

Why-MCA?

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Key words: Relationships, collaboration, training, credit recovery, after-school tutoring, graduation

Funding Sources and project cost and budget narrative:

Maine Connections Academy (MCA) received a grant, which allowed Walter Wallace, principal, and 2 teachers to attend the National Dropout Prevention Center's Lessons Learned Conference in Charlotte, NC in February 2020. This grant was for at least \$10,000.

- This grant also allowed staff training and collaboration working towards dropout prevention strategies, such as internships, after school tutoring, and creating alternate credit recovery pathways.
- Plan for next year is to continue training staff, but also funding via school funds for a person that will work with students on viable alternate graduate pathways. Students that are off cohort will work with this person to find alternate ways to earn credit based on their needs and goals.

Project Description:

With our expanded programs, students have increased learning time in various ways.

- After school tutoring gives students up to 5 hours of one-on-one learning opportunities during the school week with teachers.
- Internships/work study offers students the opportunity to gain academic credit when working or completing an independent study in a topic of their choice, mentored by an MCA educator.
- Different credit recovery pathways allow opportunities for students who are credit deficient to recover credits that work for their lives.

Staffing Pattern:

At MCA, we have a total of 31 staff for grades 7-12. 21 of us are teachers in varied subjects, 2 are guidance counselors, 4 are administrators and 2 are administrative assistants. We also have a part time nurse and financial person. Except for the nurse and the finance person, we all work collaboratively on these goals.

We have groups that focus on different aspects of our goals. One group is working on internships/work study, another on increasing our NWEA scores, another on independent studies. All groups meet monthly to work together on school culture and student engagement.

Population Served:

The population of MCA is greatly varied. Our students live all over the state of Maine, ranging from Kittery to small towns on the Canadian Border. These students are grades 7-12. MCA has a cap of 480 students. This number increased this past fall from 429 students. Many of our students live in cities, suburbs, but many are also from very rural areas of Maine. The basic requirements of attending MCA is that students must have a learning coach that works with them and internet availability.

Project Origination:

Each year, MCA strives to assert itself as a viable option for Maine students to obtain their high school diploma. Last February, the principal, Walter Wallace, and two MCA teachers were sent

to Charlotte, N.C to glean information at the National Dropout Prevention Center's Lessons Learned Conference. They came back with ideas on mentoring, after-school opportunities, engagement of students and families, and school/community collaboration to increase graduation rates at MCA.

- Many of the students at MCA come as credit deficient and off-cohort. MCA wanted to consider how we can work with these students and families to help them back on track. Much focus this school year has been centered upon this idea.
- In teams throughout the year, we have been conducting research towards this focus and implementing strategies with care.
- For the school year 2020/21, a team of MCA teachers and staff are created alternate credit recovery pathways for students. One pathway option is the normal credit option.
- Another credit recovery option is for students to finish the course that they started with a mentor. The mentor would assess what essential standards the student would need to show proficiency in. A plan would be created to support the student in finishing that credit.
- Another consideration is obtaining credit for sports involvement. If a student is involved in fall, winter, and spring sports, what credit could be granted?
- Another option is independent studies, with a MCA staff as a mentor. What is the student interested in studying that is not a class option at MCA? The student and mentor would consider what the parameters would be.
- This school year has focused on finding the students who are working and having them gain academic credit by working by reflecting on their work and keeping track of their hours in a work study/internship class journal.

Issues Addressed:

As stated previously, many of our students come to MCA as credit deficient. What student interests, experiences, or work can be considered to show their learning? In addition, being an on-line school often makes it difficult to increase attendance and decrease truancy. Student and family engagement is crucial and always a focus at MCA. Some students require extra one on one work, so after school tutoring has been implemented for those that want a bit of extra time. Lastly, our population is small, but the community is fairly large and spread out. How do we, as a school, re-define what community looks like and how do we utilize our community members to best meet the needs of all of our students?

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- Different credit recovery pathways allow students who are credit deficient opportunities to recover credits that works for their lives.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

- Primarily, one of the desired outcomes of this project is to increase the rate of graduation for our students and to have them graduate on time with a well-rounded education.
- Increased family and student engagement is also a primary goal. Are students participating in Livelessons, lesson completion and other activities, such as field trips, Academic Summits, and clubs at MCA? Are learning coaches and parents working with staff and their students?
- Are students working with staff and families to create educational plans that are individualized to them and what they want to achieve in school and after high school? What classes do they want or need to move forward with their academic and non-academic goals?

Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:

Currently, we are really trying out various strategies to see what is most productive for MCA. Our groups have talked with other, more established Connections Academies across the U.S. to see what has worked for them. Groups have also talked to brick-and-mortar schools in Maine to assess criterion for credit recovery work, alternate credit paths, and for independent/work study credit. Intervention programs in reading and math have been in place with specialized instructors. After school tutoring is in place to work with students that want and need extra support.

One of the biggest strategies that we will be using in the near future is a National Dropout Prevention Center Performance Assessment Review (PAR). The PAR committee will conduct interviews and training with our staff to see what we are doing well and what improvements would be beneficial.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

- The graduation rate at MCA is increasing.
- Students with credit deficiencies are graduating, even if not all of them are on cohort.
- Student and family engagement is also increasing, evidenced by lower failure rates, but this is definitely a work in progress.
- Credit is being awarded for work done in community businesses, as well as credit recovery in the core subjects.
- After school tutoring has been implemented.
- MCA clubs, mainly virtual right now, due to COVID, are being created by students with staff mentors to include Model UN, Art, Gaming, GSA, and MCA's Connector Magazine.

Project Timeline:

- MCA has been in existence for almost 7 years. The goal of increasing graduation rates has been a school goal for at least 4 years.

- By the end of this school year (2020/21), we will have created more alternate credit pathways than just the current credit recovery path. We will continue to encourage working students to gain credit by being a part of the work study program. This involves working more collaboratively with community businesses across Maine.
- MCA's administration would like to hire at least a part time pathways coordinator to work with individual students to create individualized academic plans.

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

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- Student and family engagement are also increasing, evidenced by lower failure rates, but this is definitely a work in progress.
- Credit is being awarded for work done in community businesses, as well as credit recovery in the core subjects.
- After school tutoring has been implemented and 5 different are teachers working with students in various classes.
- MCA clubs, mainly virtual at this time due to COVID, are being created by students with staff mentors to include a Model UN, Art, Gaming, GSA, and MCA's Connector Magazine. Increasing club participation is making our school community more inclusive and engaging.
- Many of the strategies that have been implemented have occurred in the last year, but during a pandemic. The number of students requesting involvement in the after school tutoring and MCA clubs shows the need for these services, whether academic or extra-curricular. As of yet, there strategies have not been in place long enough to fully determine the impact for students and families.
- Feedback that we have received is that students are pleased they are able to work more collaboratively with their peers and the staff to find connections in the school community to meet their needs.

Special Conditions, Expertise, and/or Skills Required to Carry Out Project:

As previously stated, The National Dropout Prevention Center will be working with MCA to address areas of strength and areas of need. The work with NDPC will help our school determine what, if any, areas of expertise will be necessary.

We have also been reaching out to other schools in Maine about how they conduct independent studies, work study, and giving credit for sports. We have also been in contact with other Connections Academies regarding similar opportunities.

Current Status of Project:

- MCA is in the beginning stage of this project.
- Research has been and will continue to be done to find best practices that work for our school and students.

- Implementation of some programs has begun, and data is being collected to help guide forward progress.
- Training of staff is also being conducted so that we are collaboratively working towards a unified goal.
- The National Dropout Prevention Center will be talking and working with MCA staff this week to provide a comprehensive look at what and how MCA provides for educational resources to increase our graduation rate.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

- I am one cog in the MCA machine. Part of my prior teaching experience was working with seriously at-risk students in an Alternative Education Program. I worked with students on an individual basis to help ascertain their academic and life goals and what they needed to meet those goals.
- I was very pleased to attend the conference in Charlotte to help connect some of those resources and pieces to the work we do at MCA.
- The small group that I am working with is addressing work study and independent studies, as well as being one of the mentors for a new club at MCA.

Lessons Learned:

- Patience is a necessity for all involved. This is not a quick process, by any means.
- Listening to students, families, community members, fellow staff, and resource guides is imperative.
- Reviewing data from several years is necessary to wean out patterns of strengths and weaknesses for MCA. Talking as a staff about what the data shows will help guide us.
- Training the staff consistently, as a group, will allow us to work towards a common goal with our students' needs and desires in mind.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

- Please don't think this is a quick process. It takes time, effort, failures, and successes.
- Do as we suggest many times to our students: Break it down into small pieces, so it isn't overwhelming!
- **Celebrate** accomplishments, whether big or small! If one student is more on track towards graduation because they receive credit for working, then this is a **success!**
- Listen to others that have done similar work. They may have some really good ideas. Why reinvent the wheel?