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RE: SPCSA Recommendation Report regarding Nevada Connections Academy's Elementary School Improvement Plan

Dear Chris,

I reviewed the Authority's memorandum and I would like to make the a few points regarding the analysis contained therein.

In regard to the Authority's reference of the challenge of "boomerang students" on page 11—defined by the Authority as pupils who may fail to attend for two consecutive weeks or voluntarily withdraw and then choose to re-enroll— in my review of the data at the Elementary School, there is a very small number of students where this occurs, but because it is small, this is not a core issue that needs to be addressed or is affecting performance.

On page 9 the Authority concludes that NCA's transiency rate is more likely based on factors within the school's control and arrives at this conclusion because the transiency rate at NCA is higher than they would predict it to be based on the school's free and reduced lunch population. This is not a valid conclusion; rather, the data shows that mobility is a characteristic of a high percentage of students possess before enrolling at NCA. Only 9% of the students at the Elementary School have attended just NCA; 33% were on their second school already, and 58% had attended between 2 and 7 prior schools.

Additionally, rather than free and reduced lunch status being a driver of mobility, a more in-depth analysis of elementary students at NCA has revealed the following student characteristics that relate to mobility: 6% suffering from mental or physical health problems, 10% experiencing bullying and are new, 13% were struggling academically at their prior brick and mortar schools, 10% were advanced and seeking an option to address their students' needs, and 61% switched to NCA because they were dissatisfied with their local brick and mortar school and/or looking for more flexibility.

On pages 9-10 of the memo, the Authority's statement that "even if one were to assume that student transiency or student poverty was the efficient cause of the school's low levels of performance, it is important to note that this is not borne out by the evidence" is problematic. This conclusion is based on

a very simple correlation analysis when, in fact, a more rigorous analysis is required. The Authority presents a simple correlation between school-level free and reduced lunch population, self-reported mobility, and the NV index score (a combination of subjects, different cohorts, and performance metrics) in an attempt to rebut that student mobility is not a key driver of lower academic performance.

In contrast, the findings from the rigorous analysis done by Pearson of Connections Academy schools were consistent with numerous, prior peer-reviewed studies in finding that mobility is a significant predictor of academic performance. In the Connections Academy analysis, a more rigorous, two-tier nearest-neighbor model was employed, matching to other schools within the state at the district-level and then school-level on prior year % proficient on state tests, instructional expenditure per pupil, free and reduced lunch, student ethnicity, % on IEP, school size, and student mobility. Next, an ordinary least squares fixed-effects model was employed along with a naïve covariance structure within a robust empirical standard error formulation. This procedure results in estimates that are unbiased despite the complex nested nature of the data.

I have attached an Education Week article published August 11, 2016 that provides an overview of how student mobility affects learning. Also attached is a recent Education Week article that further explains the peer-reviewed analysis done by Pearson on Connections Academy schools and the effect of mobility on student performance.

Please feel free to reach out to me if you have questions or if you would like to further discuss.

Sincerely,

Matthew Wicks

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Enclosures