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**BEFORE THE TENNESSEE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION**

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IN RE: )  
ROCKETSHIP TENNESSEE #3 ) State Board of Education Meeting  
Charter School Appeal ) October 14, 2016  
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**FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION REPORT**  
**OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

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Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. (T.C.A.) § 49-13-108, sponsors proposing to open new charter schools may appeal the denial of their amended application by a local board of education to the State Board of Education (“State Board”). On August 19, 2016, Rocketship Education (“Sponsor”), the Sponsor of the proposed Rocketship Tennessee #3 (“Rocketship”), appealed the denial of their amended application by Metro Nashville Public Schools (“MNPS”) Board of Education to the State Board.

Based on the following procedural history, findings of fact, and Review Committee Report attached hereto, I believe that the decision to deny the Rocketship amended application was not “contrary to the best interests of the pupils, school district, or community.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I recommend that the State Board affirm the decision of MNPS to deny the amended application for Rocketship.

**STANDARD OF REVIEW**

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108 and State Board policy 2.500, State Board staff and an independent charter application review committee (“Review Committee”) conducted a de novo, on the record review of Rocketship’s amended application. In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education’s charter application scoring rubric, “applications that do not meet or exceed the standard in all sections (academic plan, operations plan, financial plan, and, if applicable, past performance) . . . will be deemed not ready for approval.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the State Board is required to hold a public hearing in the district where the proposed charter school seeks to locate.<sup>3</sup>

In order to overturn the decision of the local board of education, the State Board must find that the local board’s decision to deny the charter application was contrary to the best interests of the pupils,

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<sup>1</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

<sup>2</sup> Tennessee Charter School Application Evaluation – Ratings and Sample Scoring Criteria, pg. 1.

<sup>3</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

school district, or community.<sup>4</sup> Because Rocketship is proposing to locate in an LEA that contains a school on the current or last preceding priority school list, the State Board has the ability to approve the application, and thereby authorize the school, or to affirm the local board's decision to deny.

#### **PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

1. On February 1, 2016, the Sponsor submitted a letter of intent to MNPS expressing its intention to file a charter school application for Rocketship.
2. The Sponsor submitted its initial application for Rocketship to MNPS on April 1, 2016.
3. MNPS assembled a review committee to review and score the Rocketship application. The review committee recommended denial of the Rocketship initial application.
4. On June 14, 2016, MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the Rocketship initial application based upon the review committee's recommendation.
5. The Sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for Rocketship to MNPS on July 7, 2016.
6. MNPS's review committee reviewed and scored Rocketship's amended application and again recommended denial.
7. On August 9, 2016, based on the review committee's recommendation, MNPS voted to deny the Rocketship amended application.
8. The Sponsor appealed the denial of Rocketship's amended application in writing to the State Board on August 19, 2016, including all required documents per State Board policy 2.500.
9. At the time of appeal to the State Board, the Sponsor did not submit corrections to the amended application as allowed under T.C.A. § 49-13-108(a)(4)(C).
10. On August 22, 2016, the State Board sent a letter requesting that MNPS provide information regarding its denial of the Rocketship amended application.
11. On August 29, 2016, the State Board set a letter to the Tennessee Achievement School District (ASD) requesting documentation about the August 1, 2016 decision by the ASD to authorize Rocketship Education to open its first school with the ASD.
12. On August 29, 2016, the ASD provided to the State Board the August 1, 2016 letter sent to Rocketship Education from the ASD.
13. On September 6, 2016, the State Board notified Rocketship Education of the information received from the ASD that would be considered by the State Board.

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<sup>4</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108

14. On September 12, 2016, the State Board requested additional NWEA/MAP data from Rocketship Education.
15. On September 16, 2016, the State Board received the requested NWEA/MAP data from Rocketship Education.
16. The State Board’s Review Committee analyzed and scored the Rocketship amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education’s charter application scoring rubric.
17. On September 15, 2016, the State Board Executive Director and staff held a public hearing in Nashville. At the public hearing, the Executive Director heard presentations from the Sponsor and MNPS and took public comment regarding the Rocketship application.
18. The Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with the proposed governing board of Rocketship along with key members of the leadership team on September 22, 2016, in Nashville.
19. After the capacity interview, the Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of the Rocketship amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report.

**FINDINGS OF FACT**

- **District Denial of Application.**

The review committee assembled by MNPS to review and score the Rocketship initial and amended applications consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Mary Laurens Seely	Coordinator of Data Coaches, MNPS
Katy Enterline Miller	Data Coach, MNPS
Laura Ferguson	Senior Manager, School Turnaround, MNPS
John Thomas	Planning Facilitator, Federal Programs, MNPS
Gerry Altieri	Coordinator of Exceptional Education, MNPS
Dan Killian	Coordinator, Special Projects, Exceptional Education, MNPS
Rick Caldwell	Exceptional Education Coach, MNPS
Edward McKinney	RTI Coordinator, MNPS
Megan Trcka	ELD Specialist, MNPS
Melissa Bentley	ELD Specialist, MNPS
Dr. Sharon Wright	Executive Lead Principal, Elementary, MNPS
Dr. Kelli Peterson	Executive Principal, Utopian Academy, Atlanta, GA
Dr. Lesley Isabel	Executive Lead Principal, Middle Schools, MNPS
Dr. Amy Hunter	Director of Curriculum and Instruction, LEAD Public Schools
Brian Hull	Director of Curriculum and Instruction, LEAD Public Schools
Gary Pope	Senior Accountant, MNPS
Adrienne Useted	Chief Financial Officer, LEAD Public Schools
Dr. Shree Walker	Coordinator, 504 Compliance, MNPS

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Shereka Roby-Grant	Facilitator, School Improvement Planning, MNPS
Carla Richards	Facilitator, School Improvement Planning, MNPS
Dr. Lisa Currie	Director, Student Discipline, MNPS

The Rocketship #3 initial application received the following ratings from the MNPS review committee:

<b>Sections</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Does Not Meet Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

After the MNPS review committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its recommendation was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on June 14, 2016. Based on the review committee's recommendation, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of Rocketship.

Upon resubmission, the amended replication application received the following ratings from the MNPS review committee:<sup>5</sup>

<b>Sections</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Does Not Meet Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

After the MNPS review committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its recommendation was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on August 9, 2016. Based on the review committee's recommendation, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Rocketship.

- **State Board Charter Application Review Committee's Evaluation of the Application**

Following the denial of Rocketship's amended application and subsequent appeal to the State Board of Education, State Board staff assembled a diverse Review Committee of internal and external experts to evaluate and score the Rocketship amended application. This Review Committee consisted of the following individuals:<sup>6</sup>

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Leigh Cummins	Policy and Research Analyst, State Board of Education
Jesse Gray	Instructional Coach and Teacher, LEAD Academy High School, Nashville, Tennessee

<sup>5</sup> Please see EXHIBIT C for a copy of the MNPS review committee report.

<sup>6</sup> Please see EXHIBIT B for detailed bios of each review committee member.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Mark Modrcin	Director of Charter and Partnership Schools, Tulsa Public Schools
Hillary Sims	Dean of Students, STEM Prep High School, Nashville
Tess Stovall	Director of Charter Schools, State Board of Education
Elizabeth Taylor	General Counsel, State Board of Education
Jay Whalen	Coordinator of Charter Schools, State Board of Education
Michael Whaley	Regional Director of Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE), Memphis, Tennessee

The Review Committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Rocketship amended application, a capacity interview with the Sponsor, and a final evaluation and scoring of the amended application resulting in a consensus rating for each major section. The Review Committee’s consensus rating of the Rocketship amended application was as follows:

<b>Sections</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Portfolio Review/Performance Record	Partially Meets Standard

The Review Committee recommended that the application from Rocketship be denied because the applicant had not determined a geographic area for the school’s location, enrollment projection, or a facility plan for the proposed school. With regard to academic plan design and capacity, the operator did not clearly articulate a description of the community from which the school intends to draw students, nor did the operator provide a thorough and compelling explanation for how the academic plan would fit the needs of the two possible geographic locations identified for the school. Moreover, the enrollment projections that Rocketship presented in the application were not aligned with the projections presented in the capacity interview. Finally, there was a lack of evidence provided to determine how the educational program would change based on the suggested change in enrollment.

While the review committee found that the operations plan presented by Rocketship in the application demonstrates a strong network governance structure and a clearly defined relationship between the network and the school, the fact that the locations, facilities, and staffing plans presented in the application did not fully align with the options described in the capacity interview was particularly troubling. In addition, while the operator’s network and Tennessee region are in strong financial health, the school budget presented in the application did not align with some of the facility, enrollment, and staffing options described in the capacity interview. Accordingly, the review committee found a lack of compelling evidence to determine the viability, validity, and practicality of the proposed operational and financial plans for the proposed school.

Regarding the portfolio review and performance record section, the review committed found that the operator did not provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate the operator’s schools are successful based on the Tennessee state assessments. While the operator provided evidence of success in their California schools, the operator’s Tennessee schools lag behind the network’s schools in terms of growth

using NWEA MAP assessments and absolute proficiency on Tennessee assessments. Thus, the review committee determined that the Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets the standard.

Overall, the Review Committee found that the academic, operational, and financial plans, and past performance lacked critical evidence, depth, and detail, and the capacity interview with the Sponsor did not provide further clarification that would have resulted in a higher rating. For additional detail regarding the Review Committee's evaluation of the application, please see EXHIBIT B for the complete Review Committee Report, which is fully incorporated herein by reference.

- **Public Hearing**

Pursuant to statute<sup>7</sup> and State Board policy 2.500, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director of the State Board was held in Nashville on September 15, 2016. The presentation by MNPS representatives at the public hearing focused on the argument that the denial of the Rocketship amended application was in the best interests of the students, school district, and community. MNPS argued that Rocketship has not proven that it has the capacity for opening additional successful schools. In addition, they stated that based on 2015 TCAP scores, the two Rocketship schools are in the bottom 3% of all Tennessee public schools and have the "worst performing charter school in the local system."

During its presentation, Rocketship focused on the need to emphasize the operator's existing schools' growth scores, since the students tested with state assessments only spent 1 year at Rocketship but had spent the previous 3-4 years at MNPS schools. Rocketship stated that it could not close the preexisting academic gaps in one year. According to Rocketship, the 2016 achievement data from California shows that students who attended Rocketship for four consecutive years made "huge gains." In addition, all Rocketship students take the NWEA MAP assessments, which are used nationally by many schools and districts, including the ASD, as well as many other charter operators. Using Rocketship's 2015-16 Tennessee NWEA MAP assessment data, the ASD determined that Rocketship met or exceeded the performance targets set forth in the ASD's K-8 School Performance Framework. This was the basis for the ASD's decision to grant the operator the ability to open one school in Nashville in 2017-18. Rocketship stated that its first year of data in Tennessee was better than two-thirds of MNPS schools and that Rocketship Nashville Northeast posted the second highest TVAAS scores in Nashville.

A portion of the public hearing was dedicated to taking public comment. Nine members of the public spoke at the hearing. Six of those who commented were in favor of Rocketship opening an additional school, and three commented against it. In addition, State Board staff accepted written public comments via e-mail.<sup>8</sup>

## **ANALYSIS**

State law requires the State Board to review the decision of the local board of education and determine whether the denial of the proposed charter school was in the "best interests of the pupils, school district, or community." In addition, T.C.A. § 49-13-108 requires the State Board to adopt national standards of authorizing. One such standard is to maintain high standards for approving charter applications. In making my recommendation to the Board, I have considered the Review Committee

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<sup>7</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-109.

<sup>8</sup> Copies of written public comments received by the deadline have been provided to State Board members.

Report, the arguments made by both Rocketship and MNPS at the Public Hearing, and the public comments received by State Board staff, and conclude as follows:

The Review Committee's report and recommendations are sound and grounded in evidence contained in the application and gained at the capacity interview. For the reasons explicated in the report, I agree that the Rocketship amended application does not meet or exceed the standard required for approval.

Given the great responsibility of educating students and the amount of taxpayer dollars entrusted to a charter school that is approved by a local district, the State Board expects that only operators who propose a robust, fully developed school plan designed to address a clearly articulated need, demonstrate a high likelihood of success, and meet or exceed the required criteria in all areas, will be authorized. While it is evident that the Sponsors of Rocketship's application are passionate and dedicated to serving the students in Nashville, I agree with MNPS that Rocketship has only displayed partial evidence of success. Moreover, real concerns remain about the Sponsor's incomplete plan for the proposed school, including the lack of a clear geographic location and the lack of a defined student population, both critical considerations for a successful education program designed to meet the needs of the students being served.

#### **CONCLUSION**

For these reasons, and for the reasons stated in the Review Committee Report attached hereto, I do not believe that the decision to deny the amended application for Rocketship Tennessee #3 was contrary to the best interests of the students, the school district, or the community. Therefore, I recommend that the State Board of Education affirm the decision of MNPS to deny the amended application for Rocketship.



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Dr. Sara Heyburn, Executive Director  
State Board of Education

10/12/16  
Date



**EXHIBIT A**

**State Accountability Data Comparison  
Rocketship Tennessee #3**

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-13-107(e), in reviewing a charter school application, a chartering authority may take into consideration the past and current performance, or lack thereof, of any charter school operated by the sponsor. This document provides the available state accountability data for any schools currently operated by the sponsor, the state, the school district in which the sponsor proposes to locate or currently locates, and any neighborhood schools specifically mentioned by the sponsor in its amended application.

**Tennessee**

The most recent state accountability data available is for the 2014-15 school year, and in that year, Rocketship Education had one (1) school in operation: Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary (RNNE).<sup>1</sup> In the table below, RNNE is compared to the state of Tennessee, Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), and the five (5) elementary schools the sponsor named in its application based on the location of the proposed school. The data included in the table is the percent of students scoring proficient or advanced on the 3-8 TCAP in Math, Reading Language Arts, and Science; and the school's/district's composite TVAAS score.<sup>2</sup>

		TCAP Math	TCAP RLA	TCAP Science	TVAAS
2015	RNNE	29.1%	17.7%	26.0%	5
	Tennessee	55.6%	48.4%	64.5%	-
	MNPS	47.4%	39.3%	49.1%	5
	Thomas Edison Elementary	40.9%	32.0%	33.3%	1
	Lakeview Elementary	40.2%	28.4%	36.9%	1
	J.E. Moss Elementary	39.4%	22.5%	30.7%	5
	Paragon Mills Elementary	33.2%	22.0%	30.8%	1
	Una Elementary	48.6%	32.4%	31.5%	2

<sup>1</sup> Rocketship Education opened Rocketship United Academy in 2015-16 in Nashville, but no state accountability data is available.

<sup>2</sup> (n.d.). Retrieved October 11, 2016, from <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/report-card>.

## California

The most recent California accountability data available is for the 2015-16 school year, and in that year, Rocketship Education had nine (9) elementary schools in operation in California. In the tables below, these nine schools are compared to the state of California and the school districts where the schools are located. The data included in the tables is the percent of students who met or exceeded the standard on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress.<sup>3</sup>

		<b>3rd ELA</b>	<b>4th ELA</b>	<b>3rd Math</b>	<b>4th Math</b>
2016	California	43%	44%	46%	38%
	Franklin-McKinley School District	40%	42%	49%	39%
	Rocketship Mosaic	48%	46%	69%	58%
	Rocketship Spark	56%	65%	68%	77%

		<b>3rd ELA</b>	<b>4th ELA</b>	<b>3rd Math</b>	<b>4th Math</b>
2016	California	43%	44%	46%	38%
	San Jose Unified School District	52%	51%	51%	45%
	Rocketship Mateo Sheedy	38%	42%	36%	48%
	Rocketship Discovery	46%	52%	55%	54%
	Rocketship Alma	32%	41%	65%	56%

		<b>3rd ELA</b>	<b>4th ELA</b>	<b>3rd Math</b>	<b>4th Math</b>
2016	California	43%	44%	46%	38%
	Alum Rock School District	33%	30%	37%	23%
	Rocketship Si Se Puede	42%	37%	60%	51%
	Rocketship Los Suenos	22%	37%	36%	38%
	Rocketship Brilliant Minds	29%	39%	41%	59%
	Rocketship Fuerza	35%	40%	39%	54%

<sup>3</sup> (n.d.). Retrieved October 10, 2016, from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.

### Wisconsin

The most recent Wisconsin accountability data available is for the 2014-15 school year, and in that year, Rocketship Education had one (1) elementary school in operation in Wisconsin. In the table below, this school is compared to the state of Wisconsin and the school district where the school is located. The data included in the tables is the percent of students who scored proficient or advanced on the Wisconsin Badger assessment.<sup>4</sup>

		<b>3-8 ELA</b>	<b>3-8 Math</b>
2015	Wisconsin	51.2%	43.7%
	Milwaukee Public Schools	26.4%	16.5%
	Rocketship Southside Community Prep	51.4%	32.4%

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<sup>4</sup> (n.d.). Retrieved October 10, 2016, from [wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard](http://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard).



**EXHIBIT B**

**Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report**

**October 12, 2016**

School Name: Rocketship Tennessee #3

Sponsor: Rocketship Education

Proposed Location of School: Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

Evaluation Team:

Leigh Cummins  
Jesse Gray  
Mark Modrcin  
Hillary Sims  
Tess Stovall  
Elizabeth Taylor  
Jay Whalen  
Michael Whaley

This recommendation report is based on a template from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.



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## Introduction

Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A) § 49-13-108 allows the sponsors of a public charter school to appeal the denial of an application by the local board of education to the State Board of Education. In accordance with T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the State Board of Education shall conduct a de novo, on the record, review of the proposed charter school's application, and the State Board of Education shall adopt national authorizing standards. As laid out in State Board Policy 6.200 – Core Authorizing Principles, the State Board is committed to implementing these authorizing standards aligned with the core principles of charter school authorizing including setting high standards for the approval of charter schools in its portfolio.

The State Board of Education's charter application review process is outlined in T.C.A. § 49-13-108, State Board Policy 2.500 – Charter School Appeals, and State Board Policy 6.300 – Application Review. The State Board assembled a charter application review committee comprised of highly qualified internal and external evaluators with relevant and diverse expertise to evaluate each application. The State Board provided training to all review committee members to ensure consistent standards and fair treatment of all applications.

## Overview of the Evaluation Process

The State Board of Education's charter application review committee developed this recommendation report based on three key stages of review:

1. Evaluation of the Proposal: The review committee independently reviewed the amended charter application, attachments, and budget submitted by the sponsor. After an independent review, the review committee collectively identified the main strengths, concerns, and weaknesses as well as developed specific questions for the applicant in the four sections of the application: Academic Plan Design and Capacity, Operations Plan and Capacity, Financial Plan and Capacity, and Portfolio Review and Performance Record.
2. Capacity Interview: Based on the independent and collective review of the application, the review committee conducted a 90 minute in-person interview with the sponsor, members of the proposed governing board, and identified school leader (if applicable) to address the concerns, weaknesses, and questions identified in the application, and to assess the capacity to execute the application's overall plan.
3. Consensus Judgment: At the conclusion of the review of the application and the capacity interview, the committee submitted a final rubric and developed a consensus regarding a rating for each section of the application.

This recommendation report includes the following information:

1. Summary of the application: A brief description of the applicant's proposed academic, operations, and financial plans, and performance record.
2. Summary of the recommendation: A brief summary of the overall recommendation for the application.
3. Analysis of each section of the application: An analysis of the four sections of the application and the capacity of the team to execute the plan as described in the application.

- a. Academic Plan Design and Capacity: enrollment summary; academic plan; performance management; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
- b. Operations Plan and Capacity: network vision, growth plan, and capacity; management; governance; charter management contracts (if applicable); network personnel/human capital; staffing management and evaluation; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
- c. Financial Plan and Capacity: budget narrative; budgets of network and school; cash flow projections; related assumptions; financial policies and procedures; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
- d. Portfolio Review and Performance Record: evidence of successful student outcomes in network; evidence that schools within network are high-performing; detailed narrative of high-performing and low-performing schools; latest audit presented without findings; and organization in good standing with authorizers.

The State Board’s charter application review committee utilized the Tennessee Department of Education’s Charter School Application Evaluation Ratings and Sample Scoring Criteria (“the rubric”), which is used by all local boards of education when evaluating an application. The rubric states:

An application that merits a recommendation for approval should present a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; be detailed in how this school will raise student achievement; and inspire confidence in the applicant’s capacity to successfully implement the proposed academic and operations plans. In addition to meeting the criteria that are specific to that section, each part of the proposal should align with the overall mission, budget, and goals of the application.

The evaluators used the following criteria and guidance from the scoring rubric to rate applications:

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
Meets or Exceeds the Standard	The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It clearly aligns with the mission and goals of the school. The response includes specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation.
Partially Meets Standard	The response meets the criteria in some aspects, but lacks sufficient detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.
Does Not Meet Standard	The response is significantly incomplete; demonstrates lack of preparation; is unsuited to the mission and vision of the district or otherwise raises significant concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant’s ability to carry it out.



## Summary of the Application

School Name: Rocketship Tennessee #3

Sponsor: Rocketship Education

Proposed Location of School: Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

Mission:<sup>1</sup>

Rocketship Education Tennessee will eliminate the achievement gap by graduating our students at or above grade level in Language Arts and Math.

Number of Schools Currently in Operation by Sponsor:

Nashville: Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary; Rocketship United Academy  
Outside of Tennessee: Ten (10) schools in California; one (1) school in Wisconsin; and one (1) school in Washington D.C.

Proposed Enrollment:<sup>2</sup>

Grade Level	Year 1 (2017)	Year 2 (2018)	Year 3 (2019)	Year 4 (2020)	Year 5 (2021)	At Capacity
K	112	112	112	112	112	112
1	112	112	112	112	112	112
2	112	112	112	112	112	112
3	56	112	112	112	112	112
4	56	49	102	102	102	102
<b>Total</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>497</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>550</b>

Brief Description of the Application:

Rocketship Tennessee #3 is an elementary school proposing to locate in Nashville, Tennessee and serve students in grades Kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The school is a replication of the Rocketship Education model, and it would be the fourth Rocketship Education school in Nashville and, as a whole, Tennessee.<sup>3</sup> The academic focus for the school is personalized learning, and the instructional model includes whole group instruction, small group instruction, targeted interventions, and online learning programs.<sup>4</sup>

Rocketship Tennessee #3 will be organized under the existing non-profit entity of Rocketship Education. The existing Rocketship Education Governing Board of Directors will govern the school in addition to the operator’s other schools. Rocketship Education will satisfy the Tennessee statutory

<sup>1</sup> Rocketship Education Tennessee Original Application, pg. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rocketship Education Tennessee Amended Replication Application, pg. 5.

<sup>3</sup> On August 1, 2016, the Tennessee Achievement School District (ASD) authorized Rocketship Education to open its first school with the ASD in Nashville, Tennessee in the 2017-18 school year.

<sup>4</sup> Rocketship Education Tennessee Amended Replication Application, pg. 7.



requirements with a local advisory board composed of local community members and parents of children in the school. The school proposes to locate in Southeast Nashville.

Rocketship Tennessee #3 projects to have \$4,925,162 in revenue in Year 1 and \$5,087,185 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a negative ending fund balance of (\$155,149). In Year 5, the school projects to have \$5,913,434 in revenue and \$5,638,868 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$664,273.<sup>5</sup> The school assumes that 70% of the student population will qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch and 14% of the student population will be students with disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rocketship Education Tennessee Amended Replication Application, Attachment T.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Attachment S.

## Summary of the Evaluation

The review committee recommends that the application for Rocketship Tennessee #3 be denied because the applicant lacks a clear geographic location, enrollment projection, and facility plan for the proposed school. As a result, the review committee did not have sufficient evidence in the academic, operations, and financial plans to determine the reasonableness and viability of the plans presented. Additionally, while the operator has clearly demonstrated that the educational model results in academic growth for students, there was a lack of evidence to demonstrate that the operator has been successful in Tennessee schools based on state assessments.

The operator did not articulate a clear description of the community from which the school intends to draw students, nor did the operator provide a thorough and compelling explanation for how the academic plan would fit the needs of the two possible geographic locations identified for the school. The enrollment projections presented in the application did not align with the projections presented in the interview, and there was a lack of evidence provided to determine how the educational program would change based on a change in enrollment.

The operations plan presented in the application demonstrates a strong network governance structure and a clearly defined relationship between the network and the school. However, the geographic location, facilities, and staffing plans presented in the application did not fully align with the options described in the capacity interview. Additionally, while the operator’s network and Tennessee region are in strong financial health, the school budget presented in the application did not align with some of the facility, enrollment, and staffing options described in the interview. Therefore, the review committee found a lack of compelling evidence to determine the viability, validity, and reasonableness of the proposed operations and financial plans for the proposed school.

In the portfolio review and performance record section, the operator did not provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate the operator’s schools are successful based on the Tennessee state assessments. While the operator provided evidence of success in their California schools and that the typical students at the network’s schools demonstrate more than a year’s growth on NWEA MAP, the operator’s Tennessee schools lag behind the network’s schools in terms of growth using NWEA MAP assessments and absolute proficiency on Tennessee assessments.

### Summary of Section Ratings

In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education’s charter application scoring rubric, “applications that do not meet or exceed the standard in all sections . . . will be deemed not ready for approval,”<sup>7</sup> and strengths in one area of the application do not negate material weaknesses in other areas. Opening and maintaining a successful, high-performing charter school depends on having a complete, coherent plan and identifying highly capable individuals to execute that plan.

Sections	Rating
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	Partially Meets Standard

<sup>7</sup> Tennessee Charter School Application Evaluation – Ratings and Sample Scoring Criteria, pg. 1.

## **Analysis of the Academic Plan Design and Capacity**

*Rating: Partially Meets Standard*

### **Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:**

The applicant's Academic Plan Design and Capacity partially meets standard because the operator's current existing schools in Tennessee do not perform at a level higher than the neighborhood schools identified by the applicant. Additionally, although the applicant presented a clear description of the plan for the proposed location of Southeast Nashville and the proposed enrollment size of 448 students in Year 1 in the application, the applicant described multiple geographic location options and enrollment options during the capacity interview, which did not align with the plan presented in the application.

In the application, the applicant identified five neighborhood elementary schools in the area of Southeast Nashville where the applicant stated it would locate the school. All of the identified schools performed at a higher level than the operator's existing schools in Tennessee on the 2015 TCAP in 3<sup>rd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts and mathematics. While the applicant provided a thorough rationale for how the proposed school will serve a need in Southeast Nashville based on overcrowding, the review committee found insufficient evidence that the proposed school would perform at a higher academic level on TCAP than the neighborhood schools in Southeast Nashville.

Throughout the academic section, the applicant provided a clear description of the community from which the school intends to draw students including the rationale for a school in Southeast Nashville and the demographics of the proposed school in this area of the city. However, in the capacity interview, the applicant group stated that they were looking at facility locations in both Southeast Nashville and in Madison located in Northeast Nashville. Although the applicant group stated that the new geographic location option has a similar demographic population to the one proposed in the application and the operator's schools in California, the review committee found a lack of evidence in the application to evaluate a Madison location to determine if there was a clear rationale for selecting this possible alternative.

In the application, the applicant provided a clear description of the existing academic plan for the operator and stated that the proposed school would not have any key academic plan features that would differ from the existing Rocketship schools. However, in the capacity interview, the applicant group stated that depending on recruitment and enrollment trends as well as facility and location plans, the proposed school could open with as few as 250 students. While the review committee appreciated the candor of the applicant group, the review committee found insufficient evidence to evaluate the proposed academic plan based on the option of opening with 250 students instead of 448 students. With the lack of a specific geographic area for the proposed school, as well as a starting enrollment level that could be nearly 200 students smaller than the enrollment proposed in the application, the review committee found insufficient evidence to determine that the key features of the academic plan would meet the needs of the proposed student population.

### **Strengths Identified by the Committee:**

While the Academic Plan Design and Capacity partially meets standard because of the weaknesses described above, the review committee did find evidence of strengths within the academic section. The operator presented clear and mission-specific goals and a compelling explanation of how the organization tracks and monitors the progress of students, schools, and the network. Specifically, the review



committee found evidence of a strong assessment plan within the network and a detailed plan for how the network works with schools to support data driven instruction.

## **Analysis of the Operations Plan and Capacity**

*Rating: Partially Meets Standard*

### **Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:**

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because although the applicant provided a thorough description of the proposed school's operations in the application, the operator's lack of certainty around the geographic location, facility options, and enrollment projections resulted in a lack of evidence for the review committee to determine the viability and validity of the proposed plans presented in the application.

The review committee found insufficient evidence of a strong, clear, and compelling organizational plan to implement operations of the proposed school based on the multiple options for geographic location, facilities, and projected enrollment differences presented throughout the application and review process. While the review committee appreciates the willingness of the operator to be flexible, there was a lack of evidence regarding 1) the rationale for a potential location outside of Southeast Nashville, and 2) a clearly-defined, strategic vision for the proposed school that included the targeted community and projected enrollment.

Based upon the written application, the review committee found evidence of a proposed staffing structure that aligned with the education program as presented, and that the staffing structure in the application was conducive to the plan's success based on a fully enrolled school of 448 students. However, in the capacity interview, the applicant group stated the possibility of locating in an area of the city outside of the area identified in the application and opening with as few as 250 students. The applicant group did not provide additional information of how the staffing structure and projections would need to change for up to 200 fewer students or how the recruitment strategy for staff would align with serving a different community, including any change in specialized positions such as Special Education or English Language certified teachers. Given the possible shifts in enrollment and geographic location, the review committee did not find sufficient evidence to evaluate the validity of the operator's proposed staffing plans.

The application detailed a facilities plan including renovations and new construction and the use of Turner Impact Capital to finance the facilities. The applicant group provided additional details regarding the financing of facilities through Turner Impact Capital during the capacity interview. However, the applicant group also stated that they were looking at possible facility locations in Southeast Nashville, which is outlined in the application, as well as Northeast Nashville, which was not outlined in the application. Additionally, the applicant group described the option of locating in a smaller, temporary facility with a smaller enrollment while the operator searched for a permanent facility location, but this option is not described in the application. While the review committee appreciated the candor and flexibility of the applicant group, the facility and geographic location options varied significantly from what was described in the application. There was no evidence provided within the application of the alternate or temporary facility options, including financing and renovations. Therefore, the review committee lacked sufficient evidence to determine that operator had a sound plan and timeline for identifying, financing, and renovating a facility.

### **Strengths Identified by the Committee:**

While the Operations Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because of the lack of defined geographic location and enrollment projections, the review committee did find evidence of strengths within the operations plan. The applicant provided a clear, detailed description of the governance



structure for the school and a compelling network strategy for shared and centralized services. The applicant provided a rationale for the collection, use, and structure of the fee paid from the school to the region and the network. Additionally, the applicant stated that it had identified two potential school leaders for the two schools in Nashville that it planned to open in 2017-2018.

## **Analysis of the Financial Plan and Capacity**

*Rating: Partially Meets Standard*

### **Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:**

The Financial Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because although the applicant's financial plan presented in the application is based on a location in Southeast Nashville at an enrollment of 448 students in Year 1, the applicant group presented multiple geographic locations, facilities, and enrollment options in the interview that had not been described in the application. While the review committee found strengths in the network's financial position and its ability to fundraise to the levels described in the application, the review committee was unable to assess the viability of the proposed school's budget because of a lack of clarity around the operations plans for the school.

The review committee found evidence that the financial plan for the proposed school described in the application was detailed, reasonable, and realistic based on a proposed full enrollment of 448 students. However, in the capacity interview, the applicant group discussed the possibility of opening the proposed school at a significantly smaller size, potentially 250, which would result in a \$2.7 million difference in BEP revenue for the proposed school in year one. A school of 250 students would require a different staffing plan, but the budget presented is based off a significantly larger school. The review committee appreciated the candor of the applicant group and found strength in the operator's overall financial monitoring. Ultimately, the review committee lacked sufficient evidence to evaluate the reasonableness of the proposed school's budget because there was a lack of a clear vision of what the proposed school would actually look like in terms of student population and staffing needs.

In the application, the facilities plan contained within the budget is based off renovations or new construction for a facility for 448 students in Southeast Nashville and a financing plan through Turner Impact Capital. Although in the capacity interview, the applicant group thoroughly described the financial relationship of a facility with Turner, the applicant group also stated that the network is looking at facility options outside of Southeast Nashville and may opt for a temporary facility that houses a smaller school while the operator determines a permanent location. However, the applicant did not describe any of the geographic locations, facilities, or contingency options in the application. The review committee found insufficient evidence to determine if the assumptions for facilities costs were reasonable and realistic because there was a lack of a clear plan for a geographic location and size of facilities.

### **Strengths Identified by the Committee:**

While the Financial Plan and Capacity only partially meets standard, the review committee found evidence of strengths in the financial plan. The applicant provided a thorough description of its financial policies and procedures. In the capacity interview, the Chief Financial Officer described in great detail the financial monitoring of the network. The operator provided clarity on the use of Charter Schools Program funding as a part of the start-up operations for the proposed school and the philanthropic dollars needed beyond what is currently committed. The review committee found evidence that the network and region are in strong financial positions with the region having \$1.9 million cash on hand.

## **Analysis of the Portfolio Review and Performance Record**

*Rating: Partially Meets Standard*

### **Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:**

The Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets standard because there is a lack of clear, compelling evidence of successful student outcomes for each school in the network and thin evidence that the operator's schools are high performing and successful on state and national standards. While the operator provided evidence of success in their California schools, the schools in Tennessee lag behind the network's schools in terms of growth using the NWEA MAP assessments and absolute proficiency on Tennessee state assessments compared to the existing neighborhood schools in Southeast Nashville.

The application stated that in the 2015-16 school year both of the operator's schools in Nashville were projected to make 1.1 to 1.3 years of growth in mathematics and reading on NWEA MAP. The review committee found evidence that the operator's model is producing academic growth with its students in Tennessee; however, the growth rate of the two existing schools in Tennessee puts them at the bottom of all of the network's schools on NWEA MAP. In 2015, Rocketship Nashville Northeast (RNNE) lagged behind the rest of the Rocketship network in the percent of students above the national norm on NWEA MAP and continued to lag behind the rest of the network into its second year. Rocketship United Academy (RUA), the school opened in 2015 by the operator, saw a higher percentage of students above the national norm on NWEA MAP than RNNE at the end of the 2015-16 school year; however, based on the data available to the review committee, RUA also performed at the bottom of the network.

While RNNE received a one-year overall TVAAS composite of a Level 5 in 2015, the review committee found insufficient evidence that the existing Tennessee schools' growth rates on NWEA MAP and TVAAS have translated, and will translate, into high levels of academic proficiency on state assessments. In 2015, RNNE saw 17.7% of its students achieve proficiency on English language arts on TCAP while 29.9% of its students achieved proficiency in math. These proficiency rates place the school in the bottom 3% of schools in the state based on a one-year success rate and are below the proficiency rates of the state, the district, and all neighborhood schools identified in the application. The proficiency rates of the neighborhood schools in Madison were not provided by the operator; therefore, the review committee lacked evidence to determine if the operator would provide a higher quality option in a location other than Southeast Nashville.

### **Strengths Identified by the Committee:**

Although the Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets standard, the review committee did find evidence of strengths within the performance record. The operator has demonstrated clear success with its model in California with many of the schools performing above proficiency rates of the school districts in which the schools are located. The California schools demonstrated significant gains on NWEA MAP assessments, and the applicant stated in the interview that over 60% of students in California are above the national norm on NWEA MAP after persisting for four years in a Rocketship school. As required in the application, the applicant identified a school, Rocketship Los Suenos, which performed below expectations. Both in the application and in the capacity interview, the operator candidly described the challenges the school faced and the strategies it utilized to improve the school.



## Evaluation Team

**Leigh Cummins** is currently the Policy and Research Analyst for the Tennessee State Board of Education, supporting both the charter appeals and standards review processes. Prior to the State Board, Ms. Cummins worked at the Tennessee Department of Education, supporting the development and implementation of teacher professional development within the Division of Curriculum and Instruction. She also previously served as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the University of Mississippi, coordinating a support program for first-year, at-risk college students. Ms. Cummins earned her B.A. at the University of Mississippi and her M.Ed. at Vanderbilt University.

**Jesse Gray** currently serves as an instructional coach and teacher for LEAD Academy High School in Nashville, TN. In addition to these roles, Jesse also coordinates services for the school's English Learner population. Jesse began teaching in 2005 while pursuing graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has been teaching and learning with students in Nashville for the last decade in private and public schools, both traditional and charter. Jesse holds graduate degrees from UNC Chapel Hill and Vanderbilt University.

**Mark Modrcin** has led both the authorizing office and the Tulsa Charter Collaboration Compact work at Tulsa Public Schools since 2013, ensuring that charter schools are held accountable to high standards while also supporting their work within the greater Tulsa portfolio. During this time, the Tulsa charter portfolio has added nearly 900 quality seats for students residing within the District. Under Mark's leadership, TPS follows 9 Essential Authorizing practices as defined by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), up from just 3 in 2012. Prior to working in this capacity, Mark was the project manager of the Tulsa Summer Institute in partnership with Teach For America as well as a classroom teacher in TPS. Mark holds a BS in Finance from Miami University and a MBA from the University of Tulsa. He is also an alumnus of the NACSA Leaders Program.

**Hillary Sims** Following 5 years of service to STEM Prep students and families as Founding Dean of Students and Support Services, Ms. Hillary P. Sims serves in the role of Dean of Students for STEM Prep High. Hillary has been educating youth and leading high-performing organizations for nearly two decades. A graduate from both East Tennessee State University and The University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Ms. Sims aspires to inspire youth to actualize dreams. Having served as a school administrator for more than 10 years as well as actively supporting the charter school movement, state and nation-wide, since 2005, Ms. Sims enthusiastically leads faculty and staff in achieving ambitious outcomes both in and out of the classroom. Ms. Sims was appointed by Governor Haslam to serve on the Advisory Council for Students with Disabilities and has gratefully served in this capacity for several years. In an effort to support the State Board of Education, Ms. Sims assists in the yearly review of charters seeking SBE approval.



**Tess Stovall** serves as the Director of Charter Schools for the Tennessee State Board of Education. In this role, she manages the charter school application process and authorization duties of the State Board, and she was a member of the 2015 National Association of Charter School Authorizer’s Leaders Program. Prior to joining the staff of the Board, she served as the Transformation Facilitator at Cameron Middle School, the first district-led conversion of a traditional public school to a charter school in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. While in Washington, DC, Tess worked for Congressman Jim Cooper (TN-05) and a centrist think tank, Third Way, on economic and education policy. She is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of The George Washington University earning a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science and Sociology and a graduate of the London School of Economics with a Master of Science Degree in Political Sociology.

**Elizabeth Taylor** is the General Counsel of the Tennessee State Board of Education. As General Counsel, she is responsible for advising the Board on legal matters and advises board staff on pending education legislation in the General Assembly. She also manages charter school appeals, develops charter school contracts, and provides guidance on the charter school authorization process. In addition, Elizabeth works with other organizations to draft or revise board policies and regulations. Elizabeth earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Fisk University, a Master of Business Administration from the University of Phoenix, and a Juris Doctorate from the Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law at the University of Memphis. Prior to joining the State Board of Education, Elizabeth was a Staff Attorney and Director of the Office of Civil Rights for the Tennessee Department of Education and an Assistant Attorney General for the State of Tennessee in the Civil Rights and Claims Division.

**Jay Whalen** serves as Coordinator of Charter Schools for the Tennessee State Board of Education. In this role he works on the charter school application process and authorization duties of the State Board. Prior to joining State Board staff, Jay was the Data Analyst at KIPP Nashville, a charter school organization operating multiple schools in Metro Nashville Public Schools. He was responsible for all data management, collection, analysis, and reporting for the region. Jay is a former high school social studies teacher, spending time in both rural and urban Title I public schools, and has also done consulting work for the Tennessee Department of Education. He holds Bachelor of Arts degrees in Secondary Education and History from the University of Rhode Island.

**Michael Whaley** is the founding Regional Director of Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE) in Memphis. Prior to joining LEE in June 2016, Michael served as the Founder and Executive Director of Memphis College Prep, a kindergarten through fifth grade charter school. A member of the 2006 Teach For America charter corps in Memphis, Michael taught elementary school before being selected for the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship, nationally recognized for its rigorous, year-long training program in charter school management. Michael is active in the Memphis community, serving on several advisory boards including the Shelby County Schools Charter Compact Advisory Committee. Michael previously worked in Legislative Affairs for Southwest Airlines and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Public Policy from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX.



# Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Office of Charter Schools

## Charter School Application Recommendation Report

### Rocketship Fresh Start

Submitted by: Rocketship Education

### Evaluation Team

#### Core Team

Mary Laurens Seely, Coordinator of Data Coaches, MNPS

Katy Enterline Miller, Data Coach, MNPS

Laura Ferguson, Senior Manager, School Turnaround, MNPS

John Thomas, Planning Facilitator, Federal Programs, MNPS

#### Satellite Readers (subject matter experts)

Gerry Altieri, Coordinator of Exceptional Education, MNPS

Dan Killian, Coordinator, Special Projects, Exceptional Education, MNPS

Rick Caldwell, Exceptional Education Coach, MNPS

Edward McKinney, RTI Coordinator, MNPS

Megan Trcka, ELD Specialist, MNPS

Amanda Nelms, ELD Specialist, MNPS

Melissa Bentley, ELD Specialist, MNPS

Dr. Sharon Wright, Executive Lead Principal, Elementary, MNPS

Dr. Kelli Peterson, Executive Principal, Utopian Academy, Atlanta, GA

Dr. Lesley Isabel, Executive Lead Principal, Middle Schools, MNPS

Dr. Amy Hunter, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, LEAD Public Schools

Brian Hull, Director of Resource Strategy, MNPS

Gary Pope, Senior Accountant, MNPS

Adrienne Useted, Chief Financial Officer, LEAD Public Schools

Dr. Shree Walker, Coordinator, 504 Compliance, MNPS

Shereka Roby-Grant, Facilitator, School Improvement Planning, MNPS

Carla Richards, Facilitator, School Improvement Planning, MNPS

Dr. Lisa Currie, Director, Student Discipline, MNPS

## Introduction

Charter schools are public schools operated by independent, non-profit governing bodies that are granted greater autonomy in the areas of curriculum, calendar, staffing, methodology, and pedagogy in return for greater accountability in achieving high quality academic results with their students. In Tennessee, public charter school students are measured against the same academic standards as students in other public schools and are required to use the same state-approved assessments as all other public schools. Charter schools are required to serve all eligible students, with the education of at-risk students being of utmost importance.

It is the responsibility of the authorizer to create and apply a rigorous, fair and thorough authorization process in order to ensure only those charter schools who can offer and sustain high quality educational options for all students are recommended and approved to open. Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools is interested in charter applicants who demonstrate the capacity to educate the most at-risk students in highly diverse and personalized settings.

Charter schools in Nashville are required to provide appropriate curriculum, aligned professional standards, engaging models of parental and partnership programs, and strategic planning to leverage and grow resources for the school. Schools are held accountable for academic results, responsible school leadership, sound fiscal and operational management and adherence to the laws and rules that govern education in the state of Tennessee.

## Evaluation Process

The Office of Charter Schools worked closely with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) to create an evaluation process that embodies best practices from authorizers throughout the country and is rigorous and thorough. This process has gained both state-wide and national recognition as rigorous, thorough, fair and impartial.

The applications are reviewed by a core team specifically trained to assess the quality and sustainability of a proposed school. In addition, the applications are also reviewed by individuals with specific expertise: special education, English Language learners, business and finance, curriculum, facilities and transportation.

The Office of Charter Schools and one or more MNPS board representatives exercise additional oversight of the process.

### Evaluation Process

This recommendation report from the Office of Charter Schools is the culmination the three stages of review:

- **Proposal Evaluation** - The evaluation team conducted independent and group assessment of the merits of each proposal against the published evaluation criteria.
- **Capacity Interview** - The evaluation team conducted an interview with the applicant group for the purpose of providing applicants an opportunity to address questions from the written proposal and also to evaluate the applicants' capacity to implement their proposed program effectively and with fidelity.
- **Consensus Conclusion** - The evaluation team came to a consensus regarding whether to recommend the proposal for approval or denial to the MNPS Board of Education.

### Rating Characteristics

**Meets the Standard** - The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues and alignment within all areas of the proposal - academic, operational, and financial. It shows thorough preparation; presents a clear and realistic picture of how the school expects to operate at a high level; and inspires confidence in the applicant's ability to carry out their plan effectively.

**Partially Meets Standard** - The response meets the criteria in some respects, but lacks detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.

**Does Not Meet Standard** – The response has substantial gaps in a number of areas and the review team has no confidence the applicant can deliver a high quality educational option to the students in Davidson County.

### Evaluation Contents

This evaluation report includes the following:

- **Proposal Overview** – Basic summary of the proposed school as presented in the application
- **Recommendation** – an overall judgment, based on extensive analysis of all evidence presented by the applicants, regarding whether the proposal meets the criteria for approval
- **Evaluation:** Analysis of the proposal is based on four primary areas of plan development:
  - › **Executive Summary** – Provides a comprehensive review of all three major areas of the application with emphasis on the reasons for the recommendation from the review team.
  - › **Academic Plan** – Describes the applicant’s model in regards to curriculum and instruction, assessment, working with at-risk and special populations, goals, discipline and logistics (school calendar, daily schedule, etc.).
  - › **Operations Plan** – Outlines operational support for the academic program, including staffing and human resources, recruitment and marketing, professional development for teachers, community involvement, and governing board structure and membership.
  - › **Financial/Business Plan** – Provides budgeting and financial plans to ensure both initial and on-going fiscal compliance, including budget assumptions, transportation, fundraising, payroll and insurance functions

Opening a successful, high-performing charter school depends on having a complete, coherent plan. It is not an endeavor for which strength in one area can compensate for weakness in another. Therefore, in order to receive a recommendation for approval, the application must **meet or exceed the standard in all three major areas** of the capacity review.

## Proposal Overview

**Operator/Applicant - Rocketship Education**

**School Name - Rocketship Fresh Start**

**Mission and Vision - Rocketship Education will eliminate the achievement gap by graduating our students at or above grade level in Literacy and Math. Rocketship Education seeks to create a future in which thousands of children from Tennessee have graduated from four-year colleges and have come back to Tennessee to eradicate the last traces of the achievement gap. (This mission statement was in the original 2013 Rocketship application).**

**Proposed Location - Southeast Nashville**

**Enrollment Projections (as presented by applicant in the written proposal)**

Academic Year		Grades Served	Proposed Number of Students
Year 1	2017	K-4	448
Year 2	2018	K-4	497
Year 3	2019	K-4	550
Year 4	2020	K-4	550
Year 5	2021	K-4	550
Year 6	2022	K-4	550
Year 7	2023	K-4	550
Year 8	2024	K-4	550
Year 9	2025	K-4	550
Year 10	2026	K-4	550
At Capacity		K-4	550

## Executive Summary

### Recommendation from the Review Team:

- Authorize
- Do Not Authorize

### Summary Analysis

The evaluation team recommends **denial** of the application by Rocketship Education for a fresh start charter school opening in the 2017-18 school year.

The application is a true replication of the academic, operational and financial plan for the first two Rocketship schools, Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary and Rocketship United. Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary opened in 2014-15 and Rocketship United opened in 2015-16, the current school year.

The threshold for expanding existing schools must be high, with compelling evidence that those schools are exhibiting strong academic results for students that are significantly better than their previous results. The Tennessee Charter law itself speaks to that standard in TCA 49-13-107, specifically stating “in reviewing an application, the chartering authority may take into consideration the past and current performance, or lack thereof, on any charter school operated by the sponsor.” The Charter School Act itself encourages us to hold charter schools to a higher standard of performance when they list as purposes for the Act such things as:

- Improved learning for all students
- Providing greater decision making authority to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance
- Ensuring that children have the opportunity to reach proficiency on state academic assessments (TCA 49-13-102).

It is in the last bullet point that this application fails to meet very specific and essential standards in the state’s application scoring rubric. Those standards are:

- Performance management standard: If an operator has existing schools within the district, previous compliance/performance reports show evidence of **student academic success**, organizational efficiency, and financial sustainability.
- Existing school record of performance standard: Applicant provides clear, compelling evidence of **successful student outcomes for each school in the network.**

Both Rocketship schools did test for 2015-16, but due to the unforeseen difficulties with the state's TN Ready testing platform, and the subsequent decision by the state to halt testing before completion, no results for state accountability testing are available for 2015-16.

Due to this circumstance, the only state accountability test results available are the TCAP results from Rocketship Nashville Northeast in 2014-15. Based on these outcomes, **Rocketship has compiled a record of substandard results.**

Among MNPS charter schools, Rocketship was the lowest achieving school. Rocketship's 2015 success rate, which is the percentage of students reaching proficiency across reading, math, and science, was 24.3%, which ranks at only the 3<sup>rd</sup> percentile (bottom 3%) of Tennessee public schools state-wide. Schools in the bottom 5% for three years are identified as Priority Schools by the Tennessee Department of Education.

Based on both the written application and the interview, the review team did not find that Rocketship provided a clear, comprehensive plan to ensure last year's substandard results would not be repeated. Additionally, Rocketship describes their own process for consideration of expansion called "greenlighting" within their application, and in the review team's estimation, did not follow their own process for ensuring their current schools are academically successful before applying for additional schools.

Adding an additional school before Rocketship has demonstrated academic success on state accountability measures would not be in the best interests of the students, the district or the community. After carefully reviewing the application in its entirety and interviewing the applicant team, the evaluation team is recommending denial of this application.

### **Amended Application Summary Analysis**

The charter application review team has very carefully analyzed the amended application for a fresh start school submitted by Rocketship Education, and is once again recommending the MNPS Board of Public Education **deny** approval for this school.

The review team did not find compelling evidence that Rocketship had sufficiently analyzed their performance data or developed a plan to ensure stronger student outcomes. As explained in the original recommendation, there is no 2016 state accountability data to review, and thus the review team could only look at 2015 data.

Rocketship Education based their amended application on two major points:

- 1) The MNPS APF shows that their overall performance for one year put them in the “Satisfactory” range.
- 2) Their own internal benchmark tests, using NWEA MAP, show growth among their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders, and they requested the review team consider these scores in lieu of state accountability scores.

In addressing the first point, the Academic Performance Framework includes measures that allow MNPS to evaluate the all schools academic performance or outcomes. Specifically, it answers the question: *Is this school an academic success?* A charter school that meets the standards in this area is implementing its academic program effectively, and student learning – the central purpose of every school – is taking place on a regular, sustained basis. The APF also allows MNPS to compare schools across its portfolio using the same measures and metrics, thereby giving a balanced picture of school quality.

The APF is one tool the review team uses to review existing schools’ prior performance. Its intended purpose is not to be the sole source of information when an existing charter school requests replication. In the case of Rocketship the review team found that, with one year of data, Rocketship would actually rate below the Priority Status designation guidelines issued by the state with its one year success rate. Although not designated a Priority school because it lacks three years of solid data, the trend is not positive.

Also, as is shown clearly on Rocketship’s 2015 report card, a Satisfactory rating on the APF would trigger a full renewal review if this were their renewal year. That means there would have to be a full renewal application filled out, including a detailed plan to raise academic outcomes. Even then, renewal is not assured for a school with a history of “Satisfactory” ratings only.

Additionally, if Rocketship were a traditional district school, the district would have already provided extra supports and assistance to develop a plan that addresses the performance deficits. Only ten (10) of 70 traditional schools scored lower in a one-year percentile ranking in TCAP results in 2015. Charter schools in our district must provide performance outcomes above the 3<sup>rd</sup> percentile, regardless of whether they are in the first year of operation.

In addressing the request for the review team to consider internal growth scores rather than state accountability scores, the state charter application is very clear that this is not an option. “A Tennessee operator requesting replication must:

- Be in compliance with local, state, and federal laws and their charter contract;
- Be in at least year 2 of operation in Tennessee;
- **Provide student performance data analysis from state assessments**

Even assuming this were not true, the review team could not utilize internal growth scores, even those such as MAP with national norms, due to the fact we have no way of verifying the fidelity with which those assessments were given, what protocols are in place to ensure the testing environment is optimal, or what instructions were given to test administrators. Additionally, NWEA MAP is not mandated across the district or the state, making any data comparison challenging at best.

In summary, with no additional state accountability data to consider, and no compelling evidence presented that provides confidence that Rocketship can provide improved student outcomes, the review team does not believe it is in the best interests of the students, community, or the district to authorize a third Rocketship school at this time.

## Section Summaries

Only applicants who score “Meets Standard” in all three major areas on the evaluation rubric will be recommended for authorization.

**Academic Plan**

- Meets Standard
- Partially Meets Standard
- Does Not Meet Standard

**Operations Plan**

- Meets Standard
- Partially Meets Standard
- Does Not Meet Standard

**Financial Plan**

- Meets Standard
- Partially Meets Standard
- Does Not Meet Standard

## Academic Plan Detail

### Rating: Does Not Meet Standard

**Summary as Presented in Proposal:** Rocketship proposes to open a third (3<sup>rd</sup>) stand-alone elementary school with all grades at once (K-4). The Rocketship model combines traditional classroom instruction with blended learning, which enables highly personalized individual instruction through on-line adaptive technology and tutors; a parent engagement strategy that allows for advocacy on behalf of all children and their education; and a leadership development program that creates sustainable careers for highly effective educators.

The academic plan will not differ significantly from the original Rocketship model. Rocketship's instructional model is a teacher-led, technology-supported approach to personalized learning. Teachers leverage frequent assessment and learning lab data to group students for targeted instruction. Rocketship utilizes a unique integrated special education program, with special education teachers pushing into the classrooms to provide support and co-teaching. Teachers collaborate to provide greater differentiation for all learning. Rocketship provides a positive behavior intervention and support culture that promotes character development and offers social emotional curriculum to all students. Blended learning initiatives increase access to technology, self-paced curriculum and on-going real time data. Additionally, the instructional program includes social-emotional learning curricula and enrichment opportunities.

### Review Team Analysis:

The application does not meet standard due to the less than successful state accountability scores of one of the existing Rocketship schools. In breaking down the proficient/advanced TCAP scores from 2014-15, the following facts emerge:

In reading and math scores, Rocketship's performance falls below that of several identified MNPS priority schools.

- Six (6) MNPS priority schools performed within + or - 5% of Rocketship in Math. Three performed better than Rocketship.
- Nine (9) MNPS Priority Schools performed within + or - 5% of Rocketship in Reading, with five (5) priority schools performing better.

In 2015, Rocketship's economically disadvantaged (ED) success rate was below district averages for ED students. Rocketship's ED students had a 29.4% success rate in math, compared to MNPS's 37% ED success rate. Rocketship's RLA ED success rate was 17.4%, compared to MNPS's 32% success rate for ED students.

While Rocketship boasts of a TVAAS growth score of 5, the highest level, further analysis shows that even the growth was modest in reading and math, and built more on the strength of the science scores. As well, only 56.7% of students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade math increased their NCE score from the year before, leaving over 43% of students staying at the same growth level or falling behind. Fifty-four percent of students increased their reading/language arts (RLA) NCE score in 2015, leaving over 45% of students staying at the same growth level or falling behind. Looking at the math and reading growth without science, their Math NCE gain was 2.4% (14<sup>th</sup> among MNPS elementary schools); and Reading NCE gain was 2.3% (18<sup>th</sup> among MNPS elementary schools). Rocketship's own application includes goals of a year and a half growth in Reading and Math, and this moderate growth does not meet their own goals. Significantly above average growth is desirable in all subjects, not simply science.

Additionally, while growth is important, it does not meet the standard of evidence of student success in the state's replication rubric. The State of Tennessee defines success as the % of all test takers in math, reading, and science in a given year. That measure is achievement based. Consideration of growth is not a part of the definition of student success.

For these reasons, the review team has determined that the academic plan does not meet the standard for replication.

### **Amended Application Analysis**

In evaluating the amended application, there were no additional state accountability scores to review. The applicant also requested that the team review their internal growth scores closer, and indicated that their science scores should not be discounted from 2015 as a part of their TVAAS growth score.

The review team did not discount or exclude science scores in evaluating how Rocketship achieved their level 5 growth under TVAAS. The team did, however, consider that the Reading and Math scores were more important. While almost 71% of Rocketship students showed some type of NCE growth in science, only 53% showed some type of NCE growth in Reading, and 57% showed growth in Math. More students must show growth in more significant ways in order to overshadow achievement in the bottom 3<sup>rd</sup> percentile.

In addition, the review team originally found that Rocketship did not appear to follow their own “greenlighting” process. Rocketship provided additional information concerning their process, and they did, indeed follow it. However, the review team remains concerned that their process would allow for opening additional schools when their existing school for which we have information is performing so poorly on standardized state accountability measures.

In reviewing an application, the review team cannot take into account internal benchmark assessments, such as NWEA MAP, which are designed to be given to assess growth throughout the school year and inform instructional practice for teachers. The state application and our own review process are aligned to only include state accountability data when assessing an existing school for replication purposes. There is no way to verify the fidelity with which the internal assessments are given, and no way to compare with other schools in the district, as this is not a mandated district assessment.

A charter school that is performing in the bottom 3% does not meet the MNPS threshold for replication, and the review team does not have confidence that this school will be successful if allowed to open. Therefore, the review team’s original assessment that the academic plan does not meet standard remains valid.

## Operations Plan Detail

**Rating: Partially Meets Standard**

### **Summary as Presented in Proposal:**

Rocketship Tennessee schools are governed by Rocketship Education's (RSED) Board of Directors and will benefit from the support of the Rocketship Education Network Support Team (NEST). The governance structure will not change significantly with the addition of a new stand-alone school. Rocketship has a local advisory board comprised of community members and parents of students attending the school.

The Rocketship model includes all grades beginning at the same time, with year one estimated at 448 students. At capacity, Rocketship Fresh Start will have 550 students. Rocketship typically starts out at three-quarters capacity and reaches maximum capacity within two years.

The leadership team consists of a principal, two assistant principals, and a business operations manager. This is consistent with all Rocketship schools, including their first Nashville school which opened for the 2014-15 school year.

Staffing plans include salaries that average above the local district and Rocketship will provide transportation and food service. Rocketship anticipates 10% of their population will be identified as special needs and 90% of their population will be identified as economically disadvantaged.

Organizational charts, start-up plans and job descriptions are included and recruitment and hiring plans are also presented. The relationship between the network board and the local governing advisory board is given, as well as an extensive network staffing model.

**Review Team Analysis:** The Operational Plan partially meets the standard for approval because their operations model appears well thought out and has proven successful throughout the country. The review team found these characteristics to indicate a solid plan:

- Rocketship has a robust and well-developed talent pipeline. Applicants explained during the interview that not only do they have access to teachers trained in Rocketship's methods here in Nashville, but they also have access to talent within the larger organization. Both the application and the interview

- indicated intentional development of staff as leaders
- The national Rocketship Education network is supportive to local schools
  - The local advisory board has input into all aspects of the Nashville schools.

However, the review team has significant concerns about the process that Rocketship indicates it uses for assessing both school-by-school academic health and the greenlighting process used for consideration of expansion. In their own words, Rocketship outlines an extensive process used within the organization for assessing expansion, using such metrics as network capacity, student academic success, and certain financial indicators. The review team does not have confidence that Rocketship followed their own process for replication, considering their academic results for students are substandard.

### **Amended Application Analysis**

As stated above, Rocketship provided information to the review team that indicates they are following their process. However, the review team has serious concerns that the process would allow expansion when their existing school is performing in the bottom 3<sup>rd</sup> percentile. This section still only partially meets standard by the review team evaluation.

## Financial/Business Plan Detail

### **Rating: Partially Meets Standard**

**Summary as Presented in Proposal:** The application indicates a consolidated budget and a fee schedule to schools that support the regional office. These fees will be 15% of revenues generated for each year in operation.

The school anticipates a significant investment in technology and equipment in the first year of operation, and also anticipates a very large lease expense.

The school will run a deficit in the first year of operation, and experience a negative fund balance through 2018-19. School assumes \$525,000 in Charter School start-up funds from the USDOE.

**Review Team Analysis:** The financial plan partially meets standard because, while the review team believes the Rocketship network overall has adequate financial resources, some of the budget assumptions are concerning. First, the school will run a deficit for at least one year, with a negative fund balance until 2018-19. While the school believes it has adequate fundraising and philanthropy to cover this deficit, the review team is not convinced this financial strategy is well-thought out.

The assumption of \$525,000 in Charter School start-up funds is equally concerning to the team. These funds are not guaranteed, and are competitive in nature. While it is likely that Rocketship would qualify, the review team is concerned that it is included as a part of the budget.

The only contingency plan presented in the event of an unexpected emergency was waiver of the 15% network fees, but no detail was presented to indicate what other budgetary adjustments would have to be made if this were not enough.

### **Amended Application Analysis**

Rocketship is generally thought to be in a strong financial position due to the fact that it has an extensive nationwide network, and there have been no findings in their audited financials.

However, although Rocketship addressed the contingency question through a waiver of the 15% network fee, there was no explanation of how that would impact the Nashville network.

The network budget also includes \$1.4 million in philanthropic donations, but provides no explanation for how or where this money will be raised.

Because of these lingering questions, the review team still rates this section as “partially meets”.