



Annette Dawson Owens, Executive Director
2632 Sunday Grace Drive
Henderson, NV 89052

December 12, 2019

VIA EMAIL

Members of the Board of the State Public Charter School Authority: Chairperson Melissa Mackedon, Vice-Chair Randy Kimir, Sheila Moulton, Sami Randolph, Mallory Cyr, Don Soifer, and Dr. Tonia Holmes-Sutton

1749 N. Stewart Street, Suite 40
Carson City, NV 89706

re: ***Supplement to the Charter Application
of Nevada Strong Academy***

Dear SPCSA Board Members:

As you know, Nevada Strong Academy (“NSA” or “Nevada Strong”) is an applicant in the current Summer 2019 application cycle of the State Public Charter School Authority (“SPCSA”). On behalf of NSA’s initial Board of Directors, I am writing to provide additional information in advance of your December 17, 2019 meeting. We will also be at the meeting to offer testimony and answer any questions SPCSA Board or Staff may have.

At the outset, we want to thank you and SPCSA staff (“Staff”) for your diligence and hard work in reviewing and analyzing our application. It is no small task for you to digest the hundreds of pages of documents which made up our application. We are grateful for your time and input. In the last few weeks, we have met or spoken to Staff multiple times, and we greatly appreciate their open doors and their expertise. We have no doubt about their commitment to providing a quality education to every Nevada child. Although, we may disagree with Staff’s recommendation, we do not disagree with their intent or their effort.

As you would expect, we were disappointed to see Staff’s recommendation that the Board not approve Nevada Strong’s application. We have, however, had an opportunity to digest Staff’s report. We have also had the chance to engage in positive conversation with Staff about their concerns. We are convinced that with a little clarification and follow-up on our part—both in this letter and at the meeting on the 17th—you will see Nevada Strong is ready, willing, and able to successfully target and serve an underserved student population **now**, without further delay.

A. Nevada Strong’s exceptional team.

Nevada Strong has been before the Board previously, when it asked last December for a waiver so as to be included in the Winter 2019 application cycle. Although the Board denied that

waiver for reasons unrelated to Nevada Strong’s qualifications, the Board did recognize the abilities of the team Nevada Strong had brought together. In particular, Member Hinton noted that Nevada Strong consists of “a *rock star assembly of educators* . . . an exceptional group,” most of whom are “well known” to the Board (12/14/18 Mtg. Video, 7:46:04).

We believe those were well-deserved words. As noted in our Application, NSA’s Committee to Form includes:

- a governance expert, meaning Mayor Andy Hafen, who successfully ran Nevada’s second largest city (Henderson, NV) as a Councilman for 22 years and Mayor for another 8 years;
- educational experts, meaning:
 - Dr. Carrie Buck, who (i) until recently was the executive director of the Pinecrest network of Nevada charter schools, which in her last year received five-star grades at all 8 of its campuses; and (ii) has many years of experience as an ELL teacher, specialist, trainer, and administrator;
 - Bea Soares, who worked in CCSD for over 30 years as a teacher, counselor, and administrator, including 14 years as Principal of a high-performing CCSD school;
 - Amy Trombetti, who has over 19 years of special education (SPED) experience, including as a teacher, charter school Principal, District Facilitator, state employee, and CEO/founder of a SPED consulting company;
- legal and administrative experts, meaning:
 - Sam Castor, Executive Vice President and attorney at Switch, which operates the largest data center in the U.S., and which has donated over \$10 million to educational STEAM projects; and
 - Kurt Harris, a local family-law attorney; and
- banking/finance, medical, and technology/AI experts, meaning David Jones, R. Lindsey Dalley (who chaired the Moapa Valley Community Educational Advisory Board), and Monty Coon.

The Board members’ credentials were included in Attachment 8 to the Application.

The fundamental mission of the SPCSA, as defined by our Legislature, is to empower qualified community and educational leaders to “[i]mprove the learning of pupils and, by extension, improve the system of public education; increase the opportunities for learning and access to quality education by pupils; [and e]ncourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods” (SPCSA Website).

Nevada Strong shares in that fundamental mission, as demonstrated by the exceptional team it has assembled and the student body it intends to serve. NSA’s combination of academic, special-education, administrative, governance, financial, legal, and technical know-how is your insurance policy that this school will be an immediate, unqualified success. This team of long-time Nevadans respectfully asks for your trust—not blindly, but instead based on decades of experience improving the lives of Nevada families.

B. The CEO of Nevada Strong’s projected EMO is one of the country’s most distinguished, respected charter school leaders.

At that same December 14, 2018 meeting, your Director of Authorizing, Mark Modrcin, also praised Dr. Soner Tarim, the CEO of NSA’s proposed EMO, the Royal School System (“RSS”). In Mr. Modrcin’s words, Dr. Tarim “is a very reputable individual” who “has many strong results to speak of” (6:51:28).

That was a gracious reference to Dr. Tarim having previously founded and led the Harmony Public Schools charter network in Texas.¹ As described in the Application (Attachment 3), while at Harmony, Dr. Tarim ran a network of 56 STEM-focused schools, which (i) employed 4,000 staff; (ii) served over 36,000 students—an astounding 61% of whom were “economically disadvantaged, and 85% of whom were minorities—with another 24,000 students on Harmony’s waiting lists; and (iii) completed 8 different bond-financings (for over \$540 million). As a result of Dr. Tarim’s efforts:

- Dr. Tarim was named 2017 Texas Charter Schools Association “Leader of the Year” (in a state where 675 charters serve about 270,000 students); and
- Harmony was a finalist for the national 2017 Broad Prize for Urban Education (which focuses on low-income and minority students).

Given his expertise, the Texas Education Agency authorized Harmony to open a new campus anywhere, at any time, on just 60 days’ notice. Dr. Tarim’s is a proven success.

C. I also believe in my credentials as a competent, passionate educator.

It is an honor and privilege for me to serve as Executive Director for a charter school board as qualified and committed as the one described in Section A above. I believe I also have the knowledge, tools, and experience to successfully carry out my Board’s vision. Attachment 3 to the Application lists my credentials. As an executive summary:

- I have worked in and around education, including as a teacher, over the last 25 years;
- I have two Masters degrees, one in Curriculum and Instruction and the other in Educational Administration, plus a Graduate Certificate in Education Leadership Administration;
- I serve on the City of Henderson Community Education Advisory Board (CEAB); and
- I serve on the [Nevada] Title 1 Education Committee.

D. Nevada Strong will help underserved student populations, justifying special consideration under AB 462 and long-standing SPCSA policy.

At that same December 14, 2018 meeting, several members of this Board took special note of where Nevada Strong intends to open in Las Vegas. Chairperson Guinnasso, Member Kirnir, and Member Hinton emphasized that (i) NSA’s intended pupils “are the kids we need to be” reaching (7:46:15); and (ii) it was obvious NSA had great “passion” for teaching the “underprivileged students we need to be serving” (7:53:00).

Your Staff agreed with that sentiment. At the Interview, Staff complimented NSA on

¹ As Dr. Tarim noted at the interview, he left to create RSS in October of 2018 because other Harmony leaders had little to no desire to expand its thriving model to other U.S. States. RSS is now either approved or under consideration for charter schools in Texas, Alabama, Michigan, and New York.

getting the geography “correct.” In AB 462 terms, SPCSA Staff agreed that:

- *Nevada Strong’s location will meet academic needs*, by serving populations surrounded by underperforming, 1- and 2-star schools and/or at greater risk of dropping out; and
- *Nevada Strong’s location will meet demographic needs*, by serving “persistently underperforming student populations” such as those qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, English-language learners (ELL), and students with IEPs.

(For more information, please see the AB 462 Addendum included in NSA’s application.)

E. Nevada Strong believes in the strength and merits of its academic and financial plans.

Given the number of long-time educators and professionals on our Board and Dr. Tarim’s empirically-proven success, it is no surprise that we believe in the strength and soundness of our operational, academic, and financial plans as presented to you. In its recent “Charter School Application Report” released on December 6, 2019, SPCSA Staff complemented many aspects of our plans. Of course, SPCSA Staff expressed “areas of concern,” too, and attached as Exhibit A are those concerns and Nevada Strong’s point-by-point response. As you will see, we believe we have resolved and/or explained every area of concern, and therefore respectfully ask that you override Staff’s recommendation and approve NSA’s Application.

F. Conditional Approval.

As you know, this Board occasionally opts not to give an applicant an absolute, unqualified approval, but instead to issue a “conditional approval.” Given the number of concerns raised by your Staff and rebutted here, Nevada Strong would understand if you preferred to condition approval in one or more ways. Although it’s unclear which (if any) of Staff’s concerns might remain “live” after the meeting on the 17th, you might, for example, condition approval on:

- NSA successfully holding the RFP, selecting an EMO, agreeing to an EMO fee of no more than 12%, and agreeing to an EMO contract approved (as to form) by SPCSA counsel. Nevada Strong’s Board will evaluate the EMO annually to determine if there is value added and it is a sound investment, and make adjustments accordingly;
- NSA soliciting a minimum number of student enrollments by certain milestone dates; and
- NSA working with Mr. Modrcin to agree on tweaks to its academic, operational, or financial plans. Nevada Strong will work to ensure it is satisfactorily meeting all of the SPCSA’s expectations for success.

We hope you will interpret this Supplement not as a challenge to you or your Staff, but as our earnest commitment to work with the SPCSA to immediately resolve any concerns and move forward towards the best academic result possible. We all have the same goal, and a conditional approval is presumably the best immediate step in pursuing that.

To be sure, neither Nevada Strong nor anyone else is entitled to run a charter school, but Nevada’s children are entitled to the best education possible. And we do not hesitate to say that Nevada Strong will very much be a net positive to both Nevada as a whole and to a Nevada community that needs it most.

G. If Nevada Strong were not approved in this cycle, the school will lose its facility and subsidies offered by its landlord.

NSA's primary time pressure here is to avoid losing a year educating some of the most underserved students in the Las Vega Valley. That said, it is also very possible that Nevada Strong will, if asked to wait another year, lose an extraordinary real estate opportunity. NSA's favored location is in the 89119 area code, not far from UNLV, in space owned and operated by a prospective landlord named ELV. In negotiations to date, the landlord has not just offered the space for rent, but to contribute all of the tenant improvement (TI) funds necessary to deliver a state-of-the-art, turnkey facility. In blunt terms, the landlord is volunteering to subsidize the build-out of the facility, in an amount estimated to cost \$1,250,000. This is, in fact, separate and apart from the \$90,000 contribution offered by this landlord and discussed in Exhibit A hereto.

Note that as evidence of its commitment, this landlord has already commissioned and received architectural plans, prepared and signed a land use application, and conducted a fire permit survey. We would be happy to provide these items to you upon request.

Unfortunately, if this Board were to deny NSA's application, ELV could not reasonably be expected to hold the property for an entire extra year—and it has confirmed that it does not intend to do so. Please see the letter attached here as Exhibit B. NSA has the opportunity to save Nevada taxpayers a huge sum of money, but only if it were successful now, not in a future cycle.

Thank you so much for your time, efforts and attention. My team and I look forward to seeing you at the upcoming December 17th meeting and proving to you that Nevada Strong is ready to educate our children now.

Sincerely Yours,

/s/ Annette Dawson Owens

Annette Dawson Owens

cc:

BY EMAIL:

State Public Charter School Authority
Attention: Rebecca Feiden, Ryan Herrick, and Mark Modrcin
9890 S. Maryland Pkwy, Suite 200B
Las Vegas, NV 89183

enc:

LIST OF EXHIBITS

Exhibit No.	Exhibit Contents
A.	Nevada Strong's Substantive Responses to SPCSA Staff's "Areas of Concern"
B.	Facility Support
C.	Community Support (Including Letters Submitted with Application)
D.	Table of Further UNLV Centered Support/Commitment
E.	Sample of Petition Signature (There were 79 Families and Intent to Enroll/Survey (112 Students)