

Derek Schenk  
Maine Connections Academy

Dear Legislators:

My name is Derek Schenk, I am a proud member of the local Democratic party, I have been active in Scarborough since 2018 and currently I sit as the vice chair of the Scarborough Democrats.

I also work at Maine Connections Academy (MCA), which opened in September 2014 as Maine's first virtual public charter school, and it currently educates students from over 100 school districts statewide. We give an alternative for students who, for a variety of reasons that I will list, struggle with an in-person environment.

The school's curriculum combines online and offline resources working with specialists to deliver comprehensive, high quality education. The school's mission is to help each student maximize their potential and meet the highest performance standards through a uniquely individualized learning program in grades 7-12 for students who desire an alternative to the traditional classroom. MCA's vision is to reach students for whom a virtual approach provides the best pathway to school success through an individualized learning program that combines the best in virtual education with close connections among students, family, teachers, and the community.

How do we pull off these lofty goals? Data. At its core, Maine Connections Academy excels in using data to find where a student thrives and where they struggle. We use this information everyday to differentiate curriculums to fit our students' needs. We use a variety of sources, from state standardized tests, to a student's classroom work, to historical grade data and trends, to interviews with the student's family, and to the student's own perspective on their learning. We synthesize this data, organized by the Maine State Learning Standards, to customize a student's pathway to success. Our model allows us to work together within our subject groups weekly to analyze student data and to best support our teachers to customize the classroom for our learners.

At Maine Connections Academy, we use research backed lesson plans and interventions to ensure student success. For example, if a student is struggling in Math, we have two different additional math assistance programs that we will enroll them in to give them the extra support. These programs are proven by research studies (which I can share if asked) to increase understanding and engagement. This philosophy is intertwined in every subject, every class, and every assignment.

Charter schools are public schools that have the flexibility to try innovative ways of learning, and are held accountable for improved student achievement. Like traditional public schools, charter schools are tuition-free, receive federal, state and local funding, and are subject to the same educational accountability requirements as traditional public schools. As a matter of fact, our students are tested more often than standard public schools, as we have had every student take the NWEA standardized test three times this year. We are the image of transparency and accountability.

Over the past year, charter schools have been part of the solution for millions of families. While the pandemic disrupted learning for most schools, it was business as usual for MCA. We already had proven experience and expertise with the virtual learning environment. While most schools were struggling to use Zoom and set up online routines on the fly, we were successfully using our tried and true model to keep students safe while not impacting their learning at all. If anything, our standardized test scores have grown significantly in the past year.

Beyond offering a quality education, we also offer options to customize lessons around outside activities. For example, many of our students are pro or semi pro athletes who need to train during the day. At MCA, these students can focus on their studies at night when they have completed their practice. We give opportunities for students who struggle due to disability, either physical or emotional, to have an even

playing field to access their education.

The proposed legislation, LD604, provides the Education Commissioner with the power to decide on facilities and funding. I am in alignment with the stance of The Maine Charter School Commission, which is firmly opposed to LD604, as it would effectively undermine the critical work that the Commission does to support charter schools in Maine and would transfer the authority to the Education Commissioner.

An online school is not the best option for every student. Many students are best served at a traditional school. Nevertheless, there is a population of children in Maine who have really blossomed under our virtual model. We give an option for students, and putting that option at risk is not in the best interest of the students, their families, or their communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Sincerely,  
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