

Reno, Nevada

Year Started: 2020

Students Enrolled: 1,400

Free & Reduced Lunch: 55%

English Learners: 2%

Instructional Model: Online courses and pre-apprenticeships and/or work-based experiences at training centers and businesses

Nevada Connections Academy (NCA) is a full-time online charter school located in Reno, Nevada, serving students in grades 9 through 12 across the state. While the school has been running since 2007, its career readiness program started in 2020. In the 2020–21 school year, NCA served a total of 1,400 students. All of NCA’s enrolled students are placed on a career track or course progression to graduate college and career ready.

NCA’s Superintendent, Chris McBride, explained further: “When students enroll in NCA, they are required to choose from one of three pathways: (1) Advanced Placement/Honors,

(2) Career Technical Education, or (3) Dual Enrollment.” The CTE program includes NCA’s offerings as well as online courses offered through Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC) in Reno. NCA offers six specific CTE clusters: business management, marketing, and health sciences in-house, and early childhood education, graphic design, and cyber security through the partnership with TMCC. NCA plans to start offering hospitality and tourism for the 2021–22 school year. As Katie Vaughan, NCA’s Grades 11 and 12 Principal emphasized, “The idea was to create opportunities for our students to experience as many career technical options as we could provide. We focused on those we could facilitate in-house, and then for the CTE pathways that we could not pull off in-house, we looked to our college dual enrollment partner to structure those classes.” For students in pathways that require in-person job shadowing as well as clinical hours, such as Health Sciences, these career exploration opportunities are onsite. Those pathways that require software, such as Cybersecurity, have software requirements and textbooks mailed to them.

Throughout the courses, students are introduced to a number of professionals in the fields aligned to their pathway. When students finish the courses in their pathway, they can take the state assessment aligned to that pathway, and if they pass, they can graduate with a College & Career Readiness (CCR) diploma. There are also two pathways that provide opportunities for certifications: Health Sciences and Cybersecurity. One of the challenges for NCA is reaching students who are enrolled from across Nevada. As Christine Dzarnoski, NCA’s High School Principal (Grades 9 & 10), emphasized, “Students are at various locations throughout the state, lots of small towns, hundreds of miles away from each other.” In order to accommodate their needs, students can schedule industry tours and field trips, both in person and virtual, to learn more about potential careers.

To support students’ program navigation, NCA has a CCR specialist as well as a CCR counselor. The CCR specialist manages and monitors the dual enrollment students, while the CCR counselor manages the students who are doing the pathways at TMCC. Additionally, five NCA teachers instruct the NCA CTE courses. The TMCC courses are

taught by the college's faculty. Personnel at TMCC provide grades and any updates as needed to the CCR counselor. The CCR specialist and CCR counselor also host workshops for students focused on writing resumes, interviewing for jobs, navigating the housing market, buying cars, and more. For seniors specifically, NCA provides a mock interview program, where students have the opportunity to sit down with professionals and practice interviewing. NCA also started offering Career Technical Student Organizations, such as Future Business Leaders of America, to help students increase their networking opportunities. In the future, NCA is working on adding the internship portion of the program in 2021-22. The program is also planning to offer a professional mentorship program where they partner students with industry professionals to talk about their goals as well as keep up with what is happening in the field and how it is changing.