



## Commonwealth of Massachusetts Virtual Schools Application Interview Opening School Year 2014-2015

### Interview Summary

**Applicant:** The Education Cooperative

**Date:** January 8, 2014

#### **Attendees (applicant)**

Nancy Gallivan, Chair, TEC Board of Directors and Walpole School Committee

Dr. Brad Jackson, Superintendent, Holliston Public Schools

Dr. Jean Kenney, Assistant Superintendent, Walpole Public Schools

Liz McGonagle, Executive Director, The Education Cooperative

Liz Pape, Executive Consultant, Former CEO, Virtual High School

Kirby Salerno, Parent Representative and Vice President of Sales, TenMarks Education

Dr. Peter Sanchioni, Superintendent, Natick Public Schools

Dan Shovak, Director for Finance & Operations, The Education Cooperative

Dr. Patricia Hoge, Chief Academic Officer / Executive Vice President, Curriculum & Instruction  
Connections Education

Marjorie Rofel, Senior Director, Student Services Connections Education

David Schmidt, Vice President, State Relations, Connections Academy

Josh Solomon, Senior Director, School Business Services Connections Education

#### **Attendees (ESE)**

Cliff Chuang, Associate Commissioner

Luis Rodriguez, Director, Office of Digital Learning

Susan Hargrave, Coordinator of Digital Learning and Accessibility, Office of Digital Learning

Leanne O'Brien, Registrar, Office of Digital Learning



**I. How will the school demonstrate academic success?**

**A. Mission Statement, Guiding Principles, and Core Values**

- 1. What is relationship between TECCA and the TEC Online Academy? Will the existing TEC courses be migrated to the TECCA environment? Is there a separate contract for the CA courses that are offered through the TEC Online Academy? When would the TEC Academy courses be available to students?**

[Response] TECCA would contract with TEC to use the TEC Online Academy online courses. Yes, there would be a cost associated with this. There is an anticipated financial relationship. There is separate governance of TECCA and TEC. What TEC can offer is some of the individual classes that are currently serving our students. Initially there will be two separate learning management systems (LMSs); the ultimate goal is to someday have one LMS. There will be one password students would use for both systems. Courses from both Connections Academy and the TEC Online Academy would be available in the first year. Connections has had experience in other states working with additional course providers.

- 2. Innovative programs, such as a STEM program, internships, and higher education partnerships were mentioned at the beginning but not later in the application. When will these ideas be implemented?**

[Response] Part of the TECCA job is to work with our students, do some needs assessments, and see where partnerships can be developed. The academies will grow as TECCA grows. Some of the STEM academies (course sequences) will be available the first year.

- 3. Will the TEC Online Academy continue if TECCA is granted a certificate? Who would teach the TEC Online Academy courses?**

[Response] Teachers from the districts would teach the courses and would need to be hired by TECCA. TECCA could contract with TEC Online Academy for those courses.

## **B. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

- 1. How will TECCA ensure that students do not fall behind if teachers contact them once every two weeks? At the high school level, if the responsibility rotates, what is the minimum frequency a student would communicate with, for example, the English teacher?**

**[Response]** Once every two weeks is the bare minimum required for synchronous contact (phone calls), and in experience, it is much more frequent than that. TECCA asserts that there will be 24/7 contact available between the learning coach, teacher, and student. Each teacher will have a comprehensive homepage in which to track overall progress, assignments and daily or weekly quizzes. TECCA asserts that if a student fails to make expected progress that there will be “immediate alerts.” The system will indicate the concepts that students are struggling with and will provide for curriculum-based interventions. At the high school level, if a student is doing extraordinarily well, it is possible that he or she might speak with a subject matter teacher once every six weeks. However, if the student was having difficulty, the contact would be more frequent, and it would be initiated by the teacher or principal. There will be synchronous contact between a teacher and individual students every two weeks, but typically there is synchronous contact more frequently. The two-week minimum does not take into account emails, and other forms of contact; the teacher is required to initiate contact every two weeks, even if the student has initiated contact more frequently.

- 2. How often will teachers provide synchronous learning opportunities (teleconferences) for elementary students? For high school students? Is this in addition to the teacher contact, which was also to take place at least every two weeks?**

**[Response]** The synchronous learning opportunities (teleconferences) are scheduled according to the course syllabus and are on a separate schedule, which does not count as teacher contact.

- 3. How will TECCA provide direct instruction for students who need it, such as students with disabilities and ELL students? For ELL students, the state strongly recommends 2.5 hours per day of direct ESL instruction.**

[Response] Synchronous learning opportunities include teleconferences and small group supportive learning. . Teachers can have a private chat with a student during a teleconference, and teleconferences are recorded and are available to students for future use. Phone calls between student, teacher and learning coach can occur at any time and may not occur on a specific schedule, but rather on an as-needed basis. All contact is tracked and documented within the student’s homepage, and is viewable by the student, teacher, parent/learning coach and administrators. Special education teachers work with students individually, in small groups, and in inclusive environments. In a few cases in other schools, Connections has contracted a service provider to provide an educator to goes into a student’s home to work with a student, when required by the IEP.

- 4. How will ELL students be served? Who will teach them? (Specialists are not included in the budget.)**

[Response] – The percentage of ELLs in Connections schools is growing; historically the numbers have been extremely low. Connections Academy has a “model ELL Plan” and will work with each school to personalize that plan and to meet unique requirements approaching in terms of teacher certification. If students need “pull-out service” or “sheltered content instruction,” students will receive these services. These services will be provided through live teleconferences. TECCA plans to hire as many teachers as are needed to provide the services.

- 5. How will TECCA ensure that learning coaches will have the knowledge and skills to effectively coach students? What will TECCA do if a student’s learning coach is inadequate?**

[Response] TECCA’s plan is to comply with Massachusetts’s requirements.

**6. If a student arrives to the school with an IEP, how will TECCA ensure that the IEP is implemented without delay--or that it is modified, if necessary?**

**[Response]** Special education teachers see students individually, and may work in small groups, may teach in an inclusive environment and may co-teach with a content area teacher during a live lesson. There will be a special education manager, special education teachers and guidance counselors available.

**7. How will TECCA ensure that its materials and those of its curriculum partners are accessible to students with disabilities?**

**[Response]** – Connections Academy materials meet accessibility guidelines. In addition, Connections Academy has an accessibility associate who answers an 800 number, and asserts that staff is available to assist students where they need assistance with ACCESS. For example, if a class required a student to view a video, a staff member would assist a blind student by describing the video experience for the student.

**8. How will secondary level students with disabilities receive individualized services and opportunities related to transitioning to adult life, including postsecondary education and training, competitive employment, independent living, and community participation?**

**[Response]** – Connections Academy contracts with agencies in the community to provide assessments, job coaching, and job shadowing. Typically, the school's special education manager is responsible for coordinating this.

**9. How will TECCA support the social/emotional development of students, including students who may have been bullied or are on the autism spectrum?**

**[Response]** TECCA will ensure that “a virtual environment will not be an invisible environment.” TECCA chose to partner with Connection Academy to provide a virtual education that addresses “the whole child” and can meet the needs of students with social and emotional deficits. The TECCA board members believe strongly that virtual education should not be designed to keep students secluded. Board members and Connections Academy staff agreed on the importance of collaboration and engagement between students in a virtual environment. The TECCA board will communicate the expectation that the school’s staff will include psychologists, as well as community coordinators who would coordinate field trips and extra-curricular learning experiences. Also, there is required training for all staff for identifying students in distress. Connections typically offers stipends to parents to serve the role of community coordinators. Teachers ensure that all students are engaged and are participating in the live teleconferences.

**10. Has the CA curriculum been aligned to Common Core standards? Where, for example, do the ELA standards cover nonfiction? Where in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade math is problem solving taught? When will the curriculum be updated?**

**[Response]** Connections courses meet the common core standards. If a course needs revision or enhancement if standards change, or a gap is indentified, this is addressed and rectified. Although the curriculum overall is in alignment with common core standards, there may be “gaps” such as the non-fiction standard, and it will be the responsibility of the board of trustees to hold Connections accountable to filling any gaps. Alignment documents were provided with the application. TECCA’s board of trustees includes an assistant superintendent for curriculum to keep an eye on the curriculum.

**C. Student and Supports (including those for special student populations) (2:15--2:25)**

**1. Which staff are on the Student Support Team? How will it work?**

**[Response]** Student support would mirror what a brick-and-mortar school does and would include the principal, special education teacher, regular education teachers, and parent (if a special education referral has been made). Also, each student is assigned an advisory teacher.



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### 2. Besides extra-curricular activities, how will TECCA provide peer-to-peer interaction?

[Response] The school staff will include psychologists, as well as community coordinators who would provide field trips and extra-curricular learning experiences.

## II. How will the school demonstrate its capacity to deliver proposed programs and services?

### A. Governance

#### 1. What is the state of your organization as a governance board?

[Response] The TECCA board is ready. One of the advantages of having a board of public educators; we understand open meeting law. We have been working as a loose group, but we are not yet an official board. We have drafted our bylaws. We've talked about the process of appointing people to the "real" board. We have hired an attorney to advise us, and his advice is that the TEC folks should not be on the board of directors, so the list we submitted is not the final list of board members.

#### 2. What have you discussed about your ability to make decisions independently if there need to be recusals (because of conflicts of interest if you are an employee of TEC or a board member of TEC)? Also, who hired the lawyer?

[Response] The TEC board of directors authorized \$10,000 for the TECCA board to hire a lawyer, and the TECCA board hired someone. Many of us have been pushing for a clearly defined minimal role of the TEC director, but TEC's name is on the school.

#### 3. How are you going to ensure that TECCA can sever the contract with TEC if, for example, the TEC Online Academy is not working well? How will you make these decisions and work through the potential conflicts?

[Response] One of the things we will do is to have the TEC staff not be voting members on the board.

**4. Is the board prepared to sever the relationships with both Connections Academy and TEC if it had to?**

[Response] We believe Connection has the best product, but if that is not the case in the future, we will go somewhere else, assuming we can make a smooth transition. We do need a partner, but we feel it is a good idea to have relationships with more than one vendor. We could be with even more than two vendors. We see ourselves as a “broker.” We would like the school to reflect the quality we have in our own districts, and we would like to share this quality with the rest of the state. Including the TEC Online Academy is part of the solution.

**5. Can you explain your decision to hire an Executive Director?**

[Response] We need someone taking care of TECCA and not someone receiving a paycheck from the vendor. We need a person who is looking at it 24/7. An executive director will be hired; this person will report to the TECCA board. The Executive Director will ensure that all terms of the contract are met.

**6. Would your plan be disrupted if certificate limited enrollment to 3000 or 2000? Or if only 500 students enrolled?**

[Response] Connections Academy has not placed any constraints on enrollment. We want to open a high quality school; we will deal with lower numbers if needed.

**7. How will the board evaluate the effectiveness of special education and other programs that the vendor is offering?**

[Response] We would evaluate them in the same we evaluate other programs. We want special education, ELL, gifted, and regular programs--we have high expectations for all of them. We would expect to see growth on state tests.

**8. Have you established a process whereby Connections would provide you with that data?**

**[Response]** Yes, Connections has a process. The Connexus system will allow Connections to drill for data and aggregate or disaggregate it. Also our Executive Director will have independent access to the data, including every test—much more than an administrator would have in a traditional school. We will lay out our expectations and include them in our contract with Connections. The system also provides data to teachers in a meaningful way. We feel we have an important oversight role in making sure that Connections delivers.

**9. We didn't see a line item in the budget for paying TEC to leverage TEC's courses. How would that work and who would coordinate it?**

**[Response]** We hope to have a reciprocal tuition agreement for TEC courses, but we have not negotiated the agreement yet. The Executive Director would coordinate this.

**10. Who would handle the internships?**

**[Response]** We don't know yet. We might contract with TEC to do that.

**B. Management and Staff (2:30-2:45)**

**1. How often will TECCA teachers receive professional development?**

**[Response]** Teachers will be licensed in MA; will have strong technology skills, strong communication skills, and strong sense of customer service. The training program that the board envisions will include the Connection's established training program (described in the application), plus additional training from TECCA on topics such as the common core. Connections Academy would provide scheduled trainings, and just-in-time trainings will be provided by TECCA.



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**2. What will be TECCA's process for observing educators? Who will do the observations?**

**[Response]** Live lessons can be observed virtually, and administrators will also be able to observe the way that teachers interact with students by observing their instruction in person at the brick-and-mortar teacher center. All communication will be archived, so administrators can review it. At first, teachers will be required to work onsite in an office in the metro west area. This stipulation is the result of having learned from partners' mistakes in other communities.

**3. Will TECCA be able to hire the necessary number of teachers and administrators (to work in an office in the metro west area) in time for the school to open? What is TECCA's plan to do this? (These teachers will not be eligible to participate in the Massachusetts teacher retirement system.)**

**[Response]** TEC has experience in managing and hiring people, as does Connections. There is a recruiting plan, and Connections is already ramping up so that they will be ready to act if MA grants a certificate.

**4. Does TECCA intend to hire one SPED/ELL manager with expertise in both areas? The proposal mentions ELL and gifted staff; where are they in the budget?**

**[Response]** The number of ELL/Special Education staff needed will be determined by the number of ELL/Special Education students who enroll in the school.

**5. Teacher salaries are \$1,405,000. What will be the salary range for teachers? Does TECCA expect to be able to hire experience teachers?**

**[Response]** Salary range for teachers is in low 40-thousand range for elementary teachers, and mid 40-thousand range for secondary teachers. There is a different market for teachers for virtual schools versus brick-and-mortar schools.

- 6. What is the typical student-to-teacher ratio in other Connections schools? What is the ratio at TECCA? Even with the proposed budget increase, the ratio would be 33 to 1.**

**[Response]** The ratio is an average and it is comparable to the ratio at Connections schools in other states. It is a different environment; the curriculum and tools are provided, so teachers do not need spend time on things like lesson planning or lunch duty, and they have more time to devote to pure teaching and individual students' needs. TECCA is committed to obtaining the "lowest possible student-teacher ratio."

**C. School Finances (2:45-2:55)**

- 1. It looks like supplies and tech for each student will average \$2000—what will students receive, and what happens if a student drops out?**

**[Response]** Some students use their own technology. For families who cannot afford it, the technology will be provided. Connections keeps detailed records on all materials provided to students, and it has a high return rate on materials for students who drop out. (The technology has a built-in tracking device.) The budget that used the default funding rate (\$4925) included one computer per family, whereas the budget that used the requested rate included one computer per student. The assumption made in the budget with the lower budget was that approximately 10% of students would need to be provided with technology.

- 2. If TECCA received \$7000 per students, what percentage goes to Connections?**

**[Response]** At least 40% of the budget is pass-through and most of the funds will be used for teacher salaries and will stay in Massachusetts.



**III. How will the school manage operations?**

**A. School Characteristics (2:55-3:10)**

- 1. How will TECCA gather data from students who drop out and/or from parents who are not satisfied with the school?**

**[Response]** Connections have a formal withdrawal process, which includes surveying and tracking reasons a student leaves. Connections has tools to assess which students are at risk of dropping out so that they can intervene. The TECCA board will request and carefully review monthly reports on topics like drop-outs.

- 2. Page 65 says, "TECCA has an active base of interested families." How will TECCA ensure that every student has an equal opportunity of being enrolled in the school?**

**[Response]** We will have a recruitment plan that will launch all statewide, with advertisements, web-based information, and face-to-face meetings. Everything will be date- and time-stamped, which would be used if is a wait list. We need to reach a quota of 5% from the TEC districts. If demand exceeds the supply of seats, we would have a lottery.

**Any final comments?**

**[Response]** We see this as an opportunity to provide a rigorous and high quality education to students to throughout the Commonwealth.