

**To:** Chris McBride, Superintendent, Nevada Connections Academy  
**From:** Selcuk Ozdemir, Education Programs Supervisor  
**CC:** Jason Guinasso, SPCSA Board Chair  
Scott Harrington, NCA Board Chair  
**Date:** Friday, March 22, 2019  
**Re:** Site Evaluation Report for Nevada Connections Academy

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## **SITE EVALUATION REPORT NEVADA CONNECTIONS ACADEMY**

Site Evaluations are a critical accountability component to the oversight of schools by the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA) and are fundamental to charter schools' autonomy. As approved by the Legislature [NRS-388A.150] the Authority is to *"provide oversight to the charter schools that it sponsors to ensure that those charter schools maintain high educational and operational standards, preserve autonomy and safeguard the interests of pupils and the community."*

Site Evaluations allow the SPCSA to assess schools' student achievement, progress to goals, and fulfillment of their mission, vision, and educational program outlined in their charter. Improving the learning of pupils, and, by extension, the public education system; increased opportunities for learning and access to quality education; and a more thorough and efficient system of accountability for student achievement in Nevada are all foundational elements of the SPCSA's mission, the legislative intent of charter schools and are central elements of the Authority's on-going evaluation of charter schools.

The SPCSA conducts multiple visits and evaluations throughout schools' charter terms. The cumulative evidence through multi-year oversight measures become part of the record that help inform recommendations put forth by SPCSA staff, specifically renewal recommendations to the Authority Board. The Board of the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority makes all final charter renewal decisions. Site Evaluations are just one criterion considered for renewal; student achievement, financial prudence, and fulfillment of the program outlined in the approved charter are also evaluated by the Authority when making renewal decisions.

Attached is the Site Evaluation Report for Nevada Connections Academy, which was conducted by myself and Daniel Peltier on Thursday, January 24, 2019 at Nevada Connections Academy, 555 Double Eagle Ct Ste 2000, Reno, NV 89521. The optional school response is also included. The school is currently operating under an amended charter contact, which it entered in 2017. The amended contract terminates on the last school day of 2020. The school leader is Chris McBride, and the board chair is Scott Harrington.

Please contact the Team Lead for this Site Evaluation, Selcuk Ozdemir, with any questions.

# SITE EVALUATION REPORT

## NEVADA CONNECTIONS ACADEMY

**Campus Name:** Nevada Connections Academy  
**Grade Levels:** K-12  
**School Leader:** Chris McBride, Superintendent  
**Purpose of Site Evaluation:** Upcoming renewal  
**Date of Authorization:** May 5, 2007, renewed July 1, 2013  
**Conducted Date:** Thursday, Jan 24, 2019  
**Conducted By:** Selcuk Ozdemir and Danny Peltier

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### SUMMARY OF SITE EVALUATION

The SPCSA conducts multiple visits and evaluations throughout schools' charter terms. The cumulative evidence through multi-year oversight measures become part of the record that help inform recommendations put forth by SPCSA staff, specifically renewal recommendations to the Authority Board. The Board of the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority makes all final charter renewal decisions. Site Evaluations do not trump end of year results and site evaluations are just one criterion considered for renewal; student achievement, financial prudence, and fulfillment of the program outlined in the approved charter are also evaluated by the Authority when making renewal decisions.

The mission of Nevada Connections Academy is to provide a high-tech virtual school environment that not only provides a data-driven, highly accountable virtual educational program, but also facilitates and fosters genuine connections among students, teachers, parents, and all members of the school community.

The work toward fulfilling this mission was noted in observations by the team, including:

- High-tech virtual school environment;
- Connects students and teachers from different geographical locations;
- Create virtual environment students asks question and access educational programs; and
- Fosters connections among students, teachers, parents via field trips.

The team conducted 9 classroom observations across various grade levels at Nevada Connections Academy. Team members observed grades 4, 6, 8, 9,11, 12, Honor roll, and special education classes. On average, the observation time in each classroom was 15 minutes. Observations ranged through the full cycle of class time, with some conducted in the beginning, middle, and end of the lesson.

Observers noted consistency in schoolwide expectations, procedures, and practices throughout the school, in communication with students and parents; the use of chat boxes during the live lessons, and virtual discussion rules.

Common trends from stakeholders were noted in focus groups, as well, including educational options provided by the school; support for the teachers; and the emphasis on

opportunity for students who do not fit a traditional program of academic achievement. Most of the stakeholders spoke positively of Nevada Connections Academy, and there was a sense of pride being a staff member of the school because of the work the school is doing.

The team identified technology that provided opportunity for students who do not fit traditional brick-and-mortar schools and that technology allowed students to work at their own pace. However, Nevada Connections Academy has opportunities for growth and to improve academic achievement, which would further their commitment to fulfilling their mission for all their students.

## I. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Classroom Environment	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport	In multiple observations, the team noted that teachers try to apply discussion techniques to engage students and create discussion. However, there was minimal student participation in relevant topic discussions. While the conversations that took place were grade-level appropriate in tone and behaviors, an increase in student-led discourse should be prioritized.	Distinguished Proficient <b>Basic</b> Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Establishing a Culture for Learning	In general, there were not any behavior management concerns observed by team members. On the other hand, observers noted some students engaged in off-task conversation and discussion of unrelated issues in the chat boxes during live lessons.	Distinguished Proficient <b>Basic</b> Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Managing Classroom Procedures	In general, there were rules and procedures evident through virtual classroom observations and across grade levels. However, there was inconsistent implementation of school wide procedures observed across all classes.	Distinguished Proficient <b>Basic</b> Unsatisfactory Not Observed
Managing Student Behavior	Teachers demonstrated proficiency with management of student behavior. There was some evidence of positive reinforcement, and limited evidence of corrective or negative reinforcement, particularly with the off-task commentary in the chat box.	Distinguished <b>Proficient</b> Basic Unsatisfactory Not Observed

## II. INSTRUCTIONAL OBSERVATION

Instructional Observation	Evidence Observed	School-wide Rating
Communicating with Students	Observers found the communication to students during instruction to be inconsistent. In general, observers noted that instruction was generally not well differentiated. A wide range of instructional strategies was not observed nor was higher-level questioning (as noted in recommendations to consider).	Distinguished Proficient <b>Basic</b> Unsatisfactory Not Observed

	Communication by teachers during the live lessons was positive.	
<b>Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques</b>	Teachers generally led questions and answers, rather than facilitate discussions among students. Many of the questions observed by both teammates were low-level, basic questions soliciting yes/no or recall responses. Given the grade levels observed, evaluators would expect to see much more analysis and application questions leveraged during instruction to promote higher-level thinking.	<b>Distinguished</b> <b>Proficient</b> <b>Basic</b> <b>Unsatisfactory</b> <b>Not Observed</b>
<b>Engaging Students in Learning</b>	In lower grade levels, there was consistent proficient engagement by students. In upper grades, however, students were disengaged – not participating in either whole group or small group discussion and off-task, as evidenced by chat box commentary.	<b>Distinguished</b> <b>Proficient</b> <b>Basic</b> <b>Unsatisfactory</b> <b>Not Observed</b>
<b>Using Assessment in Instruction</b>	In multiple observations, the team noted teachers were not using assessment in instruction. When it was noted, it was only recall responses (DOK Level 1, Bloom’s levels 1 and 2).	<b>Distinguished</b> <b>Proficient</b> <b>Basic</b> <b>Unsatisfactory</b> <b>Not Observed</b>

**III. OPERATIONS**

<b>Observations</b>	<b>Evidence Observed</b>	<b>School-wide Rating</b>
<b>Mission driven operations</b>	In general, there seems to be designed or implemented school-wide procedures that are mission-aligned. However, there was limited evidence that fostered connections among students, parents, and all members of the school community existed.	<b>Distinguished</b> <b>Proficient</b> <b>Basic</b> <b>Unsatisfactory</b> <b>Not Observed</b>
<b>Managing Schoolwide Procedures</b>	Observers noted that while there was evidence of school-wide processes or procedures they were generally inconsistently implemented and/or vary from teacher to teacher. There was not a uniformity to the degree one would expect.	<b>Distinguished</b> <b>Proficient</b> <b>Basic</b> <b>Unsatisfactory</b> <b>Not Observed</b>
<b>Maintaining a Safe Environment</b>	Given the online nature of the program and the current description for this criterion, the team did not evaluate this area in its observations.	<b>Distinguished</b> <b>Proficient</b> <b>Basic</b> <b>Unsatisfactory</b> <b>Not Observed</b>

**IV. FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY**

<b>Group</b>	<b>No. of Participants</b>	<b>Duration</b>
Governing Board	2	55 minutes
Parents/Families	5	50 minutes
Students	3	45 minutes
Staff	16	55 minutes
School Leadership	9	45 minutes

Site Evaluation team members conducted five Focus Groups, one each with the following groups: Governing Board, Parents/Families, Students, Staff, and School Leadership. Participants were asked a series of questions, including common questions across all Focus Groups, with a range of 8 -15 questions, depending on the group. Only a few grade levels were represented for the Parents/Families and Students Focus Group due to not logging into the system via internet. One parent preferred to join in-person while other parents joined the focus group via online.

Both instructional and non-instructional/support staff were present for the Staff Focus Group. Some staff joined the focus group via online tool.

In general, the common theme threaded throughout all Focus Groups was the sense of community and ‘family feel’ of Nevada Connections Academy. All stakeholders, particularly board, staff, and school leadership, commented on the maximizing student potential based on student needs, educational opportunity and equitable experience to all students in Nevada.

### **Governing Board**

- Nevada Connections Academy is in a unique situation as compared to a traditional brick-and-mortar school in the way that there is a high transiency rate that other schools do not have. Students who are at NCA for more than 1 year perform better than those with less than 1 year at the school This year, the board completed a survey that was based on the overall impressions of the principal at the school.
- The board said the principal’s goals were to increase enrollment, increase the school’s star rating, and improve student proficiency. The achievement of these goals is measured by a mid-year and end-of-year principal evaluation and the principal’s bonus is tied to those evaluations. The board said the principal was doing a good job furthering the goals and expected continued improvement in years ahead.
- Nevada Connections Academy has an accountant that attends the board meetings every month, and the account and board members go through the financials. The board gets updates a week prior to the meeting, and then they discuss the information during the meeting. This ensures that the Board is always aware of the school’s fiscal health.
- There is an annual survey that goes to parents and it is sent out to all NCA schools nationally. It asks the parents to rate NCA. The Board is not aware of any unresolved parent concerns; members understand parents to be quite satisfied with their choice of Nevada Connections Academy.

### **Parents/Families**

- Parents expressed appreciation with the school’s flexibility and school staff communication. Said one parent, “Brick and mortar school was not working for us. We live in a remote location. I am very comfortable with technology and this school gives us flexibility.”
- There was general appreciation for the option that the virtual school serves and provides parents with a choice. Parents can also monitor their kids learning “If there was no online option, they might be separated because husband is working in the military,” said one parent.

- Parents and family members said they feel their child is somewhat challenged in class. Said one parent, "...More challenged in some subjects than others. One-on-one interactions with teachers are helpful."
- Parents also expressed appreciation for the teachers. "She has a close relationship with her math teacher and has had the same English teacher for 2 years," said one parent.

### **Teachers/Staff**

- Staff was very positive about the working environment and professional development opportunities. Staff shared opportunities for professional development, citing the attention to the level of support they receive. Said one staff, "There are a number of professional development programs in place. Teachers can continue to take ongoing training and in-person staff training. Staff met two weeks ago and met physically for training. In addition, Pearson has a number of resources on their level for continuing education of teachers." Said another, "Being in a virtual school, I did not think there would be as much professional development but there actually was. I recently attended a conference and it provided good information. If she finds a conference on her own, the school supports the teacher attending the conference and she brings back lessons to the teachers for further learning at the school site."
- Staff was generally positive about the leadership. Staff mentioned there are number of ways which leadership solicit feedback, including weekly check in with direct managers, multiple staff surveys at school and corporate levels.
- Staff shared specific notes from using data to inform instruction. "Working online has the unique caveat that any amount of data can be pulled at any time. Real time assignments come in and they go through gradebooks very often. Nice thing is they can look at gradebooks to adapt lessons for one on one lessons based on the grades. They can narrow down to subgroups with the data to help those subs get caught up and get back on track" said one staff member.
- Staff consistently cited and spoke highly of the staff retention. "The people are great, and the interactions are great as well" said one staff member.

### **Students**

- Overwhelmingly, students expressed how they enjoy and spoke favorably of the field trips and mentioned they want more. Said one student, "My favorite thing about school is field trips."
- Students echoed some of the comments from other stakeholders, including brick and mortar school was not working for them. Virtual classrooms gives them flexibility.
- Students expressed appreciation of their teachers and one-on-one lessons. This signals that most teachers are effective in reaching their students and building relationships.
- Students felt safe and supported. Said one student, "I like my English teacher, she helps me when I struggle."

## **V. OVERALL STRENGTHS OF PROGRAM**

### **1. Emphasis on providing options**

All stakeholders – board members, parents, staff – spoke highly and passionately about providing educational opportunity for students who do not fit the traditional

program. Parents praised being at Nevada Connections, and the opportunity given to students who work at their own pace and how Nevada Connection Academy was helping students reach their goals.

## **2. Strong appreciation for school**

Staff identified the working environment and professional development opportunities as reasons for their continued retention, and they praised the ‘family feel’ of the school. Board members and staff all spoke positively of the school and the school’s leader, with both board members and some staff mentioning he was doing a great job at Nevada Connections Academy.

## **VI. RECOMMENDATIONS/ACTION ITEMS**

### **1. Focus on academic changes, interim and annual performance growth goals as outlined in the submitted Elementary School Improvement plan**

To support the academic goals and benchmarks presented in the Elementary School Improvement plan and approved by the Authority, the rigor in classroom instructions and learning needs to be elevated. The rigor will stimulate the students intellectually and enhance their academic growth. Due to the underperformance of the elementary school program Nevada Connections Academy and the Authority entered into a mutually agreed to address the academic deficiencies. Addressing these academic deficiencies can be provided via high-level DOK and Bloom’s questioning which will allow analysis, application, and extending thinking. The team observed low-level questioning featuring recall and basic skill/concept questions in most classrooms.

### **2. Increase student discussion and student-centered learning**

In most classrooms the team observed the teacher-led questioning of students rather than facilitating a discussion between students. Teachers tended to contribute more ‘teacher talk’ and draw conclusions for students. Additionally, the off-task conversations by students in the chat boxes, indicated a lack of engagement and a need for more challenging, rigorous opportunities for learning. During the live lesson observations teachers were reluctant to turn over the discussion to students and present them with evidence.

### **ACTION ITEM**

Provide specific professional development to teachers which they will receive how they can incorporate higher order thinking without overextending their lessons. Collectively review the DOK levels and/or Blooms’ Taxonomy to push for higher-level and more rigorous questioning throughout all grade levels. In addition, the school should spend time retraining all teachers on multi-tiered instructional approaches and the RtI to ensure that teachers are aware of all strategies and available resources to help students. Nevada Connections Academy should continue to focus on implementing it’s Academic Improvement Plan as Approved by the Authority in 2018.

### **Note**

SPCSA School Support Team members will follow up on each of these recommendations during their next site visit, unless otherwise noted.

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## Nevada Connections Academy Site Evaluation Response

Nevada Connections Academy (NCA) appreciates the Site Evaluation Report for the SPCSA. We view this document as an additional data source that will be useful as we continually drive to improve student outcomes and school operations. We do have concern that several tools used in the Authority's site evaluation have been designed for use in brick and mortar schools (i.e. classroom environment, and instructional observation) and should not be applied in the same manner to a virtual education environment.

We also see that we may not have sufficiently informed the conductors of the site evaluation how, exactly, instruction and learning take place for our students. The Live Lessons that were observed are optional, supplemental Tier I instruction. The majority of learning takes place between a combination of direct virtual learning and 1-to-1 instruction. The evaluators did not have the opportunity to observe either virtual learning or 1 to 1 instruction, and these are the core of our instruction. While Live Lessons are optional for students, direct virtual instruction and 1-to-1 instruction are mandatory. In consideration of the misalignment between the evaluation tool and the instructional model, NCA proposes that a new site visit be conducted using a tool aligned with our virtual instructional model.

Despite the misalignment of the Authority's evaluation tool with our virtual instructional model, NCA is appreciative of the opportunity to learn from the feedback provided, and notes its response to portions of the site evaluation report below.

Regarding the Instructional Observation component "Questioning and Discussion Techniques," we note that NCA's internal processes also revealed opportunities for improvement with some aspects of our Live Lessons. While we disagree with the 'unsatisfactory' rating, we certainly recognize the opportunity for improvement. Again, it should be noted that Live Lessons are typically generalized instruction that is planned based on the needs of a group of students determined by assessment data. Further, NCA is already undertaking measures to improve Live Lessons. NCA will implement the action item to "provide specific professional development to teachers regarding how they can incorporate higher order thinking without overextending their lessons."

Regarding the Instructional Observation component "Using Assessment in Instruction," NCA contends any rating should take into account discussion with



the teachers. While assessment during instruction can often be used to help guide a lesson as it is happening, the majority of the benefit of using assessment in instruction occurs when the teacher utilizes assessment data to plan instruction. As such, NCA does not agree that a school-wide rating is appropriate absent a meeting with teachers.

NCA would like to also address the 'basic' rating for the Classroom Environment component "Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport." The evidence comment that "there was minimal student participation in relevant topic discussions" should also note that the Live Lessons are optional, supplementary instruction for students. Student to student discussion in the virtual setting also occurs on discussion boards, however this was not observed by the evaluators.

While NCA's response to the three ratings above does not represent all of our points of concern, these are the areas we focused on in our response. NCA takes pride that the strengths of our program were apparent from the meetings with the focus groups. NCA also appreciates the professional manner and general demeanor of the evaluators while they were visiting with us. We would welcome the opportunity to participate in another site evaluation conducted utilizing an evaluation tool that takes into account the virtual nature of e our academic program. NCA would volunteer to participate in a working group to assist in the development of an evaluation tool for virtual schools if the SPCSA decides to take that approach. NCA looks forward to further demonstrating our commitment to improve our academic performance and serving our diverse student population.

Sincerely,



Chris McBride, Ph.D.  
Superintendent  
Nevada Connections Academy