

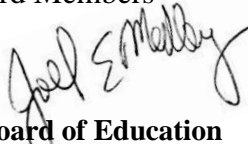


4220 NC Highway 55, Suite 130
Durham, NC 27713
Phone: 919.346.0121
Fax: 919.324.6597

<http://ncva.k12.com>

DATE: November 14, 2016

TO: Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee Members
State Board of Education Members
Charter School Advisory Board Members

FROM: Joel Medley, Head of School 

RE: **JLEOC Report by the State Board of Education**

Thank you for providing the North Carolina Virtual Academy (NCVA) an opportunity to review this version of the draft report and include a response from our perspective.

NCVA had a good first year of operation and can celebrate many successes. We readily admit that our goal is to improve academically; however, we want to point out the positive milestones from our first year of serving students and families:

- Testing greater than 95% of our students.
 - As the law required one testing location in each of the State Board educational districts, NCVA hosted 15 different sites. The average drive per family to a testing center was less than 20 miles.
- NCVA exceeded the State average in meeting Participation targets by nearly a full percentage point.
- NCVA's English 2 test results exceeded the State average in College/Career Ready status by 21 percentage points. Our proficiency score was 70.7 compared to the State's score of 49.6.
- NCVA had a clean financial audit with no findings or identified material weaknesses .
- EDGE Research group surveyed the parents of NCVA at the end of the 2015-16 school year to gauge their thoughts. Listed below are responses on questions most directly related to the family experience at NCVA:
 - 78% were satisfied with the virtual education experience
 - 86% were satisfied with NCVA specifically
 - 89% were satisfied with their child's primary teacher
 - 89% would enroll their child or recommend other children the next year
- Parent testimonials speak of the difference that NCVA and its teachers are making in the lives of their children.
 - Mother of 3 Adopted Students at NCVA Shares Her Experiences
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zv5sgXvHbvW&feature=youtu.be>
 - From Bullied to Budding Child Author with an Anti-bullying Message
<http://www.carolinaparent.com/CP/Brendens-Story-From-Bullied-at-School-to-Budding-Child-Author>
 - At the end of this letter is an email from a newly enrolled family. It is unedited other than removing the family's name for FERPA purposes.

Every child...Every class...Every day



4220 NC Highway 55, Suite 130
Durham, NC 27713
Phone: 919.346.0121
Fax: 919.324.6597

<http://ncva.k12.com>

Upon conclusion of our first year with students, a comprehensive look back at that year was undertaken to revise our Academic Plan. We recognized that our scores were not what we hoped; however, we also understand that the first few years of a charter school's existence are, in the words of Jonathan Schorr and his book *Hard Lessons*, a "traumatic fight for survival." Several changes have been implemented in the second year to improve our academic performance. Some of those items are outlined below:

- Shift to the block schedule for high school students.
- Additional math teacher hired at the middle and high school level.
- Data-driven instructional model fully implemented at the school.
- Co-teaching model used at the middle school level between general education and special education teachers.

While the Department of Public Instruction references the CREDO report and the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools recommendations, we are uncertain as to their inclusion for a report on the virtual charter school pilot in our state. Neither report examines the North Carolina specific context leading to a question of relevance. We believe it is necessary to discuss several factors regarding from these reports that were not mentioned by the Department.

- CREDO
 - The report, released in October 2015, does not included any data whatsoever from North Carolina; however, the report does affirm several important factors:
 - Virtual charter schools serve a higher population of students that enter the charter school below proficiency. The data presented by NCVA to the State Board of Education in the fall of 2015 verified that fact.
 - Virtual charter schools serve a higher population of low-income students when compared to traditional charter school counterparts.
 - Virtual charter schools frequently utilize student assessments to measure individual student growth.
 - The academic performance data contained in the CREDO report was prior to 2012. Considering that the most recent three years of data was not utilized, the policy conclusions of the report have diminished value. Virtual charter schools have adjusted practices to help improve student results in recent years based on more current data; however, none of those factors were considered in the CREDO report.
 - Questions regarding the "virtual twin" methodology have been continually pointed out but not addressed by CREDO. For instance, in an attempt to measure the performance of students who transferred to online charter schools from those in traditional schools, the report did not control for factors typically faced by statewide online public charter schools. Those factors include: persistence and performance over time, date of enrollment, the effect of mobility, and the reasons why children leave their local school. Absent any controls for these factors, the "virtual twin" students is not accurately matched meaning the comparison is between very different students.

Every child...Every class...Every day



4220 NC Highway 55, Suite 130
Durham, NC 27713
Phone: 919.346.0121
Fax: 919.324.6597

<http://ncva.k12.com>

- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
 - Removing virtual charter schools from the charter school sector would do a grave disservice to families as we are the only public school option for many of those families. In our first year of operation, NCVA served students from 92 of the State's 100 counties which is significantly broader reach than the other 160 charter schools.

Instead of relying upon the CREDO report, we would suggest that other peer-reviewed reports also be given consideration. For instance, *The Journal of Online Learning Research* published an article by Leuken, Ritter, and Beck entitled "Value-added in a Virtual Learning Environment: An Evaluation of a Virtual Charter School." Their study focused on the academic results by students that chose to remain with the virtual charter school over time. This study found three, important correlations:

- For students who transfer into a virtual charter school, they experience academic regression in the first year.
- For students who remained enrolled in the virtual charter school beyond a second year, they experienced an academic recovery.
- For students remaining with the virtual charter school three years, they experienced a complete academic recovery and saw significant improvement in years four and five. The value-add in years four and five outpaced that of their matched peers.

We also suggest looking to the Keeping Pace report: *Accountability in the Digital Age* (February 2015) for virtual school policy recommendations and a description of the at-risk nature of many virtual school students. This study describes the specific mobility patterns and credit-deficiency trends among virtual school students. NVCA's population resembles the students described in this report. As this report suggests, policymakers need to consider additional and/or different ways of measuring school success for full-time virtual schools. The first step toward policy recommendations is a critical analysis of available data.

We applaud your efforts to timely report on data from the two virtual charter school pilots. We look forward to continuing the data examination and contributing to policy discussions to best measure virtual charter school performance in our state.

Every child...Every class...Every day



4220 NC Highway 55, Suite 130
Durham, NC 27713
Phone: 919.346.0121
Fax: 919.324.6597

<http://ncva.k12.com>

PARENT EMAIL DATED OCTOBER 19, 2016:

Dear Mr. Medley:

I have been meaning to sit down and write you this short email about our experience with NVCA to date.

My daughter started NCVA on 9/19/2016. She has been Homeschooled for the past 2 years and prior to that attended the local elementary school here in Clayton NC. During her 5th grade year I made the decision to remove my daughter from traditional school. She is a high functioning Autistic child who also has ADHD and a few other struggles in her life (comes with the territory I suppose). She is a bright, hardworking child who struggles with anxiety pretty much daily. I removed her from the local elementary school and took on the challenge of schooling her myself. Not too long after I also removed my 9 year old (currently waitlisted for NCVA) due to my EXTREME disappointment in the public education they were receiving.

Upon finding NCVA and actually moving on the information and getting her enrolled...I was nervous. Let me tell you...nervous for no reason!

Your 7th grade team/teachers are the most amazing people I have ever had the pleasure of dealing with. They are helpful, caring, fun, engaging, the list goes on and on, with the students. They show a GENUINE interest in her successes and failures! They do everything in their power as educators to help her along. It's the most overwhelming feeling when you actually have teachers WHO CARE. I cannot thank you enough for Mrs. Dasher, Mrs. Whitley, Mrs. Shepherd, Mrs. Hunt, Mrs. Brancaccio and I cannot thank you enough for Mrs. Irene Martin...that woman being a special education teacher has gone ABOVE AND BEYOND to help me get her settled and help her along. Every one of these ladies has extended nothing but warmth and caring and encouragement to my daughter. Every one of these ladies is an amazing teacher and I cannot even find the words to express my gratitude towards them. THIS IS WHAT A TEACHER SHOULD BE! These women are shining examples of what it is to be an educator. My daughter's old elementary school could learn many things from NCVA...MANY.

The challenges may be hard for my daughter, but with the support of not only her family but her teachers as well...I know she will succeed...which is all I want for her. She doesn't need to be the superstar student...she just needs to be happy with her achievements and it's been good to see her smile while in class! To be happy with school and not an emotional wreck...it's worth every last second I help her during her day...every – last – second.

Thank you.

Every child...Every class...Every day