



Blended learning public charter school outperforms district on state tests

College Park Academy

The Challenge

Four years ago, the College Park City-University Partnership (CPCUP)—an alliance between the City of College Park and one of its largest employers, the University of Maryland—was looking for a way to attract middle-class families to the city and retain university professors, many of whom were moving in search of a better public school district for their children.

CPCUP was particularly interested in offering online learning programs that empower students to learn at their own pace and teach them the technology skills they need to be college and career ready. So it partnered with the local K-12 district, Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS), to investigate online learning options.



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An Online Learning Solution

PGCPS shared with CPCUP the success it had seen in some of its remedial classes that were using Connections Learning, a set of online courses and services now part of the Pearson Connexus™ suite of offerings. After much discussion, the partners agreed that PGCPS would open a new blended learning charter middle school, College Park Academy (CPA), using the online learning curriculum.

In August 2013, CPA opened its doors to students in grades 6 and 7. Since that time, the school has added a grade per year and now educates students in grades 6–10. Although the entire school uses the curriculum from Connections Learning, teachers are given the freedom to manage their blended learning classrooms as they see fit.

Joshua Young, a language arts teacher and the department head, combines flipped learning with a rotation model. “With the technology and the online curriculum that our kids have, it’s wonderful that they are able to work outside of the classroom and at their own pace. Students are doing rote memorization, taking notes, or reading outside of the classroom, and then when they come into the classroom, they’re doing more extended projects or discussions.”

Although there is no typical day in Young’s classroom, his 90-minute class period is divided into three segments. “The first segment is an engaging activity for everyone for review or formative assessment. The second part is group projects or discussion or even time for students to present or share their own ideas with the rest of the class. And the third segment is independent learning with computers or taking the online assessments.”

Herbert Williams, a science teacher, also uses a rotation model. On Mondays through Thursdays, during the first 30 to 40 minutes of each class, he quickly reviews the unit objective and vocabulary and then introduces supplemental content that ties the lessons to everyday life. When he’s done, students spend the rest of the class working independently on their online lessons. Fridays are spent doing hands-on labs.

PROFILE

City/State

Hyattsville, Maryland

School Type

Public charter school

District Enrollment

125,123 students

School Enrollment

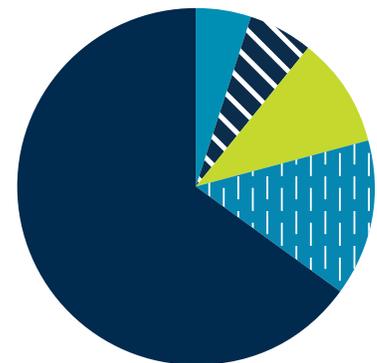
550 students

Grades

6–10

Ethnicity

- 65.0% African American
- 14.2% Hispanic
- 10.2% Caucasian
- 5.0% Asian
- 5.6% Other



The online curriculum has given teachers time to create deeper, more innovative content. Williams explained, “Everything is on the computer—the lessons are there, quick checks, discussions, and unit tests. At my last school, I had to do all of that myself. Now I review the whole lesson that I have to teach and take something that is related to the lesson, do some research on it, and develop an activity to reinforce the lesson and content.”

Students, in turn, have had to develop new skills to succeed with the online curriculum. Because of the rigor of the program, students must pace themselves carefully. They need to complete a certain number of units each quarter to stay on track. At the beginning of the implementation, many students waited to the last minute to complete their assignments and ran out of time. So teachers have learned to set soft and hard deadlines to ensure that students stay on schedule.

“What I like about CPA is we get to use computers for work. I am a better student now because the work we get here is more challenging.”

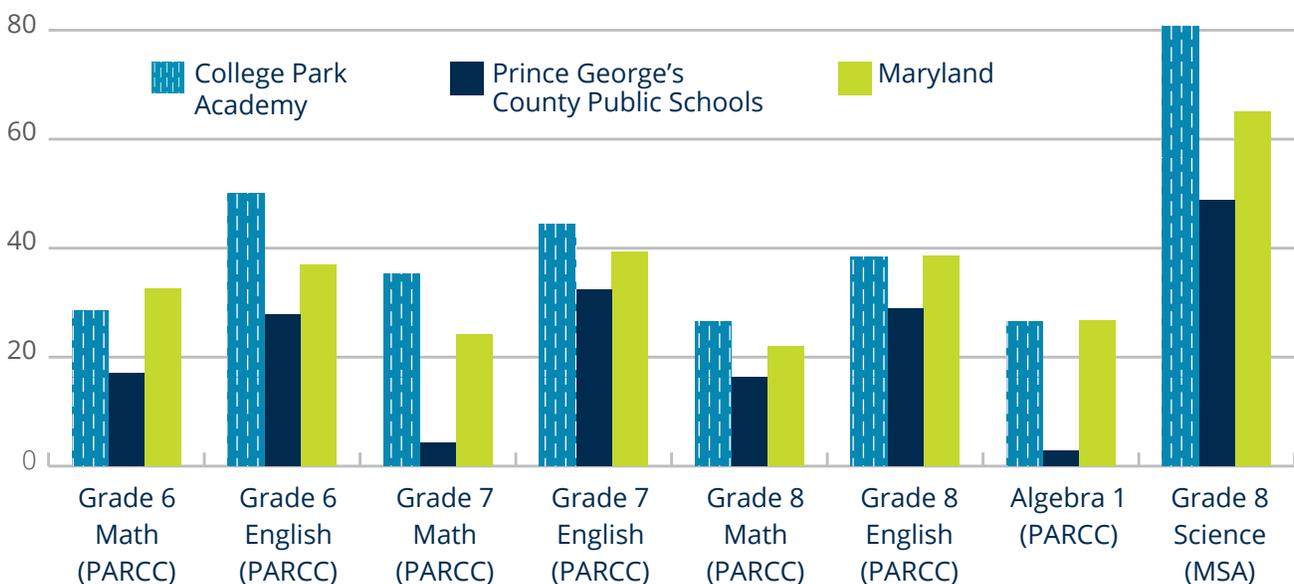
— Nathalia, 7th-Grade Student

The Results

Since CPA’s inception, students have scored higher on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) than students in PGCPs. In 2016, the percentage of students at CPA who met or exceeded standards on these tests exceeded the percentages for the state of Maryland in every grade and subject except 6th-grade math, 8th-grade English, and Algebra 1 (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Students Who Met or Exceeded Standards on 2016 State Assessments



Test scores are just one measure of the blended learning school's success. Students are also learning important life skills that are hard to quantify, like self-regulation and metacognition.

Students are also given the opportunity to challenge themselves by taking courses not offered through PGCP's traditional curriculum. "Students have more choices—for example, languages—with Connections Learning. There is just no way that we would have been able to offer all those different languages with an on-site teacher because of the budget implications," explained Dr. Bernadette Ortiz-Brewster, CPA's executive director.

CPA's board, which is chaired by Dr. Wallace D. Loh, president of the University of Maryland, meets regularly to review the data and is happy with the school's progress so far. And the community seems convinced of CPA's potential. The school had a waitlist of 500 students in 2014–2015, 1,200 students in 2015–2016, and 1,300 in 2016–2017, indicating that parents and students value what CPA has to offer.

“The best thing that I like about CPA is that students can learn different foreign languages and that they go at their own pace with completing lessons.”

—Hope, 7th-Grade Student

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