

BEFORE THE TENNESSEE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

**2012 CHARTER SCHOOL APPEAL
CONNECTIONS PREPARATORY ACADEMY**

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-108, sponsors proposing to open new charter schools may appeal the denial of their amended applications by a local board of education to the State Board of Education (State Board).

On April 3, 2012, a hearing was held at the Jackson/Madison County Board of Education in Jackson, Tennessee, to consider Connections Preparatory Academy's appeal of the denial of its application by the Jackson/Madison County Board of Education.

Based on the following procedural history and findings of fact, I believe that the decision to deny Connections Preparatory Academy's application was not "contrary to the best interests of the pupils, the school district, and the community", and therefore recommend that the Board affirm the decision of the Jackson/Madison County Board of Public Education.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. On November 17, 2011, the Jackson/Madison County Board of Education unanimously denied Connections Preparatory Academy's initial application, following the unanimous recommendation of the Jackson/Madison County charter school review committee.

2. Connections Preparatory Academy amended and resubmitted its application.

3. On December 13, 2011, Jackson/Madison County Board of Education voted to deny Connections Prep.'s amended application, following another unanimous recommendation of the review committee.

4. Because the denial was based, in part, on substantial negative fiscal impact, Jackson/Madison County submitted documentation to the State Treasurer, David Lillard, on December 14, 2011.¹

5. On March 16, 2012, the State Treasurer determined that Connections Preparatory Academy's chartering would not have a substantial negative fiscal impact.

6. Connections Preparatory Academy then appealed the denial by email to the State Board, received March 21, 2012.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Jackson/Madison County Charter School Review Committee included the following individuals, who reviewed the application submitted during this application window:

- a. Doris Battle, Deputy Superintendent, Jackson/Madison County Schools
- b. Carolyn Carter, Director of School Success, Jackson/Madison County Schools
- c. Eddie Hayes, Director of Operations/Finance, Jackson/Madison County Schools
- d. Portia Hegmon, Supervisor for Pupil Services, Jackson/Madison County Schools
- e. Dr. Brian Ford, Director of Human Resources, Jackson/Madison County Schools

2. The committee did not include any members who were not employees of the school district.

¹ As provided in T.C.A. § 49-13-108 (b)(2).

3. Using the Tennessee Department of Education’s (TDOE) scoring criteria for the application, the review committee scored the application in each of the four domains outlined on the TDOE scoring sheet: Mission, Education Plan, Founding Group, Business/Operations Plan.

4. On the initial application, Connections Prep.’s scores were labeled according to the scoring criteria developed and promulgated by the State Department of Education. Connections Preparatory Academy Charter School earned a total of 20.6 out of 100 possible points:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Mission | 2.2 out of 10 possible (22%; considered “inadequate”) |
| Education Plan | 4.8 out of 40 possible (12%; considered “inadequate”) |
| Governance | 7.15 out of 20 possible (37.5%; considered “inadequate”) |
| Business/Operations | 6.25 out of 30 possible (21%; considered “inadequate”) |

5. After the Jackson/Madison County School Board voted to deny Connections Prep.’s initial application, Jackson/Madison County sent Connections Prep. the recommendation report of the committee, the average scores from the committee, and overall reasons for denying the Connections Prep. Academy Charter School application.

6. Connections Prep. Academy’s amended application earned a total of 25.1 out of 100 possible points:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Mission | 2.4 out of 10 possible (24%; considered “inadequate”) |
| Education Plan | 5.9 out of 40 possible (14.75%; considered “inadequate”) |
| Governance | 7.3 out of 20 possible (36.5%; considered “inadequate”) |
| Business/Operations | 9.5 out of 30 possible (31.7%; considered “inadequate”) |

7. After review of the application, the committee unanimously recommended denying the amended application. Ultimately, the Board determined that the authorization of the charter would be contrary to the best interests of the students of Jackson/Madison County Schools

and would have a substantial negative fiscal impact to the overall school district budget. The committee had the following specific concerns:

a. Mission- In evaluating the application, the committee noted that the mission failed to demonstrate that the school had a commitment to high expectations.

b. Education Plan- Among the many deficiencies cited in this section, the committee cited that the assessment plan was lacking in detail and failed to make the connection between the assessment approach, instructional methods, and the school's mission. In addition, the committee noted a lack of congruence between the proposed instructional goals and the mission of the school.

c. Governance- The review committee was not convinced by the submitted application that the rules and policies would be sufficient to carry out effective operations of the school, citing a failure to demonstrate how the board would exercise financial oversight and processed decision-making.

d. Business Operations- Overall, the review committee found the business operations to be inadequate to sustain a high-performing school. The committee noted the many instances in which a personnel position, equipment, or supplies were included in a section of the application, but not included in the proposed budget. In addition, they cited a failure to provide a clear and realistic timeline for opening the school; the absence of plans for recruitment of students; and a lack of a plan for risk-management.

CONCLUSION

Pursuant to T.C.A. 49-13-108(b)(2), the State Treasurer, David Lillard, determined that the approval of Connections Preparatory Academy Charter School would not have a substantial

negative fiscal impact on Jackson/Madison County Schools. His determination is final, thus that issue will not be considered in my recommendation.

State law requires the State Board of Education to review the decision of the local board of education and determine whether the denial of the charter school was in the “best interest of the students, school district, and the community.”² Approval of public charter schools must be “in the form of a written agreement signed by the sponsor and the chartering authority, which shall be binding upon the governing body of the public charter school.”³ This means that when the local board of education votes to approve a charter school, it must be ready to sign that binding document at the same time, just as it would any other contract it approves.⁴ Because of the important nature of such a contract, the charter sponsor must take care to include details with enough specificity that an authorizer can measure, with confidence, the school’s likelihood of success upon approval.

After the April 3rd hearing, I have no doubt that Connections Preparatory Academy has the passion and community support for their proposed charter school. However, after reading the application, reviewing the scoring rubric, and hearing the evidence presented by Jackson/Madison County Schools, it appears that the application lacked consistency in tying its mission for the school to the day-to-day operations of the school. Further, it became quite apparent that the application lacked key components one would expect a quality charter application to contain.

Based on the above findings, I do not believe that the decision to deny Connections Preparatory Academy’s charter application was contrary to the best interests of the students, the school district, and the community. Therefore, I recommend that the State Board of Education


² T.C.A. § 49-13-108(a)(3).

³ T.C.A. § 49-13-110(a).

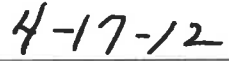
⁴ The Tennessee Attorney General recently confirmed that this is what the statutory language means. See Op. No. 10-45, available at <http://www.tn.gov/attorneygeneral/op/2010/op/op10-45.pdf> (last viewed July 21, 2010).

Connections Preparatory Academy – Public Charter School Appeal – April 2012

affirm the decision of Jackson/Madison County School Board. At the same time, the Board should encourage the leaders of Connections Preparatory Academy to take the passion and community support, coupled with a solid application and consider applying in the future.



Dr. Gary L. Nixon, Executive Director
State Board of Education



Date