

Georgia Connections Academy COMPREHENSIVE REPORT

July 2022



Prepared by the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts

Greg S. Griffin, State Auditor

This page intentionally left blank

This page intentionally left blank

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	2
ATTRITION	2
STUDENT PERSISTENCE	4
COURSE SEGMENT COMPLETION RATE	7
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT	9
VALUE ADDED MODEL	10
BEATING THE ODDS	14
COLLEGE AND CAREER READY PERFORMANCE INDEX	15
COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK ACADEMIC MEASURES	23
FINANCIAL DATA	25
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AS A RATIO OF PER-STUDENT EXPENDITURES	25
SCHOOL FINANCES	25
GOVERNANCE	30
SCHOOL-SPECIFIC ACADEMIC GOALS	32

Introduction

O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2093 requires the Department of Audits and Accounts to produce an annual report for each virtual charter school. The annual reports include information related to school enrollment and attendance, academic achievement, academic performance, governance, operations, staffing, finances, and future plans. In addition, O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2093 requires the Department of Audits to create a comprehensive report approximately every three years from prior annual reports that compiles the following elements and to identify any long-term trends regarding:

- Academic performance,
- Financial data,
- Governance data, and
- The school's actual performance compared to the goals outlined in its charter

This report includes information from the three prior annual reports (2018, 2019, 2020), covering school years 2016-17 through 2019-20; however, some data was not available because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 2019-20 school year, Georgia Milestones tests were not administered and College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) was not produced due to the pandemic, both of which serve as the basis for a number of data points that we typically include in the annual report.

Academic Performance

There are eight measures that we reported in our prior annual reports that are included in this comprehensive report as academic measures. These measures are:

- attrition,
- student persistence,
- course segment completion rate,
- student engagement,
- the Value Added Model (VAM),
- Beating the Odds (BTO),
- College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), and
- the Comprehensive Performance Framework Academic Measures (CPF).

This comprehensive report generally covers school years 2016-2017 through 2019-2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some data was not collected, impacting some of the analyses that can be conducted. The VAM, BTO, CCRPI, and CPF Academic Measures were not produced for the 2019-20 school year.

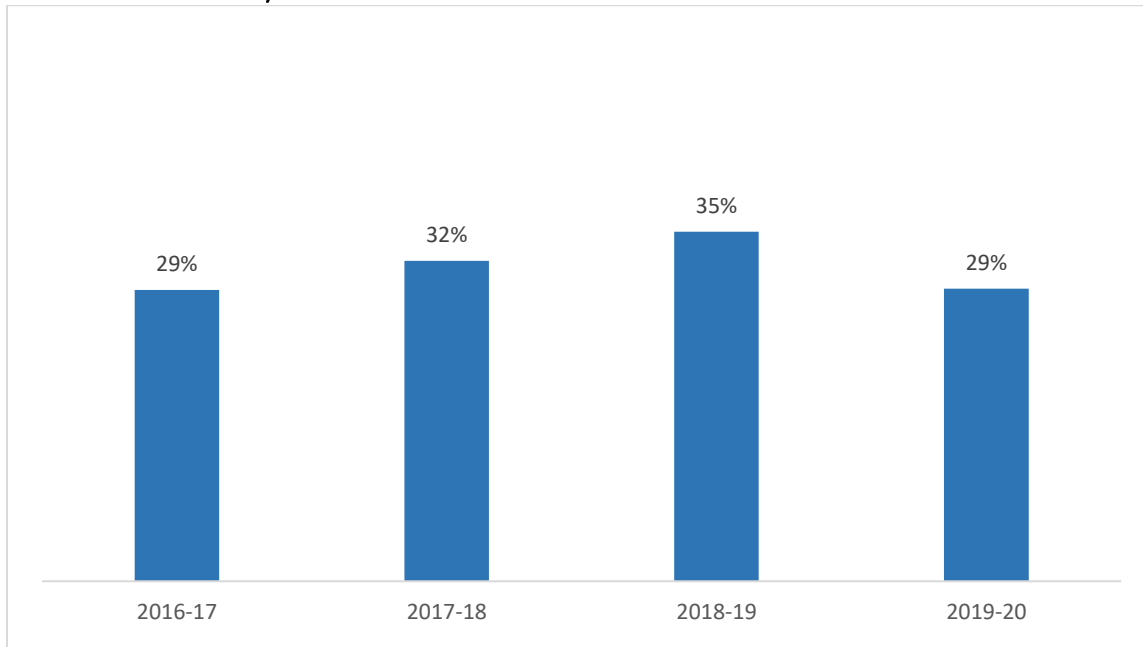
Attrition

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 1**, 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 before dropping to 29% in school year 2019-20. In the 2019-20 school year, Connections recorded a total of 5,813 enrollments and 1,703 withdrawals.

Exhibit 1

Connections' withdrawal rate increased from school years 2016-17 to 2018-19, but decreased in the 2019-20 school year

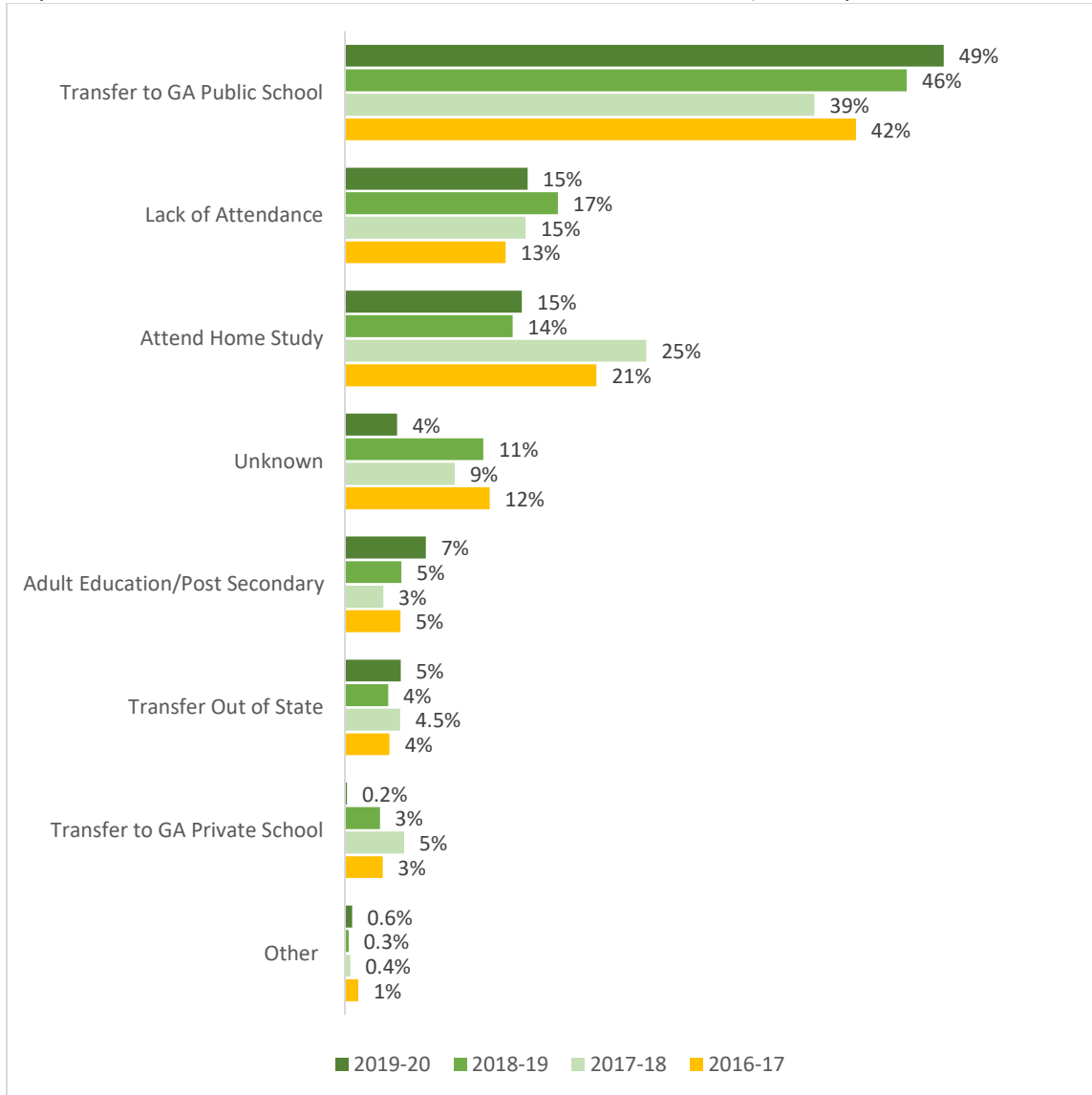


Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

As shown in **Exhibit 2**, 49% of withdrawals from Connections during the 2019-20 school year were students transferring to another state public school. This was the most common reason for withdrawals in each of the last four years, with annual withdrawals of 600 to 900 students. About 15% of withdrawals are due to those opting for homeschooling (shown as “attend home study” in **Exhibit 2**). Home study decreased from 299 students in 2016-17 to 247 students in 2019-20.

Exhibit 2

Reported reasons for student withdrawal from Connections (school years 2016-17 to 2019-20)



Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

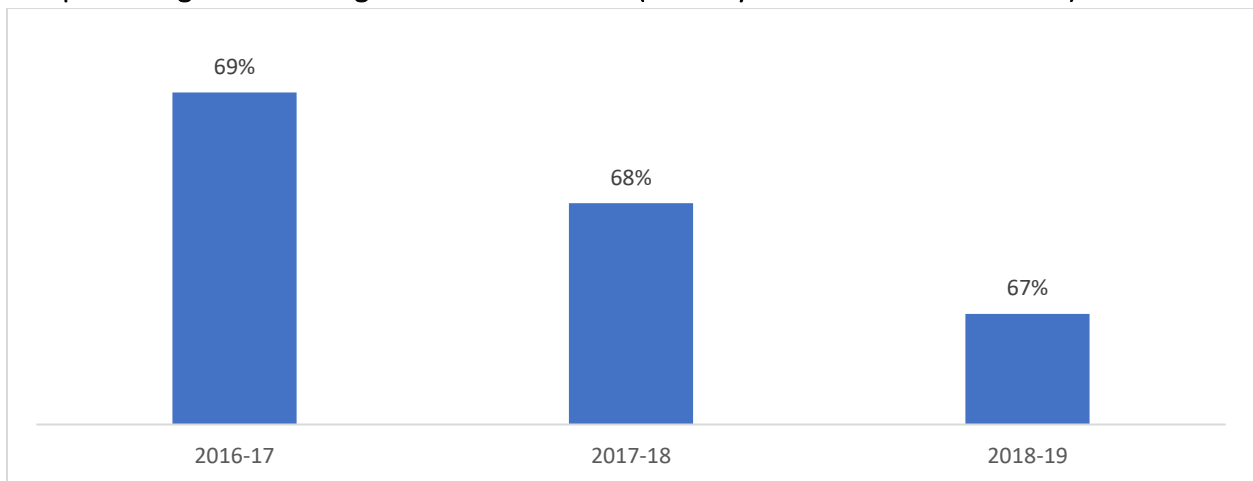
Student Persistence

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.

As shown in **Exhibit 3**, we found that the overall percentage of students who completed grades 6 through 11 in one year and returned to Connections the following year declined from 69% in the 2016-17 school year to 67% in the 2018-19 school year.

Exhibit 3

The percentage of returning students decreased (school years 2016-17 to 2018-19)

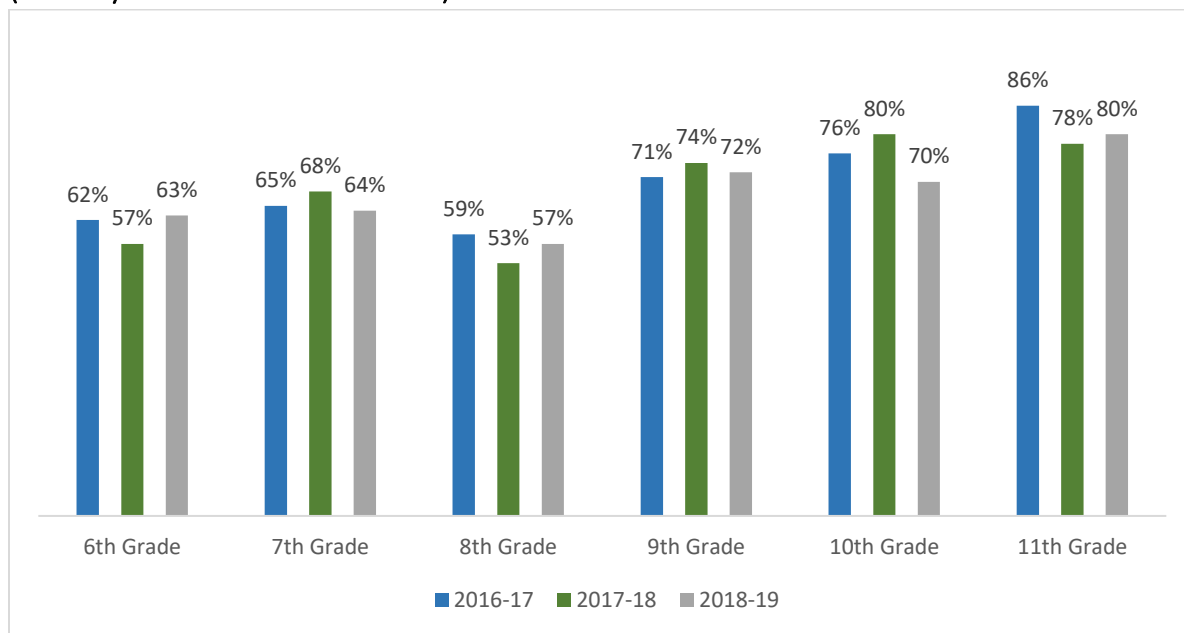


Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

In general, when reviewing student persistence by grade, high school grades experience the highest percentage of returning students. In each of the three years reviewed, eighth grade had the lowest percentage of returning students. **Exhibit 4** shows the percentage of students by grade by year that returned to Connections the next year.

Exhibit 4

Student retention is lowest in 8th grade and higher in high school grades across all three years (school years 2016-17 to 2018-19)

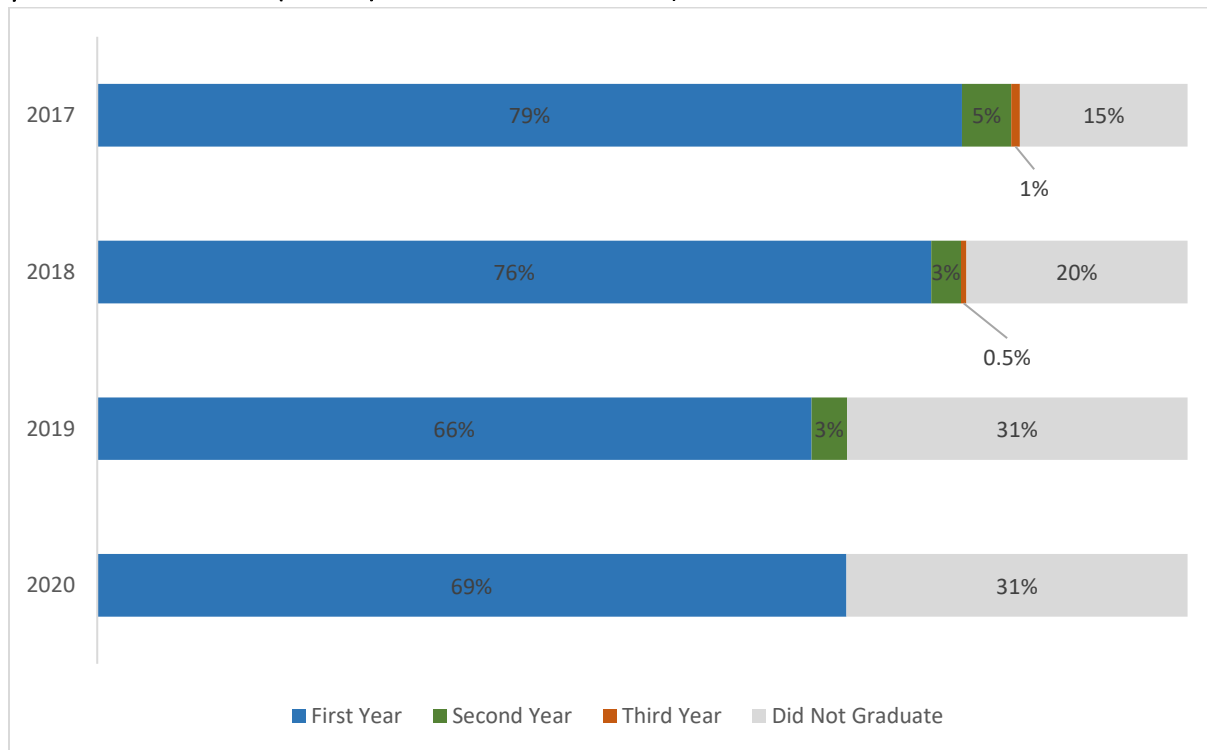


Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

We also examined the persistence related to graduation. **Exhibit 5** shows the percentage of seniors graduating in the first year as a senior decreased from a high of 79% in 2017 to 66% in 2019 before increasing slightly to 69% in 2020. In the 2017 and 2018 senior cohorts, a small number of students continued for up to three years and graduated. The 2017 senior cohort covers a four year period but had no students who graduated after year three. Data is more limited for the 2019 and 2020 senior cohorts and students in these senior cohorts who did not graduate in 2020 may re-enroll and graduate in a later year.

Exhibit 5

The majority of a senior cohort graduates in the first year, but a small percentage continues to years two and three (school years 2016-17 to 2019-20)



Source: GaDOE student enrollment records

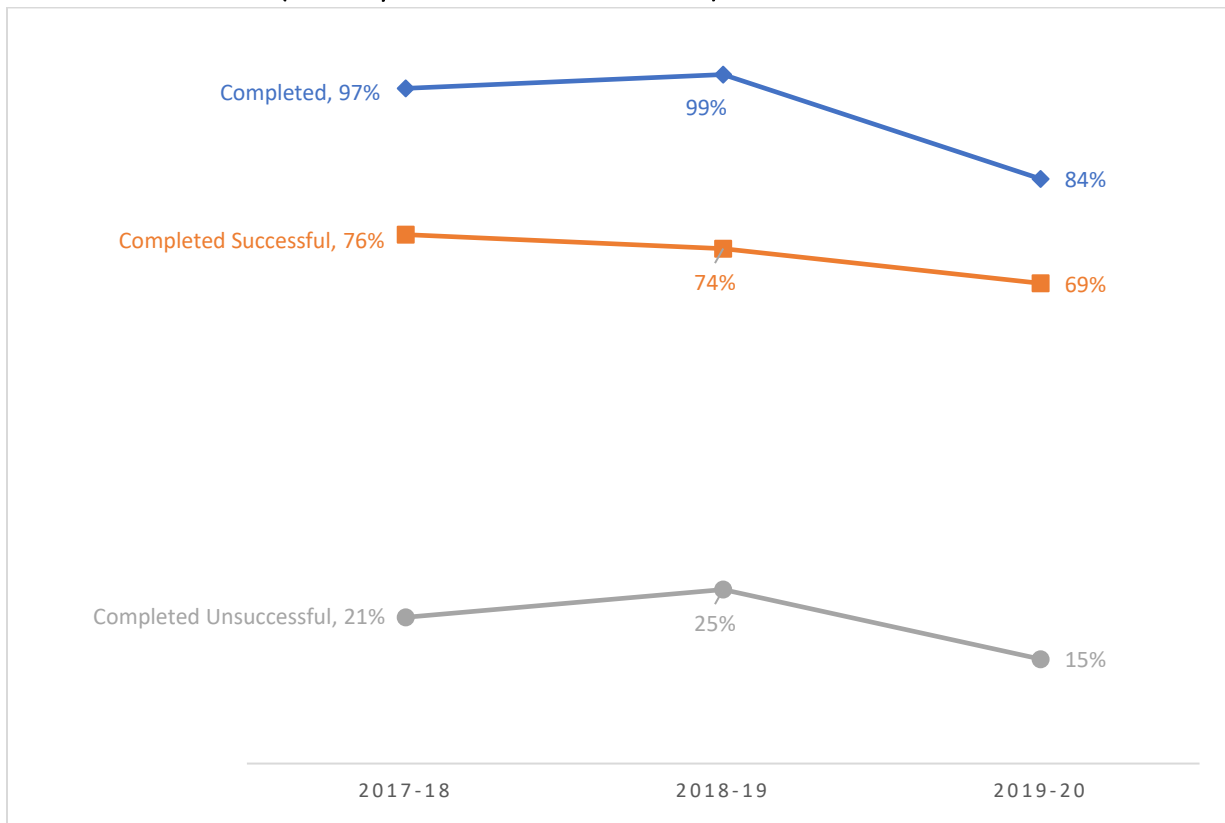
Course Segment Completion Rate

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.

The rates of completion and success for Connections students for school year 2019-20 declined from school years 2017-18 and 2018-19 (see **Exhibit 6**).

Exhibit 6

The average percentage of courses completed, successfully or unsuccessfully, across all grade levels has decreased (school years 2017-18 to 2019-20)

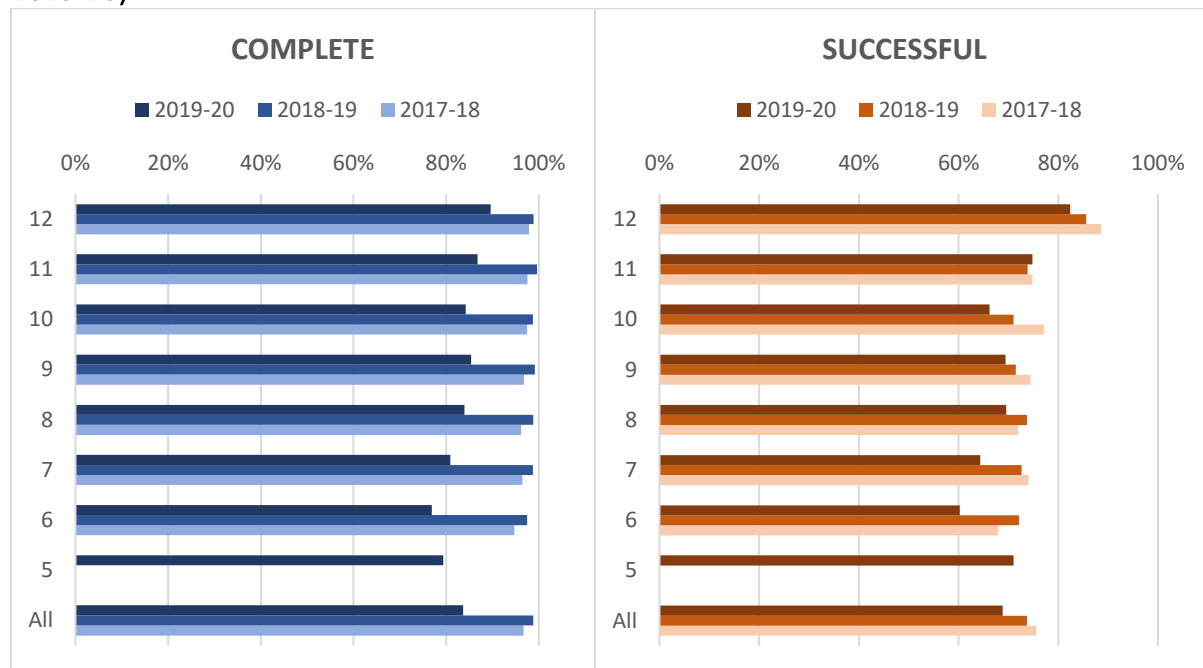


Source: Connections and GaDOE course records

As shown in **Exhibit 7**, the completion rate decreased for each grade level in 2019-20, while the rate of successful completions decreased overall. Grade eleven saw an increase in passing grades, but the remaining grades show decreases in passing grades. The 2019-20 school year was the first school year for fifth grade.

Exhibit 7

Percent of completed course segments and successful course segments decreased (school year 2019-20)



Source: Connections and GaDOE course records

Student Engagement

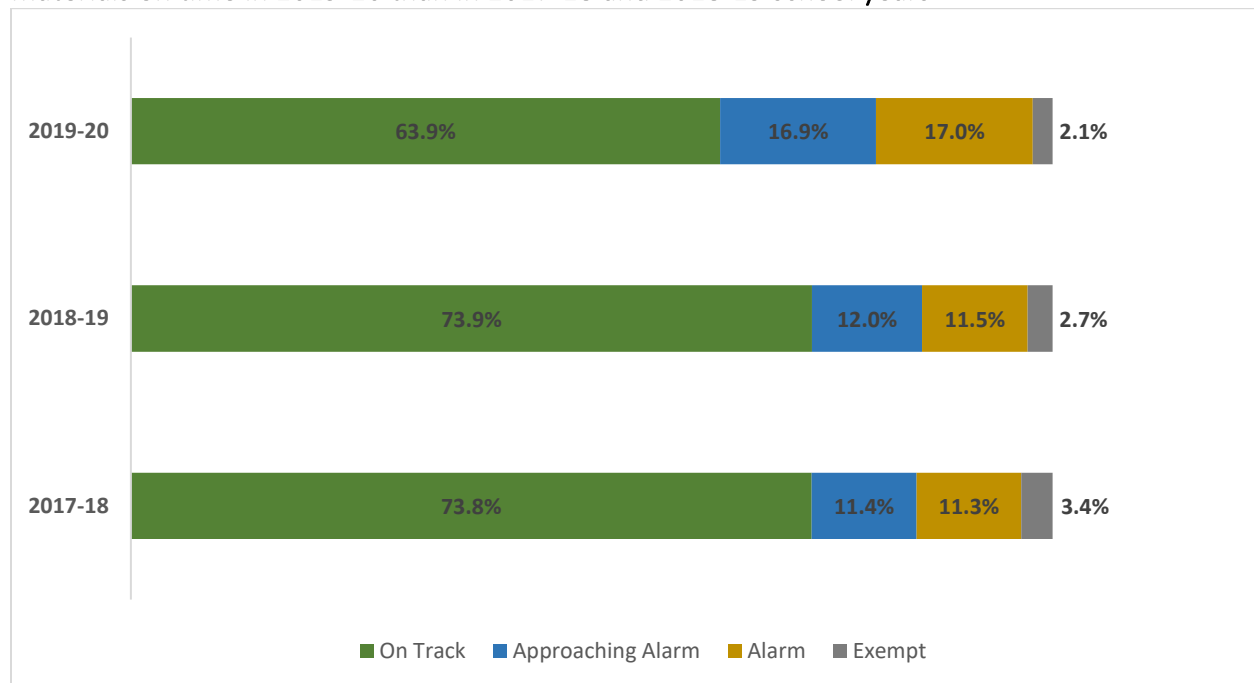
Student engagement is the degree to which students are attentive and interested in their coursework, and engaged students are more likely to perform well in school. Common measures of engagement, such as students raising their hands to pose or answer questions, participating in class discussion, or interacting 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 2019-20 school year, 4,108 students were tracked in Connections’ Escalation System. As shown in **Exhibit 8**, Connections reported that 63.9% remained on track as of April 1, 2020. The approaching alarm and alarm categories had 16.9% and 17% of students, respectively. Approximately 2% of students were exempt from the system due to being enrolled for fewer than 21 days. A higher percentage of students were in approaching alarm and alarm than in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years.

Exhibit 8

Slightly fewer students at Connections are reported to be engaged in coursework and submitting materials on time in 2019-20 than in 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years



Source: Connections Escalation Report System

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.

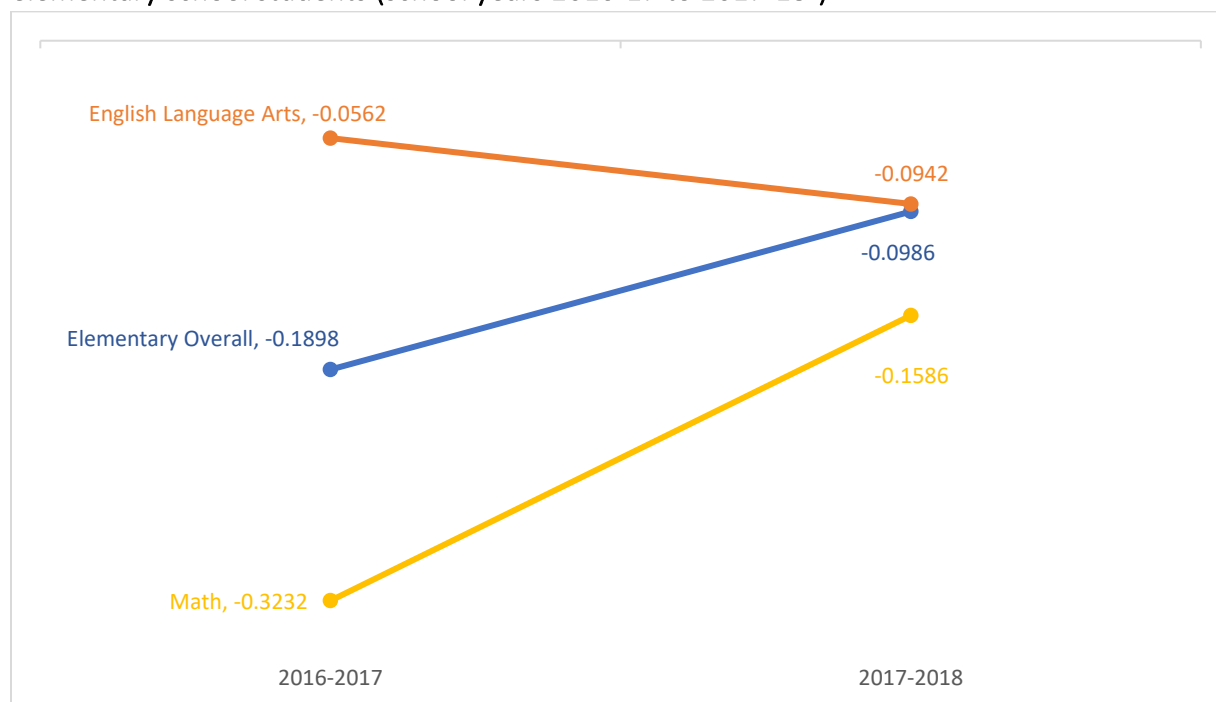
The analysis consists of a two-step process to get the final value-added measurement. The first step is to find the difference between a student's actual score and their predicted score. For each student, a predicted score is calculated based on the student's characteristics, the student's previous test 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 9**, although Connections' VAM elementary impact score showed improvement in the Elementary Overall and Math in the 2017-2018 year when compared to the 2016-2017 year, its performance is lower than the state's performance when the VAM is calculated. Connections' elementary students English Language Arts scores decreased, and the impact changed from no

difference compared to the state to lower than the state in the 2017-2018 school year. Connections did not offer an elementary program in the 2018-2019 school year.

Exhibit 9

Connections' Value-Added impact scores are generally lower than the statewide average for elementary school students (school years 2016-17 to 2017-18¹)



Relative to Statewide Average	2016-17	2017-18
Elementary Overall	Lower	Lower
English Language Arts	No Stat. Difference	Lower
Math	Lower	Lower

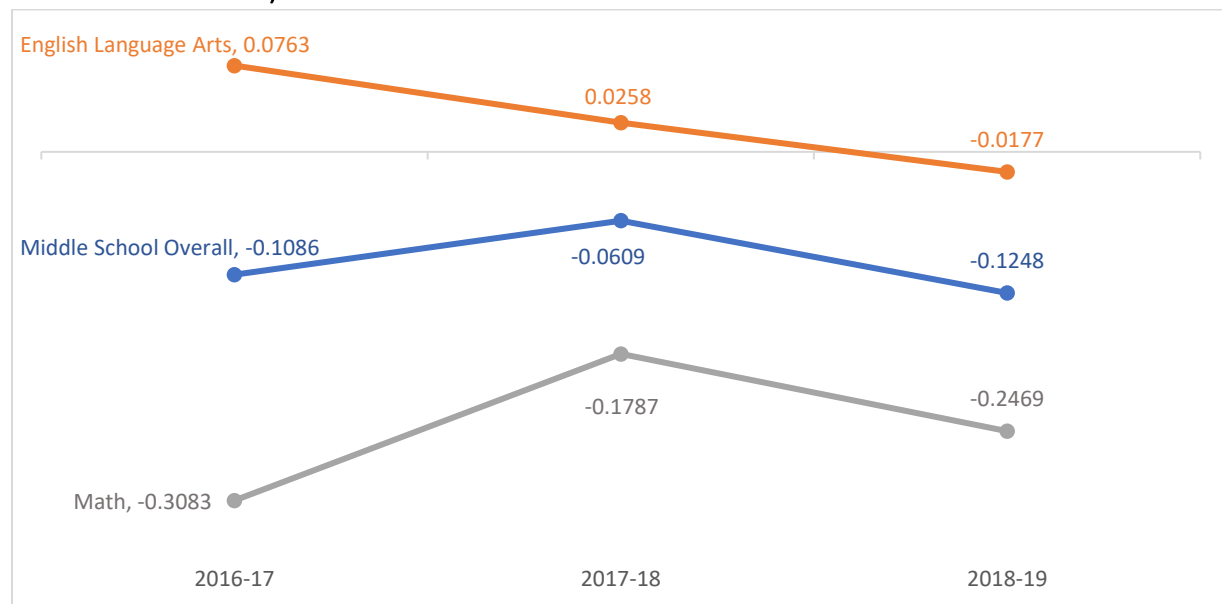
¹ Connections did not offer an elementary school program in 2018-2019

Source: SCSC Value-Added Model

As shown in **Exhibit 10**, Connections' middle school overall and math Value-Added impact scores are lower than the state, although Connections' math scores improved from the 2016-17 school year. Additionally, the school was not statistically higher or lower than the statewide average in Middle School ELA in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years but was higher in the 2016-2017 school year.

Exhibit 10

Connections' middle school scores are generally lower than the statewide average (school years 2016-17 to 2018-19)



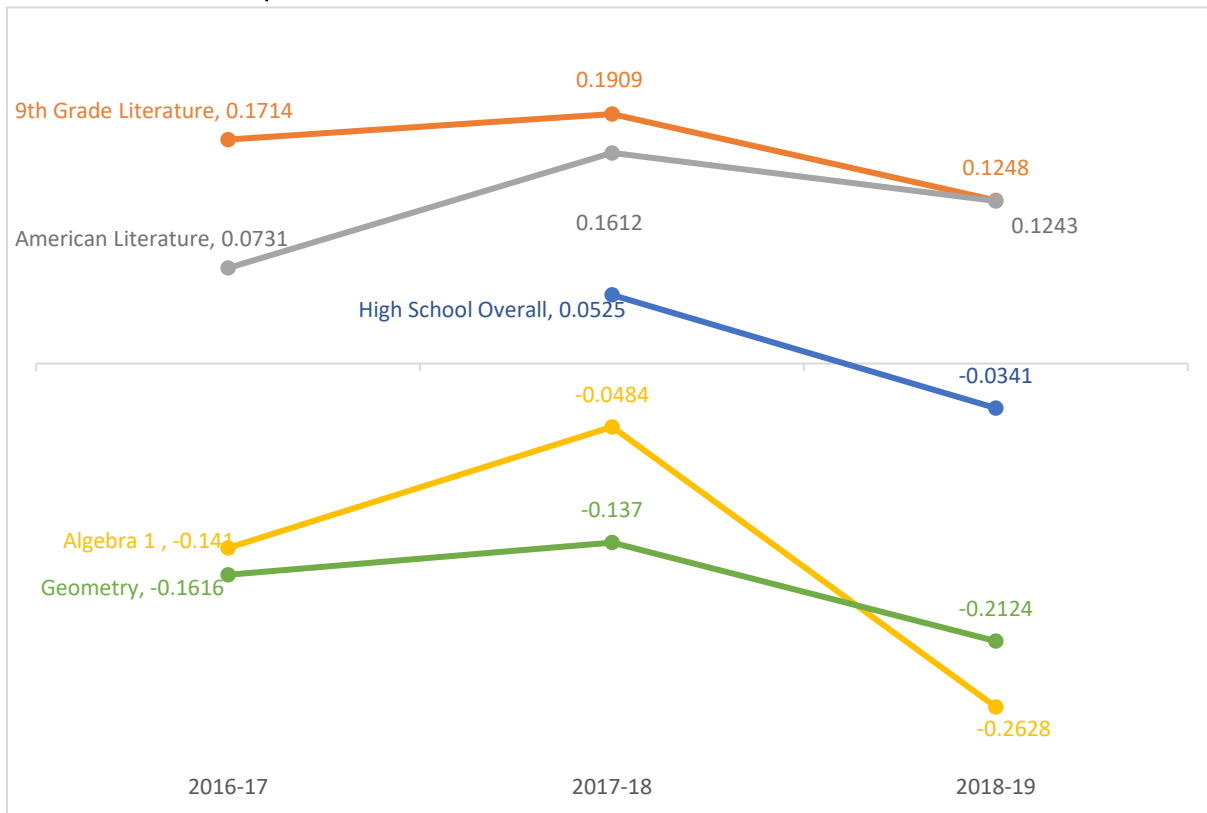
Relative to Statewide Average	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Middle School Overall	Lower	Lower	Lower
English Language Arts	Higher	No Stat. Difference	No Stat. Difference
Math	Lower	Lower	Lower

Source: SCSC Value-Added Model

As shown in **Exhibit 11**, Connections' value-added impact score for high school overall was higher than the statewide average in the 2017-2018 school year (the first year that it was calculated) and lower in the 2018-2019 school year. For the individual subjects, the school was typically lower in Geometry and Algebra I and higher in the 9th grade literature and American Literature categories. When the value-added impact scores are compared over time, the scores increased from the 2016-2017 school year to the 2017-2018 school year before declining in the 2018-2019 school year.

Exhibit 11

Connections' high school scores are mixed compared to the statewide average (school years 2016-17 to 2018-19)



Relative to Statewide Average	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
High School Overall	N/A	Higher	Lower
9th Grade Literature	Higher	Higher	Higher
American Literature	Higher	Higher	Higher
Algebra 1	Lower	No Stat. Difference	Lower
Geometry	Lower	Lower	Lower

Source: SCSC Value-Added Model

Beating the Odds

The Beating the Odds (BTO) analysis established by GOSA is an outcome measure that compares charter schools' performance on the CCRPI¹ 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 2018-19 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.

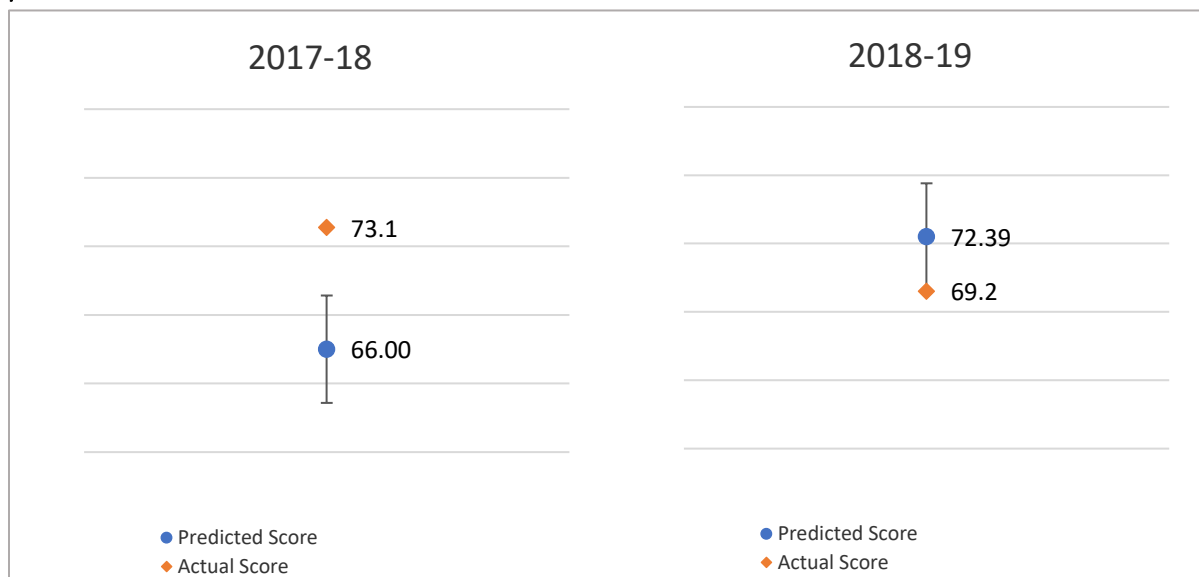
The BTO analysis includes only those students counted in the October full-time equivalent (FTE) count. The school will receive a score of "Below Expected Range" if the score is below the predicted range, "Within Expected Range" if the score falls within the predicted range, or "Beating the Odds" if the 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.

As shown in **Exhibit 12**, Connections was distinguished as Beating the Odds in the 2017-2018 school year. For the 2018-19 school year, Connections was classified as Within Expected Range. Connections' CCRPI score was 69.2, which was within the predicted score range of 69.05 – 75.73.

¹ 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.

Exhibit 12

Connections outperformed the CCRPI measure needed to qualify as BTO in the 2017-18 school year



Source: Beating the Odds Analysis, 2017-18 – 2018-19

College and Career Ready Performance Index

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 13** shows each of the CCRPI indicators and the measures used to score each indicator. In the prior annual reports, we included the 2017-18 and 2018-19 CCRPI; however, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the GaDOE did not publish a CCRPI for the 2019-20 school year.

Exhibit 13

CCRPI indicators and measures (school years 2017-18 and 2018-19)

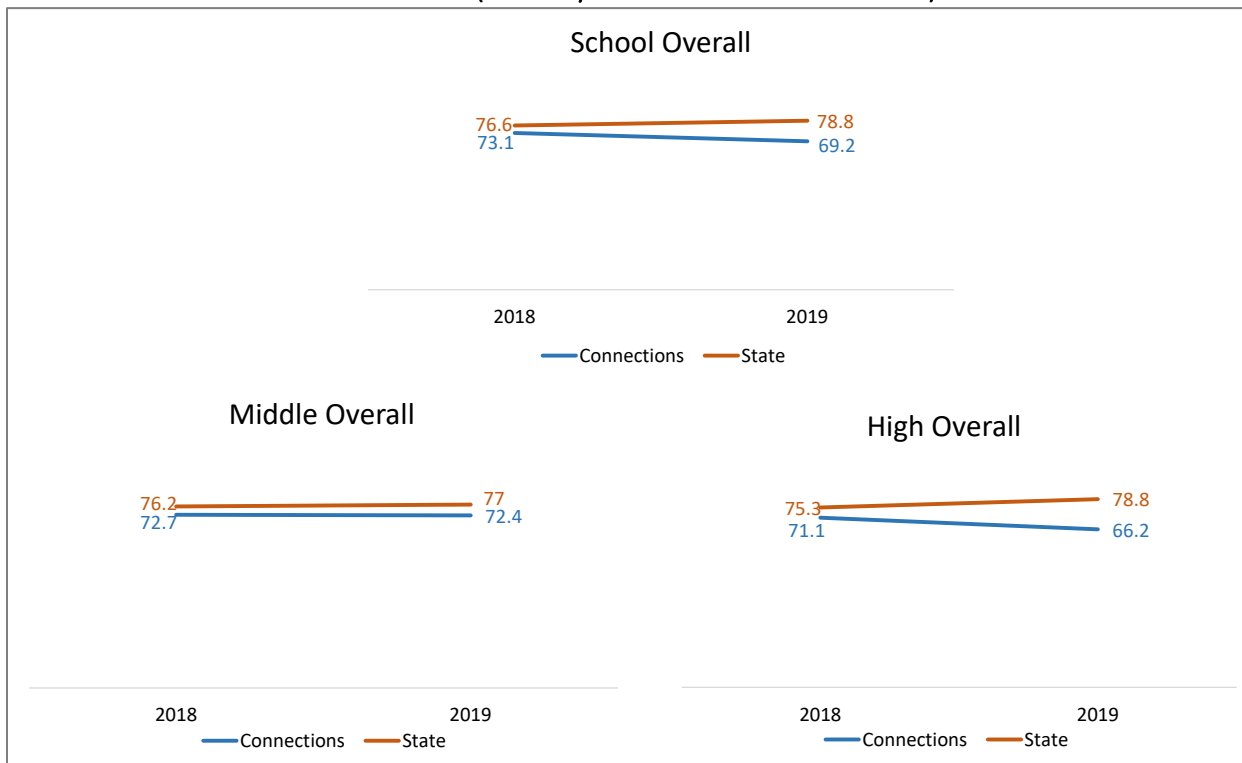
Indicator	Description	Weights (E, M, H)		
Content Mastery	Performance on the Georgia Milestones Assessment and the Georgia Alternate Assessment in ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies.	30%	30%	30%
Progress	Amount of growth a student has demonstrated relative to academically-similar students in ELA and mathematics, as well as English learners' progress toward language proficiency.	35%	35%	30%
Closing Gaps	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%
Readiness	Percent of students that show readiness in the certain areas: <i>Elementary & 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%
Graduation Rate	Percent of 12 th 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' overall CCRPI score for both the 2017-18 (73.1) and 2018-19 (69.2) is lower than the state CCRPI score (76.6 in 2017-18 and 78.8 in 2018-19); the state is Connections' "comparison district" for charter purposes because it is a statewide school. In both 2017-18 and 2018-19, Connections' overall CCRPI score for each grade band is also lower than the state as shown in **Exhibit 14**.

Exhibit 14

Connections and State CCRPI Scores (school years 2017-18 and 2018-19)

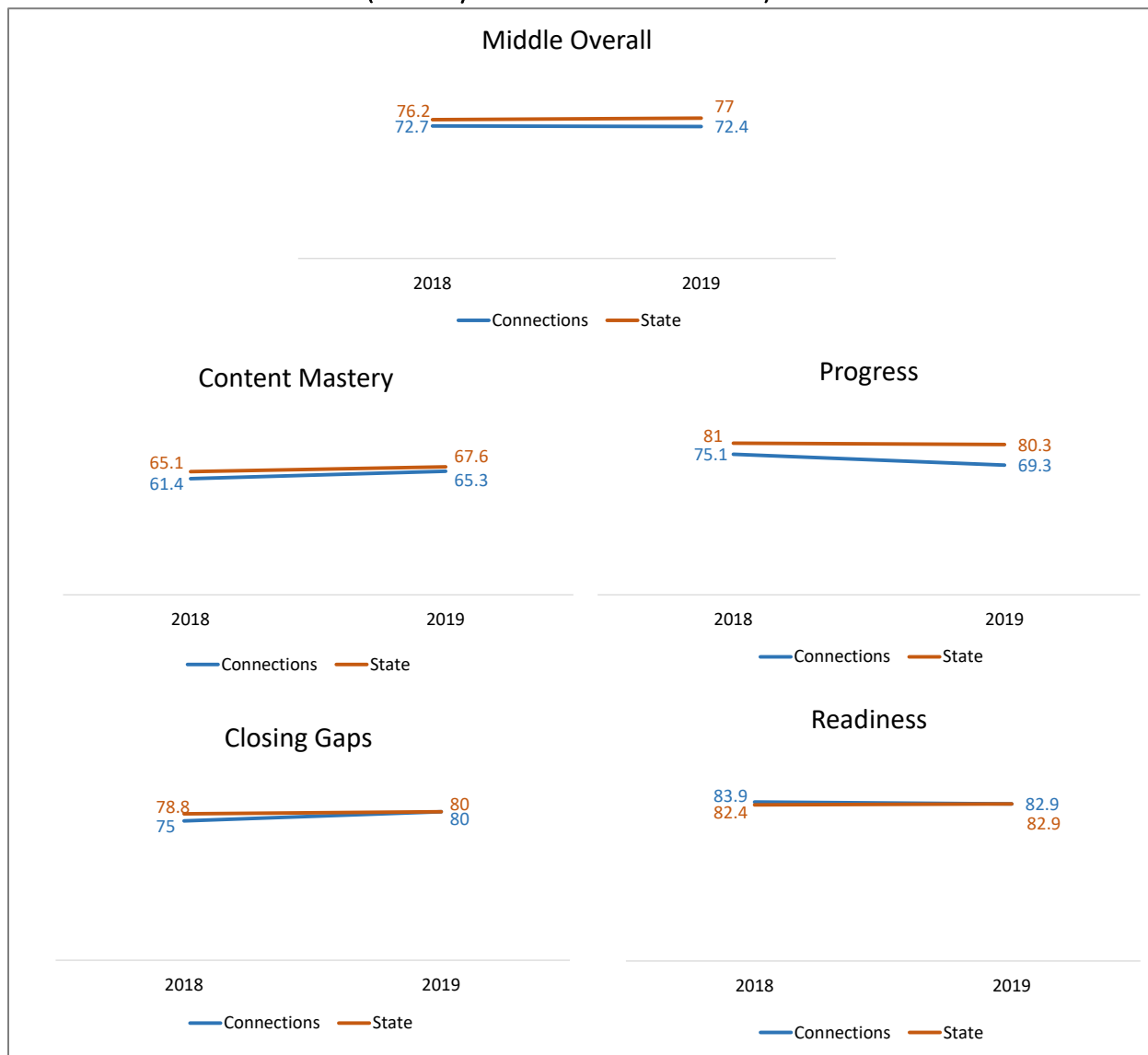


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

- Middle School** – The changes in the Connections’ component sub scores are mixed in relation to the changes in state scores. The school had decreases in three components and increases in two components, while the state increased in four and decreased in one. The overall score for middle school decreased for Connections but increased for the state from 2018 to 2019. Connections’ score decreased from 72.7 to 72.4, while the state’s score increased from 76.2 to 77 (see **Exhibit 15**). Connections’ most improved component is closing gaps (increase of 5 points or 6.7%) while the state had an increase of 1.2 points in closing gaps (1.5%). Connections improved in content mastery from the 2018 score to 2019 (3.9 point increase or 6.4%), while the state’s improvement was lower (2.5 point increase or 3.8%). Both the state and Connections had a decrease in progress; however, the state decrease was less than one point, while Connections’ score decreased 5.8 points (-7.7%). Connections had a one point decrease in its readiness score, while the state had a slight increase, but both had a score of 82.9.

Exhibit 15

Connections' and the state's middle school CCRPI scores increased in two sub scores and decreased in three sub scores (school years 2017-18 to 2018-19)

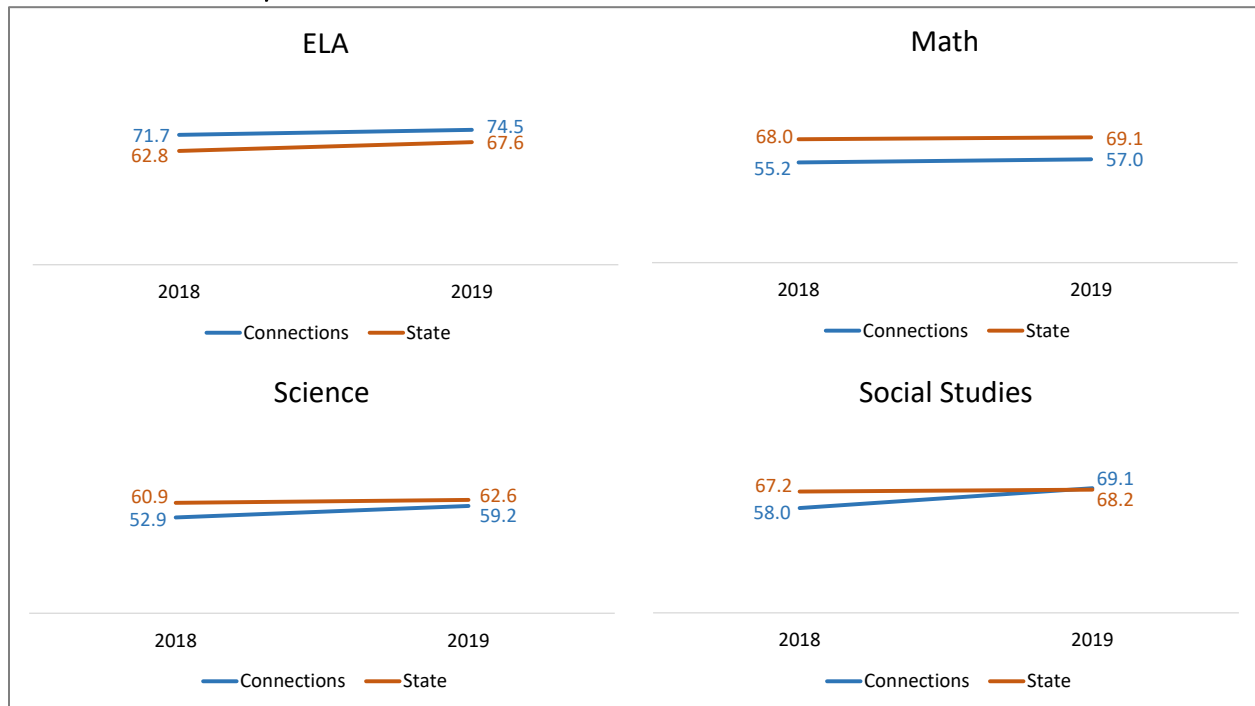


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

As shown in **Exhibit 16**, Connections had more significant changes in its middle school content mastery by subject scores than the state, with the exception of math. Connections' middle school students increased in all subjects with the largest increases in social studies (11.06 points or 19.1%) and science (6.32 points or 11.9%). In contrast, the state middle school content mastery scores increased only slightly in ELA, science, and social studies. Connections' ELA remained above the state's scores in both years, while math remained below the state score, despite increasing 3.1% (1.74 points).

Exhibit 16

Connections' middle school content mastery scores improved in all subjects from the 2017-18 to the 2018-19 school year

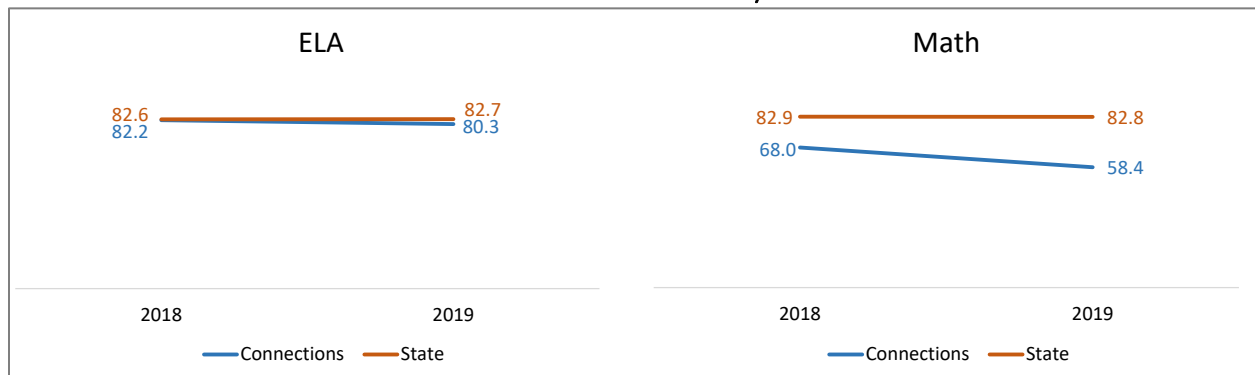


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

Exhibit 17 shows that Connections' middle school students did not make improvements in their progress indicator scores for ELA and math. In math, the school was lower than the state in both the 2017-2018 and the 2018-2019 school years.

Exhibit 17

Connections' middle school progress scores decreased while the state's middle school progress scores increased from the 2017-18 to the 2018-19 school year

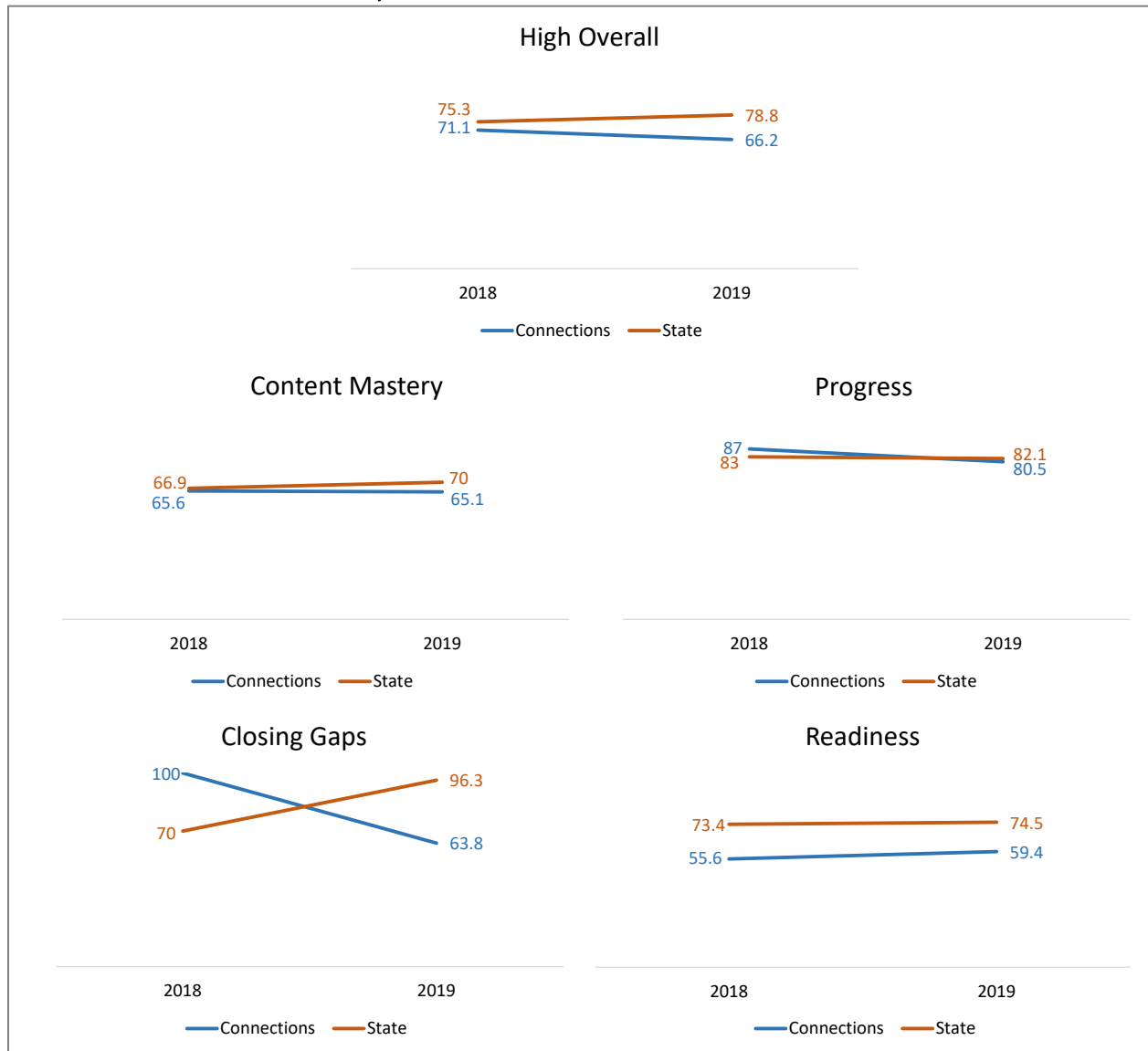


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

- High School** – All of the school’s CCRPI high school component scores decreased from the 2017-2018 to the 2018-2019 school year except readiness, which increased by 3.8 points (6.8%), as shown in **Exhibit 18**. In contrast, the state’s high school scores increased in all components except progress, which decreased by .9 points (-1.1%). The school’s overall CCRPI score decreased by 4.9 points (-6.9%) from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019, while the state’s overall score increased 3.5 points (4.6%). The school’s largest decrease is in closing gaps, which had a decrease of 36.2 points (-36.2%).

Exhibit 18

With the exception of readiness, Connections’ high school CCRPI scores decreased from the 2017-18 to the 2018-19 school year

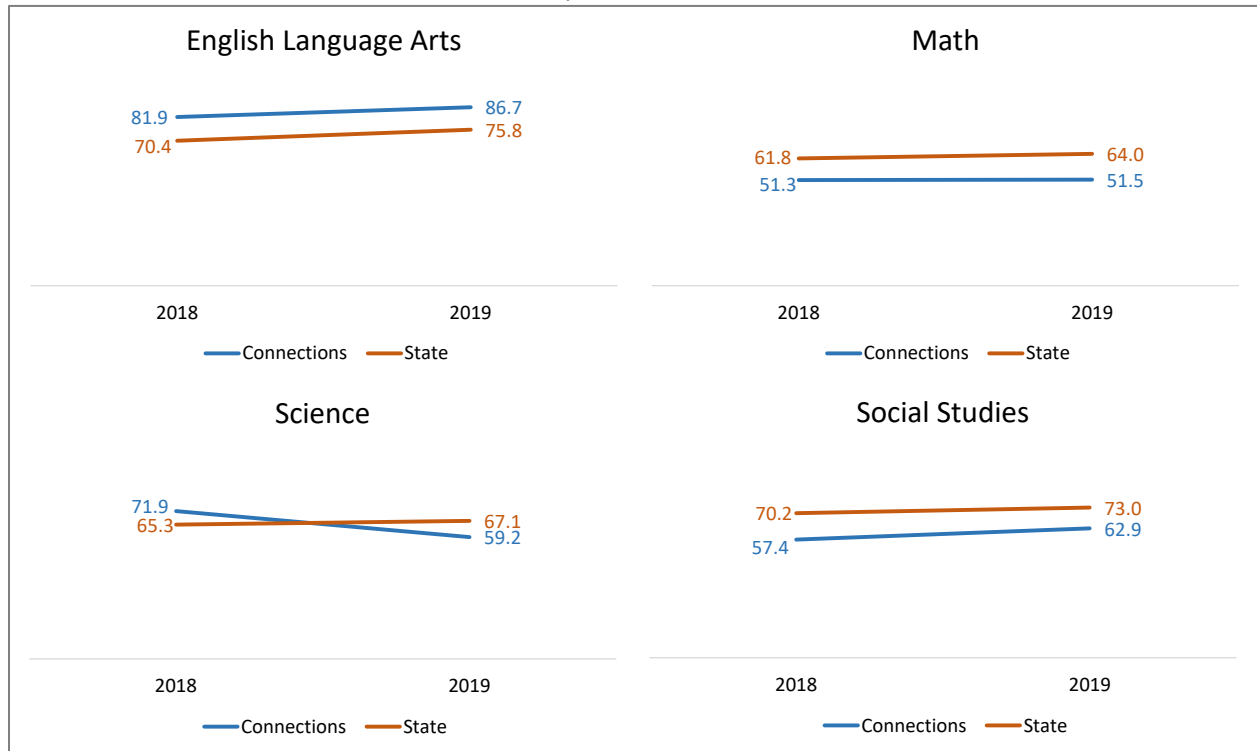


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

As shown in **Exhibit 19**, Connections' high school content mastery scores increased from the 2017-2018 school year to the 2018-2019 school year all subjects except science, while the state scores increased in all subjects. Only Connections' ELA scores were above the state scores for both the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years.

Exhibit 19

With the exception of science, Connections' high school CCRPI content mastery scores increased from the 2017-2018 to the 2018-19 school year

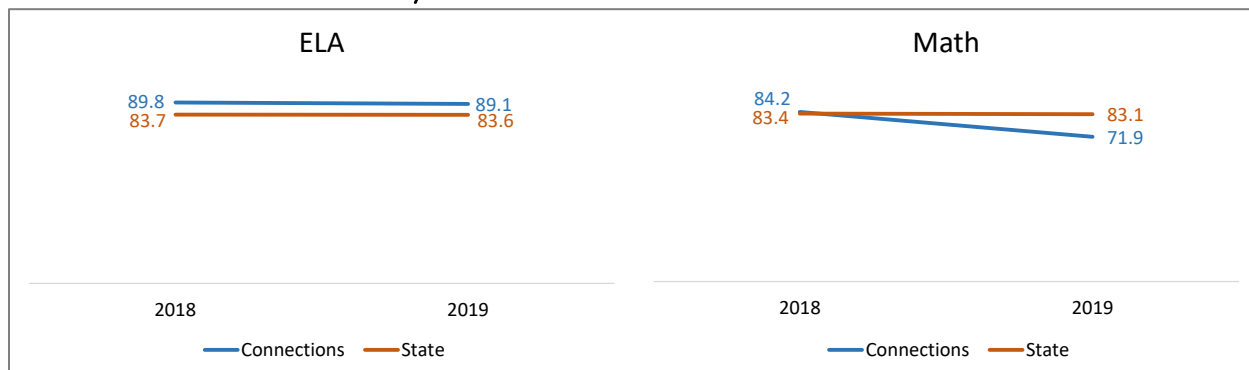


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

Exhibit 20 shows Connections' high school progress scores for ELA and math. Connections' high school students scored higher in ELA in both the 2017-2018 and the 2018-2019 school years, although their score decreased slightly in the 2018-2019 school year. While Connections' high school students scored higher than the state in math in the 2017-2018 school year, Connections' math score decreased by 12.32 points (-14.6%) in the 2018-2019 school year and was below the state score.

Exhibit 20

Connections' high school CCRPI progress score for math had a significant decrease from the 2017-18 to the 2018-19 school year

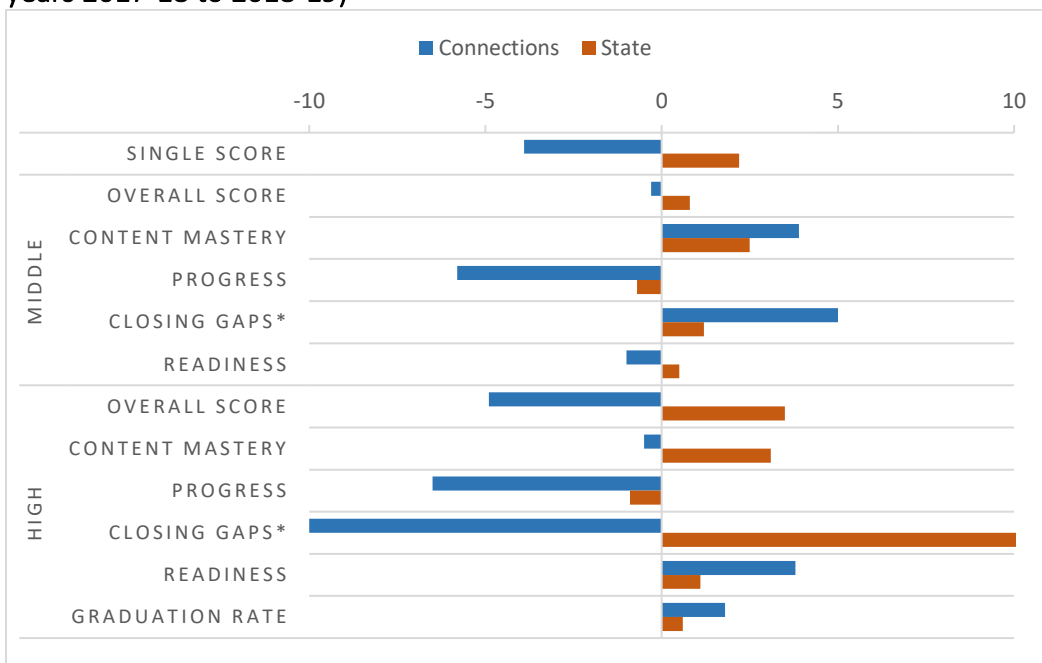


Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

Exhibit 21 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 two scores decreasing – middle and high school progress.

Exhibit 21

Majority of CCRPI scores decreased at Connections, majority of state scores improved (school years 2017-18 to 2018-19)



Source: GaDOE Accountability Division

Comprehensive Performance Framework Academic Measures

The State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC) conducts annual performance reviews of all state charter schools. The Comprehensive Performance Framework (CPF) 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.

In the 2018-19 school year, the SCSC revised the method used to report performance. In general, the measures reviewed in the performance framework remain similar; however, points are no longer assigned in the Academic Performance section. Schools receive a score of “meets standards,” “approaches standards,” or “does not meet standards.” In order to receive a “meets the standard” designation, the school must outperform the district it serves (i.e., the State for virtual schools) in one of the 6 academic metrics evaluated.

Connections’ academic performance results for the 2018-2019 school year are shown in **Exhibit 22**. The first measure looks at the CCRPI single score. Connections received a “does not meet standards” score, meaning the school earned a lower CCRPI single score than the attendance zone². The second through fourth measures look at different CCRPI sub-scores. To earn the “meets the standards” designation, the school must earn a higher “student progress” score on the CCRPI than the attendance zone. To earn the “approaches standard” score on 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 an “approaches standard” score for measure 2 in the 2018-19 school year, student achievement, based on Connections’ “content mastery” CCRPI scores. Connections earned an “approaches standard” score for measure 3 in the 2018-19 school year, student growth, based on Connections’ CCRPI progress scores. Connections earned an “approaches standard” score for measure 4 in the 2018-19 school year, grade band score, based on Connections’ CCRPI grade band scores.

The CPF also provides “Value-Added Model Impact Scores” and “Beating the Odds” scores as another way for schools to approach or meet the academic performance standards. Connections earned a “does not meet standards” score for both measure 5 in the 2018-19 school year, Value-Added Model (VAM) Impact and measure 6, Beating the Odds, based on GaDOE’s determination in the 2018-19 school year.

As part of the 2018-2019 CPF comparison score calculation methods, Connections was categorized with the school designation of “approaches standards,” meaning that Connections Academy performed as well as the district it serves.

² The attendance zone is the comparison district. Because Connections is a statewide school, the comparison district is the state.

Exhibit 22

SCSC determined that Connections approaches CPF academic standards in the 2018-19 school year under the revised method

Connections Academy: CPF Academic Performance Measures	Designation
Measure 1 - CCRPI Single Score: Is the school annually outperforming the attendance zone (as measured by CCRPI single score)?	Does Not meet
Measure 2 - Student Achievement: Is the school annually outperforming the attendance zone (as measured by grade-band CCRPI content mastery scores)?	Approaches
Measure 3 - Student Growth: Is the school annually outperforming the attendance zone (as measured by grade-band CCRPI progress scores)?	Approaches
Measure 4 - Grade Band Score: Is the school annually outperforming the attendance zone (as measured by grade-band CCRPI grade band scores)?	Approaches
Measure 5 - Value-Added Model (VAM) Impact Scores: Is the school annually outperforming the attendance zone (as measured by value-added impact scores)?	Does Not Meet
Measure 6 - Beating the Odds: Is the School “beating the odds” as determined by the Georgia Department of Education?	Does Not Meet
School Designation	Approaches

Source: State Charter Schools Commission 2018-19 CPF results amended version

In 2018-19, the SCSC also used the prior method to evaluate Connections’ academic performance which allows comparison to the 2017-18 school year. Connections met the standard in 2017-18 but did not meet academic performance standards in the 2018-19 school year.

Financial Data

There are several financial data points that we reported in prior annual reports that describe the financial performance of the virtual charter school. These points include:




- Academic Performance as a Ratio of Per-Student Expenditures and
- School Finances, which includes revenues and expenditures, expenditure by category, and expenditures per student full-time equivalent (FTE).

Academic Performance as a Ratio of Per-Student Expenditures

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 FESR for 2017, 2018, and 2019³ 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 scores received only 0.5 stars, while those in the lowest spending category with CCRPI scores at 90 or above could receive 5 stars. In each of the three years, Connections received a FESR of 3.5 stars, as shown in **Exhibit 23**.

Exhibit 23

Connections generally scores higher than most schools (school years 2016-17 to 2018-19)

School Year	Star Rating	% of Schools with a lower Star Rating	% of Schools with the same Star Rating
2016-17		55%	16%
2017-18		60%	16%
2018-19		59%	17%

Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement

School Finances

During the 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 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.⁴ In addition, the contract between Connections and

³ No FESR was available for school year 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴ 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.

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 years 2019 and 2020.

Connections’ annual financial report shows that revenue increased from \$25 million in fiscal year 2017 to \$33 million in fiscal year 2020 (see **Exhibit 24**). Expenditures during this period were less than revenues, with a surplus of \$3.4 million in fiscal year 2020. State funds provided the majority of Connections’ funding, with federal funds and other sources providing the remainder.

Exhibit 24

Connections’ revenue primarily state funds, Fiscal Years 2017-2020

Revenue	2017	2018	2019	2020	Percent Change 2017-20
State	\$21,819,477	\$22,685,586	\$25,955,523	\$31,460,450	44%
Federal	\$1,557,965	\$1,502,339	\$1,667,621	\$1,747,410	12%
In-Kind Contributions	\$1,537,500	\$1,781,000	\$0	\$0	(100%)
Other income	\$19,236	\$17,726	\$72,524	\$34,629	80%
Local	<u>\$0</u>	<u>\$0</u>	<u>\$0</u>	<u>\$0</u>	N/A
Total Revenue	\$24,934,178	\$25,986,651	\$27,695,668	\$33,242,489	33%
Expenditures					
Instruction	\$19,480,813	\$20,254,787	\$21,153,968	\$23,505,943	21%
School Administration	\$2,185,415	\$2,363,923	\$2,564,351	\$2,987,793	37%
Pupil Services	\$1,013,944	\$1,047,393	\$1,007,265	\$959,144	(5%)
Support Services – Business	\$671,553	\$704,032	\$882,671	\$738,769	10%
Other Support Services	\$579,889	\$601,159	\$582,557	\$635,087	10%
Improvement of Instructional Services	\$578,648	\$571,089	\$551,657	\$581,411	0%
General Administration	\$235,952	\$244,359	\$236,585	\$261,053	11%
Maintenance & Operations	<u>\$165,795</u>	<u>\$179,446</u>	<u>\$188,844</u>	<u>\$208,888</u>	26%
Total Expenditures	\$24,912,009	\$25,966,188	\$27,167,898	\$29,878,088	20%
Revenues Less Expenditures	\$22,169	\$20,463	\$527,770	\$3,364,401	15,076%

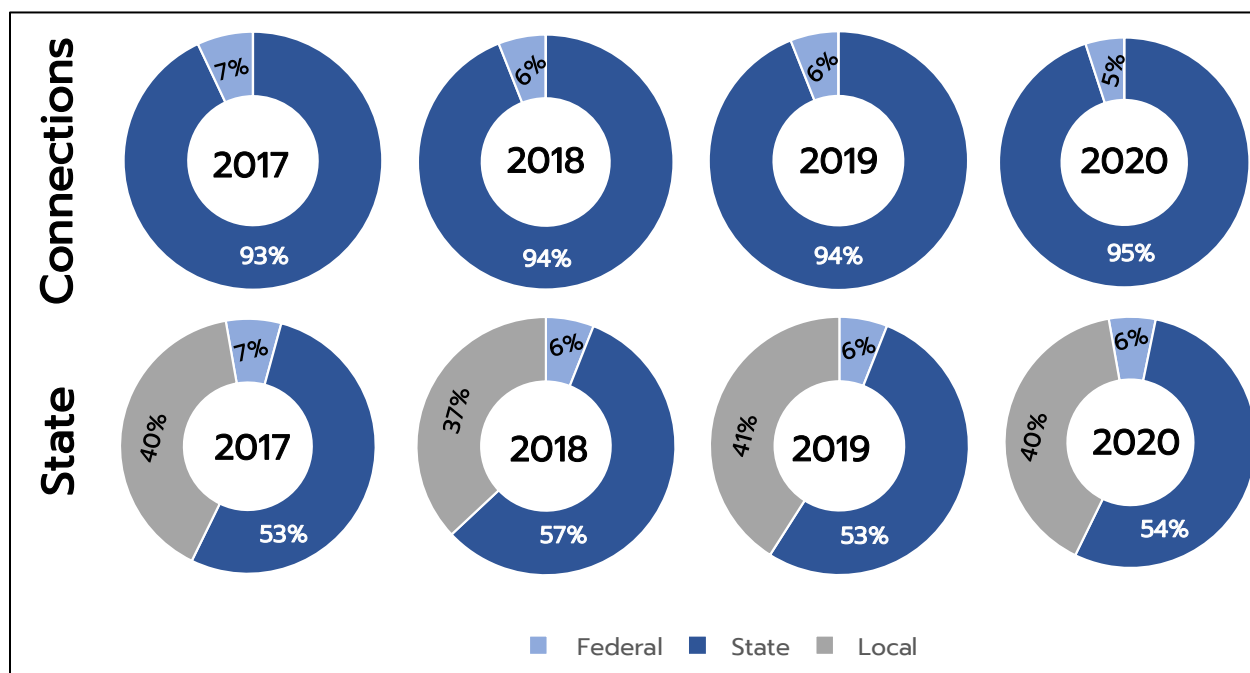
Source: Georgia Connections Academy Financial Reports

We used GaDOE revenue and expenditure reports for fiscal years 2017 - 2020 to compare Connections’ revenue and spending patterns to other public schools.⁵ As shown in **Exhibit 25**, Connections relies on state funding 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 school supplement to offset a portion of the local funding that they do not receive.

⁵ 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 25

State funds are nearly twice the revenue source for Connections than the statewide average, Fiscal Years 2017-2020



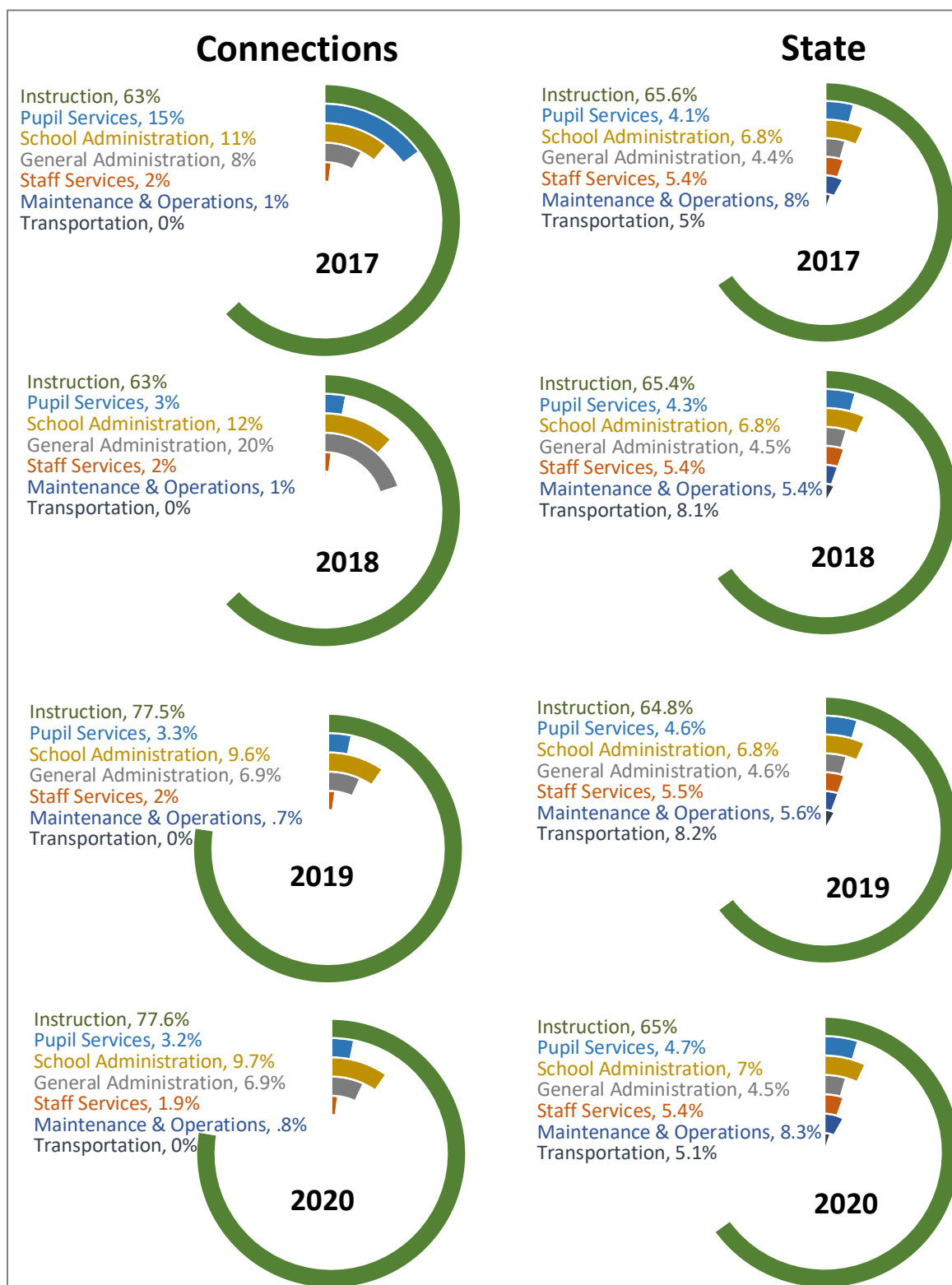
Source: Statewide & Connections GaDOE financial report

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 26**). 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.

Connections increased what it spends on instruction by 15% from fiscal year 2017 to fiscal year 2020 (**Exhibit 26**) and decreased the percentage of funds used for pupil services, which decreased by 12%, school administration, and General Administration.

Exhibit 26

Connections has increased the percentage of funds spent on Instruction, Fiscal Years 2017 - 2020

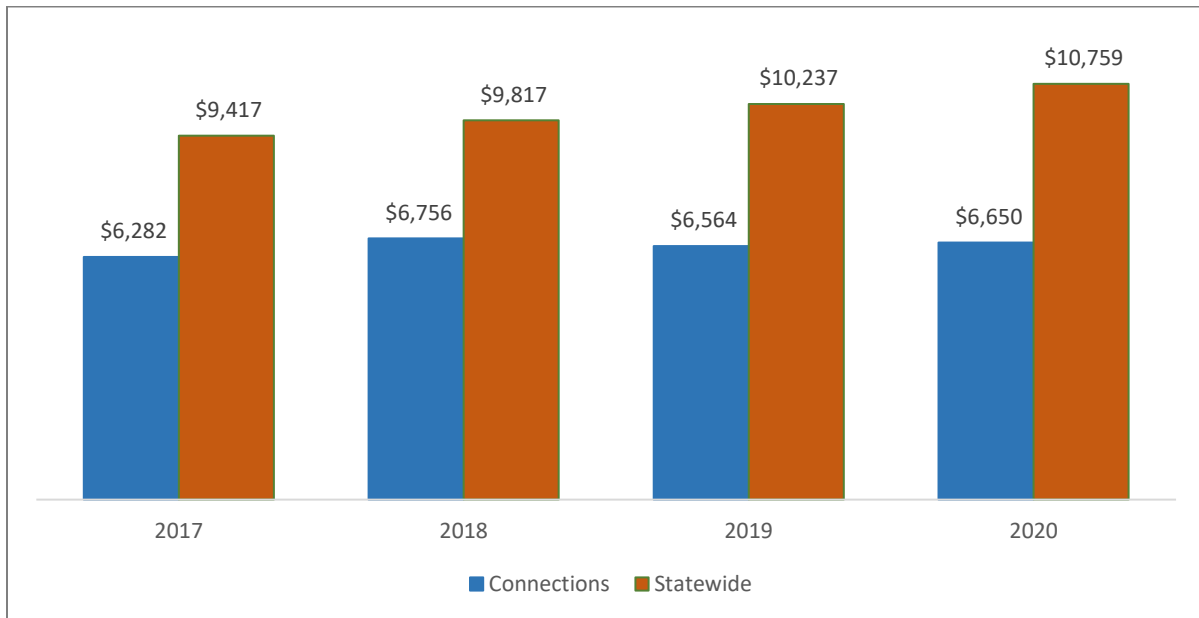


Source: Statewide GaDOE financial report and DE46 financials

Connections' expenditures per FTE were significantly lower than the statewide average. As shown in **Exhibit 27**, Connections spent approximately 65% of the statewide average per FTE during school years 2017 – 2020. Connections spent between \$6,282 and \$6,756 per FTE compared to between \$9,417 and \$10,759 for the statewide average during the same period.

Exhibit 27

Connections' per pupil expenditures are generally 65% of Statewide per pupil expenditures, Fiscal Years 2017-2020



Source: Statewide GaDOE financial report

Governance

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 between four and seven board members from the 2017-18 and 2019-20 school years). 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 between 7 and 12 meetings each year during 2017-18 and 2019-20 school years.

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 2016-17 through 2019-20 school years (see **Exhibit 28**).

Exhibit 28

Connections Met All Standards in each year reviewed (school years 2016-17 to 2019-20)

CPF Governance Performance Indicators	2016-17	2017-18	2019-20
General Governance – <i>The school complies with applicable laws rules, regulations, charter contract provisions and school policies relating to board governance.</i>	Met	Met	Met
Open Governance – <i>The school complies with the Georgia Open Meetings Act and open records requirements.</i>	Met	Met	Met
Governance Training – <i>The school ensures that all governing board members participate in required trainings.</i>	Met	Met	Met
Transparent Governance and Communication with Stakeholders – <i>The school complies with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, provisions of its charter contract or its policies relating to operating transparently and effectively communicating with stakeholders.</i>	Met	Met	Met
Source: State Charter Schools Commission report			

School-Specific Academic Goals

Virtual charter schools operate under the terms of a charter which is basically a performance- based contract that spells out the services that the charter school will provide and performance that will be achieved. According to SCSC staff, in the early years of charter schools, the schools set whatever goals they desired, but the SCSC found that monitoring and evaluating charter school performance with a lot of school specific goals proved to be difficult, and it was to determine if students were receiving a quality education. In the 2015 – 2016 school year, the SCSC implemented the comprehensive performance framework (CPF) to evaluate state charter schools. The CPF specifically sets expectations for performance and ensures that schools meet those expectations. The mission specific goals that are included in the CPF (and included in the school's charter) are to acknowledge the school's particular model and their internal goals; however, the goals are not weighted as much as other parts of the CPF.

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). In addition, Connections has a goal that 80% of parents will respond that they are satisfied with the school. The State Charter Schools Commission found that Connections met both goals in the 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 school years.