



STATE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORITY

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**ACTION MEMORANDUM**

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**TO:** SPCSA Board  
**FROM:** Mark Modrcin, Director of Authorizing  
**SUBJECT:** Nevada Connections Academy – Charter Renewal Recommendation  
**DATE:** December 16, 2022

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**Background and Summary**

Nevada Connections Academy (NCA) has submitted an application to renew its charter contract as the current charter contract expires on June 30, 2023. NCA is a full-time, statewide virtual public charter school that currently serves 1,000 students in grades 9 through 12 throughout Nevada.

After a thorough review of the historical data and charter renewal application, staff recommends that the Authority approve the charter renewal of NCA for a four-year term, beginning July 1, 2023.

**The Process Related to Renewal Applications and the Standards Under Which an Application for Renewal of a Charter Contract Will be Granted**

The first step in the renewal process is the submission of a renewal report by SPCSA staff to the charter school.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, on or before June 30 immediately preceding the final school year prior to expiration of a charter school's charter contract, the SPCSA submits to the governing body a report regarding renewal. The NCA renewal report was sent to the board chair on June 30, 2022 and can be found within the supporting documentation for the item.

The renewal report summarizes the performance of the charter school under the terms of the charter contract, identifies any deficiencies related to performance of the charter school that might lead to non-renewal of the charter contract, sets forth the requirements for the renewal application, and identifies the criteria that the sponsor will apply in making a determination on the application for renewal. The charter school may submit a response to the renewal report. [See NRS 388A.285\(1\) and \(2\)](#).

Next, the governing body of the charter school must submit a written notice of intent to submit an application for renewal to the SPCSA 45 days prior to submitting a renewal application. See [NAC 388A.415\(1\)](#). NCA submitted its notice of

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<sup>1</sup> Charter school regulations provide for an expedited and streamlined renewal process for high-performing charter schools. Generally, charter schools qualifying for expedited renewal review are those charter schools that are consistently rated as four- and five-star schools under the NSPF and have received no notices of concern or notices of breach for academic, organizational or financial performance. See [NAC 388A.415\(2\)](#).

Intent to Renew its charter contract on August 30, 2022 and NCA’s notice of intent to renew can be found along with the supporting documents.

In regard to the renewal application, the window to submit the actual renewal application is October 1 through October 15. See [NRS 388A.285\(3\)](#) and [NAC 388A.415\(1\)](#). The application for renewal must include, without limitation:

- (a) The requirements for the application identified by the sponsor in the performance report prepared by the sponsor;
- (b) A description of the academic, financial and organizational vision and plans for the charter school for the next charter term;
- (c) Any information or data that the governing body of the charter school determines supports the renewal of the charter contract in addition to the information contained in the performance report prepared by the sponsor and any response submitted by the governing body; and
- (d) A description of any improvements to the charter school already undertaken or planned.

See [NRS 388A.285\(3\)](#). NCA submitted its renewal application on October 14th, and this document can be found included with the supporting documents.

The NCA renewal application states that the school strives to develop students who are self-motivated, competent, lifelong learners. To achieve these goals, NCA implements the Pearson instructional model as a key design element, which focuses on student-centered learning and incorporates key facets, including multiple sources of guidance and support, and teaching methods to foster student motivation.

The renewal application notes that NCA continues to build a robust program to support students in College and Career Readiness. All NCA students are required to participate in a College and Career Readiness track to ensure that as many students as possible graduate college and/or are career ready.

Lastly, the renewal application explains that over the next charter term, both administrators and teachers will focus on helping students master grade-level academic content as designed by the standards and closing achievement gaps between relevant student subgroups. The data available in the school’s internal systems will support this focus and provide a variety of ways to assess progress.

Decisions to renew a charter school contract or deny a renewal application are made and based upon the Nevada’s charter school statutes and regulations related to charter school renewal (see [NRS 388A.285](#)) and the collective record of a school’s academic, financial, organizational, findings from the site evaluation process, and all data and information provided by the Department of Education.

Note that no factor may be given more weight than the academic performance of pupils at the charter school, and the academic performance of the charter school is the touchstone of any renewal decision. See [NAC 388A.415\(10\)\(b\)](#).

In making its recommendation to the Authority regarding a renewal application, SPCSA staff considers the past performance of the charter school, including information contained in the application for renewal, any site evaluations, academic achievement of pupils, and any other information that is determined to be relevant to whether the charter contract should be renewed, including financial and organizational performance. See [NAC 388A.415\(9\)](#).

When determining whether to grant an application for renewal of a charter contract, the Authority Board considers the foregoing factors, any other information that the Authority Board determines is relevant to whether the charter contract should be renewed. The Authority Board will consider the “totality of the evidence” presented to it when making a renewal decision. See [NAC 388A.415\(9\)](#). Again, as stated above, no factor is to be given more weight than the academic performance of pupils at the charter school.<sup>2</sup> See [NAC 388A.415\(10\)\(b\)](#).

At its sole discretion, the Authority Board may renew a charter contract for a term of three (3) to ten (10) years, or, alternatively, deny the renewal application. See [NRS 388A.285\(6\)](#) and [NAC 388A.415\(11\)](#). Note that a variable term

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<sup>2</sup> See [NAC 388A.415\(10\)](#). With regard to a second renewal, the Authority is required to place an even greater weight on academic performance than was assigned to it on the first renewal.

length upon renewal was discretion afforded to the Authority under Senate Bill 451 during the 2019 Legislative Session and is now codified in [NRS 388A.285\(6\)](#).

The Authority Board may accept or reject, in whole or part, the recommendation of the Executive Director. See [NAC 388A.415\(10\)\(a\)](#). See [NAC 388A.415\(11\)\(b\) and \(c\)](#).

Alternatively, the Authority Board may deny the renewal application for the purpose of reconstituting the governing body of the charter school pursuant to [NRS 388A.330](#) and assigning the charter contract to a charter management organization or a new governing body which may include, without limitation, the governing body of another charter school or a governing body assembled by the Executive Director; deny the renewal application for the purpose of restarting the charter school and issuing a new charter contract pursuant to [NRS 388A.300](#) to a charter management organization or a new governing body, including, without limitation, the governing body of another charter school, which will inherit any assets of the charter school which remain following dissolution; or deny the renewal of a charter contract for the purpose of closing the charter school. See [NAC 388A.415\(11\)\(d\),\(e\) and \(f\)](#).

## Analysis

### *Academics*

NCA is a full-time, statewide public charter school that has its offices in Reno. The school formerly operated an elementary and middle school programs, but both of these closed at the end of the 2019 – 2020 as detailed below.

Because NCA is currently in a three-year charter term that began in the 2020 – 2021 school year and coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and various waivers granted by the U.S. Department of Education, the most current NSPF rating for the NCA high school program was from the 2018 – 2019 school year. NCA’s high school received a 1-star rating for that year, and as noted in the NSPF guidance document, a 1-star rating identifies a school that has not met the state’s standard for performance. Students and subgroups are inconsistent in achieving performance standards. A 1-star school has multiple areas that require improvement including an urgent need to address areas that are significantly below standard. As a result of this 1-star rating, the NCA high school was issued a Notice of Breach by the Authority on October 4, 2019.

Due to historical academic underperformance, on January 31, 2020, the Authority voted to deny the NCA renewal application and close the school. At the time, the school served kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, but due to low performance at the elementary school, NCA elected to apply for renewal of only the middle and high school programs. Following the denial of the renewal application, NCA proceeded to appeal the Authority’s decision in district court, and ultimately, the Authority approved a settlement agreement with NCA on May 5, 2020 to allow only the high school program to remain open under a three-year contract that expires on June 30, 2023.

Over the last two and half years, however, multiple pieces of data point to dramatic academic improvement at the high school. First, it should be noted that during the charter term, NCA has shown improvement in its four-year graduation rate as validated by the Nevada Department of Education. While the 2021 – 2022 rate is slightly below that of the prior year, NCA’s graduation rate is similar to that of the state and has improved significantly over the past several years.

<b>Class of</b>	<b>Percent of Students Graduating in Four Years</b>
2017 – 2018	63.8%
2018 – 2019	69.9%
2019 – 2020	80.3%
2020 – 2021	86.1%
2021 – 2022	80.6%

As the Authority is aware, NSPF school ratings and accountability for the 2019 – 2020 and 2020 – 2021 school years have been carried over from the 2018 – 2019 reporting year. Star ratings were not calculated for the 2021 – 2022 school year

due to lack of data brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic as approved by the U.S. Department of Education<sup>3</sup>, but the Nevada Department of Education published index scores<sup>4</sup>. NCA earned an index score of 70.0. In a typical year when star ratings are issued, this index score for a high school would be equivalent to a four-star rating. It is important to compare this number to the school’s last official index score of 13.8 (equivalent to a 1-star rating) in the 2018 – 2019 school year.

As a result of this index score and the demonstrable improvement, the Authority voted at its November 18, 2022 board meeting to remove the Notice of Breach for the high school program.

The NSPF results for this current charter term are summarized and provided in the table below:

School Year	NSPF Rating
2021 - 2022 <sup>5</sup>	- High: 70.0
2020 – 2021 <sup>6</sup>	- High: 1 – star
2019 – 2020 <sup>7</sup>	- Elementary: 1 – star - Middle: 2 – star - High: 1 – star
2018 – 2019	- Elementary: 1 – star - Middle: 2 – stars - High: 1 – star
2017 – 2018	- Elementary: 1 – star - Middle: 1 – star - High: 1 – star

Additionally, the Authority adopted its own Academic Performance Framework in 2019<sup>8</sup>. Results for NCA during the 2021 – 2022 can be found below.

Campus	2021-22 SPCSA Academic Framework Score	2021-22 SPCSA Academic Framework Rating
High	68.0	Meets Standard

Overall, when taken together, these data points signal that the school is currently meeting academic performance standards across multiple frameworks.

<sup>3</sup> Page 72 of the NSPF technical guide:

<http://nevadareportcard.nv.gov/DI/MoreDownload?filename=Nevada%20School%20Performance%20Framework%20Manual%2021-22%20School%20Year.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> According to the NSPF technical guide released by the Nevada Department of Education, star ratings were not calculated for the 2021 – 2022 school year in accordance with flexibility offered in the U.S. Department of Education’s addendum to Nevada’s consolidated state plan due to COVID-19. Star ratings will resume in 2023.

<sup>5</sup> According to the NSPF technical guide released by the Nevada Department of Education, star ratings were not calculated for the 2021 – 2022 school year in accordance with flexibility offered in the U.S. Department of Education’s addendum to Nevada’s consolidated state plan due to COVID-19. Star ratings will resume in 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Due to COVID-19, the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) applied for and was granted a 2020-21 school year waiver from the U.S. Department of Education for certain requirements established by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Nevada statewide assessments were administered in the 2020-21 school year, but the NDE did not calculate new Nevada School Performance Framework (NSPF) school ratings for the 2020-21 school year.

<sup>7</sup>Due to COVID-19, the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) applied for and was granted a 2019 – 20 school year waiver from the US Department of Education for certain assessment, accountability, school identification, and reporting requirements established by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Accordingly, for the 2019 – 20 school year, Nevada statewide assessments were not administered and the NDE did not calculate Nevada School Performance Framework (NSPF) school ratings.

<sup>8</sup> Despite being adopted in 2019, results under the SPCSA Academic performance Framework were not adopted for the 2019 – 2020 and 2020 – 2021 school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of NSPF scores. 2021 – 2022 was the first academic year with reported scores.

### *Organizational*

The current iteration of the SPCSA’s Organizational Performance Framework was adopted by the Authority in the summer of 2019. The school earned 100 points under the 2020 Organizational Performance Framework as approved by the Authority on November 6, 2020, and earned 100 points under the 2021 Organizational Performance Framework as approved by the Authority on January 28, 2022. SPCSA staff have not noted any substantial organizational performance concerns during the 2022 – 2023 school year.

### **SPCSA Organizational Framework Findings**

2021 – 2022	<i>To be reported in December 2022</i>
2020 – 2021	Meets the Standard (100/100 points)
2019 – 2020	Meets the Standard (100/100 points)
2018 – 2019	No organizational performance concerns identified
2017 – 2018	No organizational performance concerns identified

### *Financial*

In 2018, the Authority requested that the SPCSA Financial Framework be modified so as to better assess the financial health of sponsored schools. The revised SPCSA Financial Framework was approved on January 18, 2019, with results for FY20 approved by the Authority in January 2021. NCA met performance standards for FY20 as the school earned a ‘Meets Standard’ rating under all seven of the reported indicators within the framework for that fiscal year. For FY21, the school once again earned a ‘Meets Standard’ rating, although performance dropped under several measures for unique, school-specific reasons. For example, a significant loss of enrollment due to the closure of both the elementary and middle school programs led to a decrease in revenue and negative cash flow for these years. Nevertheless, given these extenuating circumstances, the Authority did not take any adverse action. NCA is not operating under any Financial Framework Notices currently.

### **SPCSA Financial Framework Findings**

2021 – 2022	<i>To be reported in January 2023</i>
2020 – 2021	Meets the Standard
2019 – 2020	Meets the Standard
2018 – 2019	No financial performance concerns identified
2017 – 2018	No financial performance concerns identified

### **Recommendation: Renew Nevada Connections Academy for a 4-year term**

As described above, NCA is currently operating under a three-year charter contract, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has not received an official NSPF rating since the 2018 – 2019 school year. However, multiple data points – NSPF index scores, SPCSA Academic Framework scores, and the school’s high school graduation rate – indicate that the school is meeting performance standards academically, and has shown noteworthy improvement over that same time period. SPCSA staff has also conducted multiple site evaluations over the current charter term to monitor progress, with the most recent evaluation occurring early in the 2022 – 2023 school year. Reports have also noted several improvements, including the implementation of a flipped model classroom as well as a College and Career Readiness Program, in addition to ongoing academic course adjustments to meet individual learning styles.

Additionally, NCA has not exhibited any major organizational or financial performance concerns over the course of the current charter term.

Ultimately, because the academic performance has improved over the course of the charter term, and is at or above expected performance levels, SPCSA staff recommends that the Authority renew NCA for a four-year term, beginning July 1, 2023. SPCSA staff recommends that a renewed term include the same enrollment conditions in the school’s current contract to help the school maintain its current trajectory. These are:

- Enrollment at NCA shall be limited to grades nine through twelve.
- For 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade levels, enrollment shall not exceed 850 students (combined for the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades).

- For the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels, only students who were continuously enrolled at NCA since 10<sup>th</sup> grade may be enrolled in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels (commonly referred to as the “enrollment freeze”). Specifically, only students enrolled at NCA in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade may matriculate to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and students enrolled at NCA in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade may matriculate to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In addition, no new 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade students may be enrolled during the middle of any given school year.

**Proposed Motion**

*Approve the NCA renewal application for a four-year term beginning July 1, 2023 with the following enrollment conditions as outlined above in the recommendation memo.*

- *Enrollment at NCA shall be limited to grades nine through twelve.*
- *For 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade levels, enrollment shall not exceed 850 students (combined for the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades).*
- *For the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels, only students who were continuously enrolled at NCA since 10<sup>th</sup> grade may be enrolled in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels (commonly referred to as the “enrollment freeze”). Specifically, only students enrolled at NCA in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade may matriculate to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and students enrolled at NCA in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade may matriculate to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In addition, no new 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade students may be enrolled during the middle of any given school year.*

*In the event of academic, financial or organizational underperformance the Authority may impose additional oversight.*

*Appendix: School Demographics since 2017<sup>9</sup>*

*Nevada Connections Academy*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Enrollment</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>IEP</b>	<b>ELL</b>	<b>FRL</b>
17-18	3,199	2.9%	11.0%	50.2%	23.5%	0.8%	10.2%	1.1%	8.4%	<5.0%	35.1%
18-19	3,247	2.6%	12.2%	46.9%	24.8%	0.7%	11.1%	1.5%	9.2%	<5.0%	50.8%
19-20	3,468	2.5%	14.3%	43.4%	26.1%	1.0%	11.1%	1.3%	10.3%	<5.0%	53.4%
20-21	1,375 <sup>10</sup>	2.4%	11.2%	48.5%	26.9%	1.0%	8.5%	1.1%	9.8%	<5.0%	46.7%
21-22	1,114	2.6%	12.2%	44.8%	28.1%	1.0%	9.6%	1.3%	11.8%	<5.0%	46.8%
22-23	1,000	2.9%	11.2%	42.2%	30.5%	0.6%	11.3%	1.3%	12.6%	<5.0%	48.1%

- A – Asian
- B – Black/African American
- C – Caucasian/White
- H – Hispanic/Latino
- I – American Indian/Alaskan Native
- M – Two or More Races
- P – Pacific Islander
- IEP – Individualized Education Program – A student with a disability/special education student
- ELL – English Language Learner
- FRL – A student who qualifies for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

To protect student privacy, rates associated with IEP, ELL, and FRL populations less than 10 students are displayed with an asterisk (\*), and extreme values less than 5 or greater than 95 percent are shown as <5 and >95, respectively. N/A indicates the population did not exist.

<sup>9</sup> Enrollment as of Validation Day each year (October 1).  
<sup>10</sup> Starting in the 2020 – 2021 school year, NCA only offered grades 9 – 12.