**Maine Connections Academy**

**90-Day Review**

**December 20, 2014**

Maine Connections Academy 90-Day Review Report approved as written by the Maine Charter School Commission on 3-3-15.

Maine Connections Academy (MCA) has substantively met all the 90-Day review milestones. This was confirmed in the Review Team’s on-site evaluation, conducted December 9, 2014 at their office on 75 Robert’s Road, South Portland. A subsequent telephone conference was held on December 17, 2014 to gain further insight into the financial reports presented at the December 9th meeting. The Review Team was comprised of Ande Smith (chair), Michael Wilhelm, and John Bird, with Bob Kautz in attendance for the Commission and Peg Armstrong of the Maine DoE in an advisory capacity regarding special education matters.

The review was comprised of an oral and documentary review of materials specified under Exhibit E to MCA’s contract. This review was primarily conducted with MCA Principal Karl Francis. The Review Team also conducted a tour of MCA’s facilities, conducted an interview with several MCA Board members, including Amy Volk, Nick McGee, and Amy Linscott, and conducted a working lunch with most of the MCA faculty and several students and parents. Two additional students were interviewed by phone.

**Academic Proficiency**

The MCA Contract requires the school within 3 months of opening to “provide the Commission with a protocol for fulfilling its assessment plan (formative and summative) as listed in the Charter Application.” The Commission reviewed MCA’s proposed use of assessment tools for long-term assessment of proficiency including its LEAP (proprietary) tool for middle school students and SCANTRON for high schoolers, finding that the school was effectively implementing the system identified in its charter application. The Review Team spent considerable time reviewing MCA’s implementation of its Assessment Objective Performance Report (AOPR) and the dashboards used by the school to review student participation and achievement as they progressed through lessons. The Review Team walked through live data to see how learning coaches were engaged based on dashboard cues of struggling students.

Based upon its observation and questioning, the Review Team believed that the data being collected provided the means for the school to meet its obligations to provide meaningful assessment and progress monitoring of students as they progressed through the relevant sections.

**Parent Engagement and Conferences**

The MCA Contract requires that “Within three months of the start of Year One, the School will provide the Commission with a plan for parent engagement and conferences.” The Review Team reviewed the “Parent Involvement Plan: Maine Connections Academy” adopted by the MCA Board on September 19, 2014. The Review Team followed up on its review of the document with questioning of students, parents and faculty regarding the school’s engagement and outreach. The Review Team also took the opportunity to inquire of students, parents, and teachers regarding the school’s communications and received positive feedback on the school’s execution of engagement.

The Review Team found that the engagement plan and its initial execution were consistent with the obligations of the school and seemed to be effective.

**Financial Performance**

The Review Team reviewed summary data of MCA’s quarterly financial statements, required to be prepared under the MCA Contract. While the summary data was complete in and of itself, the Review Team requested more detailed information consistent with that provided to the Board. That was received and a conference call to review that information was held on December 17th, which included Ande Smith, MCA Board Member Nick McGee, MCA’s independent CFO Heather Neal, and Shawn Soltz, an accountant at Connections Education.

The Review Team had some concerns regarding the mechanism by which the pro-rata reimbursements for dropped students from Connections Education to MCA was accomplished. In the December 17th call, Heather Neal and Shawn Soltz explained how the process was accomplished with budget reserves and a true up at the end of the school year. This approach was selected to avoid numerous payments which would largely be offset by joining students. Both MCA’s outside CFO and Nick McGee expressed satisfaction that the conservative budget estimations would result in a net inflow of cash to MCA at the end of the year and that the one-time nature of the accounting adjustment would provide them an effective means of reconciling adds/drops from a budgetary standpoint.

The Review Team also noted that it was unclear when the start-up loan facility would be liquidated as required under the MCA Contract. As of the 90-day review, MCA had no specific plan for payback of its startup-loan from Connections Education. It was expressed to the Review Team that should financial performance meet expectations, payback would begin in year one, but as of the 90-day performance, the decision was withheld. It was also noted that Connections Education could make available a charitable grant to MCA, which might be used to off-set the loan, but MCA had made no decision on whether to accept such a grant.

The Review Team in its December 9th meeting found that there was no material concern with the viability of the school based on its initial 90-day performance, but the full team did not meet to review the subsequent detailed financial statement. As part of the recommendations of the Review Team in this report, it is recommended that a budget review be conducted shortly after the end of March.

**Student Enrollment Reports**

The MCA Contract requires that it file quarterly enrollment reports to be reviewed by the Commission. The first enrollment report was reviewed by the Review Team, which identified no material issues in the report. The Review Team also inquired regarding the number of drop-outs from MCA. MCA noted that approximately 40 students from their opening enrollment cohort had withdrawn from MCA as of the 90-day review. It also noted that of the replacements at that point, there had been no withdrawals. As required under its Contract, MCA had conducted exit interviews of those students and it was noted that the vast majority of those cited that the school was not a good match for the family or the student. The Review Team also inquired as to whether those students withdrawing were disproportionately special education students. MCA noted that of the 40, approximately 5 were special needs students, and noted that two had only recently dropped for habitual truancy.

The Review Team concluded that MCA had meet its obligations regarding enrollment and reporting and that no material issue existed with the school’s performance in this regard.

**Pre-Opening Plan**

The Review Team confirmed completion of several ministerial items that were outstanding at the time of opening, such as conclusion of a cleaning contract for the MCA facility.

Approved as written by the Commission 3-3-15