

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY-CAPSTONE REPORT  
**PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE SWAN CREEK  
SCHOOL BLENDED VIRTUAL LEARNING PROGRAM**

**FINAL CAPSTONE RESEARCH REPORT**

Prepared by

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When HCPS was seeking to identify the experiences and outcomes of the students in the BVLP at SCS at the end of its first year (the 2021-22 school year), the HCPS Office of Research and Program Evaluation worked with HCPS leadership, the SCS, and with Hanover to develop the scope of work and evaluation plans of the BVLP at SCS. This collaboration included a series of research projects, including survey research (pre and post surveys), qualitative research (student interviews and observation data from classroom observation), and quantitative research (student data).

HCPS partnered with Hanover to gather, analyze, and synthesize the results of these research projects. For example, the HCPS Office of Research and Program Evaluation summarized and synthesized the results and findings of the closed-ended responses for the pre- and post-surveys implemented as part of the evaluation of the BVLP at SCS; Hanover summarized and synthesized findings from sample comments (20 percent of all opened-ended comments analyzed by Hanover) of the open-ended responses of the same pre and post surveys.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....2

INTRODUCTION.....4

    Context/Background Information: .....4

    Full Report Versus Executive Summary:.....4

RECOMMENDATIONS .....6

KEY FINDINGS.....8

CONCLUSION ..... 10

# INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) established the Swan Creek School (SCS) Blended Virtual Learning Program (BVLP). The BVLP at SCS enrolled more than 1,200 unique students during the first year. Program enrollment currently ranges between 540-600 students and more than 80 teachers. SCS offers two types of alternative learning environments for students as indicated in the tables below:

eLearning Blended Virtual Learning Program	Hybrid/In-Person Blended Virtual Program
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Grades 1 through 12</li><li>•Scheduled synchronous instruction</li><li>•With teachers five days a week in a virtual learning environment</li><li>•Scheduled in-person events occur monthly</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Grades 6 through 12</li><li>•Students are placed into cohorts</li><li>•Students attend classes in person two-three days per week</li><li>•Students complete asynchronous assignments two-three days per week</li></ul>

HCPS seeks to identify the experiences and outcomes of the students in the BVLP at SCS at the end of its first year (the 2021-22 school year). HCPS implemented a mixed-methods evaluation framework to monitor the implementation and emerging outcomes of the BVLP in its first year of implementation. This work entails a series of research projects (the “BVLP Project Series”), including survey research, qualitative research, and quantitative research.

This executive summary of the capstone report summarized and synthesized an overview of the findings and recommendations from the program evaluation of the SCS BVLP (Project Series), which includes the:

- Swan Creek Pre-Survey: Open-Ended Response Analysis (Fall 2021);
- Swan Creek Student Interviews: Experiences with Blended Virtual Learning;
- End of Year 1 Quantitative Outcomes (Student Outcome Data) for Swan Creek School;
- End of Year 1 Qualitative Outcomes (Data from Teacher Observation Report) for Swan Creek School; and
- Swan Creek Post-Survey: Open-Ended Response Analysis (Spring 2022).

## Context/Background Information:





At the time of this program evaluation, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing. Due to state and local restrictions and social distancing protocols, in-person events, social interactions, and classroom opportunities for collaboration were limited across the Harford County school district and across the world.

Interruption to the continuity of learning impacted the academic progress and student achievement for all students across the Harford County school district and the world.

## Full Report Versus Executive Summary:

The capstone report identifies the most high-priority findings from the SCS BVLP Project Series (listed above), and the full report will include additional information organized by three main sections (the **State of Teaching**, the **State of Learning**, and the **State of School Belonging**). Details of each endeavor within the BVLP Project Series appear in Figure ES.1.

Figure ES 1: Summary of Research Projects

PROJECT	RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SAMPLE
<b>SWAN CREEK PRE-SURVEY AND POST-SURVEY: OPEN-ENDED RESPONSE ANALYSIS</b>		
 <p>Survey Administrations (Fall 2021 and Spring 2022)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What do Swan Creek staff think would improve professional development or training sessions to strengthen the Blended Virtual Learning Program?</li> <li>▪ What do Swan Creek staff, parents, and students think would improve the Blended Virtual Learning Program to more effectively serve students?</li> <li>▪ What strategies are Swan Creek students, teachers, and/or staff using to create a sense of belonging?</li> <li>▪ What concerns or challenges do Swan Creek stakeholders have?</li> <li>▪ <i>Additional post-survey research question:</i> How have stakeholder perceptions of the Swan Creek BVLP changed since the program launched in Fall 2021?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Pre-survey:</i> 805 staff, parent, and student respondents</p> <p><i>Post-survey:</i> 542 staff, parent, and student respondents</p>
<b>SWAN CREEK STUDENT INTERVIEWS: EXPERIENCES WITH BLENDED VIRTUAL LEARNING</b>		
 <p>Student In-Depth Interviews and Analysis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do students describe their learning experiences in the BVLP at Swan Creek?</li> <li>▪ What do students enjoy most about learning at Swan Creek?</li> <li>▪ What do students find most challenging about learning at Swan Creek?</li> <li>▪ What are students' perceptions of their learning progress at Swan Creek?</li> <li>▪ How do students describe their relationships with their teachers and classmates?</li> <li>▪ In students' opinions, what resources and support (at home and at school) do they need to achieve their learning goals?</li> </ul>	<p>Eight (8) student interviews and post-interview survey student responses.</p> <p>The students selected for the interviews were diverse and representatives of all school levels (ES, MS, HS), and performance.</p>
<b>END OF YEAR 1 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES FOR SWAN CREEK SCHOOL</b>		
 <p>Student Outcome Data Examination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are student outcomes at Swan Creek at the end of year 1 of the BVLP?</li> <li>▪ How do those outcomes compare to outcomes across the district, and to outcomes at matched HCPS comparison schools (one per school level)?</li> </ul>	<p>939 Swan Creek students, plus comparison data for all HCPS schools, peer HCPS schools, and the state of Maryland Virtual Program</p>
 <p>Teacher Observation Report Examination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are classroom observers' perceptions of planning and preparation, classroom environment, and instruction at Swan Creek?</li> <li>▪ To the extent that time allows, and as available in the observation notes: What do the TEOS reports suggest about the following domains?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Teachers' capacity to design and deliver virtual instruction and assessment; Teachers' capacity to differentiate/personalize virtual instruction; Teachers' capacity to support special populations during virtual instruction; Students' capacity to use technology to learn; and Students' engagement with virtual instruction.</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>11 redacted sample teacher observation notes from Teacher Observation (TEOS) reports, representing a range of individual observers, teacher experience, and school level</p>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings included in this capstone report, HCPS leadership should consider the following recommendations.

## OFFER INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT TO STUDENTS STRUGGLING ACADEMICALLY AT SWAN CREEK

### RECOMMENDATION: 1

**Offer individualized support to students struggling academically at Swan Creek.** In the 2021-22 school year, the rates of Swan Creek elementary and middle school students with more than one failing grade in a core content area were at times double those of all HCPS students and selected peer HCPS schools. By monitoring Swan Creek's rates of students with one failing grade—or near-failing grade—and providing appropriate support, HCPS may be able to reduce the discrepancy between Swan Creek and its peer schools.

Student survey respondents throughout the school year also advocated for needing more help with homework, time and workload management, and course-content tutoring, especially during after-school hours when they could not reach their teachers. Providing individualized after-school homework help may improve both students' perceptions of the academic support they can access and students' understanding of course material. Swan Creek could use the designated time to better monitor and support the students who have one failing or near-failing grade.

### RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATION: 1

Swan Creek School, in partnership with the HCPS Office of North Star Research and Program Evaluation, created the FIT Assessment Tool as part of the 2022-2023 application process. The research-based FIT Assessment is being used to learn about the characteristics of a successful Blended Virtual Learner to help determine if the Blended Virtual Learning Program is a good match. A screening process for admittance into Swan Creek School was also initiated for the 2022-2023 school year. Additionally, Swan Creek School has partnered with FEV Tutor to provide free, one-to-one tutoring in Science, Math, Social Studies, and RELA. Parents and students can access FEV tutoring 24/7 on an "as-needed/on-demand" basis or schedule regular tutoring sessions. We believe with the FIT Assessment, enrollment screening, and consistent or as-needed tutoring, we will see a decrease in overall failing grades for all students.

## DETERMINE THE REASONS FOR READING STRUGGLES FOR SWAN CREEK KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS.

### RECOMMENDATION: 2

**Conduct a root cause analysis to understand why younger students at Swan Creek experience greater academic difficulties than their peers at other schools.** Kindergarten students at Swan Creek demonstrate a significantly higher risk of developing reading difficulties than students at peer HCPS schools. Data from the 2021-22 administrations of the DIBELS assessment indicate Kindergarten students were as likely to demonstrate reading difficulties as their peer HCPS school or some HCPS Kindergarten students. Further research into best practices for early childhood literacy skills and development in the blended virtual learning environment will help improve performance.

### RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATION: 2

As a result of pending legislation, HCPS leadership decided to move away from Kindergarten enrollment for the 2022-2023 school year. Nevertheless, Swan Creek School wanted to better understand the results of the DIBELS assessment and work to ensure our future students can achieve to their highest potential. The results of assessments for grades 1-5 were consistent with other HCPS schools, and work continues to increase the achievement of all Swan Creek students.

## CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR IN-PERSON STUDENT SOCIAL INTERACTION AND ENGAGEMENT.

### RECOMMENDATION: 3

**Create more opportunities for in-person student social interaction and engagement.** Concerns over students' social-emotional well-being have increased since the pre-survey administration in Fall 2021. Across multiple survey questions, students, parents, and staff all express the need for additional social engagement between students, both through increased virtual student collaboration and in-person activities.

Multiple studies within the Program Evaluation of the BVL Project Series indicate that stakeholders have become increasingly concerned for students' social-emotional wellbeing. While teachers provide ample social-emotional support to their students, students at all ages often feel disconnected from their peers due to a lack of classroom participation and opportunities to build peer relationships. Hosting more frequent in-person events, such as back-to-school orientation nights or field trips, along with after-school activities and clubs and increased virtual collaborative activities, may help support students' social-emotional health and overall engagement with other Swan Creek students.

**Note: Due to state and local restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing protocols, in-person events, social interactions, and classroom opportunities for collaboration were limited across the school district and across the world.**

### RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATION: 3

In-person experiences for eLearning students was a component of the updated expectations for Swan Creek students. In addition to all state/district required testing taking place in person, numerous opportunities for students in grades 1-12 have been scheduled. These include social gatherings as well as academic events to include field trips and school-based learning opportunities.

Examples of in-person opportunities include:


- Material distributions
- Orientation
- Trunk-or-Treat
- Fall Fest
- Turkey Trot
- Elementary in-person school day experiences
- Field trips
- PBIS celebrations
- Field Day
- Recognition celebrations (Honor Society Inductions)
- Promotion ceremonies
- End of year celebrations


Examples of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Opportunities:


- CareerSafe (Module based safety/health training to employable skills)
- Built in SEL lessons taught by certified teachers
- Clubs/Electives for all students
- Daily community building
- SEL kits quarterly to support self-regulation and wellness for teachers and students

## KEY FINDINGS


The key findings below are based on the cumulative findings from the Program Evaluation of the SCS BVLP.


 **In general, Swan Creek employs knowledgeable and effective virtual teachers.** Swan Creek teachers are particularly skilled in building a classroom environment conducive to student learning. Observers stated that teachers demonstrated the capacity to “provide the modifications and accommodations” for students in the class. However, only a few observers commented specifically on teachers’ ability to support special populations, such as students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Additionally, teachers highlighted various professional development (PD) and training needs for themselves and for some students and parents/guardians, especially training around using educational technology tools to support student learning.

 **Some concerns were raised about communications.** Students and parents/guardians developed higher rates of concern about Swan Creek teachers in the surveys, most often related to their communication. The student interviews illustrate how virtual learning requires more effort from both teachers *and* students to communicate their needs, questions, and suggestions; some students may struggle to communicate their needs with their teachers, hence their negative perceptions of communication as a whole.

 **Throughout the 2021-22 school year, all Swan Creek students in Grades 1-3 earned similar scores on DIBELS as selected peer HCPS schools and all HCPS schools. All Swan Creek students in Grades 2-8 earned similar scores on Reading Inventory assessments as selected peer HCPS schools and all HCPS schools.** However, Kindergarten students at Swan Creek were as likely to demonstrate reading difficulties as the peer schools.

**Note:** DIBELS was administered virtually (online) for all Swan Creek students while all other HCPS schools administered the DIBELS assessment in person. Therefore, DIBELS data for SCS cannot be accurately compared with data from other HCPS schools.

 **Students across several studies within the BVLP Project Series reported their appreciation for Swan Creek teachers and had positive perceptions of their own learning progress.** One reason for students’ positive perceptions is the greater sense of independence Swan Creek grants them compared to traditional in-person schooling. Several interviewed students expressed their appreciation for designing their unique schedules for their school day and setting their own personal academic or social goals. Many Swan Creek students enjoy the opportunity to accelerate beyond the level of classroom instruction and learn about new topics or skills independently at one’s own pace.

 **The BVLP Project Series also highlights various challenges with virtual learning at Swan Creek.** In particular, student responses in the surveys continually expressed challenges with not understanding course content and managing a heavy workload. Additionally, several survey findings indicate that students continually seek additional academic support, such as after-school homework help. The TEOS reports also suggested for teachers to give more time to students to explore practice strategies and processes or to work in groups.

- **The interviewed students demonstrated a number of unique approaches to their online schooling and workload, particularly with students’ understanding of their own unique work style and productive times.** In this way, Swan Creek may consider offering more support to encourage students to build their time management skills to better manage their workload.





**While students' perceptions of their classes depend on how much their classmates participate, the BVLP Project Series presents mixed findings on the average rate of student participation and engagement.** According to the TEOS reports, Swan Creek teachers demonstrated an ability to properly engage their students in virtual instruction during the 2021-22 school year. Staff survey respondents reported difficulties in motivating students and parents/guardians to engage in lessons and respect classroom expectations, such as completing class assignments on time. Additionally, many of the interviewed students explained that they become bothered when other students do not participate in class discussions or group activities, and they subsequently become less motivated themselves.

- **Students' perceptions of peer collaboration also differ between studies.** Most of the interviewed students did not like collaborative group projects due to the aforementioned lack of participation from peers. Many of the student survey respondents, on the other hand, called for greater opportunities for student collaboration in class because they enjoy socializing with and learning from other students.



**Swan Creek teachers directly contribute to stakeholders' sense of school belonging, according to multiple studies within the BVLP Project Series.** Nearly all survey respondents (90-91%) affirmed that Swan Creek staff created a sense of belonging and inclusion, particularly through the social-emotional support that teachers provide to students in their classrooms (e.g., taking an interest in students' lives). Observers in the sample TEOS reports noted that many teachers demonstrated additional skills of positively reinforcing student engagement, praising students' work, encouraging students to celebrate each other, and creating a risk-free space for learning. Finally, the interviewed students feel most connected to their teachers and believe teachers have their students' best interests at heart.



**Given the nature of virtual school, social interactions are inherently more difficult to nurture.** While Swan Creek School does attempt to foster social interactions and relationships between students (e.g., Lunch Bunch, social breakout rooms), the frequency and depth of those in a virtual school are less than those at an in-person school. All elementary students who were interviewed experienced challenges with social interaction and friendship at Swan Creek. Student interviews highlighted that although social interactions and peer relationships *should* create a sense of belonging, opportunities for these social interactions were not widely available. Survey responses expressing concerns with the opportunities for socialization and collaboration among students also increased over the 2021-22 school year.

*Note: Due to state and local restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing protocols, in-person events, social interactions, and classroom opportunities for collaboration were limited across the school district and across the world.*

## CONCLUSION

During the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school years, HCPS set out to redefine how alternative education would be provided to interested students and families. A collaboration between the alternative school's administration and central office personnel designed a framework utilizing eLearning and hybrid best practices from districts around the state and country. As spring of 2020 emerged, the system was preparing to rebrand its lone alternative education program and present the new format to the community. All of that changed in March 2020, as the entire nation's educational system was forced to pivot due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While this was a set-back in the timeline for HCPS, it proved to be a pivotal moment, as it opened a new opportunity, which would come to fruition in the Fall of 2021.

This analysis and/or Program Evaluation of Swan Creek School, while thorough, could not possibly capture the entirety of the program. It should also be noted that enrollment in Swan Creek in its inaugural year was based on a response to the Covid-19 pandemic; thus, focus was placed on health and safety, as opposed to the best fit for its unique programming. The Fall of 2021 saw enrollment rise by over 550% from previous years. In response to this sharp rise in enrollment, HCPS created a dedicated Help Desk team to support families to effectively transition to a blended virtual learning environment. Much of that enrollment rise was pandemic driven, but as pandemic fears lessened and enrollment criteria tightened, the Fall 2022 enrollment remained 300% greater than in pre-Covid school years. Currently, Swan Creek School includes students from 44 of the 52 comprehensive schools in HCPS and interest continues to grow.