

# VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS ACADEMY



## STUDENT & PARENT HANDBOOK

Updated: July 2019

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## **MISSION STATEMENT**

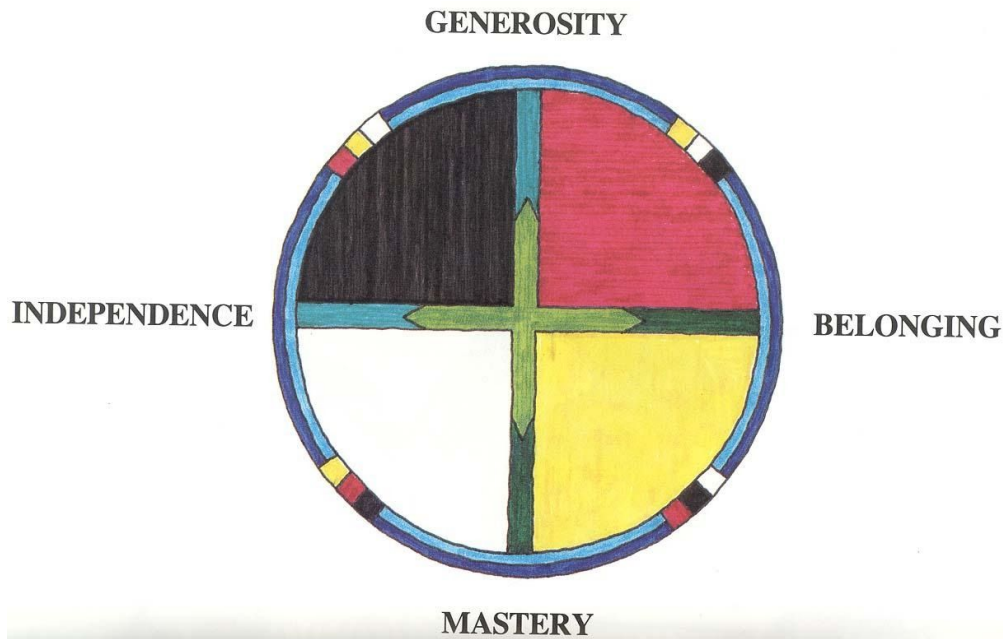
The mission of Virtual Connections Academy is to integrate school, family and community in order to provide the highest quality academic and therapeutic programs.

These programs are designed to enable students to become successful learners through a sense of belonging, mastery, generosity and independence.

## **PROMISE STATEMENT**

- We promise to provide the highest quality, individualized, academic, therapeutic and behavioral services in a physically and emotionally safe school setting for all learners.
- We promise to provide highly committed, well-trained professionals who use data, collaboration and technology to promote best practices that yield success in school and life.
- We promise to provide a broad range of in-house, supportive and educational services within a multidisciplinary environment.
- We promise to collaborate consistently with families, outside providers, school districts and other community partners to ensure students' success.
- We promise to respect the dignity of students and families by maintaining privacy and confidentiality, following laws and regulations and abiding by ethical guidelines.
- We promise to promote acceptance and fairness, honor diversity and recognize the uniqueness and dignity of each student and family.

## THE CIRCLE OF COURAGE



Anthropologists have long known that Native American tribes raised courageous, respectful children by instilling the values of Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity. At our schools, we agree that all people should work to develop these critical life skills throughout their lifetime. Therefore, the Circle of Courage informs all of our work with students, and is evident in the day-to-day functioning of our staff. *For more information about the Circle of Courage, please see our website.*

## GENERAL PROGRAM INFORMATION

The Virtual Connections Academy is a part of a group of private therapeutic day schools, with the first founded in 1998. We serve children and adolescents, ages 6 – 21 who, because of significant special education needs (ED, BD, LD, OHI, AUT & ID), require an alternative school program that is both educational and therapeutic. By utilizing therapeutic, educational, family and community connections, we promote academic achievement, social/emotional well-being and personal growth.

Staff Members employ a variety of methods to help students make academic progress, and develop and/or improve their coping, problem-solving and social skills. By utilizing a combination of respect, humor, empathy, and kindness balanced with firmness (i.e., maintaining high expectations and ensuring that students adhere to rules, boundaries and limitations), Staff Members are able to establish and maintain supportive, nurturing relationships with our students. In turn, these relationships can help the students be more open to learning the life skills required for long-term success.

The students engage in an academically challenging curriculum, which emphasizes group instruction and hands-on activities. The Clinical/Therapeutic Staff utilize a skill-building/problem-solving approach as well as psychodynamic, family-systems, and narrative principles. In addition, the Lakota-Sioux Circle of Courage – which teaches the value of belonging, independence, generosity and mastery – is employed to help students develop these essential life skills. This multi-faceted approach works to assist the students in: overcoming issues at hand; practicing more successful behavioral alternatives; and exploring ways to rewrite their negative life stories.

The goal is to work with students to build on their strengths and gifts, and be allies with them in their “fight” against the challenges and obstacles that get in the way of their success. The environment is based on a positive, nurturing model, where natural, logical consequences for behaviors are frequently utilized. Our philosophy avoids using restrictive and/or punitive methods of behavioral management and does not have a time-out room. Therapeutic holding (restraint) is only employed as a last resort, when a student is presenting as a danger to him/herself or others.

The founders of our programs, chose to base the mission of the schools on philosophical principles similar to those held at Counseling Connections – their multidisciplinary group practice which specializes in the therapeutic needs of children, adolescents and families. The professionals at Counseling Connections have worked closely with the schools, courts, and social service agencies of Lake and Northern Cook Counties since 1983.

The Virtual Connections Academy offer a comprehensive array of support services, including:

- Small Group and Individualized Academic Instruction
- Individual, Group & Family Therapy and Crisis Intervention
- Psychiatric Consultation and Evaluation
- Individual and Group Art Therapy
- Music therapy
- Substance Abuse Evaluation and Individual & Group Therapy
- Occupational Therapy and Speech & Language Evaluations and Services
- Social/Emotional and Coping Skill Building
- A Comprehensive Behavioral Management Program
- Daily School Nurse Services
- Transition and Post-Graduation Preparation

## **A FRESH START**

Our Staff believe that all students deserve a fresh start and an opportunity to learn and to be successful. Through the development of safe, supportive and nurturing relationships, our staff enable students to make academic, emotional and behavioral progress and learn the critical life and social skills necessary to find success in their lives.

While a primary goal is to help our students develop a clear sense of belonging, mastery, generosity and independence (the Circle of Courage); another goal is to boost each student's insight into, and understanding of, their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors:

- how they affect their interpersonal relationships
- how they support, or sabotage, their daily functioning and ability to meet their goals
- how they can better manage their thoughts, feelings and behavior to get their needs met in healthy ways and live the life they want

All struggles or setbacks that may arise during this process are seen as powerful opportunities for growth and learning.

Ultimately, students will get out of their school experience, what they put into their school experience...therefore, those who choose to engage in the program, are respectful of others, exhibit a positive attitude, and are willing to partner with Staff in their process of learning and growing, tend to experience the most success.

## ADMISSION

Admission to the Virtual Connections Academy begins with an initial referral from the student's home school district or the special education cooperative that represents the district. These referrals go directly to the school of choice at which point the school Principal will review the student's records (including current IEP, most recent Multidisciplinary Conference Reports, Case Study Evaluation, psychiatric and psychological reports) and an "intake interview" will take place. Eligibility for the program will be determined and will be reported back to the referral source. Upon entrance to one of our programs the student will spend part of his/her first few days in the program in orientation.

## CURRICULUM

Referred students are between the ages of 6 and 21, depending on the population of the specific Virtual Connections Academy. Appropriate class groupings, with no more than a four year age span in any given room, are maintained at all times.

The Elementary and Junior High School curriculum emphasizes the acquisition of basic academic skills (Reading, Spelling, Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies), and wellness (Physical Education and Health); as well as collaborating with the Therapists to give the

students opportunities for social and emotional growth through therapeutically-relevant group activities, and individual meetings with their therapist.

The High School curriculum is designed to meet the graduation requirements of our student's various home high schools. The curriculum includes courses in English, History, Science, Consumer Economics, Mathematics, Work Study, Health and Physical Education. While classes are generally self-contained, we also use the concepts of team teaching, departmentalization and cooperative learning when appropriate. High school students are also given the opportunity for social and emotional growth through therapeutically relevant group activities, and individual meetings with their therapist.

The Life Skills and Transition Programs work with students supporting them in their process of preparing for independent or semi-independent living and employment. Students work on developing necessary functional skills through class work, practice and community experiences. These skills include: understanding social cues and body language; developing and maintaining relationships; money management; utilizing resources effectively; transportation within the community; time management; safety within the home and community; maintaining proper hygiene; cleaning and maintaining a household; preparing meals; seeking and gaining employment; and finding future educational opportunities.

In addition to our academic curriculum, other related services are offered that are indicated on our student's IEPs, such as: Individual and Group Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Psychiatric Consultation, School Nursing, etc.

## **THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT SERVICES**

Therapeutic services are an integral part of our program. The Clinical Staff/Therapists are here to provide individual, group & family therapy, risk assessment and crisis intervention for each of our students.

Each student is assigned an individual therapist who will meet with him/her in a manner to best meet the student's needs while also meeting the requirements outlined in the student's IEP. Therapy sessions focus on a wide variety of issues, including: reason for referral; primary issues and concerns; level of self-awareness and insight; emotional and behavioral management skills; coping, problem-solving and self-soothing skills; communication and relationship skills, etc. Therapists also serve as the primary contact person for parents; and case managers who coordinate their work with outside service providers, such as: Therapists, Psychiatrists, DCFS Caseworkers, Probation Officers, SASS Workers, etc.

Therapists are available throughout the day for individual therapy sessions, and crisis management. If any staff member feels a student requires therapeutic support, or if a student requests to meet with his/her therapist, the therapist will be contacted, and s/he will pull the student for a session as soon as possible. Therapists collaborate with the teaching staff to identify appropriate times to pull students from their academic day for therapeutic services and support.

Therapists facilitate group therapy within the students' homerooms every day. These groups are focused on the development of social/emotional skills, life skills (Circle of Courage), coping & problem-solving skills and relaxation, self-soothing and stress-management skills. Students also have the opportunity for various specialty groups such as Art Therapy, Music Appreciation, Drug & Alcohol Education and Personal Management. There are also specialized pull-out groups for our students with specifically identified needs.

In order to support our students in their efforts to make, and sustain, progress in their lives, therapists offer, and strongly encourage, family therapy for our students, their parents/guardians, and if possible, siblings and extended family who live in the home.

In addition, there are monthly parent groups and activities in the evenings (schedule available on the school website), where collaboration and communication with staff and families is reinforced; and where guest speakers and educational programs are utilized to explore a variety of topics relevant to families. These topics include: behavioral management within the home, preparation for life transitions, understanding the experience of your special education student, encouraging social/emotional development, addressing drug and alcohol issues, multi-family art therapy, and much more.

### **RESTORATIVE INTERVENTION PROGRAM**

Our school community is based upon mutual respect, cooperation and generosity. Our program is focused on motivating students to demonstrate these values through positive interactions with others, thoughtful listening, group participation, supporting peers, managing their reactions to negative influences, and remaining on task in the classroom. One of our primary goals is to identify student strengths and use these to overcome emotional, psychological, and learning challenges. Our staff are dedicated to helping students understand what affects their behavior and choices, and how these impact both their interpersonal relationships and opportunities for success. Students are encouraged, supported, and rewarded for learning new and more appropriate strategies to meet their needs.

With guidance from staff members, students evaluate their decisions and the correlation to their individual goals, and desired outcomes in the areas of belonging, mastery, generosity, independence. To track their progress in these areas, students utilize a daily point sheet and refer to our level system. Earning points allows students to be eligible for additional privileges and to "spend" their points on various desired items and experiences. Students are therefore taught the relationship between their choices and additional privileges and freedoms.

The restorative interventions put in place are highly individualized, and use both anticipated and actual circumstances as positive teaching opportunities. Maladaptive behaviors and poor decision-making are addressed as immediately as possible using interventions that are individually tailored for each student, and reflective of his/her specific needs. What may look like two very similar incidents on the surface may have very different origins and emotional



context; therefore, each situation calls for a distinct set of interventions, supports, and other actions. This variety of approaches is used to help the student learn the skills and behaviors necessary to succeed.

When a student appears to require more support during the school day, staff members work with the student to identify ways in which the team and the student can be more proactive in the future. At times when students struggle to manage their emotional experiences, staff make every effort to remove the immediate stressor from the situation. Staff are trained to use a progressive series of pre-teaching, verbal prompts and redirection, as well as breaks to provide students with opportunities to make more productive choices in times of stress. Occasionally, students may be removed from the peer group to meet with the therapist, case manager, and/or principal, where the students can receive a higher level of individual assistance. Students are supported in the process of utilizing their coping strategies to regain emotional and behavioral control, and then process through the situation with an Intervention Specialist and other staff as needed. The ultimate goal is to restore students to a regulated state in order to promote learning and success.

It is important to note that we do not endorse the use of time out rooms, mechanical restraint or harsh/punitive interventions. Staff do not engage in physical interventions with a student as a consequence. Highly trained staff members use these techniques as a last resort to ensure the safety of all students and staff members. We believe that students can learn to act in a safe and appropriate manner with the positive guidance of nurturing adults, who promote clear rules, boundaries and expectations within the school.

## **COMMUNICATION & CONSULTATION**

Our organization believes that communication between all those involved with a student is crucial in ensuring success. Every student has an assigned teacher and a primary therapist. Teachers serve as case managers for the students in their homerooms and send home daily behavior report logs (or “home notes”) that indicate the student’s successes and areas of continued focus. These logs should be signed by the student’s parent/guardian, and returned the next school day. Phone calls and messages are always welcome, as are any questions specific to a student’s academic functioning or educational programming.

The therapists at VCA also serve as case managers for their assigned students and families. Any student-specific questions or concerns can be directed to the student’s primary therapist (though all academic questions should be directed to the teacher). Therapists consistently work with parents/guardians to develop opportunities for students to be successful in school, at home, and within their communities. The clinical staff also provides monthly Parents Activities and Groups. In addition, students and parents/guardians will be asked to authorize contact with all outside service providers within the community (therapist, psychiatrist, caseworker, probation officer, SASS, etc.), which allows the therapist to provide the best, and most comprehensive, quality of care for your child.

By developing a collaborative family, school and community partnership, students are given the support, consistency, nurturing and structure they require to make better choices and experience success.

## **RULES, BOUNDARIES & EXPECTATIONS**

**HOURS:** School doors open to students at 8:15am. Classes are in session from 8:30am-2:30pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays; and from 8:30am-1:30pm on Thursdays to accommodate staff in-service training. Students are expected to remain in their classrooms, monitored by Staff, all day, unless otherwise directed.

**TRANSPORTATION:** All students are provided door-to-door transportation by their home school districts. School rules and expectations are in effect from the time a student enters his/her transportation in the morning, through the time s/he is dropped off at home. Our school staff work closely with the transportation companies, and have daily communication with the drivers to ensure that students are behaving appropriately and are adhering to all mandatory safety guidelines. Students must wear their seat belts at all times while on the bus or cab.

**ATTENDANCE:** Attendance is one of the biggest indicators of school success. Students who attend school regularly are naturally exposed to more than those who are routinely absent.

Furthermore, absences can quickly add up. Our goal at Virtual Connections Academy is to have every student present every day for every class. Our schools will do everything within our limited power to compel parents to get their child to school.

In accordance with the Illinois Administrative Code 401.230 (a) 2, it is the Virtual Connections Academy policy to notify both district and parent when a student has reached 5 and/or 10 consecutive days of absences (regardless of whether excused or unexcused) to keep all parties involved in the success of the student.

When a student is absent for 5 consecutive days, a notice will go out to parents and/or district explaining exactly why the student is not in school (hospitalized, truant, incarceration, other, etc.) with interventions that have been attempted by the school team.

When a student has reached 10 consecutive days, a notice will go out to parents and/or district explaining exactly why the student is not in school (hospitalized, truant, incarceration, other, etc.) with interventions that have been attempted by the team; as well as an updated meeting scheduled with district and parents to discuss additional supports to be put in place to get the student to return to school.

Student attendance is a top priority and we will do everything possible to provide parents and district with supports on getting students to attend school regularly.

**EXCUSED ABSENCES:** In order for an absence to be considered Excused, a parent/guardian needs to call the Front Desk **prior to the beginning of the school day** on the day of any absence. If attendance becomes an issue, a doctor's written excuse may be required specifying the dates that the student's absences were excused, and the reason for absence.

**UNEXCUSED ABSENCES:** An absence will be considered Unexcused when the student is not in attendance, and the above protocol has not been adhered to. In addition, a parent/guardian can

call to let us know that, because of their child's poor decision making, his/her absence will not be excused. The home school district will be notified of unexcused absences, and school district officials will initiate contact with truancy officials if the absences become a concern.

**SUMMER TERM ATTENDANCE:** Summer Term consists of 20 school days, and students are expected to be in attendance every day in accordance with their IEP.

**HOMEWORK:** If a student does not complete his/her homework or class assignments by the due date, the student's point sheet will be addressed for not being prepared and teachers will make parents aware of all late and missing assignments on the student's homenote. Students are expected to complete homework according to their teachers' specifications. Staff are here to help problem-solve issues with homework completion in order to promote student success.

**CHECK-IN:** To ensure the safety of both students and staff, all students are searched prior to admittance into the school building. These searches are gender-specific (e.g., female staff search female students and vice versa) unless otherwise stipulated by a student's individual transgender policy. Searches generally include the use of a metal detecting wand, emptying of pockets, removal of outerwear and shoes, and examination of all belongings. Random searches may also be conducted at other times during the school day if deemed necessary by school staff or administration.

**DRESS CODE:** Students are expected to dress in such a way to bring pride to themselves and the school community:

- Shorts, skirts, and dresses must be below the longest fingertip when standing
- Leggings and yoga pants must be thick/opaque enough so as undergarments are not visible
- Tank straps must be at least 1-2" thick
- All undergarments (bras, underwear, boxers, etc.) must be completely covered at all times
- Pants are expected to be worn at, or just below, the waist
- Shirts must cover the entire torso (even when one sits, stretches, bends down, etc.)
- Pants can only have rips/tears that are below the length of the longest fingertip
- Facial piercings must be approved for safety (lip rings, tongue piercings, open gauges, etc may result in injury) (small, single, nose stud is acceptable)
- Ear gauges must be plugged with full closure plugs (no spiked or open gauges, rings, etc)
- Hickeys are to be covered at all times.
- Tattoos that are offensive, gang related, overly sexual, violent, discriminatory, drug related etc. Tattoos that communicate a negative message must be covered.
- All content on clothing must be appropriate for the school environment (Alcohol/drug related advertising or implications, obscene or suggestive language or content, signs/colors/manner that could be gang related are all considered to be inappropriate)
- Oversized belt buckles, hanging straps, or chains are not permitted
- Hooded sweatshirts, coats, hats, scarves, or bandanas can be worn on transportation, and must be put in cubbies during check in

- No garments displaying alcohol/drug related advertising or implications; obscene or suggestive slogans; signs/colors/manner of wearing that could be gang related
- Slippers or Pajamas are reserved for Pajama Day only
- Students need appropriate shoes for P.E. (gym shoes can be left at school)
- Any clothing, piercings, make-up, jewelry, nail polish, etc. that is determined by staff to be disruptive to the educational process or unsafe is prohibited.

If a student is in violation of this dress code, s/he will be asked to turn clothing inside-out, change, or remove certain items if found to be inappropriate by any staff member.

**FOOD:** Students are not allowed to bring any food or drink items into the school building. This includes hard candy, gum, breath mints, etc. Students are provided with a nutritionally balanced, catered lunch and have access to fruit and snacks. Accommodations can be made based on dietary necessity, (e.g., diabetes). Students have access to water throughout the day.

**MONEY & PERSONAL BELONGINGS:** Students do not need to bring money to school. If there is a field trip, parents will receive advanced written notification. If deemed appropriate by the teacher, parents may send spending money in a sealed envelope with the child's name and the amount enclosed, on the front. If a student chooses to bring money to school, they may not be in possession of more than \$10.00. Devices brought to school for use on transportation to and from school, must be used appropriately as indicated in the internet use/social media/communication policy.

These, along with any other non-school related belongings, will be kept in a locked coat room, in their individual cubby, and will be returned to students at the end of the day. Students who have permission to bring mobile phones to school and on transportation, must turn phones off in the building and turn them in with other belongings until they leave the campus. In addition, watches and other wearable devices with texting, calling, internet, and/or communication capability should be left at home or turned off and submitted with other belongings to the school staff during check in procedures. Students who do not follow these rules will be given one warning. Subsequent attempts to bring in excess money, unapproved devices, or items that are inappropriate for the school setting will result in these item(s) being confiscated and returned only to a parent or guardian. South Campus does not allow students to trade, exchange or purchase belongings with/from other students.

**LIVE ANIMALS:** Students are not permitted to bring live animals to school without prior approval of the classroom teacher. Any animals brought to school without approval will be confiscated as soon as they are discovered and parents will be called to immediately pick up the animal.

**CONTRABAND:** In order to promote a safe school environment, students are searched on a daily basis upon their arrival. The following constitutes a list of items/possessions which students are not allowed to bring into school:

1. *Weapons of any kind*, or any instrument that could be construed as a weapon.

2. Cigarettes, e-cigarettes, Vape Pens, lighters and/or matches. Smoking is prohibited on school grounds, including while a student is on his/her transportation to and from school.
3. Sack lunches or other food or beverage items. Organic, nutritionally balanced, hot lunch is provided by the school free of charge on a daily basis.
4. Students are allowed to bring a maximum of \$10 to school. Any amount over \$10 will be held by the front desk and returned at the end of the school day on the first offense. A subsequent incident will require a parent to come pick the money up from school.
5. Prescription Medications – prescription medication that needs to be taken at school must be accompanied by the appropriate consent form provided. This requires both parental and physician signatures.
6. Over-the-Counter-Medication - the provided form must also accompany any pain relievers, allergy medications, cold medications, etc., in order to be brought to school. Students are not allowed to carry these medications loose in their pockets, purses, etc. If any medications are found without the appropriate consent forms, disciplinary actions may occur.
  - For more information about bringing over-the-counter and prescription medications to school, please see the documents: “*HIPPA Law and Your Child’s Medications*” and page 2 of the “*Authorization for the Administration of Medication at School*”, both of which can be found on the school’s website, and must be reviewed and signed by the parent/guardian and student.

**ALCOHOL OR DRUG POSSESSION AND/OR USE:** Students are expected to be free from the effects of illicit drugs or alcohol use while in attendance. Students will refrain from bringing cigarettes, lighters, matches, tobacco products, vapes, e-cigarettes, pills, medications, and drugs or alcohol of any kind. If school personnel suspect that a student is under the influence, or in possession of an illegal substance or paraphernalia, the following options are available to our staff:

- Removal from the peer group
- Assessment of vital signs by nurse
- Assessment by school CAD/C
- Parental notification and possible request to pick up student from school
- Referral/transport to the nearest emergency room
- Police notification if necessary
- Referral for psychiatric treatment and/or hospitalization
- Referral for substance abuse evaluation/treatment
- Staffing with parents/guardians and home school district prior to re-entry

**THREATS OR ACTIONS THAT RESULT IN PHYSICAL OR EMOTIONAL HARM TO OTHERS:** Students are expected to consistently demonstrate respect for others. The Virtual Connections Academy intend to provide a safe, nurturing, comfortable environment for all students and staff members. If a situation arises in which a student becomes threatening, is verbally cruel, harassing, sexually inappropriate and/or becomes physically aggressive in any way the following options are available:

- Immediate one to one behavioral and therapeutic intervention
- Removal from peer group
- Counseling for others involved in the situation
- Peer mediation

- Parental notification and possible request to pick up student from school
- Police notification if necessary
- Removal from school
- Restitution activities for damage of property
- Staffing with school district and parents
- Assessment for psychiatric treatment/hospitalization

**GANG BEHAVIOR:** Students may not wear, possess, distribute, sell, draw or display anything that could be interpreted as a gang sign or symbol. Students may not communicate gang representation verbally, or non-verbally with gestures, handshakes, etc. Students may not solicit others for gang membership through any means.

### **FOID MENTAL HEALTH REPORTING**

The Virtual Connections Academy follows The Illinois State Police Clear and Present Danger Reporting Instructions for School Administrators. This requires School Administrators and Psychologists to report persons who pose a clear and present danger. The school administrative team regularly reviews student risk levels to determine if this report needs to be completed. For more information about FOID Mental Health Reporting please visit:

<http://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27897/documents/FOID%20Documents/FOIDbrochure.pdf>

### **CHILD PROTECTION**

The Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) has the primary responsibility of protecting children through the investigation of suspected abuse or neglect by parents and other caregivers in a position of trust or authority over the child. The staff at our schools are considered mandated reporters of abuse and neglect; therefore, staff members are required to report any suspected child abuse or neglect to DCFS. With the guidance of the school leadership, staff follow the guidelines and policies set forth by the Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act. Once reported to DCFS, DCFS is responsible for the determination of an investigation and future involvement with the family.

### **ACCEPTABLE USE POLICY FOR INTERNET ACCESS**

The use of the Internet shall correlate with the curriculum adopted by your Virtual Connections Academy. A responsible user may use the Internet to research classroom projects, send electronic mail (email), and explore other computer systems. However, with such great potential for education also comes potential for abuse. It is the purpose of this policy to ensure that this valuable resource be used in an appropriate manner.

The school takes precautions, through staff supervision and computer settings, to prevent access to materials that may be defamatory, inaccurate, offensive, or otherwise inappropriate in the school setting. Because information on the Internet appears, disappears, and changes it is not always possible to predict or control what students may locate. While it is possible to select some resources that will be more easily available to students, school officials cannot completely control the Internet environment. Although computers with Internet access are in supervised areas, parents and staff members are responsible for setting and conveying the standards that students should follow.

### **Student Regulations**

1. Our primary purpose in offering the Internet connection is educational. Access to the Internet at school must be for educational purposes and correlate with the educational objectives of the classroom.
2. All students must have parent/guardian permission to access the internet while at school.
3. The use of the school Internet is a privilege, not a right, and inappropriate use will result in being denied this privilege. Senior Staff members will make decisions regarding whether or not a user has violated this policy and may deny, revoke, or suspend access at any time.
4. Users are responsible for actions and activities involving the internet. The following are examples of unacceptable uses of the internet (however, this is not an exhaustive list):
  - a. Illegal distribution of software (pirating – which is a federal offense)
  - b. Using the internet for private, financial, or commercial gain, illegal activity, and/or advertising
  - c. Wastefully using resources, such as file space/memory
  - d. Gaining unauthorized access to resources or entities
  - e. Invading the privacy of individuals
  - f. Using another's account or password with or without permission
  - g. Posting material authored or created by another without consent
  - h. Posting anonymous messages
  - i. Accessing, submitting, posting, publishing or displaying any defamatory, inaccurate, abusive, obscene, profane, sexually explicit, threatening, racially offensive, harassing, or illegal material
  - j. Using the internet while access privileges are suspended or revoked
  - k. Degrading or disrupting equipment or system performance
  - l. Vandalism (defined as any malicious attempt to harm or destroy equipment, data or another user, the internet itself, or any other network. This includes, but is not limited to, the uploading or creation of computer viruses)
5. Users are expected to abide by the generally accepted rules of network etiquette. These include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - a. Be polite. Do not be abusive in your messages to others
  - b. Use appropriate language. No swearing or vulgarities
  - c. DO NOT reveal any personal information (addresses, telephone numbers, pictures, etc)
  - d. Recognize that email is not private and people who operate the system have access to all mail and messages

- e. Do not use the internet in a way that disrupts its use by others
6. School disciplinary action or legal consequences may result from violating acceptable use of internet access

Should a student commit any violation, access privileges will be suspended or revoked. School disciplinary and/or appropriate legal action may be taken depending on the violation or inappropriate use. School Staff do their best to monitor and educate students about appropriate and safe use of the internet.

## **STUDENT ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIBLE AND ACCEPTABLE USE POLICY**

### **Introduction**

The Virtual Connections Academy recognizes the growing use of social media by both staff, parents, and students. We respect that there are both potential benefits and potential problems that can arise from widespread access to web-based technology. To help us navigate this quickly changing trend in user generated social connectivity we have created guidelines for our schools as 'Best Practices' for electronic social media usage. Please read the following thoroughly to understand our required guidelines and expectations for student conduct with regard to personal social media usage.

### **Netiquette**

- Students should always use the internet, network resources and online sites in a courteous and respectful manner.
- Students should use good judgment and follow the schools Code of Conduct.
- Students should also recognize that among the valuable content online there is always unverified, incorrect or inappropriate content. Users should only use trusted sources when conducting research via internet.
- Students should remember not to post anything online that they wouldn't want parents, teachers, or future colleges or employers to see. Once something is online it is 'out there' to be shared and spread in ways you never intended.

### **Personal Safety**

- Students should never share personal information, including phone number, address, birthday, social security number, financial information over the internet without adult permission.
- Students should recognize that communicating over the internet brings with it privacy and associated risks and they should carefully safeguard the personal information of themselves and others.
- Students should never agree to meet someone they meet online in real life without parental permission

### **Cyber-Bullying**



- Cyber-bullying will not be tolerated.
- Do Not engage in cruel behavior. Harassing, disrespecting, impersonating, outing, tricking, excluding, and cyber-stalking are all examples of cyber-bullying.
- Engaging in online behaviors that are intended to harm another person will result in disciplinary action. In some cases Cyber-bullying may be a crime.
- Remember that your activities can be monitored and retained.

### **Social Media**

- The Virtual Connections Academy do not permit staff to accept or request friend or contact requests from any current or former students on any social network sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc).
- It is school policy that students do not communicate with staff through instant messaging, texting, twitter, wall postings or similar media.
- Furthermore, the Virtual Connections Academy does not allow staff to accept invitations to follow information current or former students post on their personal sites, blogs, etc.

### **Electronic Communication**

- The Virtual Connections Academy does not permit the use of email for contact with students unless it is initiated by staff from their school email address for a specific school related reason. Any electronic communication with students who are not currently in the school building (i.e. in the evening at home, student is absent, etc) will have a guardian and school administrator cc'd on the email.
- The Virtual Connections Academy does not allow the use of email for “therapeutic” interactions that should be more appropriately confined to the therapy office visit.
- The Virtual Connections Academy does not allow the use of text messaging between current or former students and staff.
- email messages sent or received on the school’s email system and Internet searches on the school equipment are the property of the school and subject to search at any time.
- Search of Cell Phone Content – Senior Staff have the right to search student cell phones if and when there is reason to believe content of cell phone would confirm potential harm to the cell phone owner or someone else or would cause significant disruption to the school and its academic functions.

### **Use of School Equipment and Internet**

- The computers and software that are utilized by students are owned by the school and are intended to be used for academic purposes only.
- Students are expected to follow the Acceptable Use of Internet guidelines outlined in the Parent/Student Handbook.
- VIOLATIONS of these internet and social media use policies may have disciplinary repercussions including:
  - o Suspension of network, technology, or computer privileges
  - o Notification to parents
  - o Detention or suspension from school and school related activities
  - o Legal action and/or prosecution

### **Use of personal electronic devices:**

- Students' electronic devices are collected and held for the student when the student is checked into the building.
- Students are expected to follow the rules of their respective Virtual Connections Academy regarding what devices are allowed in the building.
- All devices must be turned off when in the building (not just turned to silent).
- Devices may not be shared or loaned to other students.
- No pictures or videos may be taken of students or staff with these devices.
- Students assume all responsibility of their own devices. The school is not liable for any personal electronic devices brought from home.
- These expectations are also applicable to use of devices on students' transportation to and from school.

**Acceptable Use. Students will:**

- use school technologies only for school related activities and research
- follow the same guidelines for respectful, responsible behavior online that I am expected to follow offline
- treat school resources carefully and alert staff if there is any problem with their operations
- encourage positive, constructive discussion when allowed to use communicative or collaborative technologies
- alert a teacher or other staff member if I see threatening/ bullying, inappropriate or harmful content (images, messages, posts) online
- use school technologies at appropriate times, in appropriate places, for educational purposes only
- cite sources when using online sites and resources for research; ensure there is no copyright infringement
- recognize that use of school technologies is a privilege and treat it as such
- be cautious to protect the safety of myself and others
- help to protect the security of school resources

**Unacceptable Use. Students will NOT:**

- use school technologies in a way that is harmful to self or others
- search for inappropriate images or content
- engage in cyber-bullying, harassment, or disrespectful conduct towards others- staff or students
- attempt to circumvent the school's safety measures or filtering tools
- use school technologies to send spam or junk mail
- plagiarize content found online
- post personally-identifying information
- agree to meet someone met online in real life
- use language that would be unacceptable in the classroom
- use school technologies for illegal activities or information on such activities
- attempt to hack or access sites, servers, accounts or content that is not for educational use

This is not an exhaustive list.

## ANTI-BULLYING POLICY

**COMMITMENT TO A HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT:** The Virtual Connections Academy believes that all students have a right to a safe and healthy school environment free from bullying and harassment. We are committed to promoting mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance for all of our students. Our ongoing, school-wide culture promotes a positive reclaiming environment

**BULLYING DEFINED:** Bullying is a behavior that must be addressed because of the potential harmful short and long-term impact that it can have on students. Bullying can lead to depression, low self-esteem, anxiety and feelings of isolation, as well as school refusal and low academic achievement. We believe that bullying is contrary to State Law and contrary to the policy of our schools. We have adopted the definition for bullying as created by the Illinois Legislature.

*The Illinois legislature defines "Bullying" as: "Any severe or pervasive physical or verbal act or conduct, including communications made in writing or electronically, directed toward a student or students, that has or can be reasonably predicted to have the effect of one or more of the following:*

- 1. Placing the student or students in reasonable fear of harm to the student's or students' person or property*
- 2. Causing a substantially detrimental effect on the student's or students' physical or mental health*
- 3. Substantially interfering with the student's or students' academic performance*
- 4. Substantially interfering with the student's or students' ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by a school.*

*Bullying may take various forms, including, without limitation, one or more of the following: harassment, threats, intimidation, stalking, physical violence, sexual harassment, sexual violence, theft, public humiliation, destruction of property, or retaliation for asserting or alleging an act of bullying. This list is meant to be illustrative and non-exhaustive."*

**CONDUCT OFF SCHOOL GROUNDS:** If any of the above conduct occurs off of our school grounds, but still creates, or could reasonably be expected to create, a substantial disruption in the school setting and/or at school sponsored activities and events, this conduct may be subject to the conditions set forth in this policy.

**REPRISAL OR RETALIATION AND FALSE ACCUSATIONS:** Reprisal or retaliation against any person who reports a bullying incident is prohibited under this policy. Reporting an incident to staff in good faith will not reflect upon the individual's status, nor will it affect grades or employment status.

Appropriate remedial actions may be imposed on those making false accusations of bullying as a means of retaliation or as a means of bullying. Since bystander support of harassment or bullying can support negative bullying behaviors, the Connection Organization prohibits both

active and passive support for bullying. The Staff will provide encouragement and support for students to walk away from acts of bullying.

**CURRICULUM AND TRAINING:** A curriculum segment, specific to bullying prevention, will be taught to our students on an annual basis. Staff may also receive updated training on their responsibilities for responding to incidents of bullying as needed.

**RESPONSE PROCEDURES:** Through established behavioral and teaching strategies school employees are engaged in an ongoing effort to prevent incidents of bullying from occurring. We realize that there is a continuum of bullying behaviors which starts with interactions that might be considered mildly inappropriate. Staff provides student supervision, close observation so that even minor inappropriate student interactions are responded to in an effort to prohibit bullying from occurring. Staff members are expected to intervene according to our internal procedures when they see a bullying incident occur. All other members of the school community, including students, parents, volunteers and visitors, are encouraged to report any act that they think may be a violation of this policy.

All incidents of reported/suspected bullying will be investigated, making reasonable efforts to complete the investigation within 10 school days. Parents and or guardians of all students involved in these incidents will be promptly informed. Appropriate school personnel with experience and training in bullying will be included in this investigation process. The Principal and other Administrators will be informed of the investigation and outcome. Consistent with Federal and State laws governing student privacy rights, the parents and guardians of the students who are parties to the investigation will be provided relevant information and the opportunity to meet with appropriate school staff/administration to discuss the investigation, findings and the actions taken to address the reported incident of bullying.

**CONSEQUENCES:** The following factors will be taken into consideration when determining appropriate consequences: age, developmental issues, disabilities, degree of harm, surrounding circumstances, nature and severity of the behavior, past or continuing patterns of behavior, relationship between the involved parties, and the context in which the incident has occurred. Counseling services, restorative measures, social-emotional skill building and community-based services may be made available to assist victims of bullying as well as those who have perpetrated the bullying behavior. A hierarchy of consequences may be used as a basis for determining the disciplinary action.

**NOTIFICATION AND REVIEW PROCESS:** Students, parents and staff will be made aware of this policy. The policy will be incorporated into the Student/Parent Handbook, and the respective Virtual Connections Academy Employee Handbook, both of which are distributed annually, and will be distributed to parents, students and staff as appropriate. This policy shall be reviewed for its effectiveness in limiting/eliminating bullying every two years. The school keeps data on student behavior that will be utilized in this evaluation. Any changes made to this policy will be made available to all stakeholders and posted on our website.

**SCHOOL CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you would like any further information, or have any questions or concerns, please contact the school Principal.

# POLICY ON TRANSGENDER & GENDER NON-CONFORMING STUDENTS

## PURPOSE

1. To foster an educational environment within Virtual Connections Academy that is safe, welcoming, and free from stigma and discrimination for all students, regardless of gender identity or expression.
2. To facilitate compliance with local, state and federal laws concerning bullying, harassment, privacy, and discrimination.
3. To ensure that all students have the opportunity to express themselves and live authentically.

**A Note on Terminology:** Transgender and gender nonconforming youth may use different words to describe their lives and experiences of gender. Terminology and language can differ based on region, language, race or ethnicity, age, culture, and many other factors. Examples of terms used by some youth include: trans, trans girl, trans boy, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, and Two Spirit. These terms often mean different things or refer to different experiences of gender. All staff will use the terms that students use to describe themselves and avoid terms that make these students uncomfortable.

## DEFINITIONS

These definitions are provided not for the purpose of labeling students, but rather to assist in understanding this policy and the legal obligations of the Virtual Connections Academy staff. Students may or may not use these terms to describe themselves or their experiences.

**Bullying:** Any severe or pervasive physical or verbal act or conduct, including communications made in writing or electronically, directed toward a student or students that has, or can be reasonably predicted to have, the effect of one or more of the following:

1. placing the student or students in reasonable fear of harm to the student's or students' person or property
2. causing a substantially detrimental effect on the student's or students' physical or mental health
3. substantially interfering with the student's or students' academic performance
4. substantially interfering with the student's or students' ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by their school

Bullying can take various forms, including one or more of the following: harassment, threats, intimidation, stalking, physical violence, sexual harassment, exclusion, sexual violence, theft,

public humiliation, destruction of property, or retaliation for asserting or alleging an act of bullying. This list is meant to be illustrative and non-exhaustive.

This also includes bullying that is based on a student's actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, size, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, religion, privileges provided by their school, socioeconomic status, or another distinguishing characteristic. This also includes conduct that targets a student because of a characteristic of a friend, family member, or other person or group with whom a student associates.

**Cisgender/Cis:** Term used to describe people whose gender identity corresponds solely with their sex assigned at birth - male or female.

**Gender Expression:** The manner in which a person represents or expresses gender to others, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, activities, voice, or mannerisms.

**Gender Identity:** A person's deeply held knowledge of their own gender, which can include being female, male, another gender, or no gender. The responsibility for determining an individual's gender identity rests exclusively with the individual. Gender identity is not determined by body parts or sex assigned at birth.

**Gender Nonconforming:** Gender expressions that fall outside of societal expectations for one's sex assigned at birth.

**Intersex:** A general term used for the many ways in which a person can be born with chromosomes, reproductive anatomy, and/or genitalia that do not fit the typical definitions of female or male.

**Nonbinary/Genderqueer:** These are terms often used to describe people whose gender is not exclusively male or female, including those who identify with a gender other than male or female, as more than one gender, or as no gender.

**Pronouns:** A word used to refer to someone without using their name. Common pronouns include, but are not limited to: she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, ze/zir/zirs.

**Sex Assigned at Birth:** Typically, the assignment of "male" or "female" at birth by a medical professional based on visible body parts. This binary assignment does not reflect the natural diversity of bodies or experiences.

**Sexual Orientation:** The gender or genders to which one is romantically, emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted. Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity.

**Transgender/Trans:** Individuals with an affirmed gender identity different than their sex-assigned at birth. Transgender can be used as an umbrella term that encompasses diversity of gender identities and expressions. This term applies to identity, not body parts.

**Transition:** The process in which a person begins to live according to their gender identity, rather than the gender they were thought to be at birth. Transition is a process that is different for everyone, and it may or may not involve social, legal, or physical changes. There is no one step or set of steps that an individual must undergo in order to have their gender identity affirmed and respected.

**Questioning:** Being unsure of your gender identity, being unsure of your sexual orientation, or both. Many people go through a stage of questioning during their lives, sometimes several times. This can be because they learn new words that fit them better, or it can be that their actual feelings of gender or attraction change over time.

## **SCOPE**

This policy covers conduct that takes place in the school, on school property, and on school buses or vehicles, during a student's commute to and from school. This policy also pertains to the use of electronic communication that occurs in the school, on school property, on school buses or vehicles, and on school computers, as well as any electronic communication that is directed at a student and substantially interferes with the student's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by the school. This policy applies to the entire school community, including school staff, students and parents.

## **INTAKE**

While all Virtual Connections Academy staff are responsible for knowing and upholding the contents of this policy, students are encouraged to work with their school administration to coordinate gender-related supports. When a student and/or a student's parent(s)/guardian(s) contacts staff requesting support at school, the staff shall notify the school administration. A meeting will be held with the student and family regarding the request for support. In the interim, between this request and the meeting, a lack of a meeting shall not prohibit staff from treating students in a manner consistent with their gender identity.

## **BULLYING, HARASSMENT & DISCRIMINATION**

Discrimination, bullying, and harassment on the basis of gender identity or expression is prohibited within Virtual Connections Academy, and it is the responsibility of each school and their staff to ensure that all students, including transgender and gender nonconforming students, have a safe school environment. The scope of this responsibility includes ensuring that any incident of discrimination, harassment, or bullying is given immediate attention, including investigating the incident, taking age- and developmentally-appropriate action, and providing students and staff with appropriate resources and supports. Complaints alleging discrimination or harassment based on a student's actual or perceived gender identity or expression are taken seriously and handled in the same manner as other discrimination, bullying, or harassment

complaints. This process is outlined in Virtual Connections Academy Anti-Bullying Policy, which focuses on education and prevention, rather than exclusionary discipline.

## **PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY**

The Virtual Connections Academy shall ensure that all personally identifiable and medical information relating to transgender and gender nonconforming students shall be kept confidential in accordance with applicable state, local, and federal privacy laws. School staff shall not disclose any information that may reveal a student’s transgender identity to others, including parents or guardians and other school staff, unless legally required to do so, or unless the student has authorized such disclosure. In the rare instance that a school is legally required to disclose a student’s transgender status, Virtual Connections Academy will provide the student an opportunity to make that disclosure themselves, where practicable. This would include providing the student with any support services they need to make the disclosure in a safe and supportive environment.

Transgender and gender nonconforming students have the right to discuss and express their gender identity and expression openly and to decide when, with whom, and how much to share private information. The fact that a student chooses to use a different name, to transition at school, or to disclose their transgender status to staff or other students does not authorize school staff to disclose a student’s personally identifiable or medical information. When school staff interact with parents, guardians, district representatives, or other collateral contacts, school staff will ask the student whether to use the name and pronouns that correspond to their gender identity, or whether to use their legal name and corresponding pronouns with these individuals. (See “Student Transitions” below.)

## **NAMES, PRONOUNS & SCHOOL RECORDS**

Every student has the right to be addressed by the name and pronouns that correspond to the student’s gender identity. Regardless of whether a transgender or gender nonconforming student has legally changed their name or gender, Virtual Connections Academy will allow such students to use the chosen name and gender pronouns that reflect their identity.

If the student has previously been known at school by a different name, school staff will use the student’s chosen name and pronouns when asked to do so by the student. If the student would also prefer consistency within their school records, every effort will be made to immediately update student education documents and records (such as attendance reports, class and therapist rosters, report cards, electronic records, etc.) with the student’s chosen name and appropriate gender markers. For example, the student can identify if they would prefer John Doe (birth name), Jane Doe (chosen name), or John “Jane” Doe (both names) on these records. With the student’s permission, this information will also be communicated to the student’s hometown school so that similar changes can be made to the student’s permanent school records held in that location. Finally, in consultation with the home district and with the student’s permission, this information will also be shared with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) via phone, in



order to ensure that the student's name is changed in their Student Information System (SIS) to guarantee continuity. Within this ISBE system, there is only a binary (male/female) option for identifying gender, and it is mandatory to choose one. Therefore, the student will determine which option they prefer.

## **ACCESS TO GENDER-SEGREGATED ACTIVITIES & FACILITIES**

**Restrooms:** All restrooms in Virtual Connections Academy are gender neutral, meaning, they are accessible to all students, regardless of their identified gender. When students leave school grounds and only have access to gender segregated facilities, students will use whatever restroom they prefer. Access to restrooms and locker rooms for non-binary students and students questioning their gender will be determined on a case-by-case basis, in conversation with that student. In all cases, school staff will provide students with options for staff support and/or accompaniment to help them feel safe, comfortable, and included when off school grounds.

**Morning Check-In:** Any student who identifies as transgender or gender nonconforming will be given the option to stand in the check-in line of their choice, or receive a private check-in with two staff members. If the student chooses a private check-in, they can also identify their preference for male or female check-in staff members, or a combination of male and female staff members.

**Physical Education Classes and CAAEL Activities:** All students shall be permitted to participate in physical education classes and Chicago Area Alternative Education League (CAAEL) activities in a manner consistent with their gender identity.

## **DRESS CODE**

Students have the right to dress in accordance with their gender identity and expression, including maintaining a gender neutral appearance, within the constraints of the Virtual Connections Academy' dress code. The school may not adopt a dress code that restrict students' clothing or appearance on the basis of gender.

A student whose gender expression is different from societal expectations based on the student's sex assigned at birth shall not be considered disruptive of the educational process or in interference with the maintenance of a positive teaching/learning climate. All students shall be permitted to wear gender-affirming clothing to school, including at school events such as dances and graduation.

## **STUDENT TRANSITIONS**

Virtual Connections Academy recognize that each student has a unique process for transitioning, and that it may or may not involve social, legal, or physical changes. There is no one step or set of steps that an individual must undergo in order to have their gender identity affirmed and respected, and staff will accept the gender identity that each student asserts. A student is not

required to obtain legal and/or medical or psychological documentation as a prerequisite to having their gender identity recognized. Students ready to transition at school will be fully supported in their process of changing their name, pronouns, attire, and access to gender-related programs, activities, and facilities consistent with their gender identity as it develops.

## **TRAINING & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Virtual Connections Academy conducts training for all staff members on their responsibilities under applicable laws and this policy. Following the adoption of this policy, staff shall be trained on its content and their professional responsibility to uphold the policy. This policy will also be incorporated into the training provided for all new employees.

## **PUBLICATION**

This policy will be distributed to all new students upon entrance into Virtual Connections Academy, and annually to returning students, parents/guardians, and staff at the beginning of every school year. It is also a part of the Virtual Connections Academy Student & Parent Handbook, Faculty Handbook, and website.

## **SCHOOL CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you would like further information, or have any questions or concerns, please contact the Principal at [tguild@virtualconnectionsacademy.net](mailto:tguild@virtualconnectionsacademy.net).

## **MEDICATION**

Whenever possible, the parent or guardian should make arrangements for medication to be administered at home, before and/or after school hours. If a student's physical health and/or emotional wellbeing require the administration of medication during school hours, then the school policies and procedures are as follows:

- 1) Medication(s) are defined as all prescription and non-prescription (over the counter) pharmaceuticals and preparations. This includes but is not limited to; pain relievers, fever reducers, cough drops, eye drops, contact lens solutions, inhalers, allergy medications, skin ointments/lotions.
- 2) Medication will not be administered at school without a written physician's order and written parent/guardian permission on our school Authorization for the Administration of Medication form.
- 3) Prescription medication must be provided in the original pharmacy or physician labeled container clearly marked with the student's name and directions for use. Over the

counter (OTC) medications must be in the original manufacturer's packaging and clearly marked with the student's name.

- 4) It is the parent/guardian's responsibility to provide the school with any and all medications/preparations that have been authorized to administer.
- 5) All student medications (prescription and over the counter) must be **delivered to school by the parent, guardian, or other responsible adult approved by the school administration. The student may not bring in medication, and medication is not to be brought in by the driver of transportation.** You may deliver medications to the school Monday thru Friday, 8am to 4pm (Mon. – Thur. during summer session).
- 6) All medications, which are taken during school hours, will be locked in the nurse's office. An exception may be considered for bronchial inhalers with physician orders and parent permission.
- 7) The parent/guardian must assume responsibility for informing the school of any change in the student's health, or medications. Written Physician Orders and Parent Permission must accompany changes in medication given at school.
- 8) The school will act based on the health and medication information provided by the parent/guardian and health care provider(s). It is expected that the information provided is accurate, complete and up-to-date and that any changes will be communicated to the school in an expedited manner.

## **SUSPENSION POLICY**

Positive, proactive alternatives to suspension are emphasized at Virtual Connections Academy. However, misbehavior by a student that endangers self, others or property may result in a recommendation to the student's home school district that s/he be suspended for a total of no more than 10 days during a school year. Suspensions are a permissible educational procedure for all students when identified as a behavioral management technique in the student's IEP. Multiple suspensions will result in a staffing with the student's school district to determine necessary revisions in the student's programming, additional supportive services and/or alternative placement.

## **EXTENDED SCHOOL YEAR (ESY) / SUMMER TERM**

Every alternative school is mandated by the Illinois State Board of Education to have a Summer school program. The purpose of this Summer Term is to provide structure to alternative school students over the summer months, in an effort to prevent regression caused by an interruption in the educational and social/emotional process. Summer Term is an opportunity for students to earn 1 High School credit, or extra credit towards their next year in Grade School or Junior High School.

The Summer Term begins, after a short break, and consists of 20 school days spread out over 5-7 consecutive weeks. Students are required to be in attendance for all of ESY in accordance with their IEP. Summer Term is followed by approximately 26 days of Summer Vacation.

Summer Term is a mandatory part of the academic and social/emotional program, and a required part of a student's education, according to his/her IEP. If a student does not attend Summer Term, a placement cannot be held for them, and they will likely require an alternative school placement in the Fall.

### **TRANSITION TO MAINSTREAM/GRADUATION**

Successful transition to a less restrictive educational environment is our ultimate goal for ALL students. Examples of transition are: returning to the home school district, attending the CLC Technology Campus, engaging in a job training program, etc. The criteria to meet this goal, and time-line for this process, will be individualized for each student. However, the following list identifies the basic expectations that must be met in order for transition to be considered:

- The Student maintains an acceptable attendance rate.
- The Student earns, and maintains, passing grades (C or better).
- The Student is an active and appropriate participant in all forms of therapy – Individual, Group and Family therapy.
- The Student consistently demonstrates appropriate, positive school behaviors; sets a good example for peers and has little use for the Restorative Interventions and Supports Office (RIS).
- The Student is showing consistent effort to meet IEP goals.
- The Student's team (teacher and therapist) believes that this student is appropriate for a transition, and that it is in his/her best interest.
- The Student feels prepared to manage a transition in placement.
- Parents/Guardians feel that their child is prepared to manage a transition in placement.

### **GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS**

Graduation requirements for Junior High School and High School students are established by the home school district. Upon meeting these requirements, and if approved by the home school district, the student is eligible to participate in graduation ceremonies, both at the Virtual Connections Academy he/she attends and his/her home school. The student will receive a certificate of completion from the alternative school and a formal diploma from his/her home school district.

### **STUDENT RECORDS**

**PERMANENT RECORDS:** These records consist of: identifying information; academic transcripts; ranks and scores on college entrance examinations; attendance records; accident reports; health records; extracurricular activities; honors & awards and release of information forms. The

school shall maintain these permanent records, in any convenient form, not less than six (6) years after the student has transferred, graduated or otherwise permanently withdrawn from school.

**TEMPORARY RECORDS:** These records consist of all information not required for permanent records. These items could include: family background information; intelligence and aptitude testing results; psychological reports and casenotes; teacher anecdotal records and conference reports; honors; extracurricular activities; disciplinary information; Special Education files; and release of information forms. The temporary record shall not be maintained beyond its period of usefulness to the school, and in no case longer than five (5) years after the student has transferred, graduated or otherwise permanently withdrawn from school.

**REVIEW OF RECORDS:** Parents have the right to inspect, copy and review records of their child. A qualified professional will assist the parent in interpreting the information contained in their child's record. A parent may authorize release of the student records (in part or whole) by signing a consent form. Students may inspect their permanent records. Any student who is 18 years of age has all inspection rights accorded to parents. Records may be forwarded to a school district in which a student seeks to enroll and/or when a student moves into a new school district with a signed release of information.

In accordance with the Illinois Administrative Code 401.270 (d), the Virtual Connections Academy will return to the students' public school, all the students records of students who are no longer attending (as listed below) within 30 calendar days and maintain a record of having returned said records. Upon receipt of students' record, public school administrator will sign and return student receipt.

The following items will be returned to the public school for each student:

- State medical and county medical information
- IEP information from previous placement(s)
- Behavioral information from previous placement(s)
- Original copy of IEP paperwork and reports
- All case notes
- Any previous report cards and/or attendance reports from previous placement(s)

The Virtual Connections Academy will keep:

- Intake information
- Releases/registration
- Nurse reports/medication logs
- Copy of most recent IEP paperwork and reports
- Domain paperwork
- Staffing notes/conference notices
- Copy of FBA/BIP
- School billing/attendance calendars
- School report cards/progress reports

Student records that are kept at the Virtual Connections Academy will be archived for 2 years for a regular day school student and 1 year for diagnostic student before they are archived.

## **IN CASE OF EMERGENCY**

The staff at the Virtual Connections Academy often only access their email and voicemail communications during normal school hours (*School Year – Monday-Friday, 8am-4pm | Summer Term – Monday-Thursday, 8am-4pm*). Outside of these hours, email and voicemail communications with school staff are **not to be used for emergency purposes**. In the event of an emergency, please call 911 or go to your nearest emergency room for assistance.

**Virtual Connections Academy**

**RECEIPT & ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I have received a copy of the Virtual Connections Academy **Student & Parent Handbook** (*updated: July, 2019*), and have read through the provisions set therein with my child.

I understand the provisions of this handbook, and have discussed all questions, comments and concerns with the Senior Staff Members at Virtual Connections Academy, **Dr. Tanya Guild** (Principal), **Dr. Bernadette Santiago** (Senior Clinical Psychologist). Administrative staff can be reached at **(224) 801-8821** or through email. Please call the front desk, or see the school website for specific phone extensions and email addresses.

I understand that the school has the right to change, modify, alter or cancel any provision of the handbook without notice; and that the handbook supersedes all policies, written or oral, that may have been in effect.

I have kept a copy of this handbook, and know that I can find it on the school website, so that I may refer to it at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Parent/Guardian Printed Name**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Parent/Guardian Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Student Printed Name**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Student Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**