
Efficacy Report

Connections Academy

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Product Summary

Founded in 2001, Connections Academy is a division of Connections Education LLC, which itself is a part of the global learning company Pearson. Connections Academy schools are tuition-free, online public schools for students in grades K–12 that contract with Connections Education for the proven program, curriculum, services, and resources that Connections Education develops. Most are charter schools, overseen by a governing board, while some operate under contracts with districts or other authorizers. The curriculum provided by Connections Education meets or exceeds national and state standards and integrates the best texts, materials, and resources available.

Connections Academy schools offer a well-rounded, personalized online school experience that helps students advance along the path to success with a strong academic foundation, the flexibility to pursue interests, and teachers and friends to keep them inspired and engaged along the way.

Connections believes that all students perform better when they receive individual attention in a safe, nurturing environment – what Connections calls Personalized Performance Learning®. Students are able to accelerate learning in areas of strength or receive extra attention in areas of weakness. Individualized learning does not mean learning alone; students meet regularly in online LiveLesson® sessions and have opportunities to share ideas and experiences, and have fun learning together. In-person events, clubs, activities, and field trips help students stay connected and make friends. Parents, as Learning Coaches, are closely involved in their children’s education.

Connections Academy teachers are certified and specially trained in online teaching. In the Connections Academy model teachers get to know the learning style, skills, and interests of each student so they can give every student the best opportunity to excel.

Connections Academy’s user-friendly education management system, Connexus®, lets students access learning anywhere they have an Internet connection, and provides a wealth of information to students, parents, and teachers.

Intended Outcomes

Intended Outcome 1: Parents will be satisfied with their and their children's experience with Connections Academy.

Connections believes that parent satisfaction is a key factor in the path to efficacy for each school. Connections Academy schools are schools of choice, and parents and students often select a Connections Academy school to solve academic and/or non-academic issues. For example, students may have been bullied; be struggling with acute or chronic illness; need a flexible school schedule that accommodates an athletic or performance schedule; be very advanced and need extra challenge or be struggling and need extra support; may be working part-time; or may simply want the scheduling flexibility and personalized learning that a quality online school offers. If, after making this choice, the family's specific needs are not adequately addressed by the Connections Academy school, the family may then choose to move their child to another school – sometimes in the middle of the school year. While Connections recognizes that some students may leave a Connections Academy school once their issue has been resolved, they believe that continued mobility in search of an appropriate academic setting for the student can be disruptive and have a negative impact on the student's ability to achieve both academic and non-academic goals. Parent satisfaction is therefore a high priority for Connections and Connections Academy schools, as it supports and can significantly influence other intended learner outcomes.

To ensure parents have the opportunity to express their level of satisfaction with their child's Connections Academy school, Connections conducts annual anonymous parent satisfaction surveys. The survey results are used to drive improvements to the school and the curricular and programmatic offerings. While results have consistently shown that a significant majority of parents are satisfied with their Connections Academy school, Connections embraces a culture of continual improvement and uses the parent satisfaction survey results to make ongoing improvements to all aspects of the program.

Details on the parent satisfaction survey are found later in this report.

Intended Outcome 2: Learners will increase their student achievement (future research).

Connections Academy has focused on achievement outcomes from day one and has long lived under the scrutiny of annual public reporting of state test results. Connections schools are solving real educational and social problems for families, and superior academic results continue to be the mission-driven focus.

Intended Outcome 3: Learners will increase their rate of achieving their post-secondary plans (future research).

All Connections Academy high school students create and regularly update a personalized learning plan in which they document and track their academic and post-secondary goals. They also complete a college and career readiness planning document that is designed to help students manage a detailed set of tasks related to achieving their post-secondary goals. Teachers and school counselors also use these documents to support and guide the student throughout their high school careers. Additional data is gathered to determine the degree to which students achieve their post-secondary plans.

Overview of Product Design

The cornerstone of Connections' educational philosophy and core model is, and has always been, what we call the Learning Triad (see Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Learning Triad



Students are at the center of the Triad, supported by the curriculum, Learning Coaches and teachers as they explore, create, and learn, accessing curriculum and resources via the Internet. Connections applies a student-centered approach to everything we do, nurturing and challenging students to achieve their highest potential.

Teachers personalize lessons, provide feedback and assistance, encourage students, periodically instruct in real-time virtual sessions, and evaluate student progress. Connections maintains rigorous requirements and expectations for direct student-teacher contact and provides teachers with the tools, trainings, and supports they need to be effective educators. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), focused on continual improvement, are embedded in the fabric of Connections' teachers' lives. School leaders are charged with giving teachers individualized feedback that rewards effective practices and targets specific areas for improvement.

The **curriculum** delivers engaging, interactive content, multimedia tools, and superb resources. Over the past 12 years, Connections has developed, tested, and refined the curriculum to ensure it meets state and national standards, as well as those set by leading educational organizations. The curriculum is designed to meet the diverse needs of our learners. Delivered via Connections' proprietary education management system, Connexus, the rigorous curriculum and academic services include flexible scheduling combined with high levels of accountability. Courses go beyond the core to include rich offerings for both accelerated learners and those in need of additional supports. Student progress is monitored systematically through many tools and reports available in Connexus, designed to help teachers effectively use data to improve student outcomes.

Each student has a **Learning Coach** (a parent, extended family member, or trusted adult designated by the parent/guardian) who is encouraged to work in person with the student. Typically, a Learning Coach helps keep students motivated and on track and regularly communicates with the students' teachers. At the high school level, the Learning Coach is less involved with daily instruction but is encouraged to continue serving as an important supervisory role for the student.

Connections' Get Coaching! program is dedicated to helping Learning Coaches understand their role, providing them with easy access to resources and ensuring they are equipped with the tools and strategies to motivate and assist their students.

Evidence-Based Principles

In 2014, through a close study of learning sciences (e.g., Dweck, 2006; Hess & Saxberg, 2014; ASCD, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, Yarnall, 2013; iNACOL, 2015) and more than a decade of accumulated data and experience, Connections crystallized a set of beliefs about what best promotes student learning in an online setting. These four evidence-based principles now guide ongoing improvements to Connections' curriculum and instructional programs:

1. **Practice** that is meaningful, deliberate, and ongoing, and that provides students multiple opportunities to learn and demonstrate learning - without negative consequences - to build fluency and long term memory.
2. **Feedback** that is valid, actionable, and provided early and often to guide and support student learning.
3. **Student engagement and motivation** that is focused on the value of learning, self-efficacy, mindset, grit, and persistence.
4. **Intervention** that is timely, targeted, monitored, and effective.

Intended Product Implementation

Overview of Intended Product Implementation

In **elementary school**, Connections Academy helps young students learn the basics, acquire study skills, and develop a love of learning that will last a lifetime. Connections Academy introduces K–5 students to the building blocks for success in school—reading, writing, and mathematics. Connections Academy weaves in science, social studies, technology, art, and physical fitness to provide a well-rounded core curriculum, and supply students with hands-on instructional resources, including virtual tools, kits, and workbooks. To encourage further exploration, Connections Academy offers exciting electives, activities, and clubs. Students can take world language courses, learn basic music concepts, conduct home experiments, and much more.

A minimum of 30 hours per week is spent learning, and about 15-30% of the school day is centered on interactive online courses. Students are assigned one expert elementary teacher who brings it all together by motivating students online and personalizing lessons. A school counselor is also available. Learning Coaches are encouraged to provide a high level of oversight for elementary students, which is generally a commitment of about five hours per day. Learning Coaches typically support students by setting a schedule with varied activities and breaks, assisting with lessons, monitoring student comprehension and grades, and communicating frequently with the teacher.

In **middle school** (grades six to eight or seven to eight in some schools) students enter a new world of academic growth and personal discovery. Connections Academy helps them reach their potential and prepare for the endless opportunities available to them. In grades 6–8, students sharpen their language arts, math, and critical thinking skills through a blend of online and offline work. They also deepen their understanding of history and science. Through exciting electives, students learn new skills, find art in everyday life, and explore new technologies. They can also join clubs that enrich them in new ways, like learning about robotics or writing for the school newspaper. When available in a school and approved by a counselor, gifted students can even start earning high school credits early.

Connections Academy provides students with a prescribed schedule, which requires a minimum of 30 hours per week. Students work with teachers as needed to create more accommodating schedules. About 50-75% of the school day is centered on interactive online courses. Connections Academy middle school students begin working directly with subject-specific teachers and a homeroom or advisory teacher who monitors and assists with all subjects. A school counselor is also available. The role of the Learning Coach changes as the student becomes more independent and takes increased ownership of his or her learning. Connections recommends that the Learning Coach spends about two to three hours per day overseeing learning. Activities may include: supporting the transition to more independent learning, assisting with some lessons, monitoring student comprehension and grades, and communicating with teachers and referring student to teacher as needed.

High school is about setting goals and reaching them. Connections Academy encourages students to aim high—and then soar. The grades 9–12 education features a core curriculum including math, science, English, and social studies. Electives in varied topics such as digital photography, marine science, game design, and world languages encourage students to explore and grow to become well-rounded individuals. Honors and Advanced Placement®

courses provide the challenge needed for college preparation. In some states, early college credit is available. Students can also prepare for the future by joining college and career clubs.

Students maintain their prescribed schedule, spending a minimum of 30 hours per week learning. Students may work with teachers to create modified schedules. About 80-90% of the school day is centered on interactive online courses. Students are guided by outstanding subject-specific teachers and school counselors. All students meet with an advisory teacher who continues to monitor advancement and helps to develop a personalized learning plan that will prepare them for success in their chosen path. The Learning Coach role changes as the student transitions into high school and more independent learning. Connections recommends that the Learning Coach base his or her time commitment on the student's progress. The typical Learning Coach spends about 30 minutes per day overseeing learning. Activities may include: encouraging and supporting a teen's growing independence, verifying that lessons and assessments are completed, communicating with teachers and referring student to teacher as needed, and attending regular teacher conferences.

Product Research

Overview of Product Research

Annual parent satisfaction surveys provide evidence related to overall parent satisfaction and the perceived effect that selecting a Connections Academy school has on students.

While not considered part of the research related to the efficacy of Connections Academy schools, the process of accreditation provides additional information on the overall quality of Connections Academy schools in helping students achieve their educational and personal goals. All established Connections Academy schools are accredited by either a local accrediting body or a regional organization recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the US Department of Education, while newer schools start the process of being accredited as soon as it is viable. Additionally, Connections Education is accredited by the national accreditation agency AdvancED. Accreditation is a third-party review of a school against a set of standards, and is intended to help schools improve their student outcomes through a rigorous examination of current practices with an eye to continual improvement.

Future studies will gather stronger correlational evidence and over time more rigorous quasi-experimental studies will also be conducted. Details of some anticipated studies are provided later in this document.

Research Studies

<i>Connections Academy Parents Give the Program High Ratings</i>	
Study Citation	Shapiro + Raj (2015). Parent Testimonials: Connections Academy Parents Give the Program High Ratings. Retrieved from http://www.connectionsacademy.com/results/parent-reviews
Research Study Contributors	Survey distributed by Shapiro + Raj, an independent market research firm.
Type of Study	The survey is administered annually to families of all Connections Academy students. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the results each year.
Sample Size	18,051 families responded to the survey.
Description of Sample	The sample was comprised of families with children who were enrolled as K - 12 Connections Academy students during the 2014-15 academic year.
Outcomes Measured	Parent satisfaction with Connections Academy.

Introduction

Connections Academy believes that a student learns best as part of an inclusive and welcoming community of teachers, parents, and other students — all working together to chart a path to student success. That's why one of the hallmarks of the Connections Academy program is parental involvement.

A parent (or other trusted adult) typically plays a vital role as a Learning Coach by guiding daily learning activities. Learning Coaches have the opportunity to be significantly involved in the student's education - not only because of the time they spend with their student, but because the Connections Academy program allows the Learning Coach to be in regular, substantive contact with the student's qualified, certified teacher or teachers. Connections believes that the opportunity to be in close touch with the student's teacher(s), to have up-to-the minute information on the student's academic progress, to have a wide range of resources and opportunities available to their student, and to be involved in the child's education in a way that is not possible in a traditional school, leads to very high parent satisfaction.

Method

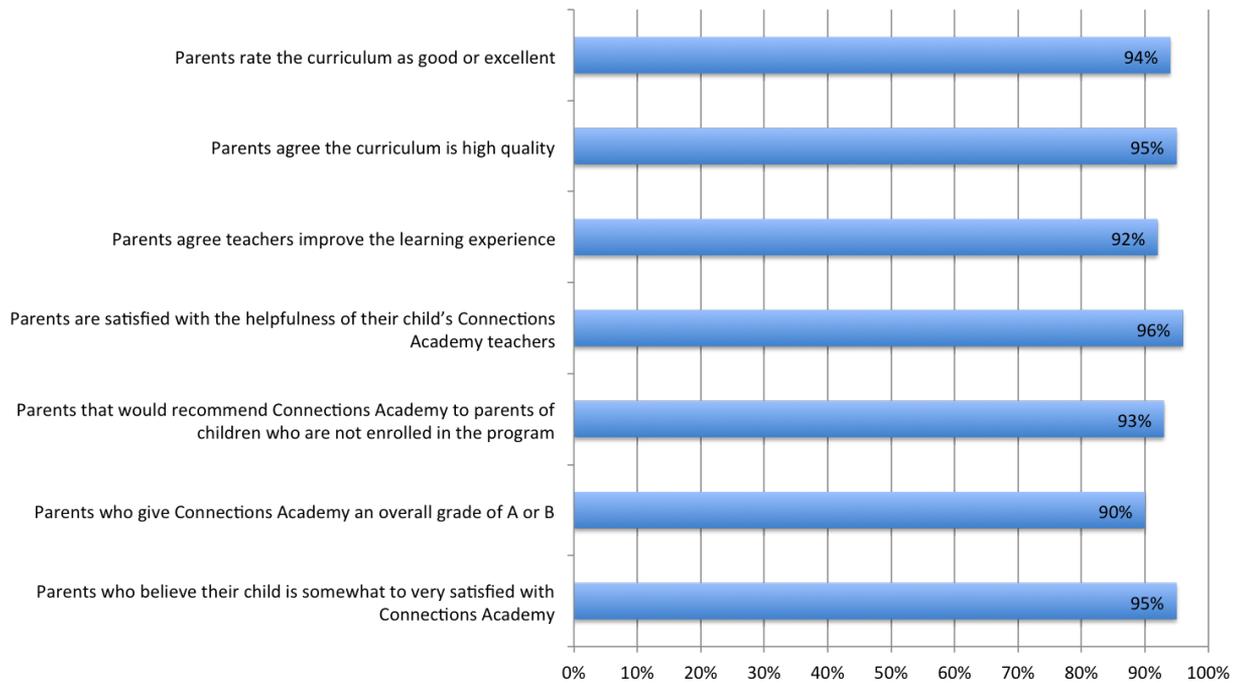
Since 2007, Connections Academy has invited families to complete a satisfaction survey annually. The survey is sent to parents as a link in a WebMail message (secure, internal email within the Connexus platform). The survey is administered by an independent third party to assure anonymity. The survey has six areas of focus: satisfaction with Connections Academy, support, academic and emotional success, socialization and interaction, academic experience, and teacher availability and performance.

In 2014-15, a total of 47,442 families from 29 Connections Academy schools in 25 states were invited to participate in the survey and 18,051 families responded. This represents a response rate of 38%. Of the families surveyed, 25,684 were first year families; of those, 10,346 or 40%, responded. Returning families comprised 21,785; of those 7,705, or 35%, responded.

Results

The report, Connections Academy 2014-15 Parent Satisfaction Survey, provides a summary of findings for each area of focus for the 2014-15 school year. The findings reported in this summary focus on the area of parent satisfaction with Connections Academy since this was our primary outcome of focus (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Parent Satisfaction Survey Results



Discussion

A majority of Connections Academy parents report that they would recommend Connections Academy to another parent, would provide a grade of A or B to Connections Academy, believe their child is satisfied with Connections Academy, are satisfied with the helpfulness of their child's teachers and believe the teacher improves the learning experience, feel the curriculum is high quality and rate the curriculum as good or excellent. These findings do not imply causality. The data is derived from a survey that is offered to all Connections Academy parents in which slightly less than half responded. This is considered an acceptable response rate in survey research, but the findings may not be representative of the satisfaction levels of all Connections Academy parents.

Future Research Plans

Overview of Future Research Plans

Connections Academy has access to publically available student achievement data for each school they support. However, the majority of this data is at the school level and compares Connections Academy to state-level performance. While this data is meaningful, it does not allow for causal inferences due to a lack of an experimental design and student-level data. Connections Academy also has access to student post-secondary plan data for each school they support.

Connections Academy is embarking on a series of research studies beginning in 2016. The first study will examine whether fidelity to the Connection Academy Core Model is positively correlated to student performance, and whether particular aspects or components of the Core Model have greater or lesser impact on student learning, and which elements may have the most/least impact.

A quasi-experimental longitudinal study will begin in fall 2016 to examine the impact of attending a Connections Academy school on student achievement. Interim results for the student achievement study are expected to be available beginning in 2017, with a final report expected to be available in 2020.

A descriptive study will begin during the 2016-17 school year. This study will use students' stated post-secondary goals from their personalized learning plan and/or college and career readiness planning document to determine the degree to which students fulfilled these goals.

We believe this research agenda will contribute to the field of virtual learning, and will also inform Connections Academy's learner-outcome-focused continual improvement efforts.

Future Research Plans

<i>Implementation Correlational Study</i>	
Intended Start Date	2016
Anticipated Length of Study	Likely to be 1-3 years
Type of Study	Correlational
Research Leads	Pearson
Intended Sample Size	To find a significant correlation of .4 with .8 power we anticipate a sample size of 50 sections (virtual classrooms).
Description of Sample	A representational cohort of Connections Academy sections (virtual classrooms) will be selected to participate in an implementation study.
Outcomes to be Measured	1. Implementation of the core model

	2. Student performance
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<i>Student Achievement Quasi-Experimental Study</i>	
Intended Start Date	2016
Anticipated Length of Study	Four years
Type of Study	Quasi-experimental
Research Leads	Pearson
Intended Sample Size	Approximately 800
Description of Sample	Connections Academy students will be matched to students enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools.
Outcomes to be Measured	Student achievement on state assessments.

<i>Student Fulfillment of Post-Secondary Plans</i>	
Intended Start Date	2016
Anticipated Length of Study	Multi-year
Type of Study	Descriptive
Research Leads	Pearson
Intended Sample Size	Approximately 800
Description of Sample	A representative sample of students from Connections Academy graduating classes (2017 - 2019, or as defined by length of study once finalized).
Outcomes to be Measured	Student fulfillment of post-graduate goals from their personalized learning plan and/or college and career readiness planning documents.

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