

# Georgia Connections Academy

## ANNUAL REPORT

December 2019



Prepared by the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts  
Greg S. Griffin, State Auditor

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## DEPARTMENT OF AUDITS AND ACCOUNTS

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November 27, 2019

The Honorable Brian Kemp, Governor  
The Honorable Geoff Duncan, Lieutenant Governor  
The Honorable David Ralston, Speaker of the House  
Members of the State Charter Schools Commission  
Members of the State Board of Education

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In accordance with the O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2093, we have completed our annual report on Georgia Connections Academy for the 2018-19 school year.

The information used in the report was obtained from a number of sources, including the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC), the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), Georgia Connections Academy, and the school's financial audits. As an annual report, the review was not conducted in accordance with generally accepted government audit standards. However, we used information from the source deemed most reliable and assessed all information to determine if it was reasonable.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance provided by Georgia Connections Academy, SCSC, GaDOE, and GOSA during the review.

Respectfully submitted,

Greg S. Griffin  
State Auditor

GSG/jw

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### *Mission Statement*

*The Department of Audits exists to provide decision-makers with credible management information to promote improvements in accountability and stewardship in state and local government.*

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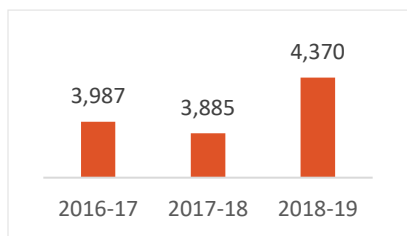
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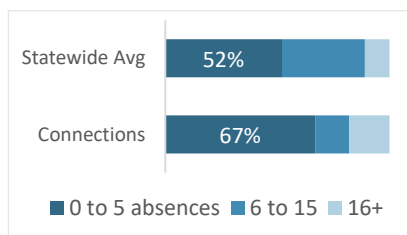


## Enrollment & Attendance

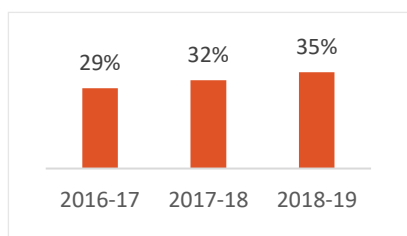
Georgia public schools are responsible for tracking and reporting data for student enrollment and attendance. This section contains enrollment, attendance, and various statistics which indicate the level of student participation at Georgia Connections Academy. Key points in this section include:



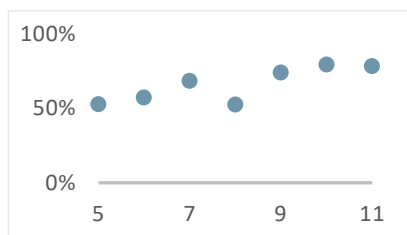
Connections' **total enrollment** has been between 3,800 and 4,400 students annually, and demographics are similar to Georgia's public school students. The exception is the school's significantly lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the 2018-19 school year.



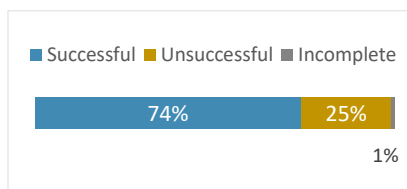
Student **attendance** at Connections is higher than most schools, with 67% of students missing five or fewer days in 2018-19. The variance may be partially attributed to the methodology Connections uses to calculate attendance, which is necessarily different than a traditional brick-and-mortar school. This variance can also be attributed to the ease of access to education associated with virtual schools.



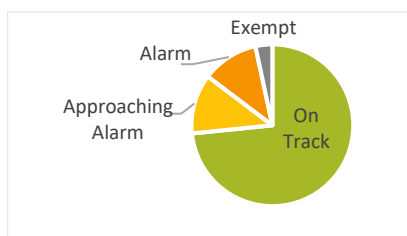
Approximately 35% of students **withdrew** before the end of the 2018-19 school year, with many transferring to another Georgia public school or to home school. The school's student mobility rate, which captures enrollments and withdrawals between October and May, was approximately 49%, higher than the statewide median rate in recent years of 16%.



Of students who completed the 2017-18 school year at Connections, approximately 66% returned the following year. The **retention rates** were highest in high school, reaching approximately 80% for those in 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 2017-18.



In the 2018-2019 school year, the overall **course segment completion** rate was 99%, with completion rates generally higher as the student grade level increased. Across all grade levels, the rate of students completing courses with a passing grade was 74% and the rate with failing grades was 25%.



Connections measures **student engagement** by tracking factors such as attendance, frequency of assignment submissions, frequency of teacher contact, and others. During the 2018-19 school year, approximately 23% of students were deemed in need of some type of intervention due to these measures.

## School Enrollment

Connections, which serves grades six through twelve, had 4,370 students in the 2018-19 school year.<sup>1</sup> This was approximately 12% more than the 2017-18 school year, despite not having any students in elementary grades.<sup>2</sup> As shown in **Exhibit 1**, the number of students in most of the subgroups tracked by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) was similar over years 2016-17 and 2017-18. Female students, Hispanic students, and economically disadvantaged increased most significantly in school year 2018-19.

### Exhibit 1

#### Connections enrollment, 2016-17 to 2018-19 school years

	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
<b>Total Students</b>	3,987	3,885	4,370
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	1,859	1,794	1,891
Female	2,128	2,091	2,479
<b>Race</b>			
Hispanic	298	308	347
American Indian	11	15	16
Asian	94	76	76
Black	1,380	1,343	1,477
Pacific Islander	4	2	11
White	1,992	1,931	2,196
Two or More Races	208	210	247
<b>Other Subgroups</b>			
Student with Disabilities	416	448	477
English Language Learners	20	21	43
Economically Disadvantaged <sup>1</sup>	1,765	1,123	2,212 <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GaDOE defines economically disadvantaged as the number of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals. However, Connections does not serve lunch.

<sup>2</sup> For the 2018-19 school year, United States Department of Education approved the Charter School Poverty Rate Formula, which GaDOE used to calculate the poverty level for Connections. This formula allows poverty to be calculated from direct certified numbers that can be verified.

Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

Connections has a racially diverse student population, somewhat similar to the demographics of Georgia's public school students. As shown in **Exhibit 2**, Connections' student body has a greater portion of white students and students of two or more races than the statewide enrollment and a smaller portion of Hispanic and Asian students in 2018-19.

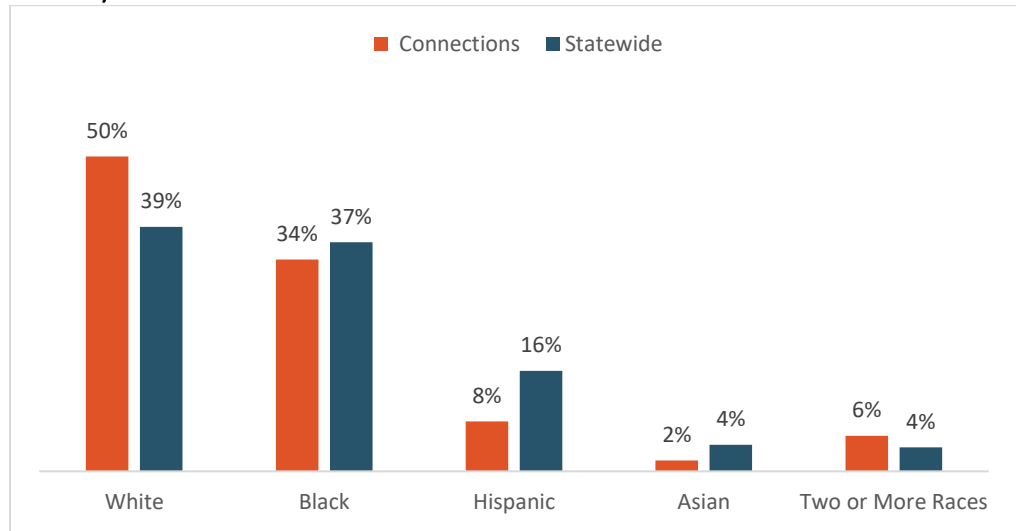
<sup>1</sup> For school funding purposes, student enrollment is captured during October and March full-time equivalent (FTE) counts. GaDOE uses the October count when reporting enrollment for a school year.

<sup>2</sup> The new charter for Connections (effective July 1, 2018 - June 30, 2021) stipulates that the school serves grades 6-12. Elementary grades were dropped for the 2018-19 school year. Subsequent performance reviews by the State Charter Schools Commission have allowed Connections to gradually add elementary grades back, beginning in the 2019-20 school year with 5<sup>th</sup> grade and 4<sup>th</sup> grade in school year 2020-21.



## Exhibit 2

White students represent a greater portion of Connections' enrollment, 2018-19 school year<sup>1</sup>

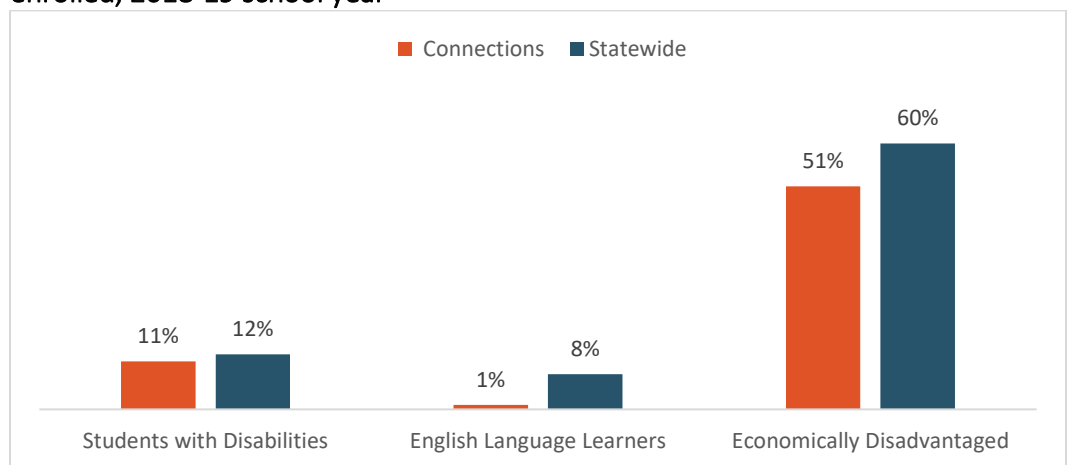


<sup>1</sup>Total enrollment for American Indian and Pacific Islander students was less than 1% each.  
Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

When looking at the other subgroups identified in federal law, Connections had a similar portion of students with a disability as the statewide public school population. However, the portion who were English language learners or economically disadvantaged was significantly lower than the statewide population. As shown in **Exhibit 3**, only 1% of Connections students were English language learners, compared to 8% statewide in 2018-19. The school's economically disadvantaged population was 51%, compared to 60% statewide.

## Exhibit 3

Connections had a smaller percentage of economically disadvantaged students enrolled, 2018-19 school year



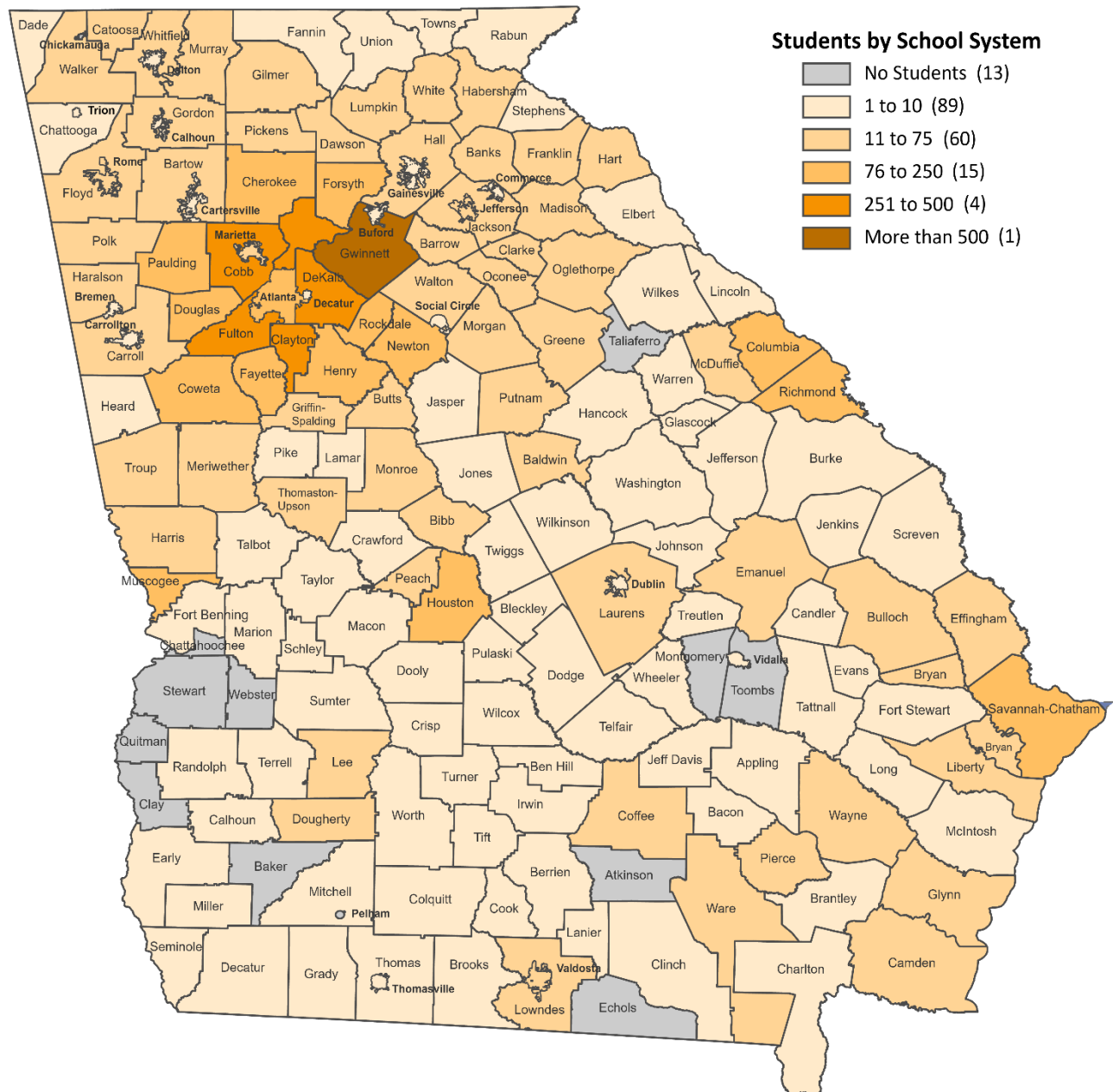
Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

*The report released December 4, 2019 included the incorrect economically disadvantaged percentage for the school. The corrected report, with a higher percentage, was released December 5, 2019.*

As shown in **Exhibit 4**, most Connections students are from metropolitan Atlanta, with more than 500 enrolled students residing in the Gwinnett school district, and between 251-500 in Cobb, Clayton, DeKalb, and Fulton school districts. All but 13 school districts have residents enrolled at Connections.

#### Exhibit 4

Students enrolled at Connections are primarily located in the Atlanta metropolitan area, 2018-19 school year<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> In addition to the state's 180 public school districts, the map shows Fort Benning and Fort Stewart as separate school districts. Some students were removed because they did not have a complete physical address on file.

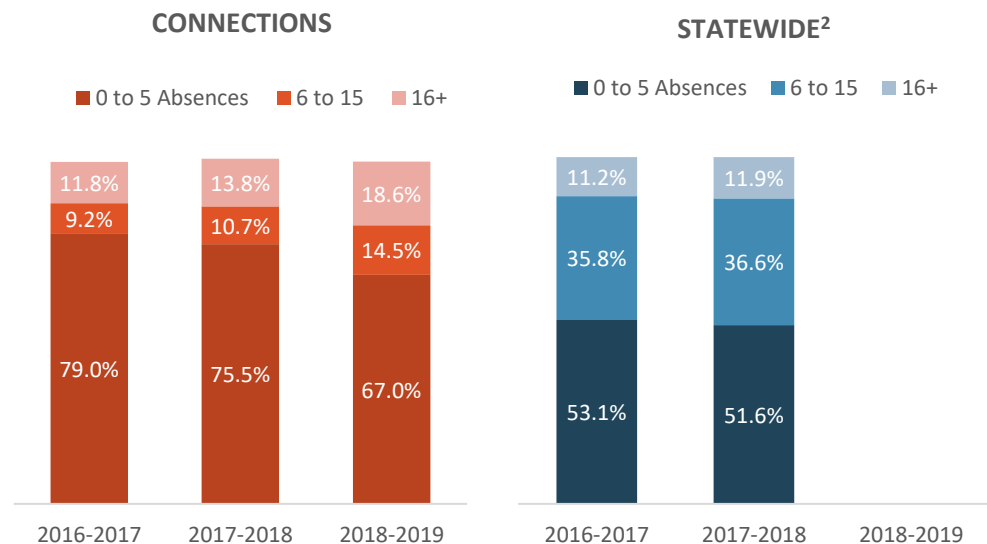
## Student Attendance

Student attendance is one predictor of academic performance in school. Low attendance rates are associated with decreased achievement in school and higher high school dropout rates. Measuring attendance in a traditional, brick-and-mortar school is relatively straightforward: a student is present if they are present in the classroom. Attendance in a virtual environment is less obvious. Because students may attend live lessons, view recorded lessons, or work offline, virtual schools may use a variety of methods to gauge attendance. Typical considerations include assignments submitted, teacher interactions, login data, and self-reported records provided by students or their learning coach (i.e., adult monitoring the student at home).

Connections calculates attendance based on submissions made by the learning coach. Connections asks that the learning coach enter attendance daily. According to GaDOE standards, students in the 6<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grades are expected to complete 28 hours of school per week. Connections employs an attendance coordinator who compares attendance reported by the student's learning coach with student logins, assignment submissions, and teacher interactions. If the attendance coordinator determines that student logins and assignment submissions are not compatible with the attendance records submitted by the learning coach, the coordinator can adjust the student's recorded attendance.

### Exhibit 5

Connections' student absences increased in 2018-19 school year, but remains lower than statewide rates in 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>The percentages GOSA reports are rounded, and therefore may not total exactly 100.0% for each school in each year.

<sup>2</sup>Statewide data for the 2018-19 school year is not available as of publication.

Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) Attendance Data and GaDOE student enrollment records

For each school's annual report card, the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) calculates the percentage of students who missed five or fewer days of school, 6 to 15 days, and 16 or more days. Because GOSA's calculation for 2018-19 will not be available until after publication, we used GaDOE student records data to calculate Connections' attendance rate for the 2018-19 school year. In the 2018-19 school year, approximately 67% of Connections students missed five or fewer days of school, 15%

missed between 6 and 15 days, and 19% missed 16 or more days. Attendance has declined slightly from the 2016-17 school year as shown below. However, Connections' attendance has been higher than the statewide rates in 2016-17 and 2017-18 (see **Exhibit 5**). While not yet available for the 2018-19 school year, statewide attendance rates for each year are relatively stable.

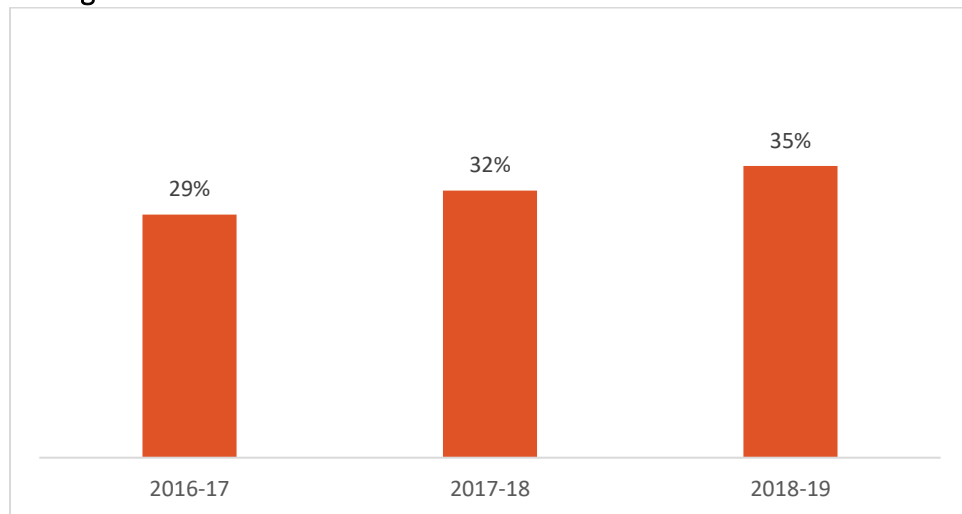
## Attrition

Virtual charter schools normally experience a high amount of student mobility, or attrition through withdrawals. Withdrawals serve as the basis to calculate school attrition, which refers to students who are enrolled in school but withdraw prior to the end of the school year. In a virtual school, some students withdraw because they determine that they are not well-suited for a virtual education, lacking the discipline or educational support at home. Others may have enrolled to satisfy temporary needs (e.g., health issues, extracurricular activities, family issues) without an intention to remain in the school throughout the year. Regardless of the reason for withdrawals, changing schools can negatively impact student performance. Curriculum can vary among school districts and different teachers and classrooms move at different paces.

As shown in **Exhibit 6**, the percentage of students that withdrew from Connections before the end of the school year increased from 29% in 2016-17 to 35% in 2018-19. In the 2018-19 school year, Connections recorded a total of 5,539 enrollments and 1,919 withdrawals.

### Exhibit 6

Connections' withdrawal rate increased each year over school years 2016-17 through 2018-19



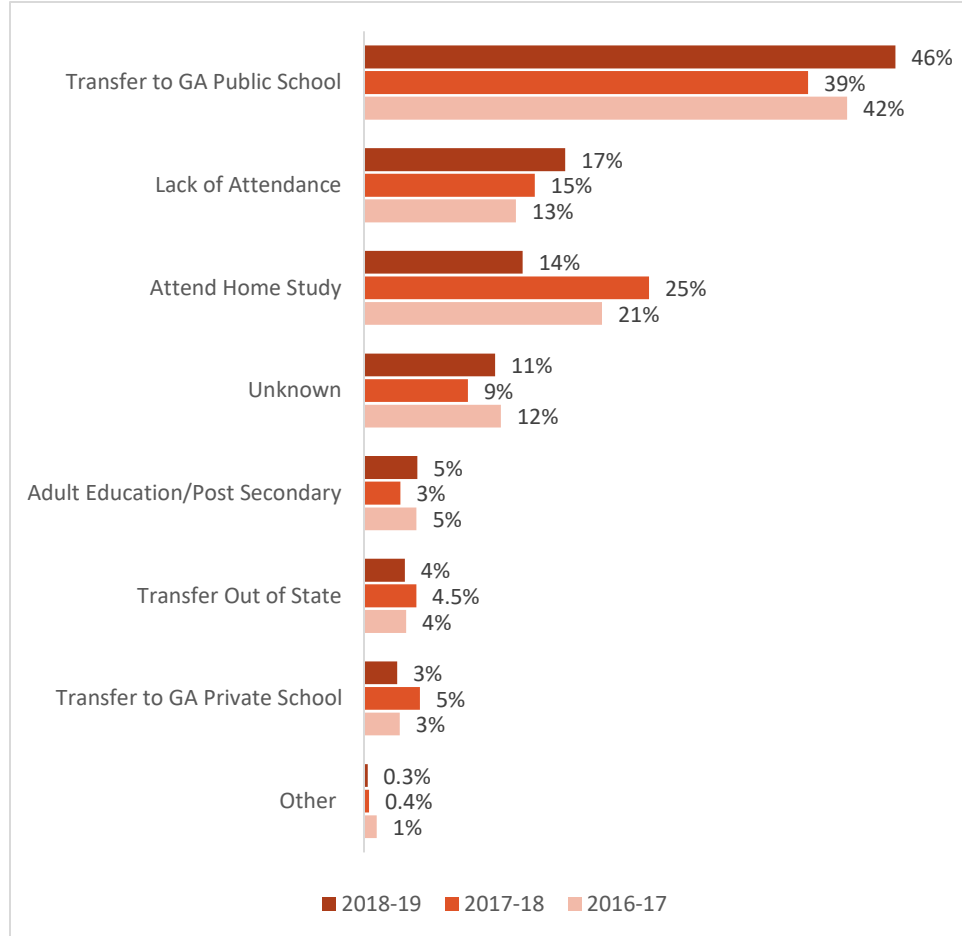
Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

As shown in **Exhibit 7**, 46% of withdrawals from Connections during the 2018-19 school year were students transferring to another state public school. This was the most common reason for withdrawals in each of the last three years, with annual withdrawals of 600 to 900 students. At 17% in 2018-19, an increasing portion of withdrawals are due to lack of attendance. The portion of withdrawals for those opting for homeschooling (shown as “attend home study” in Exhibit 8) declined in

2018-19 to 14%. Home study decreased from 299 students in 2016-17 to 264 students in 2018-19.

#### Exhibit 7

#### Reported reasons for student withdrawal from Connections 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 school years



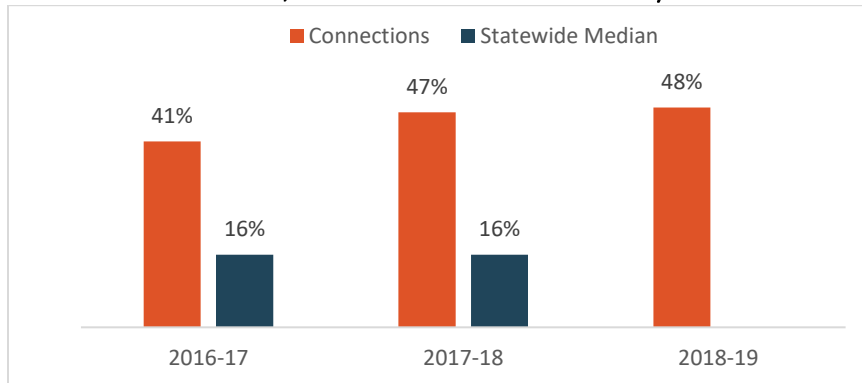
Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

GOSA also calculates a student mobility rate based on entries and withdrawals during the school year. GOSA determines this student mobility rate, also known as a “churn” rate, for all Georgia schools. The rate measures the percentage of a school’s students who entered or withdrew from a school between the October FTE count date and May 1<sup>st</sup>. Because the churn rate also includes students who entered school in its calculation, it is slightly different from the withdrawal rate. Because GOSA’s calculation will not be available until after publication of this report, we used GaDOE student records data along with GOSA’s formula to calculate Connections’ mobility rate for 2018-19.

As shown in **Exhibit 8**, Connections had a student mobility rate of 48% during the 2018-19 school year. The rate is slightly higher than the previous school year. While the statewide average mobility rate for 2018-19 is not yet available, it was 16% in both the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years. Research indicates that virtual schools generally have higher turnover rates than brick-and-mortar schools.

### Exhibit 8

Connections' student mobility rate increased each school year and is over double the statewide median, 2016-17 to 2018-19<sup>1</sup> school years



<sup>1</sup> As of publication, GOSA statewide results are not available for the 2018-19 school year.

Source: GaDOE student enrollment records and GOSA mobility analysis

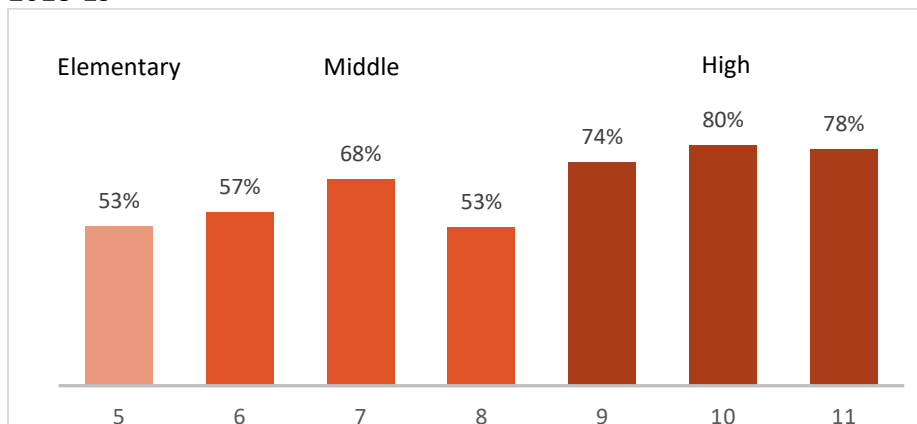
### Student Persistence

Student persistence is the act of continuing towards an educational goal. It is a measure generally used in the postsecondary education environment, when students can more easily discontinue their education. Student persistence can be measured by a year-to-year retention rate for a school and can provide a proxy measure for students' satisfaction with the learning environment at their school.

We found that 66% of students who completed grades 5 through 11 in the 2017-18 school year returned the following year. High school students were more likely than middle school students to remain at Connections across the two years (**Exhibit 9**). The retention rates per grade level range from 53% in 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade to 80% in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

### Exhibit 9

Between 53% and 80% of students in each grade level returned to Connections in 2018-19

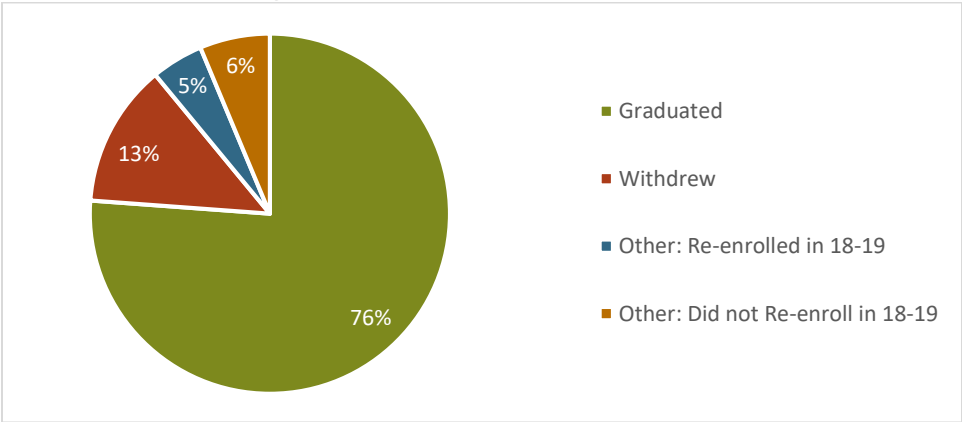


Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

We also examined the persistence of students who are likely old enough to discontinue their education – non-graduating seniors. In the 2017-18 school year there were 428 Connections students in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. While the majority (76%) graduated in 2017-18 and another 13% withdrew, 11% of students did not graduate or withdraw. Of those non-graduating seniors, 5% (20) re-enrolled at Connections the following year, and 6% (27) did not re-enroll (see **Exhibit 10**).

**Exhibit 10**

5% of Non-Graduating Seniors re-enrolled in 2018-19, 6% did not re-enroll

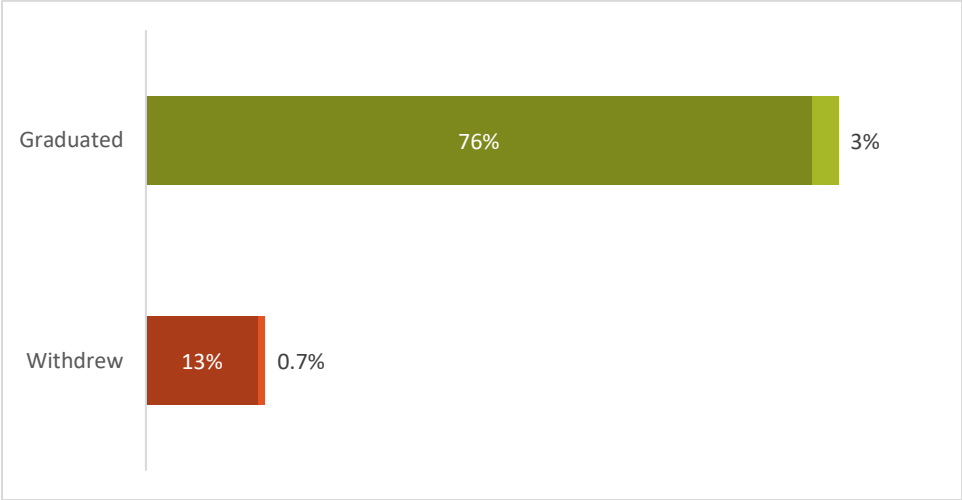


Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

We found that an additional 3% (13) of 2017-18 seniors graduated in 2018-19, bringing the graduation rate to 79% over two years (see **Exhibit 11**). Another 0.7% (3) of students withdrew in 2018-19, bringing the withdrawal rate to 13.7%.

**Exhibit 11**

79% of the 2017-18 senior cohort graduated from Connections and 14% withdrew



Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

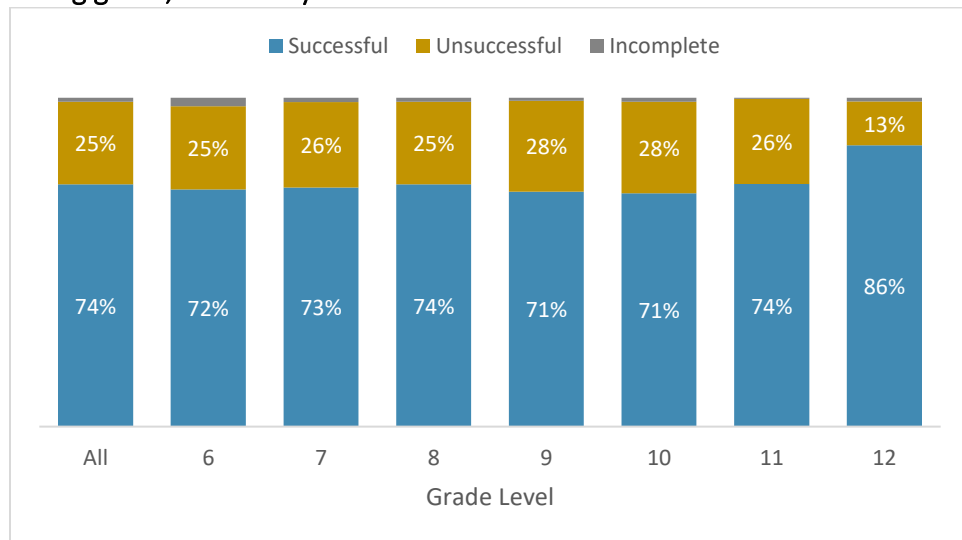
## Course Segment Completion Rate

Given student mobility and attrition, not all students will complete their enrolled courses. GaDOE data does not permit a determination of the percentage of students who complete a course, but we were able to determine the portion that complete a course segment. A yearlong course will often have two segments (first and second semester). Completing a single segment in a multi-segment course does not result in academic credit; a passing grade in the final segment is required.

In the 2018-19 school year, the course segment completion rate was 99% (see **Exhibit 12**), with rates for grade levels ranging from 97.5% to 99.7%. The rate of students completing courses with a passing grade (i.e., successful completions) was 74% across all grade levels, ranging from 71% in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade to 86% in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The percentage of students who completed the course with a failing grade (i.e., unsuccessful completions) was highest in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades at 28%.

### Exhibit 12

Connections students completed nearly all course segments, but about 25% with a failing grade, in school year 2018-19



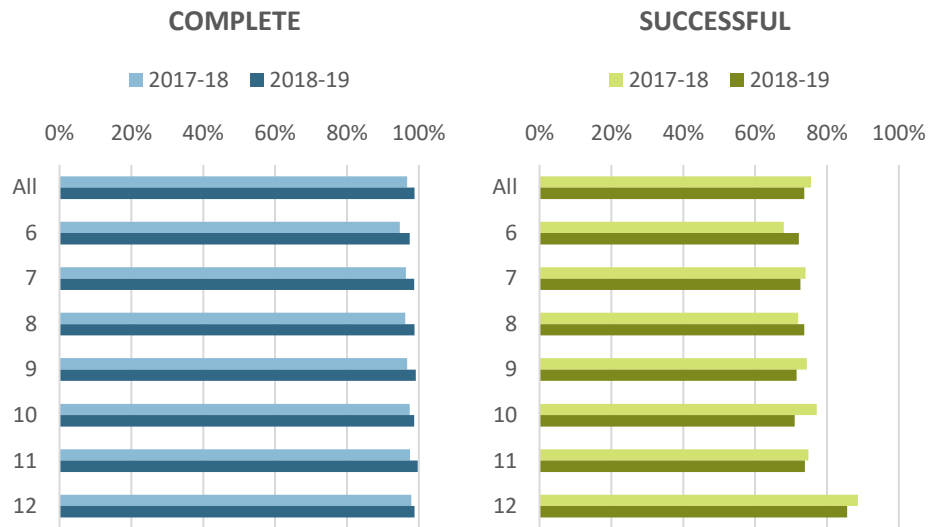
Source: GaDOE course records

The rates of completion and success for Connections students for school year 2018-19 are similar to those for school year 2017-18 (see **Exhibit 13**). The completion rate increased in the second year for each grade level, while the rate of successful completions decreased overall. Grades six and eight saw an increase in passing grades, but the remaining grades show slight decreases in passing grades.



### Exhibit 13

Percent of completed course segments increased in 2018-19, while percent of successful course segments decreased



Source: GaDOE course records

### Student Engagement

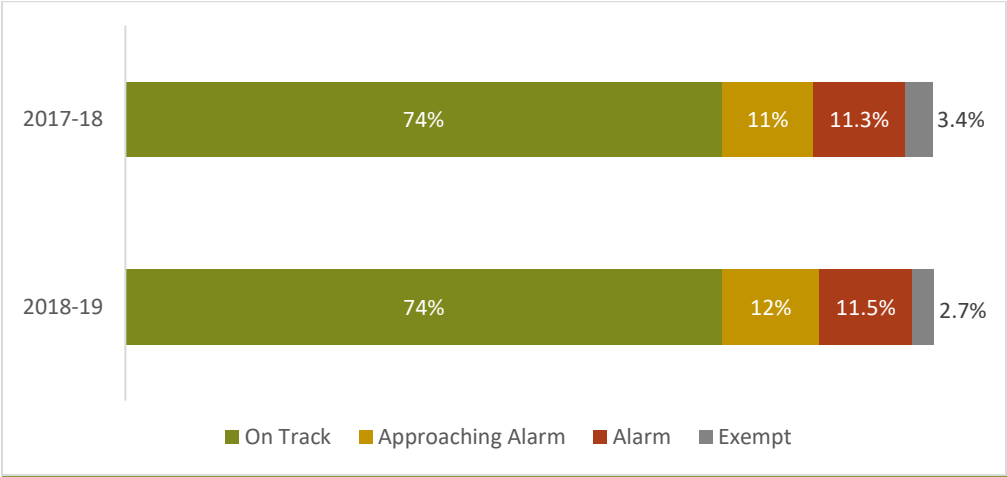
Student engagement is the degree to which students are attentive and interested in their coursework, and engaged students are more likely to perform well in school. Common measures of engagement, such as students raising their hands to pose or answer questions, participating in class discussion, or interacting with teachers in the classroom, are not available in an online environment. As such, virtual schools must develop systems to define and capture student engagement.

Connections measures student engagement through an “Escalation System” developed by the school. The system places students into one of three categories—on track, approaching alarm, and alarm—based on factors such as attendance, frequency of assignment submissions, frequency of contact with a teacher, and others. If a student consistently submits assignments, interacts with teachers, and has grades over the required percentage, the student is on track. Students who do not meet the standards are moved into approaching alarm status, with continued non-compliance leading to a student being placed into alarm status.

During the 2018-19 school year, 3,764 students were tracked in Connections’ Escalation System. As shown in **Exhibit 14**, Connections reported that 74% remained on track as of April 1, 2019. The approaching alarm and alarm categories had 12% and 11.5% of students, respectively. Approximately 3% of students were exempt from the system due to being enrolled for fewer than 21 days. The performance was similar to the 2017-18 results.

Exhibit 14

Most students at Connections are reported to be engaged in coursework and submitting materials on time, 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years

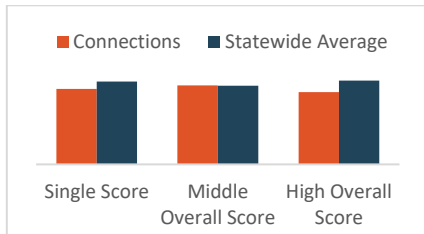


Source: Connections Escalation Report System

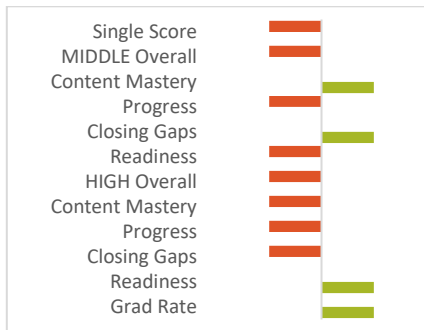
## Academic Achievement, 2018-19 School Year

Charter schools are expected to use their flexibility from certain state and local rules to raise student achievement. There are numerous methods used to measure academic achievement in Georgia's public schools. Some academic performance data for the 2018-19 school year was not available in time for inclusion in this report. For those measures, we report 2017-18 data in a subsequent section on page 22.

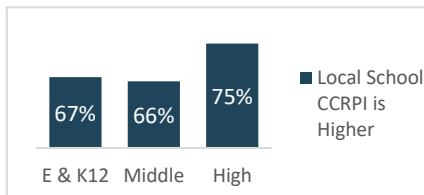
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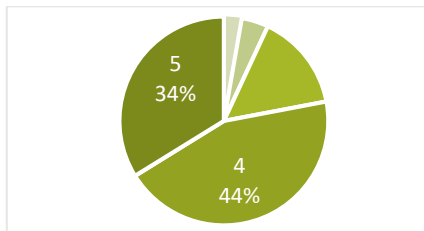
Connections' 2018-19 College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) single score was lower than the state average. However, Connections' middle school scores were slightly higher than, or similar to the state average. The school's high school scores were lower than the state average.



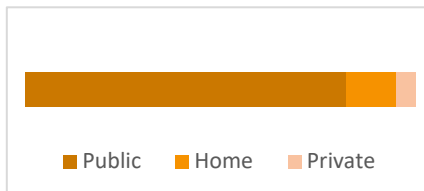
In addition to the single score and overall scores, CCRPI contains several sub-scores for each grade band (elementary, middle, and high), including: content mastery, progress, closing gaps, and readiness. When looking at the **change in sub-scores from 2017-18 CCRPI to 2018-19 CCRPI**, we found that while Connections improved in four sub-scores, most sub-scores decreased in the 2018-19 year.



**Alternate options** for students enrolled at Connections include attending a local district school, home school, or private school. Most students enrolled in 2018-19 live close to a traditional, brick-and-mortar public school with a CCRPI score higher than Connections.



The majority of Connections students enrolled in 2018-19 live near a local district school with a **climate rating** of 4 or 5; the climate rating scale is from 1 (low) to 5 (high).



Over 80% of Connections' new students in 2018-19 **previously attended** another Georgia public school. Some new students transferred from home school (13%) and private school (5%).

## College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)

The College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) is an accountability tool the state uses to measure performance and hold schools accountable for student achievement. The CCRPI provides multiple measures of student performance. GaDOE redesigned the framework for measuring and reporting CCRPI and implemented the new methodology beginning in 2017-18.

CCRPI is comprised of four main indicators used to assess students in multiple areas. All students are assessed based on content mastery, progress, closing gaps, and readiness. An additional assessment, a graduation rate, is also included for fourth- and fifth- year high school students. **Exhibit 15** shows each of the CCRPI indicators and the measures used to score each indicator.

### Exhibit 15

#### CCRPI indicators and measures, 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years

Indicator	Description	Weights (E, M, H)		
<b>Content Mastery</b>	Performance on the Georgia Milestones Assessment and the Georgia Alternate Assessment in ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies.	30%	30%	30%
<b>Progress</b>	Amount of growth a student has demonstrated relative to academically-similar students in ELA and mathematics, as well as English learners' progress toward language proficiency.	35%	35%	30%
<b>Closing Gaps</b>	Based on CCRPI improvement targets for academic achievement, represented by improvement flags, in order to show that all students and all subgroups of students continue to make improvements.	15%	15%	10%
<b>Readiness</b>	Percent of students that show readiness in the certain areas: <i>Elementary &amp; Middle:</i> literacy, attendance, and Beyond the Core (earning a passing score in fine arts or world language); <i>High:</i> literacy, attendance, accelerated enrollment, pathway completion, and college/career readiness.	20%	20%	15%
<b>Graduation Rate</b>	Percent of 12 <sup>th</sup> grade students that graduate in four or five years.	n/a	n/a	15%

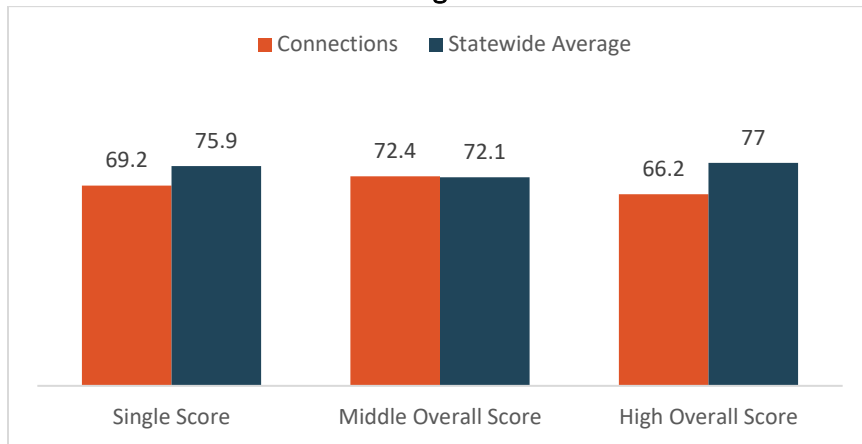
Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

GaDOE calculates a score for each CCRPI indicator and an overall score for each school, as well as an overall single score for each district. Connections' single CCRPI score for 2018-19 (69.2) is lower than the state average (75.9); the state average is Connections' "comparison district" for charter purposes because it is a statewide school.

Connections' overall CCRPI score for middle school (72.4) is slightly higher than the state average (72.1), while the overall score for high school (66.2) is lower than the state average (77), as shown in **Exhibit 16**.

## Exhibit 16

### Connections and Statewide Average 2018-19 CCRPI Scores

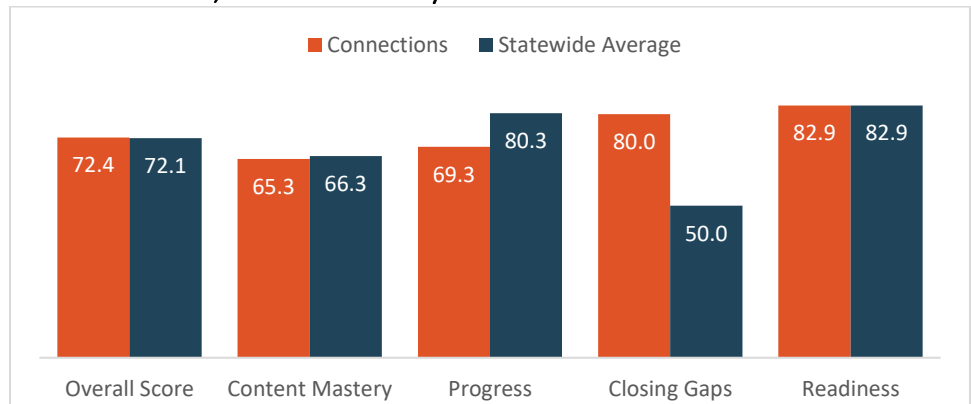


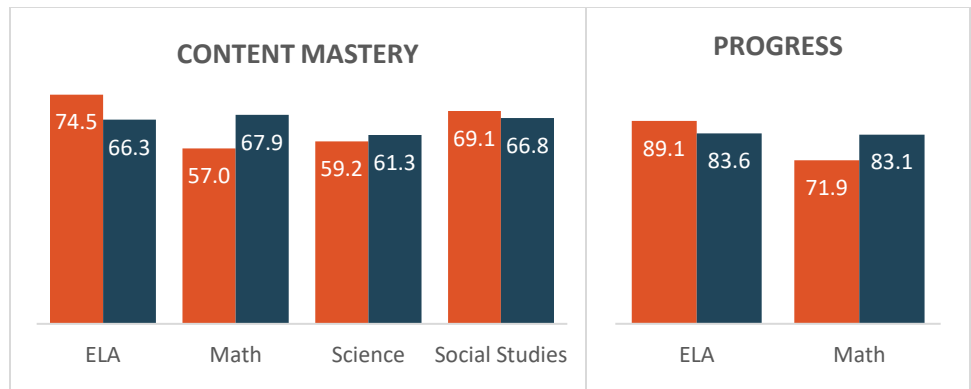
Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

- **Middle School** – Connections’ overall score for middle school is higher than the state (see **Exhibit 17**). The school’s component scores are mixed in relation to the statewide averages. Connections and the state scored equally in readiness, and Connections has lower scores in content mastery and progress compared to the state. For content mastery by subject, middle school students are above the state average in ELA and social studies but below the state average math and science. For the progress indicator, students were above the state average in the amount of growth shown in ELA but lower in math. Finally, the readiness score for middle school students is equal to the state average.

## Exhibit 17

Connections’ middle school CCRPI scores are similar to the state average in most sub scores, 2018-19 school year



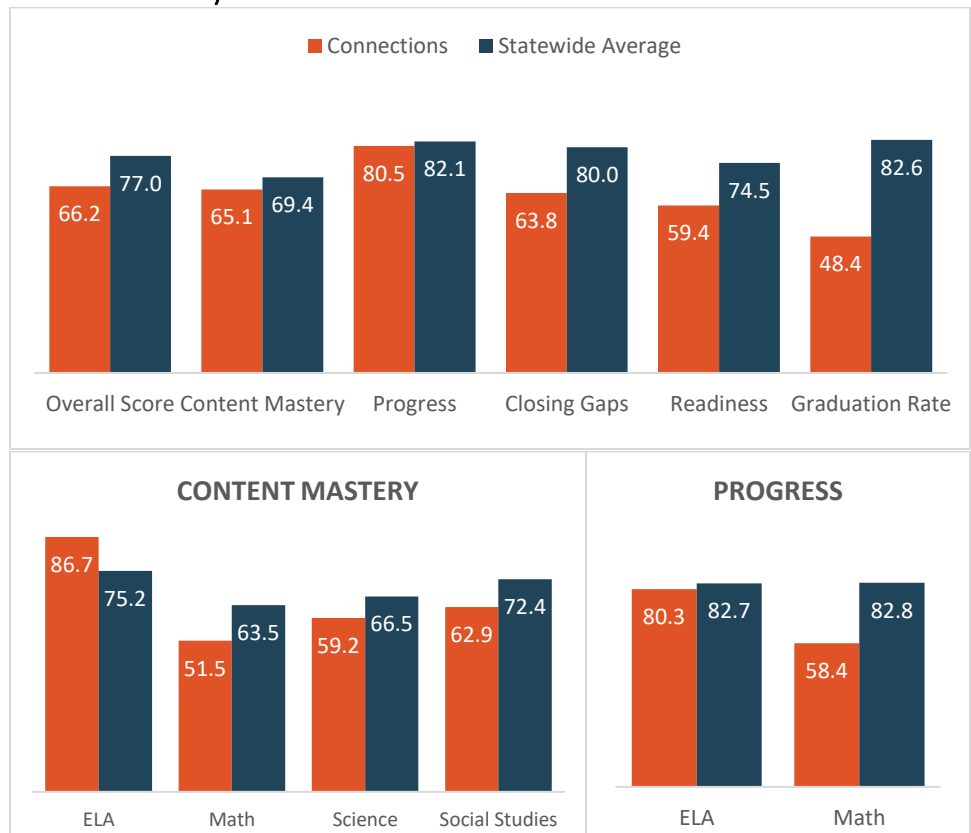


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

- High School** – The school’s overall CCRPI score and score for each component is below state high school scores, as shown in **Exhibit 18**. For content mastery, Connections’ scores were above the state average in ELA but lower in all other subjects. In progress, students were slightly below the state average in the amount of growth shown in ELA, and further below math when compared to the growth of academically-similar students. Finally, both the high school readiness score and graduation rate are much lower than the state numbers.

Exhibit 18

Connections’ high school CCRPI scores are lower than the state average, 2018-19 school year

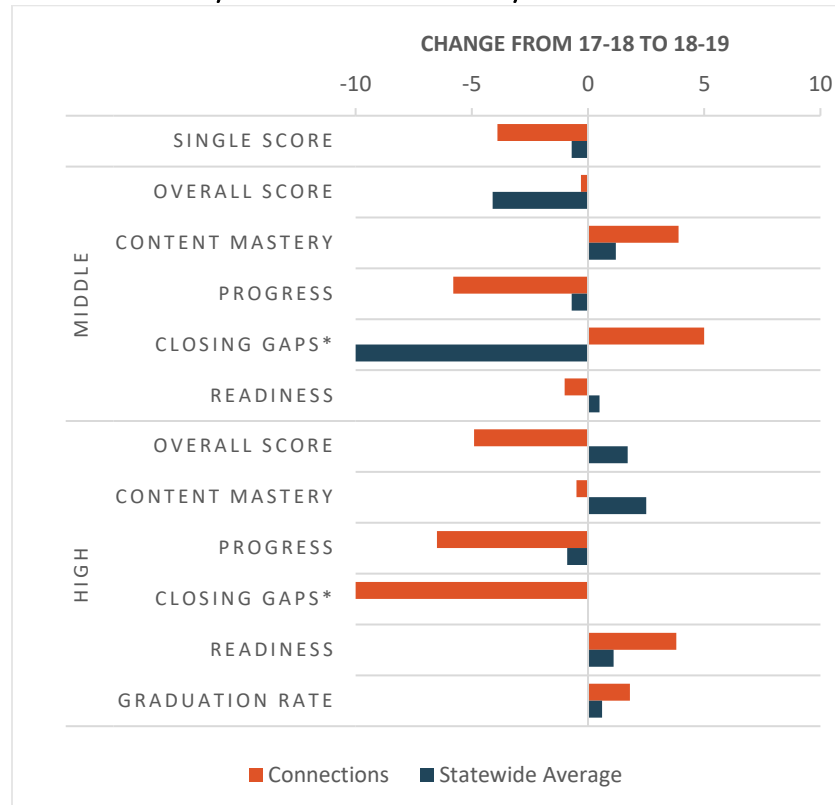


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

**Exhibit 19** below shows the change in Connections' CCRPI scores from the 2017-18 school year to 2018-19. In eight of the twelve scores shown, including the single score, Connections' performance decreased. The remaining four scores – content mastery in middle school, closing gaps in middle school, high school readiness and graduation rate, increased in 2018-19. The state's scores mostly improved, with only four scores decreasing – the single score, middle school overall score, middle school closing gaps, and high school progress.

#### Exhibit 19

Majority of CCRPI scores decreased at Connections, majority improved statewide, 2017-18 school year to 2018-19 school year



Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

### School-Specific Academic Goals

In addition to academic measures listed above, Connections has established an internal academic goal in its charter. The Connections charter includes the goal that 75% of graduating seniors that have completed their Post-Secondary Option Dataview should be accepted to at least one of their post-secondary options (two-year college, four-year college, vocational school, or military service). Connections reported to SCSC that it met the graduating senior measure in the 2018-19 school year.

## Alternative Academic Options

Students enrolled at Connections have several alternatives for obtaining an education, including attending a local district school, private school, or home school. The availability of these options may vary for some students.

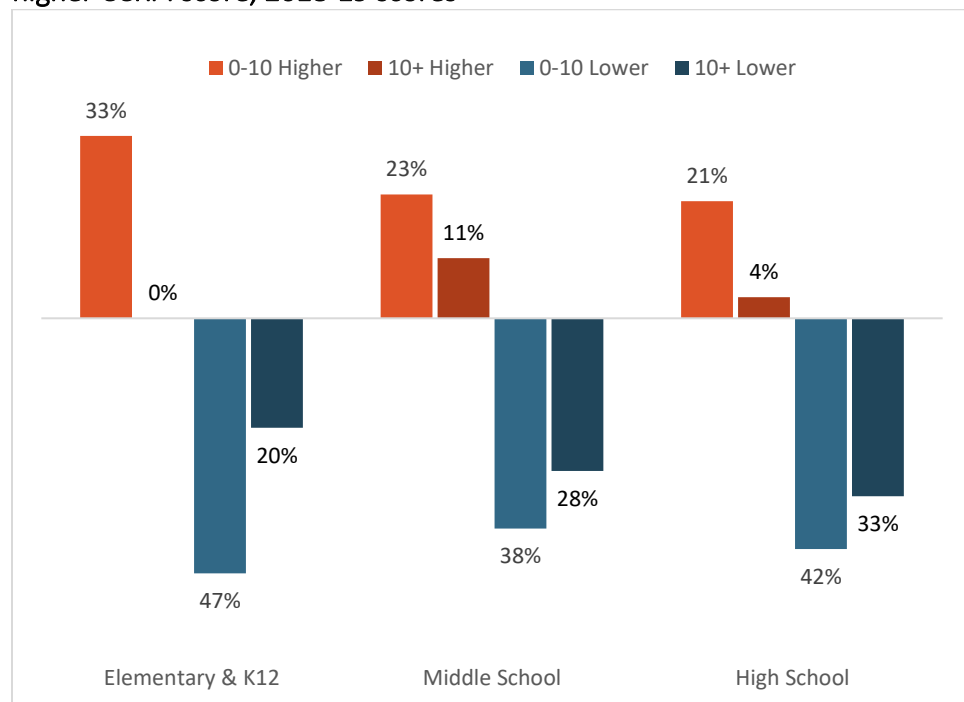
### Local District School

Students enrolled at Connections have the option of attending one of 2,200 public schools throughout the state. These schools are operated by the 180 school districts (159 county, 21 city) and are available to students who live within the school's attendance zone. These schools are publicly funded and available to all students.

Most Connections students live near a local district school with a higher CCRPI score.<sup>3</sup> As shown in **Exhibit 20**, this is true for elementary<sup>4</sup>, K12, middle, and high schools. We found that 28% of middle school students' local schools had a CCRPI at least 10 points higher. The number was 33% for high school students, and 20% for those that matched to a local elementary or K12 school. It should be noted that the CCRPI is only one measure of a school, and there can be other reasons that a student chooses not to attend a local district school.

### Exhibit 20

Most Connections students live close to a local school district public school with a higher CCRPI score, 2018-19 scores



Source: DOAA analysis

<sup>3</sup> The student's zoned district school is not reported; therefore, we determined the local school district school that is closest to the home address of approximately 5,500 Connections students. We excluded schools not open to all students in a specific zone (e.g., magnet schools) and other special schools (e.g., alternative schools, residential treatment facilities).

<sup>4</sup> Connections did not have any elementary students (grades K-5) in 2018-19. However, some Connections students in grades 6-8 live nearest an elementary school that includes those grades.



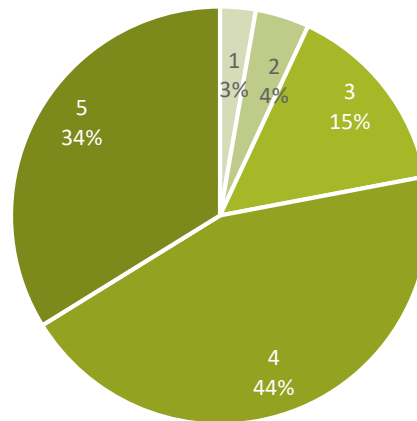
GaDOE also uses survey information obtained from students, parents, and school employees to assign each local school district school a climate rating. The climate rating is based on the following:

- **Attendance** – Frequency of students’ unexcused absences and frequency of employee leave
- **Discipline** – In-school and out-of-school suspensions, as well as alternative school assignments and expulsions
- **Safe and Substance Free** – Frequency of physical, bullying/harassment, and drug-related incidents
- **Climate Perception** – Survey of students, parents, and employees about the school

As shown in **Exhibit 21**, almost 80% of Connections students live close to a school with a school climate rating of four or five. The ratings range from one (lowest) to five (highest). As a virtual school, Connections does not receive a school climate rating.

#### Exhibit 21

Most Connections students live close to a local school district public school with a climate rating of 4 or 5, 2018-19 school year



GaDOE and Georgia Connections Academy

#### Availability of Private Schools

Some students enrolled at Connections may have the option to attend one of more than 600 private schools. Private schools are available in 110 Georgia counties. Fulton and DeKalb counties have a combined 135 private schools, 21% of all private schools in the state. Forty-five counties have a single private school.

Private schools charge tuition and may have various attendance restrictions, limiting the option for many students. The cost of attending a private school in Georgia ranges from approximately \$1,250 to \$32,000 per year, though scholarships may be available for qualifying students. In addition, the private schools in Georgia may restrict attendance eligibility based on grade level (e.g., K-5), religious affiliation, gender, or any other criteria that fits their mission.

## Home School

Some students at Connections may have the option to be home schooled. As shown in **Exhibit 22**, over 10% of students entering and exiting Connections are transitioning between home school and virtual school.

In order for a student to be home schooled in Georgia, state law requires parents or guardians who wish to teach their children at home to have a high school diploma or GED at minimum and annually declare their intent to homeschool to GaDOE. At least 180 days instruction (a minimum of 4.5 hours of per day) must be completed annually unless the child is physically unable to comply with this requirement. Home study programs are to include a minimum of the following five content areas: mathematics, English language arts, science, social studies, and reading. Students are required to participate in a nationally standardized testing program administered by a person trained in the administration and interpretation of such tests; the student must be evaluated at least every three years beginning at the end of third grade.

The costs of home schooling vary depending on a variety of factors, such as the method (e.g. being taught by a parent only or participating in a cooperative home school with other students), curriculum purchased, and number of children in the home being home schooled (the more students, the lower the cost per student). Students may also require textbooks, school supplies, extracurricular activity fees and/or computer equipment. The National Home Education Research Institute estimates homeschool families spend an average of \$600 per student annually for their education.

## Students' Previous School Locations

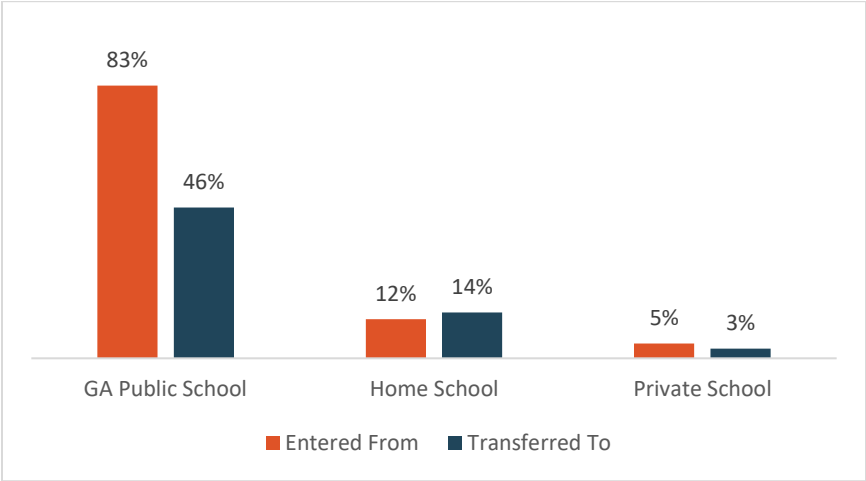
Using student enrollment records, we also identified where Connections' students previously received their education. Of 3,985 new student enrollments in 2018-19, 83% (3,116) transferred from another Georgia public school (see **Exhibit 22**). Approximately 12% (474) transferred from home schools, while another 4.5% (181) transferred from a private school. The remaining new students were in other categories, such as transferring from schools in another state or country. **Exhibit 22** also shows that 46% of students leaving Connections in 2018-19 transferred to a Georgia public school. Almost 15% transferred to home school, and 3% to private school.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The remaining students that withdrew were removed for lack of attendance, transferred out of state, pursued post-secondary education, or withdrew for other reasons.

Exhibit 22

Most students that transferred to Connections were from another public school, 2018-19

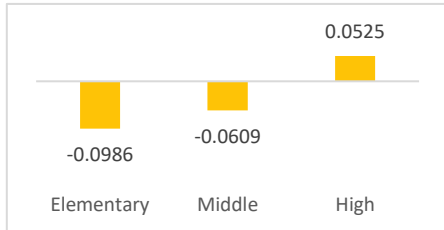


Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

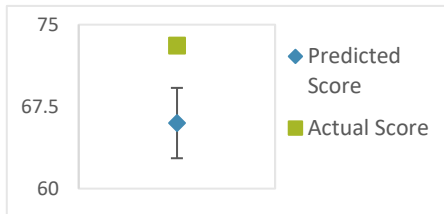
## Academic Achievement, 2017-18 School Year

Charter schools are expected to use their flexibility from certain state and local rules to raise student achievement. There are numerous methods used to measure academic achievement in Georgia's public schools. For the academic measures below, 2018-19 school year data was not available in time for inclusion in this report. Therefore, we reported results from the 2017-18 academic year.

Key points in this section include:



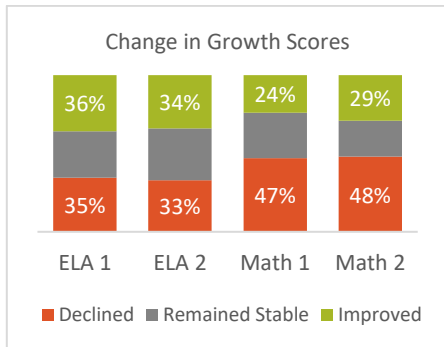
The 2017-18 **value added impact score** for Connections is lower than its comparison district (the statewide average) for elementary and middle school grades but higher in high school.



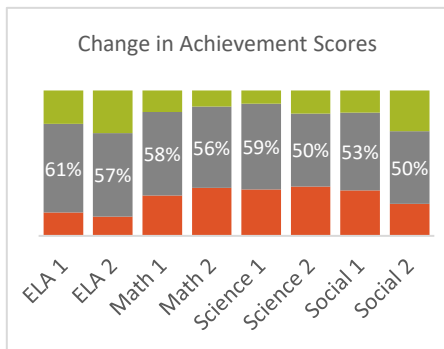
In comparison to similar schools during the 2017-18 school year, Connections' CCRPI score was higher than the predicted score. Therefore, the school was not designated as **Beating the Odds**.

**96/100 =**  
**Meets Academic Standards**

Connections scored 96 of 100 points in the State Charter School Commission's **Comprehensive Performance Framework** review of its academic performance in the 2017-18 school year. Connections also met its school-specific goal in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years.



Change in students' **growth scores** after one or two years at Connections varied by subject. English Language Arts (ELA) growth scores were generally stable or improved after time at Connections, while math scores generally declined.



Improvement and decline in students' **achievement scores** after one or two years at Connections varied by subject. However, across all subjects and cohorts at least half of students' scores remained stable after time at Connections. English Language Arts (ELA) and social studies scores showed more improvement than math and science scores.

## Value-Added Model

The Value-Added Model (VAM) established by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) measures the ability of state charter schools to positively impact student performance. The VAM controls for demographic, academic, and socioeconomic factors so that student achievement can be attributed to the school. After controlling for certain factors, the VAM calculates a predicted score for each student. The difference between the predicted and actual score is the school's impact on the student's achievement.

The analysis consists of a two-step process to get the final value-added measurement. The first step is to find the difference between a student's actual score and their predicted score. For each student, a predicted score is calculated based on the student's characteristics, the student's previous test scores, and the student's school characteristics. For each school, the difference between the predicted and actual scores for all students is averaged. In the second step, the scores are weighted to account for the unique populations that each school serves. The model has separate estimates by grade level and subject. A negative value-added measurement denotes that the actual scores for the students were lower than the predicted scores and a positive score denotes the opposite. The state average value-added effect is zero and it is used as the comparison district for virtual schools since they serve students across the state.

As shown in **Exhibit 23**, Connections' value-added impact score was lower than the statewide average for elementary and middle schools, as well as the subject grouping for those grades. (Connections did not have an elementary school in the 2018-19 school year.) Connections' value-added impact score was higher in most high school subjects. The impact score exceeded the statewide average in 9<sup>th</sup> grade Literature and American Literature, was not statistically different in Algebra 1, and was lower in Geometry.

### Exhibit 23

Connections' 2017-18 Value-Added impact scores are only higher than the statewide average for high school students, 2017-18 school year

Grade Band Subject or Course	Value-Added Impact Score	Impact Relative to Statewide Average
<b>Elementary</b>	<b>-0.0986</b>	<b>Lower</b>
English Language Arts	-0.0942	Lower
Math	-0.1586	Lower
<b>Middle</b>	<b>-0.0609</b>	<b>Lower</b>
English Language Arts	-0.0258	No Statistical Difference
Math	-0.1787	Lower
<b>High</b>	<b>0.0525</b>	<b>Higher</b>
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Literature	0.1909	Higher
American Literature	0.1612	Higher
Algebra 1	-0.0484	No Statistical Difference
Geometry	-0.1370	Lower

Source: GSU report for the State Charter Schools Commission

## Beating the Odds Analysis

The Beating the Odds (BTO) analysis established by GOSA is an outcome measure that compares charter schools' performance on the CCRPI with the performance of similar schools. The BTO model also calculates a predicted score and range (confidence interval) for each school based on demographic characteristics. The characteristics used in the 2017-18 comparison include the following:

- Percentage of female students
- Percentage of students in certain races/ethnicities (including Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Multi-racial)
- Percentage of students with disabilities
- Percentage of English language learners
- Percentage of economically disadvantaged students
- Student mobility rates
- School grade cluster
- Whether the school is traditional or non-traditional
- School size: the model splits schools into three size groups for small (0 to 500 students), medium (501 to 1,000 students), and large (over 1,000 students) schools because there was a large difference in variability between small and large schools.

The BTO analysis includes only those students counted in the October full-time equivalent (FTE) count. The school will receive a score of "Below Expected Range" if the score is below the predicted range, "Within Expected Range" if the score falls within the predicted range, or "Beating the Odds" if the score is above the predicted range. Given that the analysis controls for certain characteristics, a school with a relatively low CCRPI could be Beating the Odds.

For the 2017-18 school year, Connections was classified as Beating the Odds. Connections' CCRPI score was 73.1, which was higher than the predicted score range of 62.78 – 69.22. In the previous school year, Connections was found to not be Beating the Odds.

## Comprehensive Performance Framework Academic Measures

The State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC) conducts annual performance reviews of all state charter schools. The Comprehensive Performance Framework contains the performance standards each charter school is evaluated against in three sections – operational performance, financial performance, and academic performance. The SCSC uses each year's CPF results to inform charter renewal.

Connections' academic performance results for the 2017-18 school year are shown in **Exhibit 24** below. The first indicator looks at whether the school is meeting state improvement targets, and if the school is on a targeted improvement list. Connections earned 0 of 4 points because it failed to meet 100% of those targets and was on an improvement list. The second indicator looks at different CCRPI sub-scores. To earn the full 96 points the school must perform above the level of the comparison district (in Connections' case the comparison district is the statewide average) in one of the

listed measures. To earn partial (60) points for any measure, the school must be performing the same as or above its comparison district in at least one of the grade bands served. Connections earned 60 points for the *CCRPI Progress Sub-Score* and the *CCRPI Grade Band Score*. Connections earned 60 of 96 points for this indicator.

The CPF also provides “second look criteria” as another way for schools to earn the full 96 student achievement and growth points. Connections earned 96 points because GaDOE designated the school as Beating the Odds in the 2017-18 school year. SCSC takes the highest score from the latter two sections. As a result, Connections met SCSC academic standards in the 2017-18 school year.

#### Exhibit 24

SCSC determined that Connections met academic standards in the 2017-18 school year

CPF Academic Performance Indicators and Measures	Available Points	Points Earned
<b>First Look Criteria</b>		
<b>Indicator 1: State and Federal Accountability Systems</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
<i><b>Measure 1a:</b> the school did not receive any points because it did not meet 100% of School Improvement Targets.</i>	2	0
<i><b>Measure 1b:</b> the school did not receive any points because it was designated as TSI, CSI or Turnaround Eligible by GaDOE or GOSA.</i>	2	0
<b>Indicator 2: Student Achievement and Student Growth</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>60</b>
<i><b>CCRPI Content Mastery Sub-Score</b> was lower than that of its comparison district(s) in all grade bands served.</i>	96	0
<i><b>CCRPI Progress Sub-Score</b> was the same as or higher than the district(s) it serves in at least one but not all grade bands served.</i>	96	60
<i><b>CCRPI Grade Band Score</b> was the same as or higher than the district(s) it serves in at least one but not all grade bands served.</i>	96	60
<b>Second Look Criteria</b>		
<b>Indicator 2: Student Achievement and Student Growth</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>96</b>
<i><b>CCRPI Single Score</b> was lower than that of its comparison district(s).</i>	96	0
<i><b>Value-Added Impact Score</b> was not statistically higher than that of its comparison district(s) in all grade bands served.</i>	96	0
<i>Was designated as <b>Beating the Odds</b> by GaDOE.</i>	96	96
<b>Total Points</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>96</b>

Source: State Charter Schools Commission 2017-18 CPF results

## Comparison of Academic Growth Prior to Placement

### Student growth percentile levels

Low	1-34
Typical	35-65
High	66-99

Academic growth indicates how a student has progressed academically over time. GaDOE uses the student growth percentile (SGP) to describe student academic growth relative to academically-similar students across the state. Using state assessment scores, GaDOE compares the change in a student's performance from one year to the next in relation to other students with similar scores in the initial year. Regardless of their initial assessment score, all students are able to demonstrate growth or decline in relation to other students who started with a similar initial score. Student growth levels range from 1 to 99, with higher percentiles representing more academic growth.

### Cohort Analysis Methodology

To compare academic growth prior to entering Connections and after time at Connections, we conducted cohort analyses for two subsets of Connections students.

- **First Year:** The first group includes students that entered Connections in 2016-17. We compared their SGP results for 2015-16 (labeled "Brick & Mortar" in exhibits) to their SGP results in 2016-17 (labeled "Connections" in exhibits).
- **Second Year:** The second group also includes students that entered Connections in 2016-17. We compared their SGP results for 2015-16 ("Brick & Mortar") to scores in 2017-18, or their second year at Connections.

For each subject and cohort, we analyzed results two ways:

- **Student-level change:** First, we looked at the change in each student's SGP level over the period to determine if their SGP level declined, remained stable, or improved.
- **Distribution change:** Then, we looked at the distribution of the entire sample's SGP levels between low, typical, and high growth before and after time at Connections.

**Note:** The sample sizes for each subject area and cohort are slightly different because we matched on the SGP results. Students may not have SGP results in each subject for each school year. In addition, some Connections students in the first-year cohort are not enrolled in year two.

We analyzed cohorts of students to determine the extent to which levels improved after the students attended Connections (see text box). A decrease in the percentage in the "low growth" level and/or an increase in the percentage in the "high growth" level indicates improvement, while the opposite indicates decline. Comparing the cohorts also allows us to see if more time at Connections has an effect on SGP levels.

### Academic Growth: English Language Arts

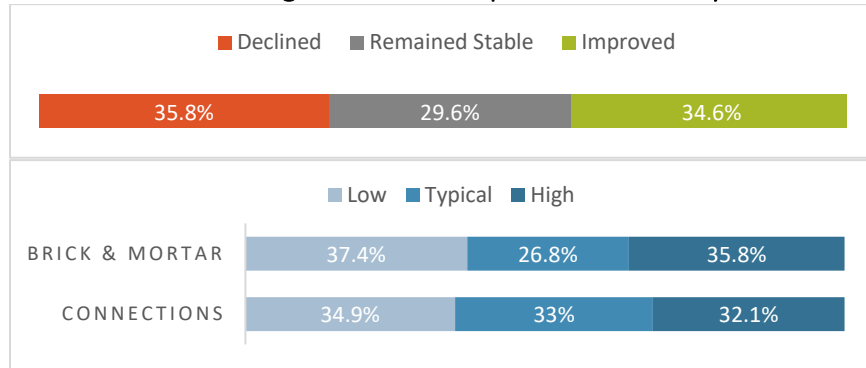
The first- and second-year groups performed similarly in English Language Arts (ELA) SGP levels when comparing brick-and-mortar results to Connections results.

- **First Year:** As shown in **Exhibit 25**, 35% of students improved their ELA SGP levels in their first year at Connections, while 30% remained stable, and 36% declined. In addition, the distributions of low, typical, and high growth pre- and post-Connections are similar. At their brick-and-mortar schools, 37% of students' SGP was "low," 27% "typical," and 36% "high." At Connections, the percentage in low and high percentiles decreased, and the percentage in the typical range increased.



## Exhibit 25

### 35% of students' ELA growth levels improved after first year at Connections

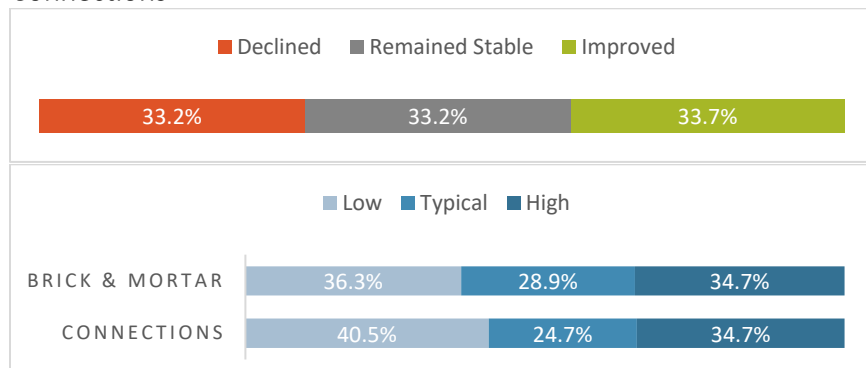


Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

- **Second Year:** Exhibit 26 shows that 34% of students' ELA SGP levels improved in their second year at Connections and 33% remained stable and declined. The distribution of SGP levels for low and typical changed from the brick-and-mortar schools to Connections. The percentage of students in low growth percentiles increased approximately 4% and typical SGPs decreased by the same amount.

## Exhibit 26

### 34% of students' ELA growth levels improved after second year at Connections



Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

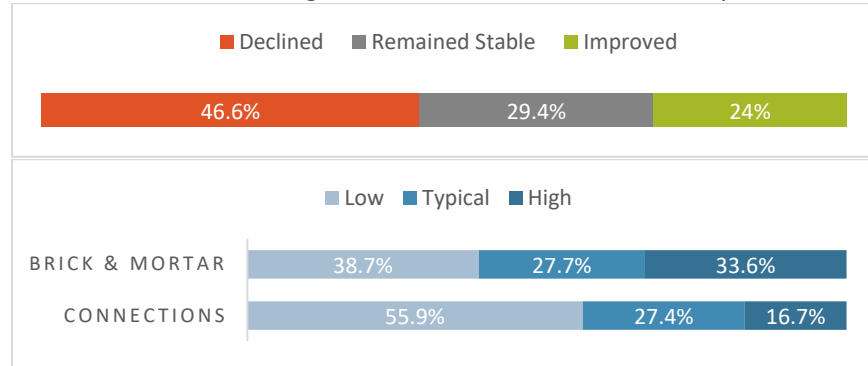
## Academic Growth: Math

Students were more likely to have lower academic growth at Connections than they had in their brick-and-mortar schools, though the second-year group performed slightly better than the first-year group.

- **First Year:** Exhibit 27 shows that 47% of students' math SGP levels declined after their first year at Connections, while only 24% improved. The distribution of low, typical, and high growth SGP also shows lower performance. The proportion of low growth SGP increased from 39% while at the brick-and-mortar schools to 56% at Connections. The percentage of typical growth remained similar, and the proportion of high growth SGP decreased from 34% to 17% after year one at Connections.

### Exhibit 27

#### 47% of students' math growth levels declined after first year at Connections

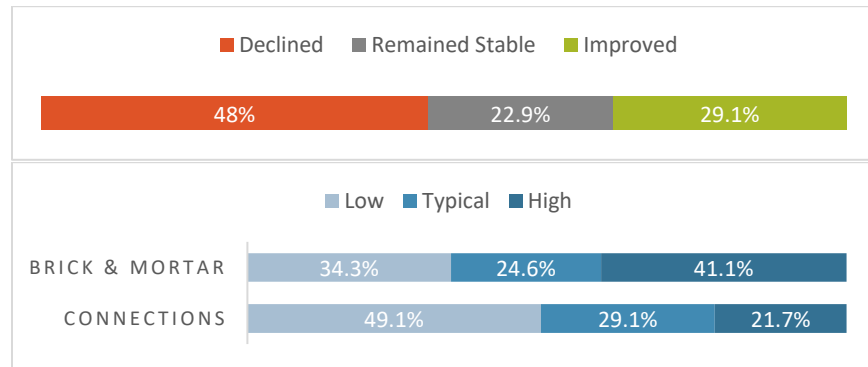


Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

- **Second Year:** As shown in **Exhibit 28**, 48% of students' math SGP levels declined after their second year at Connections, while 29% improved and 23% remained stable. The distribution of low, typical, and high growth SGP also indicates declining performance. The proportion of low growth SGP increased from 34% at the brick-and-mortar schools to 49% at Connections. The high growth group decreased from 41% at brick-and-mortar schools to 22% at Connections.

### Exhibit 28

#### Almost half of students' math growth levels declined after two years at Connections



Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

#### Milestones Assessment System Achievement Levels

**Beginning learner** – does not yet demonstrate proficiency; needs substantial academic support.

**Developing learner** – demonstrates partial proficiency; needs additional academic support.

**Proficient learner** – demonstrates proficiency; is prepared for the next grade level/course.

**Distinguished learner** – demonstrates advanced proficiency; is well prepared for the next grade level/course.

## Comparison of Academic Achievement Prior to Placement

The state uses the Georgia Milestones Assessment System to measure student achievement in grades 3 through 12. The Milestones tests measure how well students have learned the knowledge and skills outlined in the state content standards for core content areas. Students in grades 3 through 8 take an end-of-grade assessment in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, and students in grades 5 through 8 also take an end-of-grade assessment in science and social studies. High school students take an end-of-course assessment for each of the ten courses designated by the State Board of Education.<sup>6</sup>

Based on Milestones tests, students may be placed into one of four achievement levels: beginning learner, developing learner, proficient learner, or distinguished learner. Student assessment scores are reported by grade and subject for the state, school system, and school. We analyzed cohorts of students to determine the extent to which scores improved after the students attended Connections (see methodology text box). A decrease in the percentage of beginning and developing learner achievement levels and/or an increase in the percentage of proficient and distinguished learners indicates improvement, while the opposite indicates decline. Comparing the two cohorts also allows us to see if more time at Connections has an effect on achievement levels.

### Cohort Analysis Methodology

In order to compare academic achievement prior to entering Connections and after time at Connections, we conducted cohort analyses for two subsets of Connections students.

- **First Year:** The first group includes students that entered Connections in 2016-17. We compared their milestone assessment results for 2015-16 (labeled “Brick & Mortar” in exhibits) to their SGP results in 2016-17 (labeled “Connections” in exhibits).
- **Second Year:** The second group also includes students that entered Connections in 2016-17. We compared their milestone assessment results for 2015-16 (“Brick & Mortar”) to scores in 2017-18, or their second year at Connections.

For each subject and cohort, we analyzed results two ways.

- **Student-level change:** first we looked at the change in each student’s achievement levels over the period of time to determine if their level declined, remained stable, or improved.
- **Distribution change:** Then, we looked at the distribution of the entire sample’s achievement levels between beginning, developing, proficient, and distinguished learners before and after time at Connections.

**Note:** The sample sizes for each subject area and cohort are slightly different because we matched on the milestone assessment results. Students may not have these results in each subject for each school year. In addition, some Connections students in the first-year cohort are not enrolled in year two.

## Academic Achievement: English Language Arts

Students had slightly better performance in their first year at Connections than in their brick-and-mortar schools, while the second-year cohort clearly performed

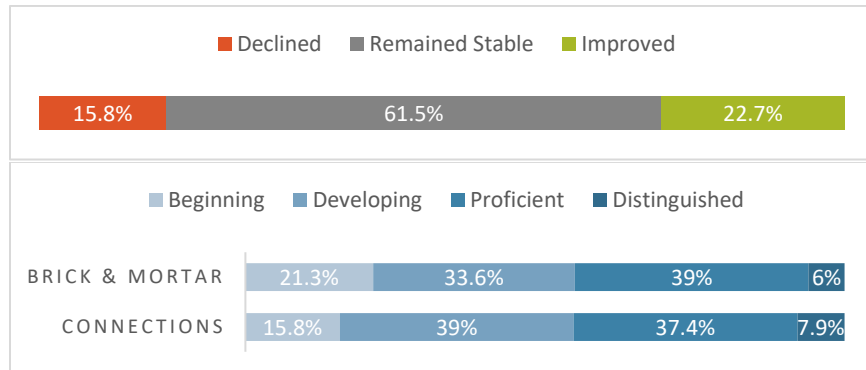
<sup>6</sup> The ten courses include: ninth grade literature and composition, American literature and composition, algebra I/coordinate algebra, geometry/analytic geometry, biology, physical science, United States history, and economics/business/free enterprise. These tests serve as a final exam for the course and contribute 20% to the final grade for the course.

better. Compared to the first-year group, the second-year students had a higher percentage of improved students, lower percentage of declined students, and a higher combined total of proficient and distinguished learners.

- **First Year:** The majority of students' achievement levels remained stable after one year at Connections, though more students had an improved level than a declining level. As shown in **Exhibit 29**, the combined percentage beginning and developing learners remained the same between the brick-and-mortar schools and Connections.

#### Exhibit 29

61.5% of ELA achievement levels remained stable after one year at Connections

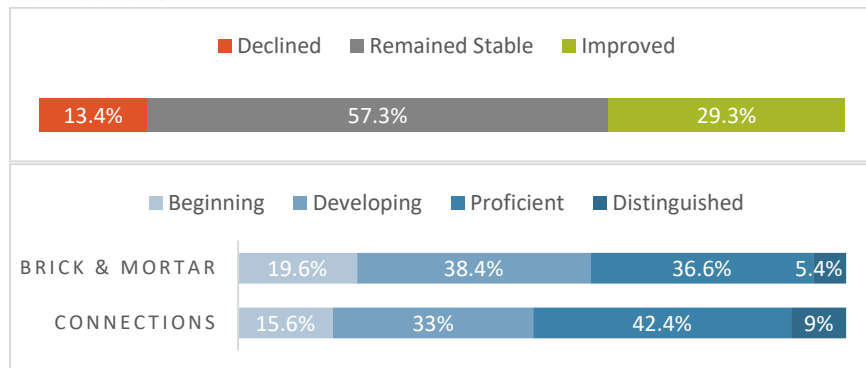


Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

- **Second Year:** Exhibit 30 shows that the majority of students' achievement levels remained stable after two years at Connections; however, 29% improved and only 13% declined. The combined percentage of proficient and distinguished learners increased from 42% at brick-and-mortar schools to 51% at Connections.

#### Exhibit 30

57% of ELA achievement levels remained stable after two years at Connections



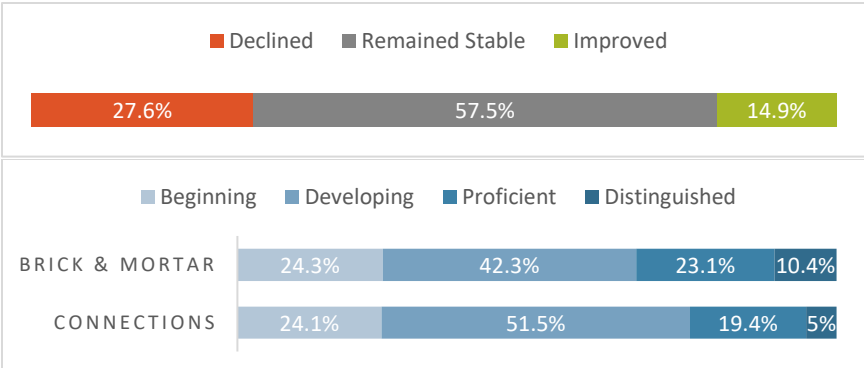
Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

Academic Achievement: Math

Students had lower math achievement levels at Connections than they did in their brick-and-mortar schools. The second-year students had lower performance than the first-year group.

- **First Year:** The majority of students’ math achievement levels remained stable after one year at Connections, but almost 30% declined and only 15% improved (see **Exhibit 31**). The combined percentage of beginning and developing learners increased from 66% at the brick-and-mortar schools to 75% at Connections.

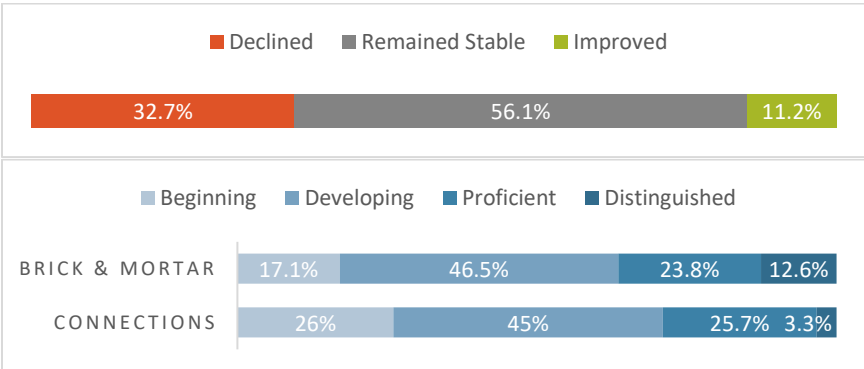
Exhibit 31  
57.5% of math achievement levels remained stable after one year at Connections



Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

- **Second Year:** Exhibit 32 shows that the majority of students’ math achievement levels remained stable after two years at Connections, but 33% declined and only 11% improved. The combined percentage of beginning and developing learners increased from 63% at the brick-and-mortar schools to 71% at Connections.

Exhibit 32  
56% of math achievement levels remained stable after two years at Connections



Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

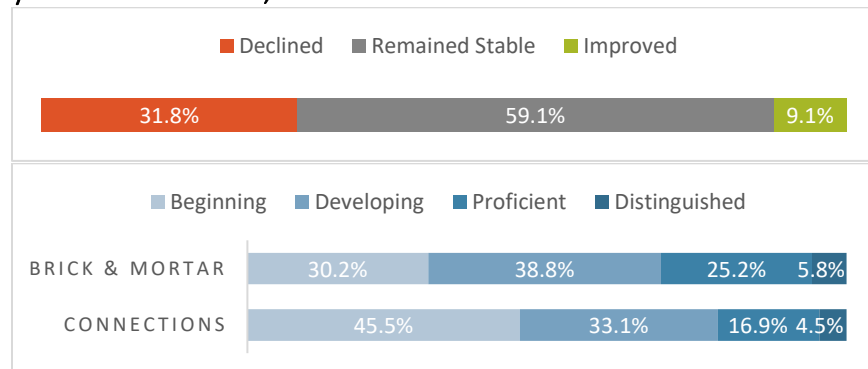
## Academic Achievement: Science

Students' academic achievement in science was lower in Connections than the brick-and-mortar schools for both the first-year and second-year groups. While the second-year group had a higher percentage of students with improved achievement than the first-year group, more than 30% of students had lower achievement levels in both years.

- **First Year:** As shown in **Exhibit 33**, almost 60% of students' achievement levels remained stable after one year at Connections, while 32% declined and only 9% improved. In addition, the combined percentage of beginning and developing learners increased from 69% prior to entering Connections to 78% after one year at Connections.

### Exhibit 33

Almost 60% of science achievement levels remained stable in student's first year at Connections, while 32% declined

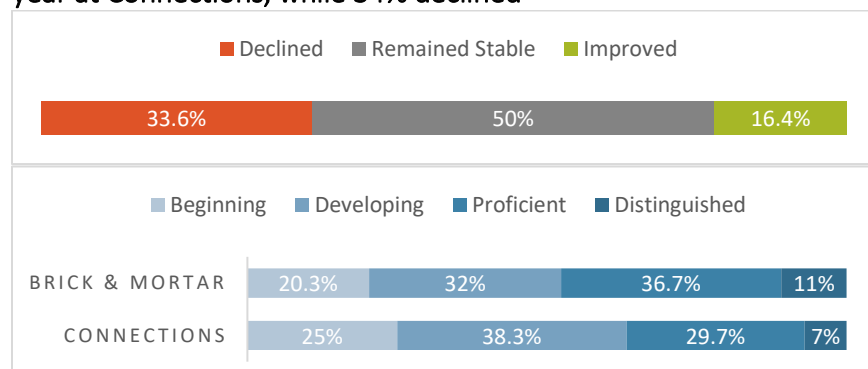


Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

- **Second Year:** Half of students' science achievement levels remained stable after two years at Connections, 34% declined, and only 16% improved (see **Exhibit 34**). The combined percentage of beginning and developing learners increased from 52% at brick-and-mortar schools to 63% at Connections.

### Exhibit 34

50% of science achievement levels remained stable in students' second year at Connections, while 34% declined



Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

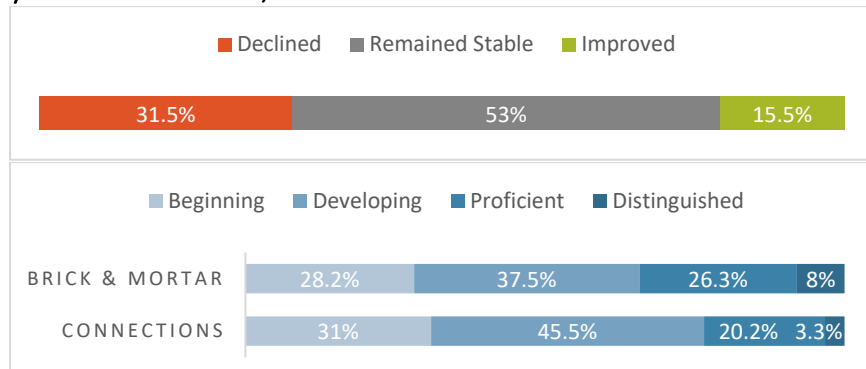
## Academic Achievement: Social Studies

Performance in social studies declined in the first year at Connections but was comparable to the brick-and-mortar performance for the second-year students. The second-year group had a higher percentage of students with improved achievement levels. The second-year group also had a lower portion of students in the beginning and developing learners categories.

- **First Year:** As shown in **Exhibit 35**, over half of students' social studies achievement levels remained stable after one year at Connections while 31.5% declined and 15.5% improved. The combined percentage of beginning and developing learners increased from 66% at brick-and-mortar schools to 76.5% at Connections.

### Exhibit 35

Over 50% of social studies achievement levels remained stable after one year at Connections, while 31.5% declined

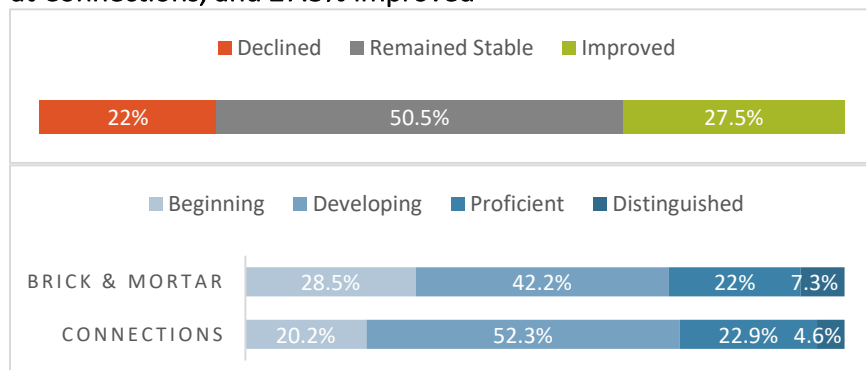


Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

- **Second Year:** Half of students' achievement levels remained stable after two years at Connections, and 27.5% improved while 22% declined. The combined percentage of beginning and developing learners only slightly increased from approximately 70% at brick-and-mortar schools to 72.5% at Connections. See **Exhibit 36**.

### Exhibit 36

50.5% of social studies achievement levels remained stable after two years at Connections, and 27.5% improved



Source: GaDOE Assessment Data

## Management & Staffing

Charter schools, unlike traditional public schools operate under the terms of a charter and are governed by an autonomous non-profit board of directors. This section provides information about Georgia Connections Academy's agreements, governance, staffing, and certification. Key points in this section include:

- Connections had an educational services agreement with Connections Education LLC for educational materials, an online platform, staffing, purchasing, and other services in the 2018-19 school year.
- A new contract that went into effect in the 2018-19 school year contains provisions that strengthens Connections' governance capabilities. Additionally, the agreement continued to incorporate many of the provisions we consider consistent with best practices for holding education management contractors accountable.
- During its 2017-18 review (the most recent available), the State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC) concluded that Connections' governing board met all SCSC standards pertaining to governance.
- Connections had 142 employees during the 2018-19 school year (the same as the prior year). While the teaching staff employed by Connections decreased by 6% between 2017-18 and 2018-19, the level of education and experience of the teaching body remained relatively constant. The average teaching experience across instructors was 12 years, and all instructors have a bachelor's degree or higher (60% have a master's degree or higher).
- Connections has a policy that those in leadership positions, such as principals and assistant principals, hold Standard Professional Teaching (SRT) and Standard Professional Leadership (SRL) licenses. It also allows those without the necessary certifications upon hire to obtain them within 18 months. One of Connections' five staff in leadership positions does not currently have the required certification. Connections' leadership stated that this staff member is actively pursuing the required certification and still within the 18-month window.
- According to the Connections executive director, the school chooses to hire teachers certified in Georgia, with few exceptions. In the 2018-19 school year, all Connections instructors had teacher certification according to GaDOE data.



## Agreements for Corporate Management Services

Charter school governing boards may contract with education management organizations to assist with the school's operation. These corporate entities provide a variety of operational services to public school districts and charter schools. They can provide either comprehensive management or selective services. The scope of services may include educational and administrative services such as accounting, procurement, and reporting.

During the 2018-19 school year, the school board contracted with Connections Education LLC for a broad range of products and services (see **Exhibit 37** and **Appendix A**).<sup>7</sup>

### Exhibit 37

Products and services obtained through agreement with Connections Education LLC in 2018-19 school year

<b>Learning Products &amp; Services</b>
License to use online curriculum, technology platform, and other educational materials
Lesson plans and instructional materials
Computer hardware and software
Assessment tests and testing readiness plan
<b>Management &amp; Administrative Services</b>
Supervision, oversight, discipline, and dismissal of teachers (in collaboration with the lead school administrator)
Administrative functions including student enrollment and placement, maintenance of student records, and accounting services
Human resources services including recruitment, payroll, and benefits administration
Continuing professional development and other staff training
Public relations and marketing
Website and IT Services (Internet access, technical support, and online system maintenance)
Financial reporting and budget development
Insurance policy oversight
Facility and capital equipment procurement and management

Source: Georgia Connections Academy

- **Learning Products and Services** – This includes access to the company's education management system and education materials, such as online lesson plans, tutorials, student assessments, computers for teachers and students, and teacher resources used to develop personalized plans for each student. These products and services are used by both teachers and students.

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<sup>7</sup> Connections has entered into a new agreement with the contractor for the period July 2018 through June 2021, the three-year period of the school's current charter.

- **Management and Administrative Services** – This includes enrollment and academic placement processing, human resources including payments and benefits administration, financial services, website and IT services, and public relations/marketing. The contractor also recruits, hires, and provides oversight of teachers, administrative staff, and certain clerical and support positions in collaboration with the lead school administrator; however, the agreement states “the governing board has final authority over matters related to hiring, compensation, discipline, termination, and employment policies and procedures.” Financial reporting functions, including creation of the annual budget for approval by the board, are handled by the contractor as well.

During fiscal year 2019, the school paid \$26.6 million to Connections Education LLC. Approximately one-third of the payments (\$9.5 million) were compensation expenses for school staff, which are reimbursed at cost. With limited exceptions, much of the educational products and services are paid for on a per student or per teacher basis, while administrative services are paid as a percentage of governmental revenue.

It should be noted that the contract contains a provision protecting the school against an annual deficit. If the school has an annual deficit and no positive net assets, the contractor provides a credit or cash payment to the school. In fiscal year 2019, Connections Education LLC did not provide a credit to the school.

## Governance and Management

Charter schools operate under the leadership of a board that serves as the governing authority of the school. The primary responsibilities of the governing board relate to strategic planning and policymaking, budgeting and fiscal stability, hiring and providing oversight for the school leader, and ensuring accountability. The governing board is also responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations, maintaining records of meetings, committees and policies, and monitoring school achievement. Board members with diverse backgrounds and skills in areas such as education, finance, human resources, and legal affairs can contribute to a board successfully performing its duties.

State law and State Board of Education guidelines establish qualifications for governing board membership and member training requirements. O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2084 requires board members to be a U.S. citizen and Georgia resident, and it prohibits members from being an employee of the school. The law also prohibits board members from being an officer or board member of any organization that sells goods or services to the school. State Board guidelines require board members to receive 15 hours of training in their first year and nine hours each subsequent year. The required training must consist of charter school finance and budgeting, best practices for charter school governance, requirements relating to public records and meetings, and other applicable laws, rules, and regulations.

Connections’ by-laws authorize between three and eleven board members (there were five board members in 2017-18). The board president is responsible for overseeing the process for screening applicants for board membership and making

recommendations to the full board for a member vote. Members are elected to three-year terms and may serve an unlimited number of successive terms. They are not paid but may be compensated for expenses incurred in connection with their duties. A majority of board members are required to transact business at meetings. The board held 11 meetings during 2017-18.

#### Comprehensive Performance Framework Governance Measures (2017-18 Results)<sup>8</sup>

The Operational Performance section of SCSC's Comprehensive Performance Framework (CPF) covers several aspects of charter school operations, including governance. The CPF states that a governing board must provide adequate oversight of school management and operations to ensure that the school is fulfilling its duties to students, employees, parents, and the general public. Given that CPF indicators and measures are incorporated into all charter contracts, a school's CPF standing is a reflection of whether the school has met the requirements and goals set forth in its charter contract, as well as applicable law, and SCSC rules and policies.

The framework consists of four standards for charter school governance as part of its expectations for operational performance. The State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC) concluded that Connections met all standards pertaining to governance in the 2017-18 school year (see **Exhibit 38** for results).

#### Exhibit 38

##### SCSC Comprehensive Performance Framework Results for Governance, 2017-18

CPF Governance Performance Indicators	Available Points	Points Earned
<b>General Governance</b> – The school complies with applicable laws rules, regulations, charter contract provisions and school policies relating to board governance.	5	5
<b>Open Governance</b> – The school complies with the Georgia Open Meetings Act and open records requirements.	5	5
<b>Governance Training</b> – The school ensures that all governing board members participate in required trainings.	5	5
<b>Holding Management Accountable</b> – The school has adequate oversight of school management and contractors, including implementation of the Teacher and Leader Keys Effectiveness Systems, monitoring employee performance, and enforcing contractual provisions or terminating the contract of noncompliant contractors.	5	5
<b>Total Points</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>

Source: State Charter Schools Commission report

#### Accountability

When contracting for education management services, the governing board is responsible for preserving its ability to exercise complete oversight of the school. This requires that agreements include provisions that enable the board to hold the company accountable for performance related to these services. It also requires that the board have the expertise and resources to assess the contractor's performance.

<sup>8</sup> Results for the 2018-19 academic year had not yet been released at time of publication.

Based on our research of best practices for contracting with education management organizations, we compiled a list of provisions that are necessary for governing boards to hold management companies accountable for performance. For example, the agreement should outline the services the school receives in exchange for its fee and give the governing board authority to terminate the agreement if it is not in the best interest of the school. As shown in **Exhibit 39**, the agreement Connections had in place during the 2018-19 school year contained most key provisions necessary for the board to hold contractors accountable for their performance.

#### Exhibit 39

#### Agreement for management & other services contains key provisions, 2018-19 school year

Key Contract Provisions	In Contract	Explanation
<b>Financial</b>		
Defines the fee structure, including an explanation of key components used in the calculation of the fee amount	Yes	Agreement includes a schedule of fees to be negotiated annually.
Outlines the services the school receives in exchange for its fee	Yes	Agreement requires contractor to provide a breakdown of charges by September of each year.
<b>Agreement Period</b>		
Gives the board authority to terminate the agreement if it is not in the best interest of the school	Yes	
Does not renew automatically with a new charter term or continue for a specified time period into a new charter term <sup>9</sup>	Yes	
<b>Services</b>		
Ensures that the academic program implemented aligns with Georgia's standards and allows for modifications to address changes in state standards	Yes	Agreement does not specifically address modifications.
<b>Oversight &amp; Monitoring</b>		
Includes an effective contract monitoring system with clearly defined evaluation criteria, performance rewards, and penalties	No	Agreement authorizes a performance review; but does not clarify the criteria, rewards, or penalties.

Source: DOAA Analysis

While contract provisions provide a mechanism for governing boards to hold companies accountable, contracting for the management services presents unique challenges for a part-time board. Staff independent of the contractor are necessary to sufficiently monitor a contractor providing a broad of services.

A new contract went into effect in the 2018-19 school year that contains provisions strengthening Connections' governance capabilities. The prior agreement indicated the contractor was responsible for virtually all aspects of school management and

<sup>9</sup> The State Charter Schools Commission adopted a rule in January 2019 that prohibits state charter schools from entering multi-year contracts that extend beyond the length of their charter.

noted the lead school administrator works “primarily under the direction” of a vice president for the contractor (subject to oversight by the school board) and “shall report to [the contractor] as to the operation of the Charter School.” While the agreement acknowledged the school’s staff was employed by the board, management was not in a position to provide an independent assessment of contractor performance. The agreement in effect for the 2018-19 school year provided clarification that the board of directors is the employer of all school staff with “final authority over matters related to hiring, compensation, discipline, termination, and employment policies and procedures.” It also reframes the relationship with the contractor’s administration as “collaborative” rather than a reporting relationship and contains clauses that soften the permanency of decisions and responsibilities delegated to the contractor.

## Staffing and Teacher Qualifications

Both GaDOE and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) have roles in assessing the qualifications of public school staff. GaDOE requires public school teachers to hold a teaching certificate and a clearance certificate issued by GaPSC. A clearance certificate is issued after completion of a criminal background check, while a teaching certificate has additional educational and testing requirements. All public school teachers—including those in charter schools—are required to have a clearance certificate. Charter schools are permitted to employ instructors without a teaching certificate.

As shown in **Exhibit 40**, Connections had 142 employees during the 2018-19 school year, the same count as the previous year. Of the staff, 132 were in certified positions<sup>10</sup> and 10 in classified positions. Though the majority of certified staff are instructors, certain staff in leadership, special education, and student or instructional support roles have certification as well.<sup>11</sup> Ten employees are classified personnel who provide administrative support for the school. They do not provide instruction and are not required to obtain a teaching certificate; however, Connections did have two additional administrative staff with teacher certification in the 2018-19 school year.

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<sup>10</sup> With limited exceptions, certified positions are occupied by individuals with state certification. Charter schools may employ those without a certificate.

<sup>11</sup> While instructors are typically required to be certified, certification for other positions is not uniformly required.

# Exhibit 40

## Staffing at Connections, 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years

Personnel Type (Total)	2017-18		2018-19	
	Certified <sup>1</sup> (132)	Classified (10)	Certified (132)	Classified (10)
Superintendent/Asst Superintendent	1		1	
Principal/Asst Principal	4		4	
Instructional Supervisor	1		0	
Elementary Instructor <sup>2</sup>	23		2	
Middle School Instructor	34		59	
Secondary Instructor	47		48	
Special Education Instructor	20		9	
Other Special Education	2		9	
Student Support Services	13		15	
Administrative	2	10	2	10
<sup>1</sup> With limited exceptions, certified positions are occupied by individuals with state certification. Charter schools may employ those without a certificate. <sup>2</sup> Connections served grades K-12 in the 2017-18 school year. Connections began operating under a new, three-year charter that limited the school to grades 6-12 in the 2018-19 school year. Subsequent performance reviews by the State Charter Schools Commission have allowed Connections to gradually add elementary grades, beginning in the 2019-20 school year with 5 <sup>th</sup> grade and 4 <sup>th</sup> grade in school year 2020-21. The decrease in elementary instructors in 2018-19 reflects this reduction in students served. <u>Note:</u> Certain staff have multiple assignments that cross categories; therefore, some may be counted in more than one category. As a result, the sum of numbers in the certified column exceeds the column total.				

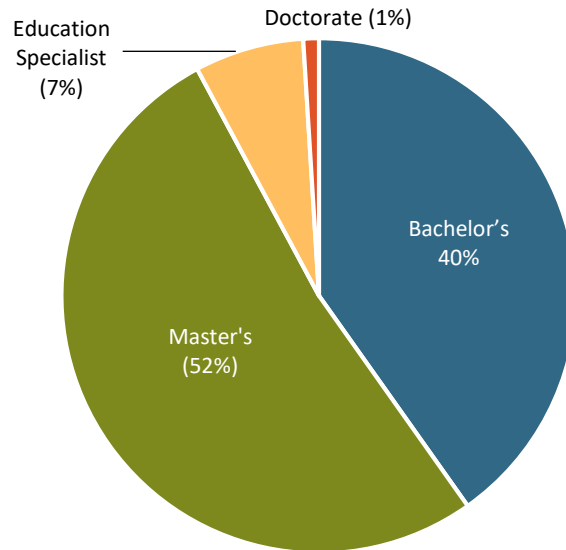
Source: GaDOE CPI data

Connections has a policy that those in leadership positions, such as principals and assistant principals, hold Standard Professional Teaching (SRT) and Standard Professional Leadership (SRL) licenses. An SRT is required before an instructor can obtain an SRL, and Connections allows an instructor hired or promoted into a leadership position 18 months to obtain the required SRL certification. In the 2018-19 school year, Connections had five staff in leadership positions, with four of the five having the required leadership certification. One individual had not yet obtained the required SRL license but was within the 18-month window.

Connections' leadership stated that they choose to hire teachers certified in Georgia, with few exceptions. In the 2018-19 school year, GaDOE data indicates all Connections teachers were Georgia certified. As shown in **Exhibit 41**, GaDOE data shows that all of Connections instructors have a bachelor's degree or higher. Over half (60%) have a master's degree or higher.

#### Exhibit 41

##### Instructor education level, 2018-19 school year

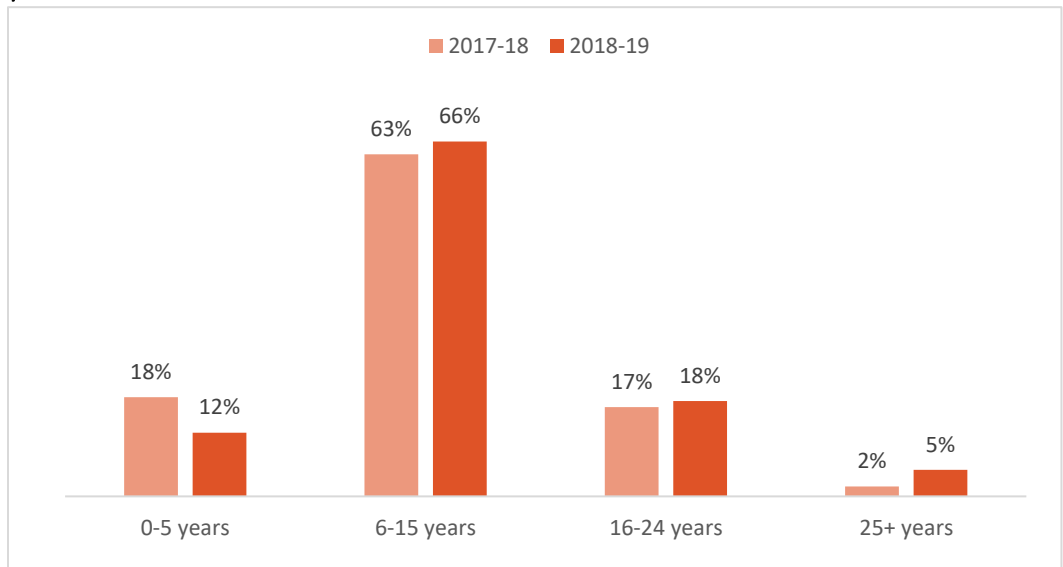


Source: GaDOE CPI data

Though the teaching staff employed by Connections decreased by 6% between 2017-18 and 2018-19, the level of experience remained relatively constant (see **Exhibit 42**). Less than 15% of Connections instructors had under five years of experience and 23% had over 15 years of experience in the 2018-19 school year. The average teaching experience across instructors was 12 years.

#### Exhibit 42

##### Majority of teachers have 6-15 years of experience, 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years



Source: GaDOE CPI data

## Development Plans for Leadership without Certification

Connections has a policy that those hired into leadership positions, such as principals and assistant principals, hold Standard Professional Teaching (SRT) and Standard Professional Leadership (SRL) licenses. Connections allows an instructor hired or promoted into a leadership position 18 months to obtain the required SRL certification.

GaDOE data indicates Connections had five staff in leadership positions in the 2018-19 school year. All five were certified employees, however, only four of the five had leadership certification specifically. One leadership staff had non-renewable leadership certification that expired and is currently pursuing re-certification.



## Operations & Planning

Charter schools can use their funding to implement innovative or unique programs that are not typically available in traditional public schools. This section discusses Georgia Connections Academy's funding, innovation, and future plans. Key points in this section include:

- Connections received 94% of its funding from state funds, which is about 40 percentage points higher than the state average. Like all state charter schools, Connections does not receive local funds.
- Compared to the state average, Connections spent a higher percentage of funding on instruction, general administration, and school administration and a lower percentage on pupil services and staff services.
- Connections has a per student full-time equivalent (FTE) expenditure of \$6,564, approximately 64% of the statewide average. Additionally, when comparing Connections' per-student expenditures and test scores, GOSA rates the school a 3.5. That is higher than 60% of the state's schools.
- Connections identified innovative methods to monitor at-risk students and to attempt to get high school students who have entered the school academically behind their student cohort to graduate on time. A "STEAM Academy" has also been initiated to provide further learning opportunities in science, technology, engineering, arts, and math.
- Connections reported future plans to increase enrollment, improve assessment scores in relation to the state average, improve graduation rates, and to add grades 4 and 5 back into the school (one grade over each of the next two school years). Other future initiatives include formalizing its programming aimed at college and career readiness, increasing participation in dual enrollment, and earning GaDOE certification for its STEAM Academy.

## School Finances

During the 2017, 2018, and 2019 fiscal years, state charter schools received Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding and supplemental state funding from the State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC). The supplemental funds were provided because SCSC-chartered schools are not eligible for local funds. Virtual charter schools received two-thirds of the supplemental funding provided to brick-and-mortar schools, did not receive capital funding until fiscal year 2019, and generally received no transportation or nutrition funding.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the contract between Connections and its contractor contains a provision protecting the school against an annual deficit. If the school has an annual deficit and no positive net assets, the contractor provides a credit or cash payment to the school. These are shown below as “in-kind contributions” in fiscal years 2017 and 2018. According to financial statements, deficit protection was not required in fiscal year 2019.

Connections’ annual financial report shows that revenue increased from \$26 million in fiscal year 2018 to \$28 million in fiscal year 2019 (see **Exhibit 43**). Expenditures during both years were less than revenues, with a surplus of \$528,000 in fiscal year 2019. State funds provided the majority of Connections’ funding, with federal funds and other sources providing the remainder.

### Exhibit 43

#### Connections’ revenue primarily state funds, Fiscal Years 2017 - 2019

Description	2017	2018	2019	Percent Change 2018-19
<b>Revenue</b>				
State	\$21,819,477	\$22,685,586	\$25,955,523	14%
Federal	\$1,557,965	\$1,502,339	\$1,667,621	11%
In-Kind Contributions	\$1,537,500	\$1,781,000	\$0	(100%)
Other income	\$19,236	\$17,726	\$72,524	309%
Local	\$0	\$0	\$0	N/A
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>\$24,934,178</b>	<b>\$25,986,651</b>	<b>\$27,695,668</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Expenditures</b>				
Instruction	\$19,480,813	\$20,254,787	\$21,153,968	4%
School Administration	\$2,185,415	\$2,363,923	\$2,564,351	8%
Pupil Services	\$1,013,944	\$1,047,393	\$1,007,265	(4%)
Support Services – Business	\$671,553	\$704,032	\$882,671	25%
Other Support Services	\$579,889	\$601,159	\$582,557	(3%)
Improvement of Instructional Services	\$578,648	\$571,089	\$551,657	(3%)
General Administration	\$235,952	\$244,359	\$236,585	(3%)
Maintenance & Operations	\$165,795	\$179,446	\$188,844	8%
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$24,912,009</b>	<b>\$25,966,188</b>	<b>\$27,167,898</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Revenues Less Expenditures</b>	<b>\$22,169</b>	<b>\$20,463</b>	<b>\$527,770</b>	<b>2479%</b>

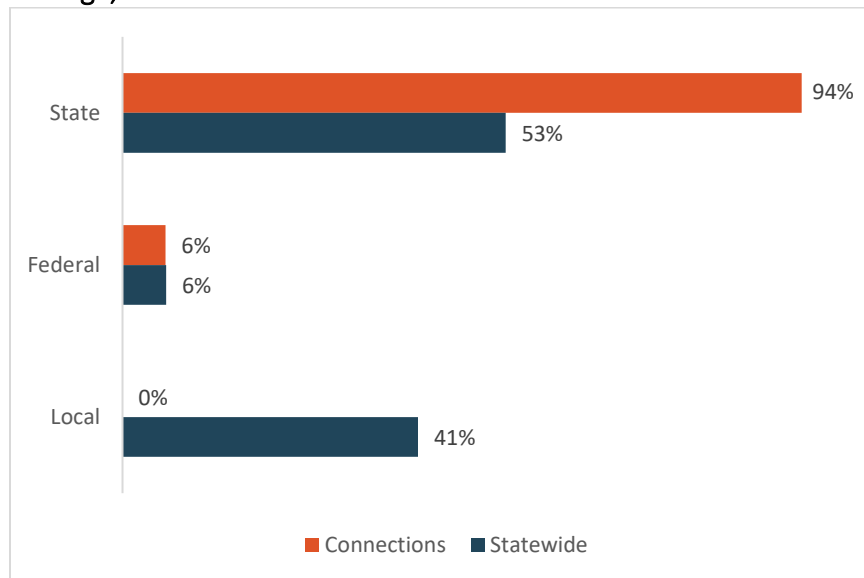
Source: Georgia Connections Academy Financial Reports

<sup>12</sup> With passage of HB 787 during the 2018 legislative session, funding for all state charter schools increased in the 2018-19 school year and virtual schools began receiving capital funding.

We used GaDOE fiscal year 2019 revenue and expenditure reports to compare Connections' revenue and spending patterns to other public schools.<sup>13</sup> As shown in **Exhibit 44**, Connections relies on state funding much more than typical public schools. This is true of all state charter schools that do not qualify for local funding. State charter schools receive QBE funding and a state charter commission supplement to offset a portion of the local funding that they do not receive.

#### Exhibit 44

State funds are nearly twice the revenue source for Connections than the statewide average, Fiscal Year 2019



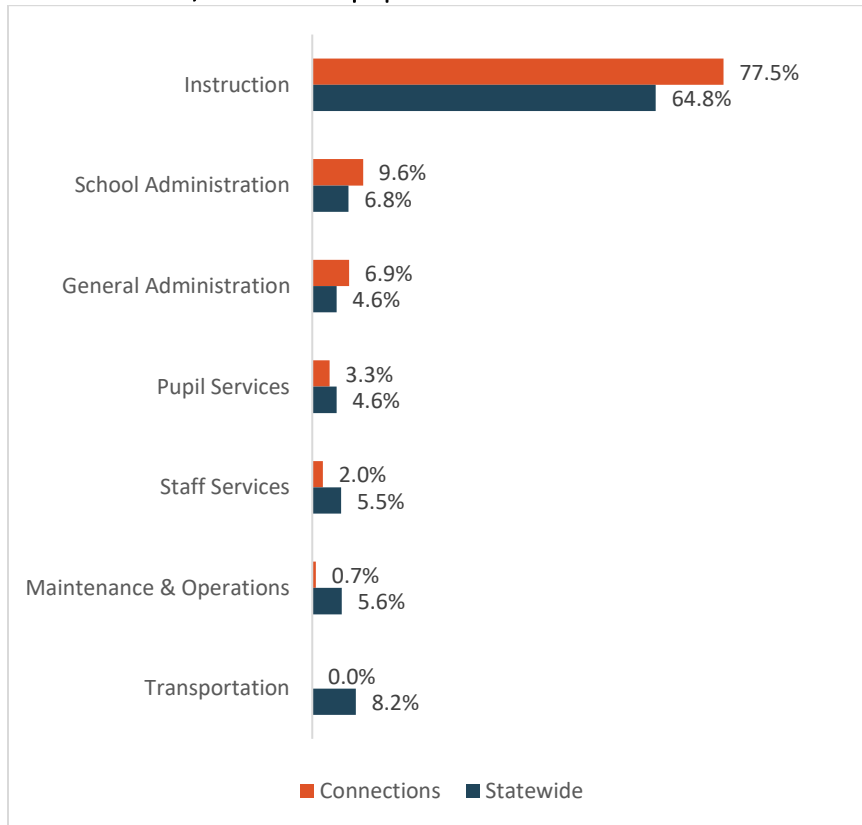
Source: Statewide & Connections GaDOE financial report

Compared to the statewide averages for expenditures, Connections spends more on instruction, school administration, and general administration. Connections spends less on pupil services and staff services (see **Exhibit 45**). School administration includes funding for leadership positions such as principals and assistant principals, while general administration covers positions such as Title I director and homeless liaison, as well as maintenance and technology related services not covered under school administration. Pupil services includes the purchase of materials such as e-books and periodicals, communication and coordination with parents, and additional educational offerings, such as summer school. As expected, Connections spends less on maintenance and operations (typically associated with buildings) and transportation than the statewide averages.

<sup>13</sup> The amounts in GaDOE's financial reports are slightly different than those in the school's financial statements due to the exclusion of certain revenue sources (e.g., in-kind contributions) and expenditure categories. However, GaDOE's reports allow a comparison to other Georgia public schools.

#### Exhibit 45

Connections reports spending more than the statewide average on instruction and administration, but less on pupil and staff services in Fiscal Year 2019

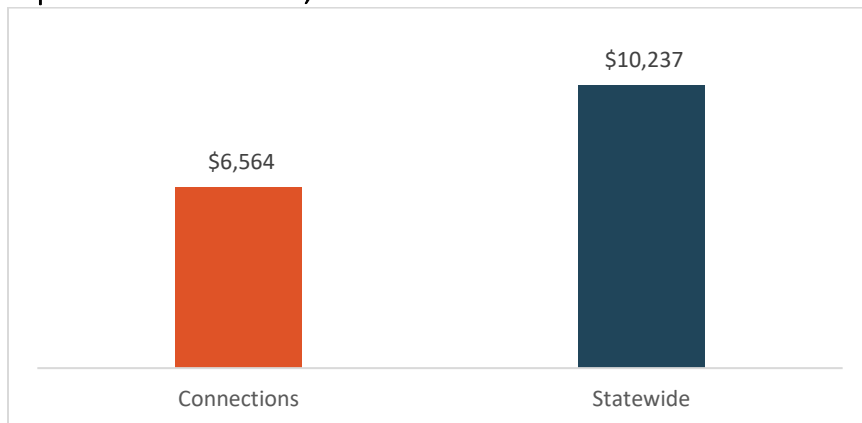


Source: Statewide GaDOE financial report and DE46 financials

Connections' expenditures per FTE were significantly lower than the statewide average. As shown in **Exhibit 46**, Connections spent \$6,564 per FTE in the 2018-19 school year. This was approximately 64% of the statewide average of \$10,237.

#### Exhibit 46

Per-pupil expenditures at Connections are approximately 64% of per-pupil expenditures statewide, Fiscal Year 2019



Source: Statewide GaDOE financial report

## Academic Performance as a Ratio of Per-Student Expenditures (2017-18 Results)<sup>14</sup>

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) calculates a Financial Efficiency Star Rating (FESR) for each school in the state. The FESR compares a school district's spending per student with its overall academic performance. The 2017-18 FESR compared each school's spending per student to its CCRPI score and assigned between 0.5 and 5 stars to each school. Schools in the highest spending category with low CCRPI schools received only 0.5 stars, while those in the lowest spending category with CCRPI scores at 90 or above could receive 5 stars.

Connections received 3.5 stars as part of GOSA's 2017-18 FESR. More than 1,200 schools (60%) received a lower rating, and 334 other schools (15%) received the same rating as Connections.

## Innovative Practices and Implementation

Charter schools operate with freedom from certain regulations applied to traditional public schools. This freedom can allow the charter schools to adopt innovative practices or new approaches that may lead to better student outcomes. Innovation can be implemented in various areas of education, including instruction, governance and accountability. While student outcomes are generally the ultimate goal of innovative practices, intermediate goals may include increasing the learning opportunities for students or adopting the use of creative teaching methods.

### Examples of Goals for Innovation in Charter Schools

1. Increase learning opportunities for all students
2. Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods
3. Create different innovative forms of measuring outcomes
4. Establish new forms of school accountability
5. Create new professional opportunities for teachers

Source: Minnesota Association of Charter Schools

Connections has implemented practices expected to improve academic outcomes for high school students. In the 2016-17 school year, Connections implemented an academic probation program that targets students who previously failed three or more credits of core academic courses. The program requires high school students to attend three-hour live sessions held three times each week and requires a teacher to monitor these students daily. Connections reported that over 65% of the students that entered this program at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year remained enrolled in the school the following year. Of those 65%, 18% improved their grades sufficiently to receive less monitoring.

To assist high school students who enroll at Connections behind their age cohort to graduate on time, Connections created the Persevere Until Success Happens program

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<sup>14</sup> We used the 2017-18 FESR because GOSA will not report the 2018-19 FESR until after this report is published.

(PUSH) program. As part of the program, Connections holds in-person and virtual one to two-day sessions throughout the year and conducts weekly check-in homeroom calls for high school students. Connections reported that participation in the PUSH program reduced the percentage of off-cohort students from 31% at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year to 23% at the end of the year.

Connections also initiated a “STEAM Academy” program in the 2018-19 school year to provide additional science, technology, engineering, arts, and math learning opportunities to students. Through the program, high school students gain hands-on learning in areas such as 3D modeling, 3D printing, biotechnology, engineering design, architecture, illustration, graphic design, digital photography, coding, and animation. Students complete a four-year progression of courses, exhibitions, competitions, forums and performances, and they also must take at least one advanced placement or dual enrollment course.

## **Future Goals and Plans**

Prior to the 2018-19 school year, Connections served kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In the 2018-19 school year, Connections began operating under a new, three-year charter that limits the school to grades 6-12. After a subsequent review by the State Charter Schools Commission, Connections was allowed to re-introduce grades 4 and 5 in the 2019-20 school year. The school board chose to offer 5<sup>th</sup> grade for the 2019-20 school year and intends to add 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the 2020-21 school year. Connections officials indicated they plan to increase enrollment by approximately 14% over the next two years (including the addition of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades).

The school is also focused on improving its operational score in the State Charter Schools Commission’s Comprehensive Performance Framework review. Academically, the school has goals to improve the high school graduation rate 20% by 2021 and outperform the statewide average CCRPI score.

Future initiatives include: 1) formation of a College and Career Academy partnering with post-secondary schools and universities to provide post-high school opportunities and resources for students; 2) dedicating a new staff member to focus on increasing participation in dual enrollment, and 3) earning certification from GaDOE for its existing STEAM Academy.

## APPENDIX A

### Georgia Connections Academy's Educational Products and Services Agreement Effective July 1, 2018

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The Performance Audit Division was established in 1971 to conduct in-depth reviews of state-funded programs. Our reviews determine if programs are meeting goals and objectives; measure program results and effectiveness; identify alternate methods to meet goals; evaluate efficiency of resource allocation; assess compliance with laws and regulations; and provide credible management information to decision makers. For more information, contact us at (404)656-2180 or visit our website at [www.audits.ga.gov](http://www.audits.ga.gov).