




Memorandum

To: Members, North Carolina State Board of Education
Dave Machado, Director Office of Charter Schools

From: Nathan Currie, Superintendent, NCCA 

Cc: Bryan Setser, NCCA Board Chair

Date: December 5, 2016

Re: NC Connections Academy Response to JLEOC Virtual Charter Report

Please find below North Carolina Connections Academy (NCCA) response to the recent JLEOC virtual public charter school report that will be included in the January State Board of Education agenda items. We have thoroughly reviewed the report and we appreciate your consideration of our response.

NCCA's First Year in Review

NCCA is proud to have met all of the first year charter goals outlined in our charter agreement. These were established with the State Board of Education as goals and indicators of success for a virtual charter's initial year. Despite the 2015-16 school year being the first year for all of our students, which studies have demonstrated can hinder a student's performance as they transition to a new setting, NCCA successfully met all of these goals. In its first year, NCCA was financially healthy with no material audit findings and demonstrated economic sustainability.

Our retention rate for teachers rated proficient or better exceeded the 90% goal. NCCA's state test proficiency rates exceed .85 of the state average in its first year and nearly 90% of full academic year students promoted to the next grade level in grades K-8 and earned at least a year's worth of required credit at the high school level, far exceeding the 85% requirement.

Perhaps most importantly, parents and students are very satisfied with NCCA. In an independent, third party survey, 91% of parents would recommend NCCA to those not currently enrolled and 94% of parents thought their child was satisfied with NCCA's program. 95% of parents were satisfied with their NCCA teachers and 94% of parents agreed our curriculum was high quality and that technology used improved the overall learning experience of their children.

During our first year we were proud to perform above the state average in reading. Elementary science scores and reading proficiencies were approximately 68%, which was also above state averages and other charter school averages. In addition, we were equally proud that the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey revealed that our teachers ranked NCCA above



the state and charter school averages. During the first year, NCCA established 7 student clubs and provided 21 field trips.

From our parents:

--I appreciate the amount of communication we are getting from the teachers. I never was this informed at my child's local brick and mortar school.

--I enjoy reading the updated webmails from our teacher. He always adds something to the webmail that makes me laugh or smile.

--To all our Teachers, we are very appreciative of your patients and heard work. We treasure every moment we share you all. Without you, we would not have presidents, doctors, lawyers and all those great careers you've helped us achieve. Cheers to all our teachers!

--Very grateful to have such positive and enthusiastic teachers at NCCA. My son is currently in the 9th grade and this is his second year at NCCA. I feel that I know his teachers better and have more contact with them, than I did with previous teachers in a bricks and mortar middle school. Keep up the great work!

--I just wanted to say that the field trip to the science museum was great. I really enjoyed myself. And my son did too. Keep up the great work. For all of my son's teachers I just wanted to say again thank you for your support, and I think all of you should get the reward you work to get.

--I have been very impressed and pleased with the curriculum here at NCCA. I have also been very impressed with the level of communication that I have had with the teachers and their responsiveness to my student's questions and needs. Everyone is very friendly, helpful and seems to be genuinely interested in helping my student succeed!

--You all are doing a great job! I like how things are coming together this year. We appreciate that teachers are available if we need help, and I like the live lessons that give the program more of a brick and mortar feel. It's especially neat when teachers allow the students web cam time at the end of live lessons so they can see each other and interact with one another and the teacher. Thanks for all you do!

--Thank you for your patience with my many questions about live lessons. My son is learning so much and we really appreciate your help and dedication. Also I'm impressed how you all can tell when he's not paying attention during a live lesson. That is an impressive teacher skill. It makes me smile. Thank you again.

While we feel very strongly that our school has met many indicators of success, we realize there is certainly room for improvement. As mentioned above, the 2015-16 school year was NCCA's



first academic year and all students were new to online learning. It is not uncommon, especially in a new virtual environment, for students to struggle academically initially as they adjust to an online learning model.

At NCCA, our number one priority is for our students to achieve academic success, and we are committed to helping improve student performance on state tests across all subjects. We have developed and implemented a robust action plan for 2016-17 to help students achieve their academic best and improve performance on state tests, especially in math.

Current Improvement Plans

To improve academic performance, the following initiatives are being implemented this (2016-17) school year:

- Purchased and distributed graphing and scientific calculators to qualified students, ensuring that they become more familiar with their functions, operations, and capabilities,
- Provided personalized Live Tutor® to students in grades 4th-10th in both math and language arts,
- Implemented new math conceptual program to all students in grades K-3rd,
- Targeted professional development in math instruction and data analysis,
- Completion of a comprehensive curriculum audit,
- Participation in Principal READY Professional Development, to develop and enhance the school's leadership team in monitoring and leading instruction,
- Increased the frequency of mandatory Live Lessons® synchronous learning sessions,
- Implemented common/mock assessments for all tested grades,
- Developed a *Traveling Academy* to serve and assist students in a blended environment,
- Implemented *Reading Plus*, a reading pilot program,
- Hired additional staff to reduce class ratios and to provide a more personalized targeted intervention approach, and
- Implemented Learning Coach University, a monthly meeting to inform, train, and model best instructional practices for parents

JLEOC Report: Withdraw Rate

For the 2015-16 school year, there were several discrepancies in how the Department of Public Instruction calculated NCCA's withdraw rate versus the calculation included in our binding charter application, which was approved by the State Board of Education. NCCA has submitted several memos to the State Board outlining these discrepancies. We are pleased that for the 2016-17 school year, it appears some of these discrepancies have been resolved due to legislation enacted during the 2016 legislative session. We believe this new withdraw rate calculation will be more reflective, accurate list of the students who should be included from the withdraw rate. Under the new withdraw rate, NCCA's rate was 20.7%, well within the acceptable range.



However, in order to fully understand the withdraw rate at NCCA, it's very important to look at the rate in context and consider the highly mobile student population virtual schools typically serve. NCCA meets the needs of families who are enrolling for a variety of reasons, including some temporary ones. Some of these temporary reasons include: ① finding a safe environment free from bullying, ② allowing a child to maintain their studies while recovering from a medical condition, ③ a temporary displacement from their home, ④ the child was behind their peers academically, and a myriad of other situations and circumstances. In these cases, when a student withdraws, it is because the problem has been resolved and the family returns to their previous school, likely a traditional public school. It is not typically because the family was dissatisfied with NCCA.

Furthermore, some who initially chose NCCA as a short-term solution decide to remain enrolled, as they are highly satisfied with the flexibility, school environment, and quality of education NCCA provides them.

JLEOC Report: Inclusion of the CREDO Report

While we always appreciate research being done in the area of virtual education, we believe the CREDO report does not completely nor accurately evaluate NCCA as well as other virtual schools.

Virtual schools are meeting the needs of students looking for a solution to a challenge. This results in a unique student body that engages with school differently. When evaluating virtual schools, we must consider attributes like student mobility, academic standing, and the impact of large numbers of year-one students on state assessments (and how this can skew results).

The CREDO report does not account for these attributes (and they acknowledge the data was not available to account for them). Until research accounts for the interplay of these factors on performance, we will continue to have an incomplete understanding of virtual schools.

NCCA is attractive to families because it is *unlike* traditional school – to fully recognize its benefits we can't assess virtual school through the traditional school lens – virtual school operates differently by design.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss how the virtual charters in North Carolina can be fairly held accountable for the unique nature of their school model. A framework and accountability system that factors in student mobility, gives additional weight to student academic growth, and expands graduation measures are just a few of the suggestions we believe we provide North Carolina reasonable tools to evaluate its virtual charters and hold them accountable.



Funding Equity

While not directly addressed in the JLEOC report, NCCA believes it is important to note that its funding level is lower than not only traditional public schools, but also traditional public charter schools, as we shared with you in our report to you on August 31, 2016.

In fact, NC virtual schools receive approximately \$0.60 for every \$1 that a traditional NC public school receives, and only \$0.74 for every \$1 that a NC (bricks and mortar) charter school receives. This equates to a funding shortfall of \$3,800 per child for virtual school students vs. their traditional school counterparts. NCCA received \$5,814 per student in the 2015-16 SY.

NCCA has different but equal costs to that of traditional public schools. We must maintain an administrative facility to host families, provide collaborative and teaching space for our teaching staff, as well as house our administrators. Our school state testing plan requires us to have multiple sites across the state, where we must often rent space and provide travel reimbursement for our teachers and staff. We provide technology and testing materials which must also be stored during the school year. Furthermore, we provide technology subsidies for students with demonstrated financial needs which exceed \$253,000 alone for the 2015-16 school year. Our curriculum provides several supplemental learning tools that can quickly add up as well. NCCA tries to stretch every dollar but at the current funding level, it is very difficult to maintain the long-term goal of providing a high-quality virtual learning opportunity for our students. We want to fully serve our families by investing in our teachers, tutoring and technology

We realize ultimately it is the legislature that would need to change the virtual charter funding formula, especially at the local funding level, but we believe it is important for the State Board of Education to have this context when evaluating the success and challenges of operating a high quality virtual charter school in North Carolina.