



January 6, 2012

PUBLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION  
c/o New Mexico Public Education Department  
Attn: Ms. Kelly Callahan, General Manager  
Options for Parents/Charter Schools Division  
300 Don Gaspar, Room 301C  
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501

Dear Ms. Callahan,

Attached is a letter of intent to submit a charter application to the Public Education Commission as required by NMSA § 22-8B-6(B) by January 10, 2012. Copies of the letter of the intent were also submitted to the following districts: Espanola, Los Alamos, Moriarty-Edgewood, and Santa Fe. We are in the process of narrowing down our search for a district or Commission authorizer who shares our goals in serving students in New Mexico through virtual education.

Connections Education, operating through its Connections Academy affiliates ("Connections"), has become a nationally recognized education service provider of virtual learning through its partnerships with districts and non-profit governing boards. Since our founding in 2002, Connections has been committed to finding the best academic partners, curriculum providers, and teachers/staff. This deliberate commitment to both quality and responsible growth has had many benefits, including a national reputation as a pioneer in high quality, highly accountable public schools. Through a virtual charter chartered through the district or the Commission, we hope to be able to offer this highly effective option to students in New Mexico.

Thanks for your assistance over the Christmas break regarding the Letter of Intent process! Happy New Year!

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Donna Hutchison".

Donna Hutchison, Ph.D.

Vice President, State Relations  
Connections Education

cc: P. Matthews

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**Santa Fe Charter  
Schools Division**

**NEW MEXICO CONNECTIONS ACADEMY: NOTICE OF INTENT**

1. General Information:

Name of Proposed School:	New Mexico Connections Academy	
Primary Contact Person	Paul Gessing	
Mailing Address:	P.O. Box 40336, Albuquerque	
City: Albuquerque	State: New Mexico	Zip: 87196
Phone:	Email: <a href="mailto:pgessing@riograndefoundation.org">pgessing@riograndefoundation.org</a>	

Name of Proposed School:	New Mexico Connections Academy	
Secondary Contact Person	Donna Hutchison	
Mailing Address:	11825 W. Amity Rd.	
City: Boise	State: Idaho	Zip: 83709
Phone: 208-794-2974	Email: <a href="mailto:dhutchison@connectionseducation.com">dhutchison@connectionseducation.com</a>	

2. Names, roles, and current employment of all persons on the applicant team, and qualifications of the team members to establish a high-quality charter school:

Name	Role	Employment	Qualifications
Paul Gessing <a href="mailto:pgessing@riograndefoundation.org">pgessing@riograndefoundation.org</a>	Applicant	Rio Grande Foundation	President/Parent/Advocate for Choice in Education
Dr. Alan Morgan <a href="mailto:Alan.Morgan@pearsoned.com">Alan.Morgan@pearsoned.com</a>	Advisor	Pearson Education	VP Government Affairs/ former NM Chief State School Officer/President High Desert Government Relations /teacher/administrator
Dr. Donna Hutchison <a href="mailto:dhutchison@connectionseducation.com">dhutchison@connectionseducation.com</a>	Advisor	Connections Education	VP State Relations/former CEO Idaho Digital Learning Academy/Adjunct Faculty Boise State University/teacher

3. Model or focus of the proposed school (e.g. performing arts, dual language, college prep, STEM):

New Mexico Connections Academy will set a new standard for virtual education excellence in New Mexico and will advance the mission of serving students, enhancing technological innovation, providing high quality education, and centering education around the community. The school will serve students full time in grades K-12 throughout New Mexico through online education, quality curriculum, and certified teachers.

4. Does the school expect to contract with another entity for either management, or substantial oversight or direction in the school's operation?

Yes:  Describe the entity and role it will have in the school's operational plan. No: .

The school has plans to engage Connections Academy of New Mexico, LLC, an operating affiliate of Connections Education LLC (referred to herein individually or collectively as "Connections" in this document), for curriculum, technology, and other services under the terms of the professional services agreement (also known as a management contract) in compliance with New Mexico statute. An affiliate of Pearson Education, Connections provides turnkey educational services, including accredited curriculum; highly qualified, certified teachers; a comprehensive Education Management System (EMS); professional development; student, parent, and teacher technical assistance; and other support, for schools. The Board of Directors of the proposed school will be responsible for determining the appropriate services for the school and ensuring the performance of Connections with its obligations under the professional services agreement. Connections has extensive experience over the last ten years in virtual learning through its operation of charter, public and private K through 12 virtual schools ("Connections Schools"). In 2011-2012, Connections Schools will serve more than 40,000 students enrolled in 22 schools in 21 states.

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5. Does the applicant team or any members of the team currently operate any other schools? Yes:  No: . Our prospective education management organization (EMO), Connections, has substantial research and proof of learning gains, collected and analyzed carefully over 10 years of serving more than 100,000 students in 21 states. As detailed below, there are multiple independent data points proving the efficacy of virtual learning, specifically the student performance results of the Connections Schools operating in 21 states throughout the country, that provide strong evidence of the measured learning gains and student success using this model.

The school founders have conducted extensive due diligence in evaluating the need for a virtual school and virtual school program providers. The founders are interested in Connections as the proposed EMO for a number of reasons, including the following:

- The company has an enviable track record of its schools achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (“AYP”) as defined per No Child Left Behind, measurable learning gains (student growth models), and high marks from independent evaluation organizations. For the 2009-10 school year, for instance, all but one (which met all of the criteria except for participation of a sub-group) of Connections Schools achieved AYP.
- The Wisconsin Connections Academy’s virtual school program has made AYP for the most recent six (6) years, a commitment to academic excellence that is rarely seen among its peers statewide or nationwide.
- Among national virtual school providers, Connections ranks #1 among EMOs for the number of schools making AYP for the most recent school year for which complete data is available (2009-10)
- 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.
- 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 the Connections program an ideal fit for the mission, vision, and needs of students in New Mexico.

6. If the proposal is a replication, identify the school(s) you are replicating and what data that you have to support this model should be replicated. N/A (see above)

7. Vision/Mission statement. (2-3 sentences)

The mission of New Mexico Connections Academy is to leverage 21<sup>st</sup> century education resources on behalf of students who need a more personalized approach to learning to maximize these students’ potential and meet the highest performance standards. The vision of New Mexico Connections Academy will be to reach students for whom a cutting-edge virtual approach provides the best pathway to school success – students who are not well served by any existing education option. This mission and vision will be accomplished through a uniquely individualized learning program that combines the best in virtual education with very real connections among students, family, teachers, and the community to promote academic and emotional success for every learner.

8. Student body to be served, including key demographic data and targeted geographical area of the proposed school. Describe the targeted student population including key demographic data (academic performance, home languages, ELL and special education populations). Identify where these students are most likely being educated currently and why they are expected to choose the proposed charter school for their future educational needs.

New Mexico Connections Academy will address a growing need for students to be educated outside of traditional brick-and- mortar schools and plans to serve students statewide. There are many reasons why students seek education outside of traditional brick-and-mortar schools: they may be gifted and need very challenging curriculum and faster pacing; be struggling academically; be homebound; be grappling with social, discipline, and/or other issues; or they may be elite athletes or performers needing flexible scheduling for education.

The experience of the schools using the Connections program nationally indicates that New Mexico Connections Academy’s families will include many of modest means (with more than 60% meeting the federal income guidelines for free or reduced-price lunch) as well as significant numbers of single parent/dual working parent households who find effective and creative ways to participate in this program. Of the students who attend a Connections School nationally, over 30% were previously home-schooled or attended private school and 50% or more of the students

were previously in traditional public schools but in need of a more personalized alternative.

New Mexico Connections Academy anticipates an even split between male and female students and that the school population will mirror the population from the state of New Mexico: 57% Hispanic/Latino, 29% White, 11% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3% Black/African American, and 1% Asian or other races. It is anticipated that approximately 13% of students will be gifted/talented, 65% eligible for free and reduced lunch, 15% ELL, and 13% special education/504's.

The enrollment goals are the following: Year 1 = 400, Year 2 = 650, Year 3 = 900.

9. Evidence and assessment of a community need for a school of this nature: Detail any objective surveys or other measures of local demand for the proposed educational program.

Over the past three years, 2,099 requests have been received for information from parents in New Mexico who are interested in an online virtual school for their child. These requests were unsolicited. Over 2,000 parents searched for educational options for their child, found the Connections Academy website, reviewed the information, and then requested additional information on how to access a school in New Mexico. The 2,099 requests were geographically spread throughout the state of New Mexico.

10. Key innovative, unique and/or programmatic features the school will implement in order to accomplish its vision and mission (non-traditional school year, longer school day, partner organizations, etc.)

New Mexico Connections Academy believes that children learn best in a safe, positive environment in which they are respected, accepted, valued and nurtured as unique individuals and are challenged to achieve their full potential. From this, it follows that students learn best when the instruction is tailored to their unique needs and when they are supported by adults who are committed to their success. The key facets of the Connections instructional model are as follows:

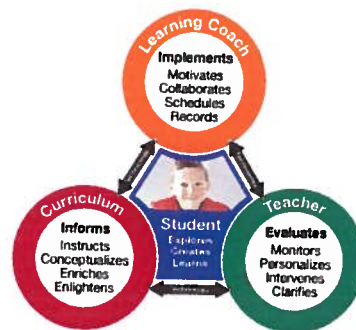
**The Learning Triad™:** Instruction at Connections Schools surrounds each student with the resources needed for success. Each student is part of a "learning triad" as illustrated at right.

**The Learning Coach:** Each student attending a Connections School has a Learning Coach, a parent, extended family member, or similarly qualified adult designated by the parent/guardian who works in person with the student under the guidance of the licensed professional teacher.

**Certificated, Highly Qualified Teachers:** Each student who will attend the New Mexico Connections Academy will have one or more certificated New Mexico teachers specially trained in the Connections curriculum and instructional method. Teachers work closely with each student on a one-on-one basis using innovative technology tools and instructional pedagogy.

The teacher is responsible for evaluating assignments and work products, providing instructional assistance, assigning and scoring assessment activities, and providing feedback on the child's performance. Based on a student's demonstrated mastery of the material, teachers add, expand or replace assignments; they also grade students in each subject for the regular report cards and make promotion or retention decisions. Depending on the need of the learner, teacher contact – via telephone, LiveLesson® session, and WebMail – with the student and Learning Coach may be as frequent as several times a day, and at a minimum once every two weeks depending on student age. Teachers do not wait to be contacted; they are proactive participants in their students' learning plans. Families of students attending the New Mexico Connections Academy are always welcome to visit the school office/teaching center during business hours to meet with their teachers in person.

**The Curriculum:** The Connections program combines proven and rigorous curriculum materials with the best in technology-enhanced learning such that a significant portion of the curriculum is delivered through the Internet and other electronic means. The Connections curriculum aligns to New Mexico Content Standards and common core standards and is regularly evaluated, upgraded and enhanced based on the needs of the school and students. The high quality proprietary curriculum developed by Connections' Curriculum Department, integrates textbooks, lesson plans and other content from a variety of leading publishers including Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and Zaner-Bloser. In addition to high-quality virtual and print textbook resources, the curriculum features technology-based content from providers such as Grolier Online, BrainPOP, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and Discovery Education. Skills for



Success content reinforces standards for language arts and math at each grade level. The proprietary and highly effective online animated Teachlets® tutorials, which introduce challenging topics and provide interactive practice, will be also included. LiveLesson® sessions, which provide for real-time web conferencing with individual and small groups of students using voice over IP, chat, electronic whiteboard, and shared web surfing, allow teachers and students to interact with one another in real time in a 'virtual classroom.' The Connections curriculum is updated regularly, based on a rigorous analysis of student performance on state testing results and internal assessments.

**The Personalized Learning Process:** The centerpiece of instruction is the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP), which provides for individualized instruction tailored to the learning needs of each child. The primary building blocks of the school's instructional approach will be parent involvement; individualized instruction; and high-quality teaching. The PLP is an extensive document developed at the beginning of the school year by the New Mexico-certified program teacher in consultation with the student and the student's parents/guardians. New Mexico Connections Academy teachers will work with Learning Coaches and students to customize student learning experiences based on specific academic needs, learning pace, learning styles, and personal interests. This program of personalization is an ongoing process that also includes the creation of a written plan for all members of the learning team to follow. Utilizing Connections unique Personalized Performance Learning® approach each student is provided with instructional and supplemental programs tailored to meet the student's individual needs. This PLP is built from a combination of baseline assessments of both academic skills/knowledge and learning modalities, information gathered from the parents, and input directly from the student. Education research has shown that these touchstones of Personalized Performance Learning directly correlate to student achievement. The PLP then guides the student's course through the New Mexico Content Standards-based Connections curriculum. We believe that the PLP provides the highest degree of program customization available in any virtual school operating today. In effect, each student will have many experts working together to leverage the school's myriad resources – technological, instructional, and interpersonal – for his or her success. We believe that working together as a team will create student success!

11. How the school will be more effective than the schools currently serving the targeted student population, and/or plans to improve student achievement and exceed the academic performance of existing public schools in the targeted service area and any data you have to support this assumption.

During its 10 years of operation, Connections, in conjunction with the Connections Schools, has developed its own methods of online teaching that have enabled it to produce the highest academic performance of any family of K-12 virtual schools in the country. All results are those publicly reported by the states on their standardized tests or state report card ratings, not based on any internal measures.

#### **2010-11 Academic Highlights**

- Ohio Connections Academy is rated "Effective"; OCA actually increased its performance index score (the basis for the rating) from what it received during 2009-2010, but the rating criteria was changed to make reaching the top categories more difficult. Highlights: value-added measure of growth met for all grades except 6th grade math. 11th grade graduation test results: 100% reading, 90.6% math, 98.6% writing, 90.1% science, 92.2% social studies.
- Nevada Connections Academy's high school program again achieves AYP.
- Wisconsin Connections Academy again achieves AYP (for the 7th consecutive year)
- Commonwealth Connections Academy meets 27 of 29 AYP targets, missing only math for two minority subgroups; of note, CCA serves about 1,000 primarily previously low achieving students from the Philadelphia school district

#### **Standardized and National Tests Results**

The real test of any online learning implementation in K-12 education is academic effectiveness, which Connections Schools have proven on multiple measures.

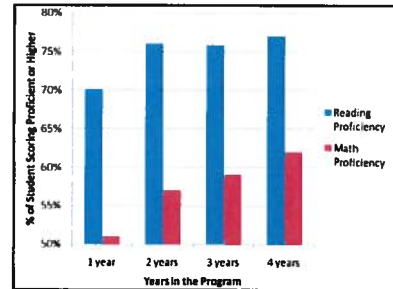
- Students attending Connections Schools aggregate Reading/Language Arts test scores for 2009-10 (across all tested grades) exceeded the state aggregate in 100% of the states where a Connections school has been operating for two or more years, while their aggregate science scores beat the state aggregate in 73% of these same states.
- In addition, Connections Schools across the nation outscored the nearest competition in 90% of the grades

and subjects tested in 2008-09.

- For the 2009-10 School Year: students attending a Connections School: 63% scored Qualified, Well Qualified and Extremely Well Qualified, vs. 58% of students nationally scored Qualified, Well Qualified and Extremely Well Qualified on Advanced Placement(AP ®) exams.
- On the SAT, students attending Connections Schools again show the same outstanding performance by scoring an average score of 1625 versus the national average of 1500 in 2010-2011. On the ACT exam, the average composite score for students attending a Connections School was 22, above the national average of 21.1(2010-2011 school year).

### Longitudinal Accountability

To rely exclusively on proficiency data rather than student growth data in some ways understates a school's accomplishments. The increasing interest in virtual education presents a challenge because new students generally enter the school behind in their academic performance, and new students represent a significant portion of the overall population. Connections Schools have also been shown to produce significant gains in Reading and Math proficiency for students who have used the program for multiple years, as shown in the graph.



*Reading and Math Proficiency for Connections Academy Students over Time*

### Academic Gains of Sub-Groups: Disadvantaged, Special Education, and Gifted

Connections Schools also demonstrate exceptional learning gains of students who are disadvantaged or struggling. Following are examples of test score performance increases in virtual schools in which more than 50% of students are low-income, nearly one-quarter are minorities, and in the case of Ohio Connections Academy, 18% are in special education.

- Commonwealth Connections Academy in Pennsylvania, providing more than 50,000 online courses in 2010-11, has demonstrated significant year-to-year improvements for its economically disadvantaged students and students with IEPs. The percentage growth from 2009-2010 for economically disadvantaged students was 9.2% in math and 7.6% in reading whereas for IEP students, it was 25.9% in math and 42.1% in reading. In comparison, the percentage growth for all students was 7.4% in math and 5.7% in reading (*CCA's 2010-11 AYP Report: <http://paayp.emetric.net/School/Overview/c21/4/7774>*)
- Ohio Connections Academy was the only e-school in Ohio to be named Excellent in 2010. The student percentiles from the Ohio Achievement Test and the Ohio Graduation Tests reflect considerable growth in student achievement over a five-year consecutive span in the Connections program. Because math scores started very low, there is a very significant increase in student test scores over time.

Connections Schools also excel at helping diverse students of all abilities to reach their potential; nationally, more than 8% of their students qualify as gifted, and their graduates have been accepted at leading universities from Harvard to Vassar to UCLA and beyond.

Signature of founder(s)

*Paul Gessing*

Date: 1/6/12

Paul Gessing

[PRINT NAME]