

I. Executive Summary

Overview & Targeted Student Population

New Mexico Connections Academy (NMCA), a statewide, K-12 full-time virtual charter school with a teaching/learning center in Santa Fe, will set a new standard for virtual education excellence in New Mexico and will advance the mission of serving students statewide, enhancing technological innovation, providing high quality education, and engaging community experiences. The school anticipates engaging Connections Academy of New Mexico, LLC, an affiliate of Connections Education LLC (“Connections”), for curriculum, technology, and other services in compliance with New Mexico statute. Connections has extensive experience over the last ten years in virtual learning. In the 2011–12 school year, Connections served approximately 40,000 students in 21 states via 22 virtual statewide public schools (“Connections affiliated schools”). The Governing Board will be responsible for determining the appropriate services for the school and ensuring the performance of Connections with its obligations under the Statement of Work Agreement as well as insuring compliance with New Mexico statute.

NMCA will address a growing need for students to be educated outside of traditional brick-and-mortar schools, projected to be 500 students in Year 1 and growing to 2000 by Year 5, which is substantiated by the dramatic growth of virtual and charter schools across the country. The most recent available national figures count nearly 200 full time virtual charter schools serving close to 100,000 students in 20 states¹. While brick-and-mortar charter schools reach students within their physical proximity, a high-quality virtual school can leverage excellent teachers and curriculum to meet the needs of students anywhere in the area served who need a virtual school option. The experience of Connections affiliated schools nationally is statewide schools mirror the demographics of the state. Of the students who attend a Connections affiliated school, over 40% met the federal free and reduced lunch guidelines mirroring the national average of 42.9%². According to the New Mexico Department of Education’s Free and Reduced Lunch Report, 66% of enrolled students met the federal income guidelines in 2010-2011.³ We anticipate that NMCA’s families will be similar to the state average of 66% and will include many of modest means as well as significant numbers of single parent/dual working parent households who find effective and creative ways to participate in this program.

New Mexico reported 12.3% of students with disabilities in 2010-11 school year⁴ and it is ranked third in the country for the number of ELL students according to the U.S. Department of Education (2009-2010)⁵. New Mexico classrooms serve the highest percentage of Hispanic students and the second highest percentage of Native American students. Connections affiliated schools have demonstrated success with special needs and English Language Learners (ELL) populations nationally serving an average of 9.8% of students with IEP’s and in California and Nevada, states ranked higher for the % Limited English Proficient students, two Connections affiliated schools are effectively serving ELL students. For those Connections affiliated schools that are their own Local Education Association’s (LEA), the special education percentage can be as high as 18%, as it is at Commonwealth Connections Academy in Pennsylvania. It is anticipated that NMCA will serve a similar percentage of special needs students as its own LEA and effectively serve ELL students who enroll. The individualization of the program will help meet the diversity of needs, linguistic structures, and unique cultures that are valued in New Mexico.

NMCA Founding Board also anticipates that 20% of students will come from homeschooling based upon experience in other Connections affiliated schools. According to the PED’s Office for Parents Division, there are 9,057 students reported as homeschooled. It could be assumed that not all homeschooling families are documented and that the number of New Mexico homeschooling families could be higher. NMCA anticipates serving 100 previously homeschooled students in Year 1 increasing to 400 students by Year 5 which is 20% of the anticipated enrollment.

¹ Center for Education Reform, www.edreform.com

² http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_042.asp

³ <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/IT/schoolFactSheets.html>

⁴ <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/IT/schoolFactSheets.html>

⁵ <http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov/data-element-explorer.cfm/deid/4/>

Finally, the NMCA Founding Board have conducted extensive due diligence in evaluating a virtual school program provider. The Founding Board is interested in establishing a full time statewide virtual public charter school in New Mexico that offers the Connections program for its strong academic results and high quality offering.

- ✓ The Connections program is the first virtual school program to receive accreditation from the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation (CITA), now a part of AdvancED™, the world's largest accreditation body for K-12 school programs, serving more than 27,000 public and private schools and districts across the United States and in 69 countries that educate over 15 million students. The program was first granted accreditation in 2005.
- ✓ Connections has been recognized for its instructional design and focus on best practices in virtual education.
- ✓ Connections Education won three BESSIE Awards for Exemplary Educational Software 2012.
- ✓ Connections Education won EDDIE Award—Honored for Best High School Chemistry Site 2011.
- ✓ Connections Education won one of the USDLA's Top Awards: the 21st Century Award for Best Practices in Distance Learning 2011.
- ✓ Connections Education's Earth Science Course won the USDLA's "Best Practices Award for Distance Learning Programming" in the PreK–12 Category 2011.
- ✓ Connections Academy's Algebra 1 course won BESSIE Award—Honored as Best Math Website 2011.
- ✓ The Connections program in Florida has consistently received an "A" rating by the Florida Department of Education for five straight years and outperforms the State of Florida on the state test.
- ✓ Ohio Connections Academy was the only statewide Ohio eSchool rated Excellent in 2010 by the Ohio Department of Education.
- ✓ The breadth and depth of curriculum, accommodations for special populations, including but not limited to special needs, struggling learners, Gifted and Talented, and low income families makes Connections Academy an ideal fit for the mission, vision, and needs of New Mexico Connections Academy.

Type of Students Served

The Founding Board anticipates students from each county will be represented when information about the school is widely available. It is also anticipated that 50-60% of the students will come from the traditional classroom; approximately 20-25% from homeschooling and the rest from private schools or students new to school (entering kindergartners or first graders, moved from another state). Students whose instructional needs will be effectively met by NMCA include: children who are in rural communities and lack access to public school options; children who are far ahead of or far behind their peers in school, including students at risk of academic failure and those coping with social issues who may particularly benefit from personalized instruction; young people pursuing artistic or athletic careers or career development opportunities that require a flexible schedule; children who are homebound due to illness or disability; children who are homeless; and students with special learning needs. NMCA estimates that these students together make up less than 2% of New Mexico's total school age population but may be over-represented among those who are struggling academically or will drop out of traditional public schools.

Evidence of Support

The NMCA Board also took notice of the interest in virtual schooling expressed by families throughout New Mexico. Without any parental outreach efforts, over 3200 families have expressed interest in learning more about this virtual program and additional families have participated in information sessions, social media, and email correspondence. See Section V for more detailed information. The board also has received several letters of support, including from the community (attached as Appendix M).

Key Innovative Features

Students learn best when lessons match their interests and abilities. The mission of New Mexico Connections Academy (NMCA) is to help each K-12 student, throughout the state of New Mexico who needs an alternative to the traditional classroom for a particular time period, maximize his or her potential and meet the highest performance standards through a uniquely individualized learning program, access to high quality NM-certified teachers, and high parental involvement. Connections' Personalized Performance Learning process—an

academic road map for each student- serves this purpose for individualizing instruction, providing high quality teachers, and providing opportunities for parental involvement in their child's learning.

NMCA will offer students anywhere in the state hundreds of courses, dozens of clubs and activities, and access to resources that will help prepare them for the global economy they will be living and working in as adults. The personalized approach to NMCA will provide important skills to New Mexico students including independent thinking, problem solving and collaboration not only with people in their community but potentially across the globe. With an additional focus on STEM (Science-Technology-Engineering-Math) education (see below), NMCA students will be prepared for the global economy with job-skills for the 21st century.

Plans to Improve Student Achievement

According to the Public Education Department "far too many students drop out or graduate from high school without the knowledge and skills required for success in the 21st century workplace and/or postsecondary education."⁶ In addition, the high school truancy rate is 26%⁷. According to the New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment (NMSBA) results, nearly 52% of 11th graders are not proficient in reading and almost 62% are not on grade level in mathematics⁸. NMCA will be well equipped to respond to the needs of students who need a more personalized approach to learning.

There is a need in New Mexico for additional charter options in rural communities. Currently there are only 18 charter schools in rural communities⁹. In addition, approximately 25% of district and charter schools in rural communities meet two performance metrics: 50% of students are at proficient or advanced and demonstrating growth. NMCA hopes to reach students in rural areas who may not have the educational options they need to be successful. Students throughout New Mexico, particularly in rural communities, need a rigorous, full time, high quality school with excellent teachers and will find NMCA to be a unique alternative. Rural school districts will still thrive but will have the ability to refer a student who needs a different program to help them be successful. A full-time virtual schooling option will help deliver additional options effectively and efficiently.

A STEM School-within-a-School Academy-Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics-is one of great interest to the NMCA Board. The Board noted Arne Duncan, US Secretary of Education, who stated, "Everyone has a stake in improving STEM education. Inspiring all our students to be capable in math and science will help them contribute in an increasingly technology-based economy, and will also help America prepare the next generation of STEM professionals-scientists, engineers, architects and technology professionals-to ensure our competitiveness." The NMCA Board believes students in New Mexico will benefit from such a focus including the ability to obtain jobs in the future economy. According to a new report released, job postings in the STEM fields outnumber unemployed people by 2-1.¹⁰ According to New Mexico Project 2012 that focuses on math and science education, only 42% of 8th grade math students score at proficient or above and only 27% in science (2009). In addition, there are only 26 new math and science teachers that are produced each year.¹¹ A STEM Academy will provide access to innovative, highly qualified teachers, specifically in math and science, and will help inspire and prepare students throughout New Mexico for a STEM field. "When it comes to pushing for better results in STEM learning, impatience is a virtue."¹² The need for a virtual STEM school to provide access for students throughout New Mexico is now.

New Mexico Connections Academy will provide another opportunity in the portfolio of learning options for students and help students achieve their academic goals through personalized learning, high quality teachers, and involved parents.

⁶ <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/graduation/index.html>

⁷ <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/it/fs/truancy/SY2010%20Habitual%20Truancy%20by%20School%20Type.pdf>

⁸ http://ped.state.nm.us/NMPED%20Strategic%20Plan%202011_2012.pdf

⁹ <http://www.nmccs.org/school-dashboard>

¹⁰ [Change the Equation's Vital Signs, http://www.changetheequation.org/stemdemand](http://www.changetheequation.org/stemdemand)

¹¹ http://www.sfafs.org/nmproject2012_documentation.asp

¹² [Ursula Burns, Xerox Chairman and CEO, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/linda-rosen/where-the-jobs-are-stem-f_b_1474046.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/linda-rosen/where-the-jobs-are-stem-f_b_1474046.html)