs call the school “unethical”.

They report that 5-10 students legally transfer to adult education classes annually. From a state perspective the students are considered dropouts and bring MCA’s graduation rates down. Many students joined MCA “severely off cohort” so they have hired a staff member who is dedicated specifically to getting students back on track. The 11th grade is made up of “kids who have been failing and come to us as a last resort”. MCA uses the Maine State Diploma in order to get “some kids over the hump”.

Student Enrollment and Recruitment

The school reported that there are currently 486 students enrolled. The 10/1/23 certified student count was 510.

They did not need an enrollment lottery for next year and have 500 students/families interested in enrolling at MCA for SY2024-25. Due to the cap on virtual charter school students in Maine, MCA is unable to enroll more than 500 students.

MCA will begin to build its waitlist and will offer empty seats to students on the waitlist through November and then again at the mid-year point of the school year.

Finances

Based on FY24 QTR2 numbers, the school's finances are **low to moderate risk** in all financial categories on the Performance Framework. Joe Drago reports "no issues" with MCA as their Business Manager, Amy Trunnell, "does such great work".

MCA is currently in negotiations with Pearson for the next 5-year contract. The contract has not yet been signed. Walter reports that there were "some hard negotiations" around fees and feels that those conversations "were very successful". Based on the negotiations, it appears that they will save over \$200,000 per year which will be used for programming and personnel.

They have received their preliminary ED279 from the MDOE and are currently preparing the FY25 budget and updating their 3-year plan. The goal is to present the budget to the board during the April meeting.

MCA will be downsizing its office space "sometime in late July". They feel that this is "the financially responsible thing to do" and are looking at office space in Portland.

Transportation

Because MCA is a virtual public charter school they do not receive any state subsidy for transportation. They own a car that is available for staff to use as needed and report that the biggest expenses related to travel are around the state-required in person testing and the academic summits which are held three times per year.

Governing Board

Connie reports that the board is "feeling positive" about the negotiations with Pearson and have found them to be "professional and engaged".

The board is engaged and "almost always" has a quorum for meetings. Most members attend board meetings virtually, but Connie found value in a recent in-person meeting as it gave members "extended face-to-face time".

They have five active members and are not actively recruiting for additional members. They have one member who is a parent of an MCA student who is a senior this year. If she chooses to leave the board after her daughter graduates, the board is particularly interested in replacing her with another parent due to the unique perspective a parent brings.

When asked about MCA's strengths, Connie shared the following:

- the quality of the teachers and their engagement with students and each other;
- increased opportunities for social interaction;
- the "push" for attendance and the value of in-person live lessons;
- engagement with special education students and families and the assistance that is given to help students "gain their own independence"; and
- the amount of information that is shared with the board, particularly the "incredible job that Amy does explaining the finances."

Connie feels that the board is "open and supportive to the school's needs". She reports that the board has not had an opportunity to meet the teachers and would like to see them present at board meetings on a rotating basis.

MCA has one board member who has not completed the required MCSC board training modules. Connie shared that the use of “many different platforms isn’t entirely clear” and that it would be “helpful to have an overview of the platforms and the requirements”.

The board would like to see the state assessments conducted remotely. MCA is a virtual public school and many students who attend have chosen to do so because of extreme social-emotional issues. The requirement of in-person testing “really takes a social-emotional toll on many of our students”.

Recommendations

- Work with the one board member who has not completed the required board training to ensure that it is complete before end-of-year reporting.