

**EXHIBIT 1**

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*Hundreds of students, with parents and teachers, braved temperatures in the 20's Wednesday morning to show their support for school choice, part of National School Choice Week, at the capital. January 25, 2017. Shelby Petersen talked about her charter school experience. Photo by Tim Dunn/Special to the Nevada Independent.*

### **By Jason Guinasso**

As Chair of the State Public Charter School Authority, I presided over a hearing earlier this week wherein I voted with a unanimous Board to find that Nevada Connections Academy (“NCA”) failed to graduate 60 percent or more of its students for the graduating cohort in 2015 and 2016, calculated by the Nevada Department of Education.

Indeed, the evidence presented to the Authority demonstrated that, despite receiving millions of dollars in public funds, NCA has consistently failed to achieve the minimum graduation rate, posting 26.5 percent in 2011, 36.08 percent in 2012, 33.91 percent in 2013, 37.19 percent in 2014, 35.63 percent in 2015, and 40.09 percent in 2016.

Further, our Board voted unanimously to reject NCA’s proposed corrective action plan because we did not have confidence in the school being able to achieve a 60 percent graduation rate in two years.

The school choice movement and the charter school paradigm that has arisen in our state rely on three important pillars for success. The first pillar is autonomy. Autonomy of charter schools is important to school choice advocates like me because we believe educators can do a better job than administrators and bureaucrats when it comes to delivering education. I trust the skill and experience of education professionals to deliver quality education to Nevada students.

The second pillar is innovation. The one-size fits all approach to education has failed our children in a dynamic local, national and world economy that is rapidly changing. I strongly believe that allowing groups of educators to develop and implement innovative approaches to educating our youth is essential to the success of public education in our state.

The third pillar is accountability. As excited as I get when I think about the possibilities that exist by providing Nevada students with public charter schools that are autonomous and innovative, autonomy and innovation are meaningless without accountability. *Real* accountability. Accountability that demands results.

Allowing space in our public education portfolio for autonomy and innovation without accountability is grossly irresponsible, given the hundreds of millions of dollars in public funds that have been entrusted to charter schools and their sponsors.

Accountability must be tied to standards that we all have agreed are important for the success of the students under our care. State lawmakers, policymakers, and educational leaders have all agreed that one of the most important data points regarding school performance and student achievement is the graduation rate. Every school in the state of Nevada – whether it is a K-12 or 9-12 grade school– is held accountable to this agreed-upon standard.

And for good reason.

The graduation rate is more than merely one data point, as NCA argued during the proceedings and as Mr. Vineyard wrote in [his op-ed to \*The Nevada Independent\*](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/move-to-close-charter-school-seems-unjust) (<https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/move-to-close-charter-school-seems-unjust>). Graduation represents the collective efforts of the school, the students, and their families to satisfy a certain agreed upon course of study that will prepare them to either pursue higher education or to enter into the workforce.

Indeed, it seems obvious to say this, but I will anyway: Students who don't graduate high school don't have a high likelihood of going to college or finding a high-paying job. I don't know of any university seeking young people to attend who have not graduated from high school. I also don't know of many employers, particularly in the new Nevada economy, who are looking to recruit and hire people who have not earned a high school diploma.

On a personal note, I know from experience just how important graduating high school is to success. I was the first member of my family on my single mother's side of the family to graduate from high school. This achievement did not come easy for me. I was the oldest of my mother's five children. I was a homeless teenager. I was an "at-risk" youth. I dropped out of high school at the end of my sophomore year. When I was rescued from the streets and re-entered high school, I was credit-deficient. Nevertheless, educators did not look at my circumstances and throw up their hands and say, we cannot help this kid. He is at-risk. He is a troublemaker. He is credit-deficient. No, instead,

they rallied to provide me with every opportunity to graduate on time. They delivered a quality of education that set me up for future success in life. I graduated– barely– but I graduated on time.

Making sure that students graduate is the most important objective of a school educating high school students. When a school fails to graduate students, they close the door of opportunity on the student.

A graduation rate of 40 percent or less is more than merely a “data point.” It represents a lost cohort of students. It says to me that at least six out of every 10 students entrusted to the care of that school have been lost. These are young people who will not likely have the opportunities to succeed in higher education or find good-paying jobs to support them and their families.

I categorically reject the arguments made by NCA that the graduation rate is merely one data point that should not be given weight by the Authority Board. Quite frankly, I was appalled at the arrogance of such an argument. Really, it represents a tone-deaf disregard for what the SPCSA Board is trying to accomplish for students in the state of Nevada. I would have expected a school that had received millions of dollars in public funds but has never graduated more than four students for every 10 it enrolls to have approached this process with a greater degree of humility.

In my opinion, something is broken at NCA. It is not Authority staff, as NCA has argued. It is not NDE’s expected graduation rate, as NCA suggested. And it is not the members of the SPCSA Board charged with the duty to hold NCA to account, as was argued in a motion before proceedings commenced last May.

I also refuse to believe it is somehow the students’ fault, as NCA seems to have argued at various points throughout the proceedings, regardless of the circumstances in which students were enrolled. Again, with a graduation rate of 26.5 percent (2011), 36.08 percent (2012), 33.91 percent (2013), 37.19 percent (2014), 35.63 percent (2015) and 40.09 percent (2016), it is clear to me that there is something broken with NCA’s model for delivering education. NCA is one of the worst-performing high schools in the state, ranking 110th of 117 schools in 2016.

I find these dismal results relative to one of the most important objectives in our education system – the graduation rate – unacceptable. Education reform that provides autonomy to education providers so that they can create educational space for innovation is useless without a zealous expectation for

results. School choice is not a meaningful choice if the alternative being offered is not rendering better results than the traditional system for public education.

Nevada has one of the lowest graduation rates in the nation. Nevada Connections has consistently had one of the lowest graduation rates in the state. So, arguably, Nevada Connections is one of the worst-performing schools relative to graduation rate in the entire country.

If we are going to endeavor to provide quality education to Nevada students, it is vital that the SPCSA demonstrate a commitment to the third pillar for charter school success by holding NCA accountable for failing to graduate students entrusted to its care.

*Jason Guinasso is the Chair of the State Public Charter School Authority.*

For more information on this case, see:

[SPCSA Closing Argument](http://charterschools.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/CharterSchoolsnvgov/content/News/201208%2014%20Closing%20Argument.pdf)

<http://charterschools.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/CharterSchoolsnvgov/content/News/201208%2014%20Closing%20Argument.pdf>

[NCA Closing Argument](http://charterschools.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/CharterSchoolsnvgov/content/News/20108-14%20NCA%20Closing%20Argument.pdf)

<http://charterschools.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/CharterSchoolsnvgov/content/News/20108-14%20NCA%20Closing%20Argument.pdf>

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