



## **Executive Director’s Recommendation Hillcrest High School Appeal**

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated (“T.C.A.”) § 49-13-108, sponsors proposing to open a new charter school may appeal the denial of its amended application by a local board of education to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission (“Commission”). On August 8, 2025, the sponsor of Hillcrest High School (“sponsor” or “Hillcrest”) appealed the denial of its amended application by the Memphis-Shelby County Schools (“MSCS”) Board of Education to the Commission.

Based on the procedural history, findings of fact, analysis, and Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto, I believe that the decision to deny the Hillcrest amended application was not contrary to the best interests of the students, local education agency (“LEA”), or community.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I recommend that the Commission uphold the decision of the MSCS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Hillcrest.

### **STANDARD OF REVIEW**

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108 and Commission Policy 2.000, Commission staff and an independent charter application review committee conducted a de novo, on the record review of the Hillcrest amended application. In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education’s Charter Creation Application Evaluation Guidance and Review Tool (“rubric”), “[t]o be eligible for approval, an application must receive a “Meets or Exceeds Standard” rating for all applicable sections [(academic plan and design, operations plan and capacity, financial plan and capacity, and portfolio review and performance record)].”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Commission 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 Commission must find that the application meets or exceeds the metrics outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education’s application-scoring rubric and that approval of the amended charter application is in

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<sup>1</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

<sup>2</sup> Tennessee Department of Education’s Charter Creation Application Evaluation Guidance and Review Tool, pg. 3.

<sup>3</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

the best interests of the students, local education agency, or community.<sup>4</sup> If the local board of education's decision is appealed, then the Commission can approve the application, and thereby authorize the school, or can affirm the local board's decision to deny.

### **PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

1. The sponsor submitted a letter of intent to Memphis-Shelby County Schools expressing its intention to file a charter school application.
2. The sponsor submitted its initial application for Hillcrest High School to MSCS on February 3, 2025.
3. MSCS assembled a review committee to review and score the Hillcrest initial application.
4. On March 4, 2025, MSCS's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of Hillcrest.
5. MSCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Hillcrest initial application, indicating it met standard on the finance section, and it partially met standard on the academic, operations, and past performance sections and the initial application was not in alignment with Memphis-Shelby County School's Board Policy 1011.
6. On April 29, 2025, MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the Hillcrest initial application.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for Hillcrest to MSCS on May 30, 2025.
8. MSCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Hillcrest amended application based on the charter application-scoring rubric and rated the academic and past performance sections as partially meets standard and the operations and finance sections as meets standard.
9. On July 29, 2025, the MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Hillcrest.
10. The sponsor appealed the denial of the Hillcrest amended application in writing to the Commission on August 8, 2025, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
11. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored the Hillcrest amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school

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<sup>4</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

application-scoring rubric.

12. On September 11, 2025, the Commission staff held a public hearing at Barnes Auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the Commission’s designee, heard presentations from the sponsor and MSCS and received public comment regarding the Hillcrest amended application.
13. The Commission’s Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of the Hillcrest leadership team on September 22, 2025 via Microsoft Teams.
14. After the capacity interview, the Commission’s Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of the Hillcrest amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
15. The Commission staff conducted a full review of the record, which included the initial and amended applications submitted by the sponsor, documentation submitted by MSCS, and the findings of the public hearing and public comment. The Commission’s General Counsel conducted a full review and legal analysis of the record.

**FINDINGS OF FACT**

**District Denial of Initial Application**

The Review Committee assembled by MSCS to review and score the Hillcrest initial application consisted of the following individuals:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
John Anderson	MSCS Decision, Analytics & Information Management, User Experience Advisor
Tiffany Boyle	MSCS Office of Literacy, Manager
Chrystal Burton	MSCS Federal Programs, Senior Manager
Erin Conley	Expert External Reviewer
Rochelle Griffin	MSCS Virtual Schools and Online Learning, Director
Kendra Hargrove	MSCS Virtual Schools, Alternative Education Advisor
LaSheka Hayslett	MSCS Transportation Advisor
Adrienne Hill	MSCS Student Services, Extended Learning Advisor
Tishsha Hopson	MSCS Recruitment and Staffing, HR Talent and Support Manager
Marian Kelley	MSCS Exceptional Education, Charter Advisor
Terriny Lloyd	MSCS Advanced Academics/Optional School Manager
Kelly Martin	MSCS Nutrition Services, Special Programs Manager
LaTonya McGowan	MSCS Safety and Security, Emergency Management Specialist

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Teneisha McNeil	MSCS Multilingual Learners, Charter Advisor
Grant Monda	Charter Leader Reviewer
Edranyce Monrore	Parent/Community Reviewer
James Nelson	MSCS School Level Partnerships and Grants, Compliance Manager
Arlandra Parker	MSCS Office of Charter Schools, Director of School Development
Thomas Perry	MSCS Office of General Counsel, Associate General Counsel
Melanie Rackley	Expert Reviewer
Virgina Rodgers	MSCS Federal Programs, Charter Schools Finance Director
Terri Stephens	MSCS Curriculum and Instruction, Instructional Advisor
Michelle Stuart	MSCS Facilities Planning & Property Management, Facility Services Officer
Laura Tippit	MSCS Infrastructure and System Support, Sr. Advisor
Lisa White	MSCS College Career Technology Education, Manager Research and Analytics
Kevin Willis	MSCS Information Technology, Manager

The Hillcrest initial application received the following ratings from the MSCS Review Committee:

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

After the MSCS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its analysis was presented to the MSCS Board of Education on April 29, 2025. The MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of Hillcrest.

### **District Denial of Amended Application**

The Review Committee assembled by MSCS to review and score the Hillcrest amended application consisted of the following individuals:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
John Anderson	MSCS Decision, Analytics & Information Management, User Experience Advisor
Tiffany Boyle	MSCS Office of Literacy, Manager
Chrystal Burton	MSCS Federal Programs, Senior Manager

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Erin Conley	Expert External Reviewer
Rochelle Griffin	MSCS Virtual Schools and Online Learning, Director
Kendra Hargrove	MSCS Virtual Schools, Alternative Education Advisor
LaSheka Hayslett	MSCS Transportation Advisor
Adrienne Hill	MSCS Student Services, Extended Learning Advisor
Tishsha Hopson	MSCS Recruitment and Staffing, HR Talent and Support Manager
Marian Kelley	MSCS Exceptional Education, Charter Advisor
LaTonya McGowan	MSCS Safety and Security, Emergency Management Specialist
Teneisha McNeil	MSCS Multilingual Learners, Charter Advisor
Grant Monda	Charter Leader Reviewer
Edranyce Monrore	Parent/Community Reviewer
Arlandra Parker	MSCS Office of Charter Schools, Director of School Development
Thomas Perry	MSCS Office of General Counsel, Associate General Counsel
Melanie Rackley	Expert Reviewer
Virgina Rodgers	MSCS Federal Programs, Charter Schools Finance Director
Terri Stephens	MSCS Curriculum and Instruction, Instructional Advisor
Michelle Stuart	MSCS Facilities Planning & Property Management, Facility Services Officer
Laura Tippit	MSCS Infrastructure and System Support, Sr. Advisor

Upon resubmission, the MSCS Review Committee conducted a review of the amended application, and the amended application received the following ratings from the MSCS Review Committee:

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

After the MSCS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its analysis was presented to the MSCS Board of Education on July 29, 2025. At the July 29, 2025 board meeting, the MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Hillcrest.

### **Commission Review Committee’s Evaluation of the Application**

Following the denial of the Hillcrest amended application and subsequent appeal to the

Commission, Commission staff assembled a diverse review committee of internal and external experts to independently evaluate and score the Hillcrest amended application. This Review Committee consisted of the following individuals:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore	Commission Staff
Nancy Dickson	External Consultant
Halli Faulkner	External Consultant
Beth Figueroa	Commission Staff
Neven Holland	External Consultant
Whitney Noel	External Consultant

The Commission’s Review Committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Hillcrest 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 committee’s consensus rating of the Hillcrest application was as follows:

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

The Review Committee recommends the denial of the amended application for Hillcrest because the applicant failed to provide sufficient evidence in the Academic Plan and Design and Portfolio Review and Performance Record sections to demonstrate that the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

The Academic Plan and Design partially meets the standard due to a lack of evidence demonstrating meaningful student growth. While the applicant has adopted new, high-quality curricula within the last two years, there is no clear evidence that these changes will meaningfully improve student outcomes beyond historical trends. Additionally, the application lacks clear, measurable benchmarks to track student growth and proficiency, raising concerns about the school's ability to effectively monitor progress and ensure long-term success. The strategy to stream instruction from another network operated high school was cited as a weakness because it has not proven effective in increasing math proficiency. Finally, the strategies implemented to decrease chronic absenteeism lack demonstrated effectiveness.

The applicant’s Operations Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard due to the demonstrated capacity of IOTA Community Schools (“IOTA”) to operate charter schools, the

strength of its network leadership team, and a clear and feasible transition plan. The applicant has successfully managed a prior school transition to the Commission's portfolio, and the operator has demonstrated consistent organizational stability and the ability to continue to support Hillcrest. The organization is further strengthened by a governing board of long-standing members with diverse expertise and a centralized support team that efficiently handles complex administrative functions. Given the network's experience, there are various feasible facility plans available should Hillcrest need to relocate.

The Financial Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard based on the network's history of sound financial management and detailed financial modeling. Hillcrest and other IOTA schools consistently operate with a positive net income, and modeling shows conservative estimates that do not rely upon philanthropy. IOTA has planned various scenarios regarding the network's uncertain future while maintaining central office support for its schools. Furthermore, the network has a feasible plan for purchasing a facility and funding capital improvements should Hillcrest need to relocate.

Lastly, the Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets standard due to low academic performance at Hillcrest and across the portfolio over the last ten years. Hillcrest's most recent TVAAS composite score of Level 1 underscores the lack of expected academic growth. Another key performance metric, graduation rate, was also well below the resident district's graduation rate, and the application failed to include plans to improve it. Additionally, the application lacked specific, measurable academic goals for the next ten years. Finally, Hillcrest is one of multiple academically struggling schools in IOTA's portfolio, demonstrating an overall lack of academic strength within the network.

For the aforementioned reasons, the Review Committee found that the sponsor did not meet or exceed the standard for approval based on the department's scoring rubric.

For additional information regarding the Review Committee's evaluation of the Hillcrest amended application, please see **Exhibit A** for the complete Review Committee Recommendation Report, which is fully incorporated herein by reference.

### **Public Hearing**

Pursuant to statute<sup>5</sup> and Commission Policy 2.000, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director was held on September 11, 2025. The MSCS presentation at the public hearing focused on the district's review process and its rationale for denying the Hillcrest High School charter application submitted by IOTA. Representatives from MSCS shared that the

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<sup>5</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.



Charter Application Review Team utilized the Tennessee Department of Education scoring rubric. The team found that the application met or exceeded the standard for Operations Plan and Capacity and Financial Plan and Capacity but partially met the standard for Academic Plan and Design and Portfolio Review and Performance Record. Subsequently, the MSCS Board of Education denied the application based on these deficiencies. Specifically, the district cited concerns regarding the applicant's failure to provide clarity and details related to the academic plan and the lack of evidence demonstrating successful academic shifts from the former organization Green Dot Public Schools Tennessee ("GDPST") to the current IOTA model. The district also noted limited community support, including the use of template letters, and concerns over the network's historical underperformance, including low historical proficiency and has remained on the Priority/Comprehensive Support and Improvement ("CSI") list.

In the sponsor's opening statement, IOTA opened by sharing its mission and vision, emphasizing relationships, accountability, determination, and justice. The school acknowledged its student body demographics, noting that 85% of incoming students enter below grade level in reading and 75% enter below grade level in math. IOTA highlighted its innovative approach, which includes a focus on career and technical education programs, such as the partnership with the Tennessee Valley Authority to offer the Student Training and Resource Sharing ("STARS") civil engineering training program, to help students become job-ready and earn certifications. The sponsor presented academic data showing moments of success, such as a Level 5 TVAAS composite score in 2022 but acknowledged a primary struggle has been with teacher retention, which caused a dip in subsequent data. They also noted Hillcrest's strong tie to the community, including featuring alumni success stories and emphasizing services like providing therapy and social workers to address unique student barriers. IOTA underscored its dedication to teacher quality through established weekly professional learning for teachers, designed to address instructional gaps and ensure high-quality instruction. Acknowledging the challenge of educating high school students who are far behind, the operator emphasized that they work immediately to create plans for pushing students forward and making college a reality. The operator also shared non-academic highlights, including serving over 30,000 free meals through its after-school program and involving over 600 students in Aviation Takeover Day since the 2023-24 school year.

During questioning by the Commission, MSCS provided an overview of their due diligence and process, confirming they utilized publicly available achievement and growth data including TVAAS and federal designations, in a manner consistent with the metrics used to evaluate all district schools. When questioned about the district's assessment of "quality seats" in the Whitehaven region, MSCS responded that a quality seat is determined when a school's performance scorecard achieves a 3.0 or above on the district's accountability framework. When

questioned about plans for Hillcrest High School should IOTA end its term with the Achievement School District (“ASD”) and the school transition back to the district, MSCS confirmed the school would be placed into the appropriate school support structure based on its Priority/CSI status, likely the Innovation Zone (“iZone”). MSCS explained that their transition team is prepared to coordinate with IOTA on all aspects, including facility, personnel, and ensuring student transcripts are transferred to keep students on track for graduation. When asked about facility discussions, MSCS confirmed they did not know the status of the Hillcrest High School facility's index or capacity but described the general process required for an operator to remain in a building. This process includes submitting a letter of interest, saturation analysis, and board approval. MSCS confirmed that the charter office itself is not involved in this process.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor, with the initial focus on inconsistent academic performance. IOTA responded by detailing their current model's strengths, including a strong leadership pipeline, established weekly professional learning for teacher collaboration, and a track record of responsiveness that they believe is showing gains. They attributed their struggles partly because MSCS promotes higher performing students from its feeder school, A. Maceo Walker Middle School, to Whitehaven High School. Therefore, the students matriculating to Hillcrest are typically the lower performing students. Questions were then posed regarding the facility plan. IOTA stated its intention to engage with MSCS soon to negotiate the purchase or long-term lease of its current building, with an expected timeline of nine months post-approval. The alternative is the conversion property in Whitehaven, which is still available. Enrollment data shows stability around 450 students historically, reaching a high of 490 last year. IOTA stated they are prepared to expand recruitment now that they are not limited by the 25% ASD cap, but noted they remain financially sustainable at 450 students. Lastly, questioning shifted to network uncertainty. The IOTA board expressed confidence in the network's financial strength having over 130 days cash on hand. Additionally, IOTA reiterated its ability to maintain operational and financial sustainability after stress-testing models with a minimum of two schools, citing Bluff City High School and Wooddale Middle School as a sustainable core, if both appeals were denied. They noted their ability to weather any scenario due to longstanding success with their budget and contingency planning.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of one in-person comment, with none speaking in support of MSCS and one speaking in support of Hillcrest. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received no written comments for either party.

### **Analysis**

State law requires the Commission to review the decision of the local board of education

and determine if the application “meets or exceeds the metrics outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education’s application-scoring rubric and,” whether “approval of the application is in the best interests of the students, LEA, or community.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the Commission adopted the State Board of Education’s Quality Charter Authorizing Standards set forth in State Board Policy 6.111 and utilizes these standards to review charter applications received upon appeal. In making my recommendation to the Commission, I have considered the Review Committee’s Recommendation Report, the documentation submitted by both the sponsor and MSCS, the arguments made by both parties at the public hearing, and the public comments received by Commission staff and conclude as follows:

The Review Committee’s report and recommendations are thorough, citing specific examples in the application and referencing information gained in the capacity interview in support of its findings. For the reasons explained in the report, I agree that the Hillcrest amended application did not rise to the level of meeting or exceeding the standards required for approval.

I agree with the Review Committee that the sponsor’s academic plan partially meets the standard. IOTA, formerly GDPST, has spent the past ten years working to provide a quality option for the high school students in the Whitehaven community and is an experienced operator. Their commendable efforts are a part of what makes this recommendation challenging. One of the purposes of Tennessee public charter schools is to provide more autonomy to operators in exchange for greater academic achievements. Yet, despite the many positive attributes detailed throughout this recommendation and appellate record, the sponsor has failed to produce academic achievement worthy of another ten-year charter agreement. I believe that the sponsor has identified and deeply understands the needs of its community and has developed a mission and vision that is specifically targeted to meet those needs, and yet good intentions cannot override the track record of academic performance.

Over the last ten years, the sponsor has consistently performed below the averages of the local district, under circumstances with more targeted support. While I acknowledge the recent adoption and use of state recommended materials, the results of this transition do not demonstrate enough improvement for me to find that the sponsor’s academic plan should be granted another ten-year charter. I am also concerned that sponsor’s stated plans and intended adjustments to its academic model will not be enough to change the outcomes and results of achievement for the students. As the sponsor is intimately aware, the students that enroll at Hillcrest are often several grades below math and reading levels. However, I do not believe that

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<sup>6</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

the sponsor sufficiently detailed its plan to address these gaps beyond their current practices which are not yielding the desired outcomes.

Another struggle that was not addressed sufficiently in the application was the chronic absenteeism at Hillcrest. The sponsor did acknowledge efforts to place a deeper focus on decreasing the chronic absenteeism rates, including hiring a new director of behavior supports. However, there is little evidence of the effectiveness of these changes in addressing chronic absenteeism. The efforts of the sponsor are commendable and well-intentioned. But, for public charter schools to be granted a greater level of autonomy, they are expected to reach greater academic achievements.

Where the sponsor shines is in the intentionality with which the team engages with the students and community they are committed to serving. I appreciated the sponsor's details at the public hearing and capacity interview about the variety of wraparound services offered to the families of Hillcrest and the purposeful way that IOTA involves the community. The use of targeted curriculum and partnerships is evidence of the care the sponsor has for its students. I also believe that the sponsor demonstrated a commitment to improving student outcomes and learning from the challenges they have faced in the expiring charter term. If the consideration was for a shorter charter term, that could factor into a different recommendation. However, the Commission's charge, and the basis of my recommendation, is whether the sponsor should be granted a ten-year charter term for the operation of Hillcrest.

Despite my admiration for the sponsor's desire to make continued adjustments and their commitment to the community and as challenging as this recommendation is, I cannot recommend approval at this time. I cannot state that the sponsor has accomplished greater academic success than the local district such that I have confidence that academic outcomes will significantly improve with a new ten-year charter term. Hillcrest has consistently performed below the local district in proficiency, and I have not seen evidence that the sponsor has determined how to best improve this data over its initial ten-year charter term. I believe in the sponsor's dedication to the Whitehaven neighborhood and the students it serves. The sponsor's commitment to a shift in focus on career and technical education is a reflection of the desires and needs of that community. These efforts could open new opportunities for the students attending Hillcrest for future life paths. But in my review, I find that the weaknesses outweigh the strengths, and therefore the academic plan partially meets the Tennessee Department of Education's standard for approval.

I agree with the Review Committee that in terms of operations and finance, the sponsor meets the standard for approval. I have witnessed the sponsor successfully navigate a change in governance structure from GDPST to the current entity, IOTA Community Schools, without



experiencing interruptions in the network operations. Additionally, IOTA successfully transitioned Wooddale Middle School from the Achievement School District to the Commission. I am confident that, if the application was approved, the transition of Hillcrest to the portfolio of the Commission would be successful operationally and financially.

I also believe that the sponsor has a governing board that is diverse and experienced, and I appreciated the perspective of the board member during the capacity interview as he discussed challenges of the network, including contingency plans for changes that may occur should the application be denied. I believe that IOTA is capable and efficient and is structured such that individual schools, such as Hillcrest, can remain focused on academic support and achievement.

Within the operations plan, the sponsor also demonstrated the ability to develop a sound facilities plan and provide contingencies that are realistic. As with Wooddale Middle School, the sponsor would seek first to purchase the facility where Hillcrest currently exists. But, if a lease or purchase from MSCS is not possible, the sponsor provided evidence of viable alternatives that could accommodate and serve the entire Hillcrest population of students. Stabilizing leadership is imperative, as the sponsor attributes low performance partially to the high turnover in this area. I believe the sponsor has developed systems to address this challenge and would be able to create consistent leadership for the success of the school.

Financially, the sponsor has clear evidence of a strong track record of financial performance. The sponsor completed nine consecutive years of its expiring charter term with clean audits and continues to maintain a significant level of days cash on hand. Hillcrest has operated at a positive net income over its charter term, and the financial plan demonstrates realistic cost assumptions and a clear contingency plan, based on the uncertainty of pending applications. I believe the sponsor has thoughtfully considered the financial implications of the Commission decisions on the network. The sponsor's application, as well as testimony during the public hearing and capacity interview, spoke to varying scenarios for the network's sustainability if one or both of the schools' applications are denied. This level of detail shows the sponsor's understanding of the importance of a sound financial plan and the impact of the Commission's decision on the network's future success.

Finally, I agree with the Review Committee that the Portfolio Review and Performance Record for the sponsor partially meets the standard for approval. As the Commission currently has two of the network schools in its portfolio, I am aware of the work the sponsor has done to increase performance at its schools. The sponsor displayed an understanding of the grave challenges faced over the charter term and admitted to insignificant academic growth over the term of the charter. Despite those assertions, the sponsor has remained committed to the

Whitehaven community and has provided the students at Hillcrest support services that have the potential to position them for success. I believe in the sponsor's passion for its students and community, but my recommendation is grounded in the record and academic success of the sponsor. Even though I believe the sponsor put forth tremendous effort to turn around Hillcrest High School, the Commission is charged in statute to only approve applications that meet or exceed the Tennessee Department of Education's scoring rubric and are in the best interest of the students, LEA, or community. When reviewing Hillcrest's historical performance, I cannot recommend that the sponsor be granted a new ten-year charter agreement. When we analyzed Hillcrest's data against the Commission's School Performance Framework, the school would not have met standard based on the 2023-24 school year data, the most recent available.

In totality, I cannot recommend approval to continue operation for a school when it is not supported by data. The sponsor's proficiency rates at Hillcrest have been low, particularly in math at 5% and have not improved over the last few years. The math proficiency rate is significantly lower than the rate of the local district, which has experienced growth year over year. Further, I remain concerned about the lack of improvement in math proficiency even after the sponsor attempted to adjust the curriculum and instruction to increase performance. Additionally, the sponsor's graduation rates are far lower than those of the local district. Hillcrest High School also has a lower graduation rate than the other high school within the network, Bluff City High School, which is also below the local district's graduation rate. This underperformance over the past ten years does not support granting a new agreement to the sponsor. As the Commission has previously considered and denied the applications of other schools formerly in the sponsor's network for academic underperformance, this must remain the standard for the approval of only high-quality charter schools.

I appreciate the sponsor's acknowledgment of performance challenges during the public hearing. But I remain concerned that even with recent curricular adjustments, the outcomes would not increase so significantly to justify extending a ten-year charter to the sponsor. IOTA is committed to the Whitehaven community, and they were faced with many challenges over the course of its previous charter. However, I do not believe the amended application and record support recommending that they be granted a new ten-year charter term.

Any authorized public charter school is entrusted with the great responsibility of educating students and a significant amount of public funds. For these reasons, the Commission expects that only those schools that have demonstrated a high likelihood of success and meet or exceed the required criteria in all areas will be authorized.

For the reasons expounded on in this report, I recommend that the Commission deny the Hillcrest High School amended application.



## CONCLUSION

For these reasons, and for the reasons stated in the Review Committee Recommendation Report attached hereto as **Exhibit A**, I do not believe that the decision to deny the amended application for Hillcrest High School was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or community. Therefore, I recommend that the Commission affirm the decision of the MSCS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Hillcrest High School.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tess Stovall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

Tess Stovall, Executive Director  
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

October 17, 2025

Date



**EXHIBIT A:**  
**Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report**

October 17, 2025

**School Name:** Hillcrest High School

**Sponsor:** IOTA Community Schools

**Proposed Location of School:** Memphis-Shelby County Schools

**Evaluation Team:**

- Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore
- Nancy Dickson
- Halli Faulkner
- Beth Figueroa
- Neven Holland
- Whitney Noel



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 sponsor of a public charter school to appeal the denial of an application by the local board of education to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission (“Commission”). In accordance with T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the Commission shall conduct a de novo, on the record review of the proposed charter school’s application, and the Commission has adopted national and state quality authorizing standards to guide its work. As laid out in Commission Policy 3.000 – Core Authorizing Principles,<sup>1</sup> the Commission is committed to implementing these authorizing standards that are aligned with the core principles of charter school authorizing, including setting high standards for the approval of charter schools in its portfolio.

In accordance with T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the Commission adopted Commission Policy 2.000 – Charter School Appeals. The Commission has outlined the charter school appeal process to ensure the well-being and interests of students are the fundamental value informing all Commission actions and decisions. The Commission publishes clear timelines and expectations for applicants, engages highly competent teams of internal and external evaluators to review all applications, and maintains rigorous criteria for approval of a charter school. In addition, the Commission plans to evaluate its work annually to ensure its alignment to national and state standards for quality authorizing and implements improvement when necessary.

The Commission’s charter application review process is outlined in T.C.A. § 49-13-108, Commission Policy 2.000 – Charter School Appeals, and Commission Policy 2.100 – Application Review. The Commission assembled a charter application review committee comprised of highly qualified internal and external evaluators with relevant and diverse expertise to evaluate each application. The Commission provided training to all committee members to ensure consistent standards and fair treatment of all applications.

## Overview of the Evaluation Process

The Commission’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

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<sup>1</sup> All [Commission rules and policies](#) may be found on the [Commission's website](#).

four sections of the application: Academic Plan and Design, Operations Plan and Capacity, and 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 ninety-minute interview with the sponsor, members of the governing board, and school leadership 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.
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 and Design:** school mission and goals; academic focus and performance standards; assessments; school calendar and schedule; recruitment and enrollment; parent and community engagement and support; school culture and discipline; special populations; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
  - b. **Operations Plan and Capacity:** governance; facilities; start-up plan; personnel/human capital; professional development; transportation; additional operations; charter management organizations; network vision, growth plan, and capacity; network governance; network management and personnel; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
  - c. **Financial Plan and Capacity:** planning and budget worksheet; operating budget; operating budget narrative; network financial plan; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
  - d. **Portfolio Review and Performance Record:** school portfolio summary; academic performance record; fiscal and operational performance record.



The Commission’s charter application Review Committee utilized the Tennessee Department of Education’s Charter Creation Application Evaluation Guidance and Review Tool (“rubric”), which is used by all local boards of education when evaluating an application. The rubric states that authorizers should adopt the State Board of Education’s (“SBE”) Quality Authorizing Standards, which establishes rigorous decision-making criteria. Specifically, SBE Policy 6.111 states a “quality authorizer requires all applicants to present a clear and compelling mission, a quality educational program, a demonstration of community support, a solvent and sustainable budget and contingency financial plans, a clear demonstration of the effectiveness of the model for the target student population, effective governance and management structures and systems, founding team members demonstrating diverse and necessary capabilities in all phases of the school’s development, and clear evidence of the applicant’s capacity to execute its plan successfully. An application that merits a recommendation for approval should satisfy each of these criteria.”<sup>2</sup>

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

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
Meets or Exceeds Standard	The applicant’s 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 applicant’s response meets the criteria in some respects but lacks sufficient detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.
Does Not Meet Standard	The applicant’s response is incomplete, demonstrates lack of preparation, does not align with the mission and goals of the school, or otherwise raises significant concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant’s ability to carry it out.

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<sup>2</sup> Tennessee State Board of Education Policy 6.111

## Summary of the Application

**School Name:** Hillcrest High School

**Sponsor:** IOTA Community Schools

**Proposed Location of School:** Memphis-Shelby County Schools

**Mission:** To relentlessly pursue excellence, guided by fostering relationships, accountability, determination, and justice.<sup>3</sup>

**Number of Schools Currently in Operation by Sponsor:** The sponsor currently has two operating charter schools authorized by the Achievement School District (“ASD”) including Hillcrest High School (“Hillcrest”) and two charter schools authorized by the Commission.

**Proposed Enrollment:**<sup>4</sup>

Grade Level	Year 1: 2026-2027	Year 2: 2027-2028	Year 3: 2028-2029	Year 4: 2029-2030	Year 5: 2030-2031	At Capacity:
9	148	151	153	156	158	163
10	138	138	140	142	145	153
11	110	122	122	125	127	138
12	99	97	105	108	110	122
Totals <sup>5</sup>	496	508	520	531	539	575

## Brief Description of the Application

The sponsor, IOTA Community Schools (“IOTA”), is proposing to continue operation of Hillcrest High School in Shelby County, Tennessee and serve students in ninth through twelfth grade for a new, ten-year charter term. IOTA Community Schools, formerly Green Dot Public Schools Tennessee (“GDPST”), has operated Hillcrest High School under the ASD since 2015. If authorized, the school intends to continue operation in the Whitehaven community in Memphis to “prepare students in grades 9-12 by providing a small, college and career preparatory program.”<sup>6</sup> The school proposes to continue offering its current academic program and model, providing an additional school option in the Whitehaven neighborhood.

<sup>3</sup> Hillcrest High School Amended Application, pg. 8

<sup>4</sup> Hillcrest High School Amended Application, pg. 17

<sup>5</sup> Totals reflect figures from the amended application and are not calculated by summing grade-level enrollment.

<sup>6</sup> Hillcrest High School Amended Application, pg. 18



The school is governed by the IOTA Community Schools board and a school advisory committee. This allows active engagement of parents and families for each school operated by IOTA and ensures that stakeholders are engaged in the decision-making process. In Year 0, Hillcrest has budgeted \$8,395,704 receiving \$6,218,321 from state revenues, \$2,149,032 in federal revenues, and \$28,351 in school activity revenues and projects \$7,643,243 in expenses for the school. Hillcrest projects the school will have \$7,685,405 in revenue and \$7,678,631 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a balance of \$759,235. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$9,320,457 in revenue and \$9,183,368 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$1,291,585.<sup>7</sup> The school anticipates that 68% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 14% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 6.5% of the student population will be English learners.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hillcrest High School Amended Budget

<sup>8</sup> Hillcrest High School Amended Application, pg. 18

## Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends the denial of the amended application for Hillcrest because the applicant failed to provide sufficient evidence in the Academic Plan and Design and Portfolio Review and Performance Record sections to demonstrate that the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

The Academic Plan and Design partially meets the standard due to a lack of evidence demonstrating meaningful student growth. While the applicant has adopted new, high-quality curricula within the last two years, there is no clear evidence that these changes will meaningfully improve student outcomes beyond historical trends. Additionally, the application lacks clear, measurable benchmarks to track student growth and proficiency, raising concerns about the school's ability to effectively monitor progress and ensure long-term success. The strategy to stream instruction from another IOTA-operated high school was cited as a weakness because it has not proven effective in increasing math proficiency. Finally, the strategies implemented to decrease chronic absenteeism lack demonstrated effectiveness.

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard due to IOTA Community Schools' demonstrated capacity to operate charter schools, the strength of its central leadership team, and a clear and feasible transition plan. The applicant has successfully managed a prior school transition to the Commission's portfolio, and the operator has demonstrated consistent organizational stability and the ability to continue to support Hillcrest. The organization is further strengthened by a governing board of long-standing members with diverse expertise and a centralized support team that efficiently handles complex administrative functions. Given the network's experience, there are various feasible facility plans available should Hillcrest need to relocate.

The Financial Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard based on the network's history of sound financial management and detailed financial modeling. Hillcrest and other IOTA network schools consistently operate with a positive net income, and modeling shows conservative estimates that do not rely upon philanthropy. IOTA has planned various scenarios regarding the network's uncertain future while maintaining central office support for its schools. Furthermore, the network has a feasible plan for purchasing a facility and funding capital improvements should Hillcrest need to relocate.

Lastly, the Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets standard due to low academic performance at Hillcrest and across the portfolio over the last ten years. Hillcrest's most recent TVAAS composite score of Level 1 underscores the lack of expected academic growth. Another key performance metric, graduation rate, was also well below the resident district's graduation rate, and the application failed to include plans to improve it. Additionally,

the application lacked specific, measurable academic goals for the next ten years. Finally, Hillcrest is one of multiple academically struggling schools in IOTA's portfolio, demonstrating an overall lack of academic strength within the network.

### **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 and strengths in one area of the application do not negate 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. The Review Committee's consensus ratings for each section of the application are as follows:

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

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

*Rating: Partially Meets Standard*

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

The applicant's Academic Plan and Design partially meets standard because despite recent efforts to improve academic performance, such as curricular shifts, the academic plan has not yet produced the gains necessary to address a decade of low performance. Additionally, the Review Committee found that academic and attendance goals were unclear and lacked measurable benchmarks, significantly hindering the assessment of the model's ability to achieve desired, long-term results.

The application notes, and the leadership team reiterated during the capacity interview, that the school has selected state-recommended, high-quality instructional materials, such as Savvas enVision for math and myPerspectives for English language arts ("ELA"), to address proficiency gaps. However, the efficacy of these materials has not yet been demonstrated by significant academic gains in internal or external testing data. Additionally, the application states that incoming ninth-grade students are often entering high school with reading levels as low as the second or third grade. Despite the severity of this deficit, the current academic plan continues to lack a clear, foundational literacy strategy tailored for secondary grades, relying instead on Tier 2 and 3 interventions. Therefore, there is insufficient evidence that the current changes to the academic model will be adequate to raise student proficiency beyond what has been seen over the last ten years.

The Review Committee specifically questioned Hillcrest staff during the capacity interview regarding the persistent, exceptionally low math scores, which are an outlier even within overall low academic performance. The last five years of end-of-course performance data consistently show math proficiency remaining at or below 5%, despite recent curriculum changes. The leadership team confirmed in the capacity interview that this challenge stems primarily from a chronic lack of consistent, qualified math teachers. To address this immediate deficit, Hillcrest is currently utilizing streaming instruction from their higher-performing network school, Bluff City High School. The Review Committee noted this reliance on streaming as weakness within the academic plan and delivery of instruction, given that this strategy has not yet proven effective in generating the accelerated academic gains necessary to meet student needs.

Additionally, the application presented broad goals that lacked the necessary measurable benchmarks tied to student proficiency, growth, and attendance goals. While the operator clarified specific academic goals during the capacity interview, including pushing for TVAAS Level 5 growth across all subgroups and aiming for a 10% increase in proficiency year-over-year, these

crucial, measurable targets were absent from the written application. The lack of detailed metrics and a clear, evidence-based process for monitoring and revising these goals in the application hinders the assessment of the school's long-term commitment to data-driven, continuous improvement. Based on this lack of detailed metrics for monitoring long-term goals, there is a lack of confidence that the model will achieve desired results.

Finally, the operator noted that a new director of behavior supports has been hired, and a robust plan is in place to decrease chronic absenteeism. However, the application did not state whether additional support has been effective. While the operator detailed the use of a cross-network attendance team, proactive home visits, and daily monitoring to identify students who are frequently absent, further evidence is needed to demonstrate the sustained effectiveness of these recent efforts in reducing chronic absenteeism rates to acceptable levels.

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

During the capacity interview, Hillcrest and IOTA leadership discussed the increased focus on career and technical education (“CTE”) rather than solely focusing on college-readiness at the high school. In addition to current programming, Hillcrest has been in conversation with Tennessee College of Applied Technology (“TCAT”) about expanding offerings such as auto mechanics and welding for their students who may be interested in such careers upon graduation. This shift reflects a realistic focus that students may be interested in other postsecondary opportunities besides college.

The CTE pathways as described in the application are thoughtfully designed to align with the school’s mission and to meet the needs of their students. By offering relevant, career-focused opportunities, the program supports students’ long-term success and provides multiple avenues for future college and career choices. It is innovative that each pathway is supported by an active career and technical student organization, including SkillsUSA, DECA, and Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America, promoting leadership, technical skill-building and national competitions. Hillcrest also offers early postsecondary opportunities so that students can complete the three credits in an elective focus-area that is required for graduation. While IOTA leadership affirmed their commitment in the capacity interview and throughout the application to ensuring college readiness, they are also working to ensure all students are prepared for any postsecondary opportunity.

Enrollment at Hillcrest has also been steadily increasing since 2021, which demonstrates steady demand for this high school option in the Whitehaven neighborhood. The application projects enrollment to increase by about 2% each year for the next five years, which is likely realistic given the increase in enrollment over the last few years.

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

*Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard*

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

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard due to IOTA Community Schools' proven track record of operational stability, the strong capacity of its central team, and the clarity of its facility transition plan.

The applicant has a strong track record of successful organizational transitions. IOTA operated schools in the ASD and successfully transitioned its governance from GDPST to a local entity without disrupting network operations. Most notably, IOTA successfully navigated the transition of Wooddale Middle School to the Commission portfolio for the 2025-26 school year. During the capacity interview, IOTA leadership affirmed their confidence that they will be able to transition Hillcrest to the Commission without disruption to their organization and its schools due to this prior experience, even while transitioning two schools simultaneously.

The organizational stability is further supported by a governing board of long-standing members with diverse expertise. During the capacity interview, the board member present was well-informed of the network's financial position and key challenges that IOTA faces into the future, including strategies to mitigate network uncertainty and enrollment decline throughout Memphis. Additionally, the organizational structure is efficient, utilizing a centralized network team that handles complex administrative functions, such as finance, IT, and legal, allowing individual school sites like Hillcrest to operate without unnecessary administrative burden. This centralized support enables Hillcrest's staff and site leadership to remain intensely focused on instruction and direct student and family support.

If approved, Hillcrest plans to continue to use the facility it currently leases from MSCS; however, the operator has viable contingency plans should relocation become necessary. The Review Committee voiced concern over the smaller size of the facility named in Hillcrest's contingency plan should they not remain in their current facility. IOTA leadership clarified that while the space is smaller, this is a result of smaller athletic facilities, which would not interrupt the academic programming. While their original space is preferable, the contingency facility would meet the needs of Hillcrest's academic program.

The network team works to provide extensive support for instructional stability, though the Review Committee noted that sustaining the school-site leadership pipeline remains a critical focus. Given that IOTA leadership attributes much of the network's historical low academic performance, in part, to leadership turnover during its current charter term, a focus on developing and retaining instructional leadership is integral in their school's future success.



While the network utilizes monthly leadership learning labs and biweekly data review meetings, the continued development of a formalized succession plan is crucial to ensure the continuity and stability of the school leadership role, to prevent a recurrence of previous growth barriers.

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

*Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard*

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

The applicant's Financial Plan Design and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard because the operator has demonstrated a strong track record of financial performance and prudent management, which is supported by comprehensive financial modeling. The network's robust financial health is evidenced by its history of maintaining positive net income and fund balances, projecting sustained positive financial positions over the next five years, and meeting financial stability indicators across the entire organization.

The organization's dependable fiscal administration is evidenced by the consistent goal that each school operates as a self-sustaining business unit, including Hillcrest High School. During the capacity interview, the operator underscored a fiscally conservative approach, implementing zero-based budgeting that originates at the classroom level. This methodology ensures instructional resources are prioritized and fundamental operational costs are covered entirely by reliable public funding sources, with no reliance on speculative philanthropic or temporary revenue to support core operations. This commitment establishes a financially viable plan independent of external variables.

Furthermore, the operator clearly articulated the strategy for managing financial uncertainty and anticipating enrollment fluctuations. The financial strength of IOTA schools was quantified in the capacity interview, with the chief business officer noting that the minimum fiscally solvent enrollment for Hillcrest High School is 320 students. To mitigate network uncertainty, the financial models demonstrated that the central office support structure could sustain a necessary 42% decrease in staffing and related expenses if the network size were reduced by two schools, all while maintaining critical services including finance, IT, and legal. This planned right-sizing minimizes impact on direct student support. Complementing this strategy, the network maintains over \$13 million in unrestricted cash reserves, guaranteeing more than the necessary amount of capacity to manage transition costs or unexpected demands without compromising institutional integrity.

The applicant also thoroughly addressed the network's ability to finance significant facility needs, including securing a contingency facility for Hillcrest High School. The recent successful purchase of Wooddale Middle School provided the Review Committee with demonstrable evidence of the network's capacity to navigate complex transactions. Financial modeling for Hillcrest's facility needs confirmed that any acquisition and renovation costs would be serviced solely by the school's operating income, based on a conservative financing model that includes



no assumption of donor giving or projected capital campaign funds. This transparency and capacity to manage modest debt, inclusive of the new Wooddale Middle School facility, affirmed the Review Committee's confidence that the operator possesses the financial resources and expertise required to fund all necessary facility costs for Hillcrest High School.

Overall financial health indicators are strong. IOTA Community Schools reports a level of days' cash on hand that exceeds standards, providing a substantial buffer against unforeseen expenses. The network's commitment to financial accountability is independently verified by a sustained track record of nine consecutive clean audits. These factors confirm the operator's deep fiscal planning expertise and ability to ensure long-term stability for Hillcrest High School.

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

*Rating: Partially Meets Standard*

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

The applicant's Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets standard due to Hillcrest's low performance over the last ten years and the mixed results within IOTA's school portfolio.

While proficiency has increased over the last few years, Hillcrest's ELA proficiency rates remain lower than all but one neighboring school and have remained below the MSCS average for all years prior to 2024. Additionally, math proficiency has remained steady at around 5%. This is far below the MSCS average math proficiency, which has risen steadily since 2021. There is a lack of evidence that the curricular and instructional shifts have translated into meaningful academic growth.

Key metrics, such as school-wide TVAAS composites and graduation rate, failed to provide compelling evidence of IOTA's success as an operator of Hillcrest High School. Hillcrest's graduation rate is below that of MSCS. Hillcrest's 2022-23 graduation rate was 68.4%, which was well below the MSCS graduation rate of 81.1% for the same year. The application failed to address this low graduation rate and did not articulate a clear plan to improve it. Additionally, Hillcrest's earned a TVAAS Level 1 composite score for the last three school years, the lowest level possible, indicating students are not achieving expected academic growth.

The network's overall academic performance indicates that Hillcrest is not the only school in the portfolio struggling to meet proficiency goals for its students. Bluff City High School, which is authorized by the Commission, was placed on probationary status for continued failure to meet academic performance targets in the 2022-23 school year and remains on a plan of correction due to academic underperformance. Additionally, the Commission declined to authorize Fairley High School from the ASD in 2023 due to its low academic performance record. The future of Kirby Middle School, another school in the IOTA portfolio, remains uncertain with its history of low academic performance as it is applying to transition to the Commission this year. Overall, there is a lack of evidence of strong academic performance within the network that meets the standard for approval.

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

Hillcrest has seen modest gains in ELA proficiency rates throughout the last five years, and in 2024 surpassed the MSCS proficiency rate. While this gain is modest at 13.6% proficiency for 2024, it shows that their curricular and instructional changes are starting to show their efficacy in this subject area.



Despite the aforementioned critical performance challenges, the applicant was forthcoming with the obstacles that Hillcrest has faced throughout the last ten years. IOTA's leadership team was also able to name various strategies that are being implemented to increase academic performance. Though these plans have yet to produce the desired academic success, the Review Committee acknowledges IOTA's commitment to serving its students by providing comprehensive wraparound services such as extended learning days, summer learning camps, and social and emotional learning curriculum tailored to their unique student population.



## Evaluation Team

**Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore** is the Authorizing Coordinator for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. She previously worked as the Student Data Analyst for the Commission. Prior to working at the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission, Sophie taught elementary school at a high performing charter school in the South Bronx. More recently, Sophie completed her Master of Public Policy from Vanderbilt University where she worked as a research assistant for the Fuchs Group. Sophie also holds a Bachelor of the Arts degree from Bowdoin College and a Master of Teaching from Relay Graduate School of Education.

**Nancy Dickson** is the Assistant Dean, Peabody Global initiatives where she supports the growth and strategy for Peabody's global partnerships and research. She also is the PI for Advancing American-Style Education in Iraq through the Center for the Advancement of Higher and serves on the design team for grant-funded projects in Jordan and Pakistan. Additionally, Nancy teaches in the Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations (LPO). Previously, Nancy served as the director of the Humphrey Fellowship Program, a Fulbright exchange program for educational leaders from around the globe. She has also been the Project Director for the Abu Dhabi Leadership Induction Program and Program Manager for the Tennessee/Shanghai Leadership Collaborative here at Peabody. Prior joining Vanderbilt, Nancy was the Director of Operations and a founding team member of LEAD Academy, a charter school network in Nashville. Dr. Dickson started her career in education at 4th grade teacher in Washington, D.C. public schools. She holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and a Master of Public Policy degree from Vanderbilt, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education from Penn State University.

**Halli Faulkner** started her career as a middle school English teacher in East Los Angeles, where she earned her Masters in Secondary Education from Loyola Marymount University. After working as a teacher, Halli went on to earn her law degree from The George Washington University Law School and then work for over a decade in education policy at the state and federal levels. She is passionate about providing high-quality school options for all families.

**Beth Figueroa** is the Director of Authorizing for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. She is a Certified Public Accountant and has spent the last 15 years specializing in school finance and charter school oversight. Before working at the Commission, Beth worked as an administrator and charter school authorizer in California. She has also had the opportunity to serve as the Chief Business Officer of a charter school, an Executive Director of Fiscal Services for a school district with an annual budget of over \$500 Million, and an auditor of charter schools and non-profit organizations. She earned her Master of Business Administration degree from California Baptist University, where she also received her B.S. in Business Administration.



**Neven Holland** is an educator and Ph.D. student in education at the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies. He began his career as a resident teacher with the Memphis Teacher Residency, serving at Aspire Hanley Elementary—a charter school in the Achievement School District. He went on to spend nearly a decade as a fourth-grade teacher at Treadwell Elementary with Memphis-Shelby County Schools. In addition to his doctoral studies, Neven serves as a graduate student researcher on a school leadership project focused on preparing leaders to build more effective schools for students and communities. He is also a mathematics content reviewer for EdReports, where he critiques and evaluates instructional materials. As a freelance writer, Neven also contributes to Edutopia and has had his work featured in Education Week, where he writes about K–12 educational issues. His dedication to teaching was recognized nationally by the White House and the National Science Foundation when he was selected as a 2022 Presidential Awardee for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching for Tennessee.

**Whitney Noel** has served as a reviewer for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission since 2018. She is the Founding Curricular Solutions Architect at Brisk Teaching and has advised and worked in organizations including Newsela, Mosa Mack Science, Snorkl, and Gates Ventures on curriculum design and implementation. Whitney also worked with the International Bureau of Education at UNESCO, contributing to global efforts in curriculum and instructional design. Earlier in her career, she taught in public, private, and charter schools in Washington State, Honduras, and Nashville, TN. She holds a master’s degree in education with certification in English Language Learning from the University of Washington and a Bachelor of Arts in History, Spanish, and Latin American Studies from Gustavus Adolphus College. Whitney is passionate about creating engaging, rigorous, and inclusive learning experiences for all students.