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To the Honorable Members of the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority,

For those who I have not met, my name is Jonathan Johnson and I'm the founder and CEO of Rooted School Foundation based in New Orleans. We are a research, development, and action non-profit that tests place-based strategies to accelerate upward economic mobility for youth. By age 22, we aim to place 90% of youth across our schools and programs into jobs that pay above the average household income in their city. This milestone is one step in a journey to help reduce the racial wealth gap with partner communities, a gap that would take more than 228 years to close by current forecasts.

In 2019, our team was invited by Opportunity 180 to explore the potential of opening Rooted School in Nevada. Jana Wilcox Lavin visited our first school in New Orleans and believed our mission, vision, and success could create new opportunities for youth in Clark County, while addressing an acute and persistent challenge in the county's public schools. Since 2019, we have focused our efforts on meeting with over 200 community leaders and prospective families to hear feedback on the model, conducting 4 focus groups between December 2020 and March 2021, identifying and training the founding School Leader, and submitting a quality charter application.

The idea for Rooted School began when I was in third grade. I'm originally from Anaheim, California and I came home to the sound of my mother crying because she and my dad were losing the home I grew up in. Our neighborhood was gentrifying and, unable to retrain themselves for higher paying jobs, they could no longer afford the rise in fees. I was heartbroken by this. I didn't know that you could lose the home you grew up in. Then that anger became a seed. How might I do something with my life so that other third graders don't have to lose their home like I did. And perhaps build a better life than the one given to them at birth.

While not the same, my story is similar to many children across Clark County. During the recession wrought by the pandemic, their families have lost jobs, have had to take on multiple jobs to survive, and/or have had to move in with multiple families. Many parents are struggling to retrain themselves for the modern economy and worry that their children will be prepared to build a better life than the one they were able to give them. This is what we've heard from families across CCSD over two years. I know this struggle intimately as my own sisters, one 41 the other 30, lost their jobs and needed to move in with my parents to get back on their feet. Fortunately, my fate was different.

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By 2010, I paid my way to become the first person in my family to graduate college in California. After college, I chose to teach youth whose stories were similar to mine and became a founding 8th grade social studies teacher at KIPP Central City Academy in New Orleans, LA.

By 2014, after four years of teaching at KIPP Central City Academy in New Orleans, I was recognized by the Fishman Prize for Excellence in Teaching. This is a national teaching award given to exceptional educators who demonstrate success working with youth in high-poverty and high-trauma settings. That success gave local leaders confidence to offer me the chance to start a first-of-its-kind high school in a city where the graduation rate has not gone higher than 78% since Hurricane Katrina. At the time, New Orleans was seeing its technology sector grow at a rate that outpaced the national average. Jobs produced by this sector were high-growth/high-wage and didn't require 4-year college degrees. At the same time, the average household income for a white family was \$56,000. And, do you know what it was for black and Laintx families? \$25,000 and \$36,000 respectively according to research conducted by Harvard University's Opportunity Insights. I believed then as I do now that there is more our public school systems could do to reduce that gap faster.

And we did. By June 2021, Rooted delivered on its promise of offering a chance at a college acceptance in one hand and a job offer in the other. Rooted School graduated its first class ever in New Orleans. 100% of students who wanted 4-year college were accepted and are attending competitive universities such as Tulane, Villanova, and Case Western Reserve. 43% of those students were the first in their family to attend college. And we obtained \$1M in scholarships for those 20 students. Additionally, 100% of students who wanted direct placements in high-growth/high-wage industries were placed. For the first time in these employers' company history, they hired students directly from high school. Students who qualified for F&R lunch were placed in jobs making more than \$32K/year with full benefits (which is more than the average household income for someone age 35 in New Orleans). Companies they work at include Fortune 500 companies like Entergy, Ochsner, and Lucid. In each case, our students doubled their household earnings in a matter of weeks and we're on track to exceed the number of students placed directly in information industries from last school year. What we've seen be true for students in New Orleans can be true for students here.

Like New Orleans in 2014, Clark County faces a tremendous opportunity. CBRE, the world's largest commercial real estate and services company rated Las Vegas within its 'Next 25' up-and-coming tech markets over the next 5 years as it makes a post-pandemic recovery. These jobs are high-growth/high-wage and don't require

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4-year college degrees, and could lift thousands of families out of poverty right now. We heard Hugh Anderson from the Vegas Chamber and Governor's Workforce Development Board speak to this earlier today. Yet, all youth in Clark County aren't equitably prepared for these opportunities in their own back yard.

By age 35, the average household income of a child growing up in CCSD is \$30,000 according to the Opportunity Atlas. That's not enough to put their children through college, buy a home, or end the generational poverty that many of their families have endured for years. Nevada, specifically Clark County, is leading the U.S. right now in unemployment at roughly 7.5%. Though, according to Nevada's chief economist, David Schmidt, this disruption in employment is seen more in the casino and hotel industry than all other industries. Employment recovery is happening faster in other industries like the information industry—where Rooted School—Clark County is focused. We have an opportunity today to act boldly to change this.

It is my understanding that the goal of this Board is to bring new models to the state that serve students in high needs areas with new and innovative models that have demonstrated success previously. In the SPCSA staff's recommendation for denial, there were multiple mentions of Rooted School—New Orleans' "C" rating from two years ago. This would roughly translate to a 3-star rating here if we purely used the state's rating system from previous years. Though I want this board to be clear that Rooted School is nationally recognized for pushing the limits of what's possible in public education and setting a high bar for youth from historically underserved communities.

In 2020, only our third year of existence, we were recognized by the Clayton Christensen Institute as one of the 130 most innovative schools in the U.S. by a panel of leading organizations for education innovation. The CCI is a nonprofit, non-partisan think tank dedicated to improving the world through disruptive innovation. In 2019, we became the earliest multi-state expansion funded by the Charter School Growth Fund in their organization's 15-year history. We were funded for continued growth in New Orleans and new expansion in Indianapolis when that city approved Rooted for its second school. Charter School Growth Fund invests in talented leaders of the U.S.'s highest-performing charter organizations and helps support their growth with funding and technical support. Their senior leadership, which includes some of the most prominent educational leaders in the U.S. invested in Rooted School because, in 7 years, our team has quickly become a national leader in workforce development, job placement, and Industry Based Credential attainment while in high school. CSGF is currently preparing to invest in Rooted's growth in Vancouver, WA (we were approved for our third school there in December 2020) and our fourth school in Clark County if approved. It is my understanding that the SPCSA review team did not speak with CSGF

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about their decision to invest in Rooted despite their nationally-recognized rigorous process. A question I invite this board to consider today is what diligence does the Clayton Christensen Institute, CSGF, and Indianapolis (in the state with the top charter law in the U.S.) conduct for Rooted that the SPCSA does not?

In December of 2020, the Washington State Charter Commission (Washington's statewide authorizing board) unanimously approved Rooted School to open the first charter school in southwest WA history after two years of community listening interviews and focus groups. Washington's charter law is ranked 3 in the U.S. and their process is considered among the most rigorous in the U.S. in a state that typically has not supported non-local charter organizations. Yet, they unanimously approved Rooted School–Vancouver in December 2020. This decision was not easy for the state board. Their application review team flagged similar concerns that the SPCSA review team flagged. However, the recommendation was to approve given our track record of listening to those directly impacted before making decisions, building long-lasting relationships that benefit Rooted students, and balancing Rooted's expansion into other communities while maintaining the integrity of Rooted School–New Orleans in its startup years. Currently, Rooted School–Vancouver is on track to meet all pre-opening conditions to successfully launch fall 2022 despite the review team's initial concerns. Not to mention, they relied on feedback from leaders who had visited the schools in New Orleans and Indianapolis, talked to members of our school boards, and sought to understand why funders like Charter School Growth Fund invested in us. It is my understanding that no one from the SPCSA visited our schools, talked to the WA State Charter Commission, WA Charter School Association, or talked to the boards of our local schools in their diligence of Rooted School–Clark County. A question I invite this board to consider today is what diligence did the state of WA conduct for Rooted that the SPCSA review team did not to inform its recommendation of our denial today?

When I asked SPCSA staff if they spoke with our New Orleans and Indianapolis authorizers about our capacity for growth, they said they had but did not disclose who specifically. This mattered because SPCSA staff mentioned their conversations with both authorizers did not give them confidence that we had the capacity to support Rooted's launch in Clark County. Our team is confused by this response. After COVID last year, we had more than 90% teacher and student retention and are fully enrolled in both schools. We were recently given automatic charter renewal by our New Orleans authorizer because of our previous performance and confidence that we would improve upon that performance during the next term as one of the highest-performing public high schools in the city. We also had our most successful site visit in the past 5 years last month. In Indianapolis, the Mayor's Office of Education Innovation (the local authorizer) invited us to revise our charter to include a 7th and 8th grade based on our early

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success and community partnerships with the school. Are these actions that an authorizer takes when it doesn't believe an organization has the capacity to grow? Lastly, SPCSA staff had concern about our fiscal solvency as a national organization to support our local schools. Based on our current projections using Afton Education Partners financial model, Rooted School Foundation will be financially sustainable with 60 days cash on hand by FY26 based on its current growth plan. As of now, we don't have any plans underway to scale beyond four schools if approved in Clark County so that we can focus on ensuring each school is delivering on its stated mission and promise within its charter. Charter School Growth Fund is willing to support us in building whatever financial and technical capacity we need to be successful in Clark County if approved.

The SPCSA recommendation report cited that there was a lack of community demand for the model and a concern regarding the underdevelopment of post-secondary and employer partnerships. Currently, we have 96 families who have provided their information for us to follow up if we gain approval. SPCSA staff stated they typically like to see at least half of the intended enrollment by the application deadline which would be 45. David Blodgett, Executive Director of NV Prep (a 5-star school) has also offered for us to co-locate in their new facility during our first year because he intends for his middle school to be a feeder into Rooted School–Clark County.

The SPCSA recommendation report also cited that our post-secondary partnerships were underdeveloped which I agree with. They typically are at this stage of our local school's lifespan and before authorization. Caprice Roberson (Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs for the College of Southern Nevada) submitted a letter of support stating that they would love to partner with Rooted School on dual enrollment given our track record of success in other communities but that they only formally partner with school once the charter is approved. For employer partnerships, Hugh Anderson from the Governor's Workforce Development Board spoke to his support in formalizing those relationships for us if approved. We submitted 15 letters of support from businesses that serve Clark County and Nevada at-large that include top leaders from the Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance, the Las Vegas Chamber, Cox, and the Nevada State Bank. Over two years, we've used a similar strategy for cultivating these relationships that led to our direct-from-high school employment success. It's unrealistic to expect an MOU from a business/university for a school that has not been approved yet. I invite this board to consider adding formal post-secondary partnerships as a condition for conditional approval.

As I close, in the halls of our successful New Orleans and Indianapolis schools, schools and boards that this review team did not visit during their assessment, you'll see a quote

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that I want to share with this board and community gathered here given the significant opportunity we have today given the great unknown we're navigating and the persistent challenges our public schools in Clark County face. "Whether you believe you can or can't you're right." This attitude runs through Rooted's DNA. Since this may be the last time we all see each other, I share the gift of its wisdom with this board.

I enjoyed collaborating with the SPCSA team throughout this process. I found them patient, flexible, and easy to work with. Because of that, I believe, if given the chance, that, together, we could build a first-of-its-kind school in Clark County that connects youth whose stories are similar to mine to high-growth/high-wage jobs in the near and distant future. Jobs that will raise the average household income for a majority of students and residents of color in this city. I believe this because the Rooted team has done it elsewhere. We're not perfect, and have a lot of room to grow over time. The question for people in this room is, while the opportunity stands before us today, will we take that same chance to prove a new possible. I ask that you reconsider the recommendation before you and conditionally approve Rooted School—Clark County. Thank you for inviting me here today.

Sincerely,
Jonathan

Jonathan Johnson
Founder and CEO, Rooted School Foundation