



Executive Director’s Recommendation Kirby Middle 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 Kirby Middle School (“sponsor” or “Kirby”) 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 Kirby amended application was not contrary to the best interests of the students, local education agency (“LEA”), or community.¹ Therefore, I recommend that the Commission uphold the decision of MSCS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Kirby.

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 Kirby 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)].”² In addition, the Commission is required to hold a public hearing in the district where the proposed charter school seeks to locate.³

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

¹ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

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

³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

the best interests of the students, local education agency, or community.⁴ 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 Kirby Middle School to MSCS on February 3, 2025.
3. MSCS assembled a review committee to review and score the Kirby initial application.
4. On March 6, 2025, MSCS's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of Kirby.
5. MSCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Kirby initial application, indicating it met standard on the finance section, and it partially met standard on the academic, operations, and past performance sections. Additionally, 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 Kirby initial application.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for Kirby to MSCS on May 30, 2025.
8. MSCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Kirby 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 Kirby.
10. The sponsor appealed the denial of the Kirby 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 Kirby amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school application-scoring rubric.

⁴ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

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 took public comment regarding the Kirby amended application.
13. The Commission’s Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of the Kirby 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 Kirby 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 includes 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 Kirby initial application consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
LaKeisha Ballard	MSCS Custodial and Grounds for Facilities, Data Analyst
Chrystal Burton	MSCS Federal Programs, Sr. Manager
Sandra Faulkner	MSCS Student Information Management, Manager
Ayodele Hall	MSCS Professional Development, Employee Performance and Support Manager
Joshua Halsey	Expert External Reviewer
LaSheka Hayslett	MSCS Transportation Advisor
Trina Holly	College Career Technology Education, Advisor
Steven Kuhn	MSCS Multilingual Learners, Charter Advisor
Latonya McGowan	MSCS Safety and Security, Emergency Management Specialist
Edranyce Monrore	Parent/Community Reviewer
Cassandra Moore	MSCS Charter Schools, Instructional Coach
Ruben Morris	Expert External Reviewer
Danielle Newman	MSCS Performance Management, Research Advisor
Virginia Rodgers	MSCS Federal Programs, Charter Schools Finance Director
Heba Sammour	MSCS Office of Literacy, Manager

Name	Title
Kavita Shelat	MSCS Office of General Counsel, Associate General Counsel
Quache Spencer	MSCS Office of Charter Schools, Director Organizational Quality
Ebony Suggs	MSCS Youth Advocacy/Adolescent Parenting for Accelerated Schools, Manager
Kobie Sweeten	MSCS Academic Operations and School Support, Hearing Official
Tim Ware	Charter Leader Reviewer
James Wiggins	MSCS Virtual Education Advisor
Erika Williams	MSCS Exceptional Education, Instructional Facilitator

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

Sections	Ratings
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 Kirby.

District Denial of Amended Application

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

Name	Title
LaKeisha Ballard	MSCS Custodial and Grounds for Facilities, Data Analyst
Chrystal Burton	MSCS Federal Programs, Sr. Manager
Sandra Faulkner	MSCS Student Information Management, Manager
Ayodele Hall	MSCS Professional Development, Employee Performance and Support Manager
Joshua Halsey	Expert External Reviewer
LaSheka Hayslett	MSCS Transportation Advisor
Trina Holly	College Career Technology Education, Advisor
Steven Kuhn	MSCS Multilingual Learners, Charter Advisor
Latonya McGowan	MSCS Safety and Security, Emergency Management Specialist
Edranyce Monrore	Parent/Community Reviewer

Name	Title
Ruben Morris	Expert External Reviewer
Danielle Newman	MSCS Performance Management, Research Advisor
Virginia Rodgers	MSCS Federal Programs, Charter Schools Finance Director
Heba Sammour	MSCS Office of Literacy, Manager
Kavita Shelat	MSCS Office of General Counsel, Associate General Counsel
Quache Spencer	MSCS Office of Charter Schools, Director Organizational Quality
Ebony Suggs	MSCS Youth Advocacy/Adolescent Parenting for Accelerated Schools, Manager
Kobie Sweeten	MSCS Academic Operations and School Support, Hearing Official
Tim Ware	Charter Leader Reviewer
Erika Williams	MSCS Exceptional Education, Instructional Facilitator

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:

Sections	Ratings
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 Kirby.

Commission Review Committee’s Evaluation of the Application

Following the denial of the Kirby 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 Kirby amended application. This Review Committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore	Commission Staff
Nancy Dickson	External Consultant
Halli Faulkner	External Consultant
Beth Figueroa	Commission Staff

Name	Title
Neven Holland	External Consultant
Whitney Noel	External Consultant

The Commission’s Review Committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Kirby 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 Kirby application was as follows:

Sections	Ratings
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 Kirby 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. Concerns also remain regarding the school's capacity to achieve and sustain the outlined enrollment projections, given inconsistent enrollment over the last five years and the shift to an open-enrollment model. Finally, the strategies implemented to decrease chronic absenteeism lack demonstrated effectiveness, as rates at Kirby remain higher than the geographic district average.

The applicant’s Operations Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard due to the demonstrated capacity of the sponsor 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 Kirby. 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 Kirby 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. Kirby 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 for 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 Kirby need to relocate.

Lastly, the Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets the standard due to low academic performance at Kirby and across the portfolio over the last ten years. Kirby's most recent TVAAS composite score of Level 1 underscores the lack of expected student academic growth. Network leadership attributed this performance to a lack of stable leadership, but it remains unclear if they can maintain the necessary stability moving forward. Additionally, the application lacked specific, measurable academic goals for the next ten years. Finally, Kirby 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 Kirby Middle School amended application, please see **Exhibit A** for the complete Review Committee Recommendation Report, which is fully incorporated herein by reference.

Public Hearing

Pursuant to statute⁵ 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 Kirby Middle School charter application submitted by IOTA. Representatives from MSCS shared that the Charter Application Review Team was comprised of expert reviewers, parents and community members, and charter leaders, and 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

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

concerns regarding the applicant's failure to clearly articulate the academic shifts from the former organization Green Dot Public Schools Tennessee ("GDPST") to the current IOTA model, limited evidence of community support and demand, and lack of compelling evidence that enrollment targets would be met. The denial was further based on the school and network's historical underperformance, noting that Kirby has remained on the Priority/Comprehensive Support and Improvement ("CSI") list for consecutive years.

In the sponsor's opening statement, IOTA shared its mission and vision, emphasizing relationships, accountability, determination, and justice. The school acknowledged its student body demographics, noting that 81% of incoming middle school students enter below grade level in reading and 84% enter below grade level in math. IOTA highlighted its innovative approach, including rigorous, standards-driven instruction, targeted interventions like a strong Response to Instruction and Intervention ("RTI²") program, and comprehensive wrap-around services. The operator presented academic data that, while acknowledging inconsistent overall TVAAS Composite scores (with multiple Level 1 ratings and one Level 5 in 2018), highlighted a more consistent track record of growth in TVAAS Literacy and Numeracy Composite scores. They asserted their curriculum and supports are positioned to grow students academically by 1.5 to 2 years despite the challenges of moving them to proficiency, and noted successful outcomes with their English learner program. The operator also shared non-academic highlights, including that IOTA has served over 30,000 free meals through its after-school program and involved 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, consistent with the metrics used to evaluate all district schools. When questioned about the district's assessment of "quality seats" in the area, 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 Kirby Middle School should IOTA end its term with the Achievement School District and the school transition back to the district, MSCS confirmed the school would be placed into the appropriate school support structure based on its CSI/Priority status, likely the Innovation Zone ("iZone"). MSCS explained that their transition team would coordinate with IOTA and the Tennessee Department of Education on all aspects, including facility, personnel, and planning, to ensure a swift transition back to district management. When asked about facility discussions, MSCS described the general process required for an operator to remain in a building which includes submitting a letter of interest, a saturation analysis, and board approval. MSCS confirmed that the charter office itself is not involved in that process.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor with the initial questions focused on the inconsistent academic performance. IOTA responded by detailing its implementation of quality Tier 1 instruction through a newly adopted curriculum, its RTI² program, and the stability of its current leadership. They attributed some of the historical academic inconsistency to earlier leadership turnover at Kirby compared to other schools in the network and emphasized their need for more time to show continued growth toward proficiency, given the high rate of students entering one or more years behind grade level. 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 contingency plan includes co-locating with network school Bluff City High School, with expansion capacity up to 1,000 students or utilizing the available Lenox Park property. Lastly, questioning shifted to network uncertainty, particularly the closure of Fairley High School and the appeals for Kirby and Hillcrest High School. The IOTA board expressed confidence in the network's financial strength having over 130 days cash on hand and its ability to maintain operational and financial sustainability with a minimum of a two-school structure, specifically citing Bluff City High School and Wooddale Middle School, as a sustainable core if both appeals were denied.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of one in-person comments, with none speaking in support of MSCS and one speaking in support of Kirby. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received one written comment, with none writing in support of MSCS and one writing in support of Kirby.

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.”⁶ 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:

⁶ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

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 Kirby 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, is an experienced operator in the state of Tennessee, and the operator has spent the last ten years working to turn around schools in some of the most difficult circumstances. 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 Kirby are often several grades below math and reading levels. However, I do not believe that the sponsor sufficiently detailed its plan to address these gaps beyond their current practices which are not yielding the desired outcomes.

In the application, the sponsor named an intention to increase its maximum enrollment. However, I believe this goal is unrealistic when considering the shift to becoming an open enrollment school, if approved, as well as Kirby's decreasing enrollment year over year. The sponsor acknowledged during the public hearing that going from a zoned school to an open enrollment school will require new strategies and dedicated efforts. However, I share in the Review Committee's concern based on the enrollment fluctuations the school has experienced over the past charter term. As important as maintaining enrollment is, I am also concerned about chronic absenteeism at the school. I acknowledge the sponsor's testimony regarding the difficulties that exist in serving a highly transient area of Shelby County and the efforts made to address this issue, including hiring a new director of behavior supports. However, the sponsor



continues to experience chronic absenteeism at a rate significantly higher than that of the surrounding middle schools. I cannot recommend approval for a new charter term if the sponsor has not earned the autonomy that is granted by operating a public charter school through demonstrated academic achievement.

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 Kirby 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 Kirby Middle School.

Despite my admiration for the sponsor's desire to make continued adjustments and their commitment to the community, I cannot recommend approval. Kirby 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 Hickory Hill neighborhood and the students it serves. 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.

The sponsor has proven its ability to meet the standard for approval in its operational and financial capacities. The sponsor has evidenced the ability to successfully transition its schools through governance structure changes as well as to new authorizers. First, the sponsor successfully navigated the change from GDPST to IOTA Community Schools. The sponsor was able to insulate its schools from the effects of that change and operations continued through the transition. I was also able to witness more directly the sponsor transitioning Wooddale Middle School from the Achievement School District to the Commission successfully. I am confident that, if the application was approved, the transition of Kirby 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 Kirby, 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 Kirby 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 Kirby 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.

Further, the sponsor's financial plan is sound as they are experienced in both day-to-day operations as well as back office supports. 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. Kirby has operated at a positive net income over the past ten years, and the financial plan demonstrates realistic cost assumptions and a clear contingency plan, based on the uncertainty of pending applications. The sponsor's contingency plan includes scenarios where both schools before the Commission are approved, one school is approved, and scenarios where both 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's finding that the sponsor's Portfolio Review and Performance Record 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 Hickory Hill community and has provided the students at Kirby 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 Kirby Middle 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 Kirby's historical performance, I cannot recommend that the sponsor be granted a new ten-year charter agreement. Despite best intentions, the proficiency rates for Kirby remain significantly low. In fact, these rates are below Wooddale Middle School, another IOTA school, and the average for MSCS. For the last three school years, Kirby's TVAAS composite score has been a Level 1. When we analyzed Kirby'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. 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 and the assertion that leadership changes are a large contributor to the inconsistencies in outcomes at Kirby during the capacity interview. But I remain concerned that even with leadership at Kirby stabilized, the outcomes would not increase so significantly to justify extending a ten-year charter to the sponsor. IOTA Community Schools is committed to the Hickory Hill 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 Kirby Middle 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 Kirby 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 Kirby Middle School.



Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

October 17, 2025
Date



TENNESSEE
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

EXHIBIT A:
Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report

October 17, 2025

School Name: Kirby Middle 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,¹ 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

¹ 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.”²

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

Rating	Characteristics
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.

² Tennessee State Board of Education Policy 6.111

Summary of the Application

School Name: Kirby Middle 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.³

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

Proposed Enrollment:⁴

Grade Level	Year 1: 2026-2027	Year 2: 2027-2028	Year 3: 2028-2029	Year 4: 2029-2030	Year 5: 2030-2031	At Capacity:
6	141	148	152	157	162	171
7	140	144	148	152	157	166
8	140	140	144	148	152	162
Totals	421	432	444	457	471	500 ⁵

Brief Description of the Application

The sponsor, IOTA Community Schools (“IOTA”), is proposing to continue operation of Kirby Middle School in Shelby County, Tennessee and serve students in sixth through eighth grade for a new, ten-year charter school term. IOTA Community Schools, formerly Green Dot Public Schools Tennessee (“GDPST”), has operated Kirby Middle School under the ASD since 2015. If authorized, the school intends to continue operation in the Hickory Hill community in Memphis to “equip students in grades 6-8 for future success by offering a focused, college and career preparatory program.”⁶ The school proposes to continue offering its current academic program and model, providing an additional school option in the Hickory Hill neighborhood.

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

³ Kirby Middle School Amended Application, pg. 9

⁴ Kirby Middle School Amended Application, pg. 20

⁵ The applicant states that the school will reach capacity at 500.

⁶ Kirby Middle School Amended Application, pg. 21

IOTA and ensures that stakeholders are engaged in the decision-making process. In Year 0, Kirby budgeted \$6,612,420, receiving \$5,333,048 from state revenues, \$1,268,569 from federal revenues, and \$10,802 in school activity revenue and projects \$5,991,185 in expenses for the school. Kirby projects the school will have \$6,525,126 in revenue and \$6,507,201 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a balance of \$639,159. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$8,128,242 in revenue and \$7,851,232 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$1,397,410.⁷ The school anticipates that 69% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 10.5% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 11.8% of the student population will be English learners.⁸

⁷ Kirby Middle School Amended Budget

⁸ Kirby Middle School Amended Application, pg. 20

Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends the denial of the amended application for Kirby 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. Concerns also remain regarding the school's capacity to achieve and sustain the outlined enrollment projections, given inconsistent enrollment over the last five years and the shift to an open-enrollment model. Finally, the strategies implemented to decrease chronic absenteeism lack demonstrated effectiveness, as rates at Kirby remain higher than the geographic district average.

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 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 Kirby. 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 Kirby 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. Kirby 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 for 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 Kirby need to relocate.

Lastly, the Portfolio Review and Performance Record partially meets the standard due to low academic performance at Kirby and across the portfolio over the last ten years. Kirby's most recent TVAAS composite score of Level 1 underscores the lack of expected student academic

growth. Network leadership attributed this performance to a lack of stable leadership, but it remains unclear if they can maintain the necessary stability moving forward. Additionally, the application lacked specific, measurable academic goals for the next ten years. Finally, Kirby 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:

Sections	Ratings
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. Despite recent, substantive efforts to improve academic performance, proficiency rates and academic growth at Kirby Middle School have not meaningfully increased over the last ten-year charter term. While the operator demonstrates a clear understanding of its community and the comprehensive needs of its students through wraparound services, the Review Committee's evaluation of the academic plan reveals notable areas of concern regarding the success of the academic model, the lack of measurable academic and attendance goals, and limited evidence to support the feasibility of the enrollment targets outlined within the application.

Concerns regarding the applicant's academic plan and its ability to close achievement gaps were raised because of Kirby's historically low proficiency in both English language arts ("ELA") and math, as indicated by TNReady assessments over the last four years. These scores have consistently remained lower than the Memphis-Shelby County Schools ("MSCS") sixth-through eighth-grade proficiency rates. 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 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 as the transition to these resources is relatively recent. Therefore, there is a lack of evidence that the changes to the academic model will be sufficient in raising student proficiency beyond what has been seen over the last ten years. Furthermore, given that many incoming students enter with reading levels as low as second or third grade, the application still lacks a clear, foundational literacy strategy tailored for middle grades to accelerate these significant gaps, beyond general Tier 2 and 3 interventions like i-Ready and Reading Horizons.

Additionally, the application presented broad goals that lacked the necessary measurable benchmarks tied to the 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 evaluation 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 continued lack of confidence that the model will achieve desired results.

When evaluating enrollment projections, concerns persist regarding the school's ability to achieve and sustain the outlined 2.5% annual enrollment increase over the next five years, particularly given the shift from a zoned to an open-enrollment model. While the school's minimum fiscally solvent enrollment was stated to be 307 students during the capacity interview, the projected increase lacks precedent, given historical fluctuations. Leadership did not describe meaningful changes to their enrollment strategy despite the need to recruit and maintain students in a competitive open-enrollment environment, raising doubts about the feasibility of reaching the higher enrollment targets.

Finally, while the operator noted that a new director of behavior supports has been hired and a robust plan is in place to decrease chronic absenteeism, Kirby's historical rates remain significantly higher than those of neighboring middle schools. 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

A noted strength for Kirby Middle School is the operator's commitment to the holistic well-being of its students and families. IOTA Community Schools offers a variety of wraparound services to support their student population, including targeted social and emotional learning ("SEL") curriculum that uses Memphis history and arts as context, and partnerships with organizations like Transformation Consulting Group for in-school group and individual therapy. Additionally, Kirby offers robust after-school tutoring and summer school for remediation, with over one hundred students taking advantage of these supports each year. These extensive services demonstrate a clear commitment to serving the unique and complex needs of their student population.

The network leadership, during the capacity interview, conveyed a commitment to learning and change to improve student outcomes. In recent years, Kirby has made substantive internal changes, including the formal adoption of new, highly rated curriculum materials and prioritizing teacher capacity building through weekly, 120-minute intellectual preparation sessions and common planning time with higher-performing teachers from the other middle school in IOTA's portfolio, Wooddale Middle School. Furthermore, the capacity interview revealed a concerted effort to implement innovative, talent-sharing solutions to ensure instructional quality. The use of a live translator device called Relay to immediately break down communication barriers for the growing English learner population is another clear example of responsive innovation.

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 network 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 Kirby to the Commission without disruption to their organization and its schools due to this prior experience, even if 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 Kirby to operate without unnecessary administrative burden. This centralized support enables Kirby's staff and site leadership to remain intensely focused on instruction and direct student and family support.

If approved, Kirby plans to continue to use the facility it currently leases from MSCS; however, the operator has viable contingency plans should relocation become necessary. One option detailed in the application is to co-locate with another IOTA network school, Bluff City High School, which is directly across the street from their current facility. During the capacity interview, IOTA stated that the existing space, which currently seats up to 650 students, has an adjacent 1.4 acres of undeveloped property where they can easily acquire and install additional modular classroom space if needed to reach a total capacity of up to 1,000 students. Should this co-location become unfeasible, IOTA has identified another potential facility to acquire and renovate that falls within pre-determined budgetary resources, demonstrating sound pre-emptive facility and financial planning.

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 Kirby's historical low academic performance, in part, to leadership turnover during the last ten years of its charter term, a focus on developing and retaining instructional leadership is integral in Kirby'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 Standards

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Financial Plan Design and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard because the operator demonstrates a history of sound financial management backed by detailed financial modeling. The strong financial position is evidenced by the history of operating Kirby Middle School with a positive net income, projected positive balances for the next five years built on realistic cost assumptions, and strong, verifiable financial indicators across the network.

The organization's sound financial management is demonstrated by Kirby operating at a positive net income over the course of its operation, alongside other IOTA schools maintaining a positive net income and fund balance individually. During the capacity interview, the operator emphasized a fiscally conservative approach to budgeting, rooted in zero-based budgeting that begins at the classroom level to ensure necessary operational funds are prioritized closest to student instruction. This careful and rigorous planning is evident in the submitted budget documents, which showcase a realistic budget that anticipates no reliance on philanthropic revenue to cover core operational costs. The applicant's model demonstrates the school can operate with positive net income based on state and federal funds alone, establishing a viable plan independent of potentially unreliable one-time, local philanthropic support.

The operator also demonstrated the ability to navigate financial uncertainties and plan for various scenarios. A well-defined financial contingency plan was articulated during the capacity interview, ready for use should revenue or enrollment not materialize as projected. The financial strength of each school is foundational, with the minimum fiscally solvent enrollment for Kirby Middle School at 307 students. Furthermore, the underlying financial model is built on the philosophy of right-sizing budgets relative to student needs and income levels. To address the uncertainty of network size, the operator confirmed various financial models had been run. These models show that even if the network were reduced by two schools, the central office support structure could undergo a necessary 42% decrease in staffing and related expenses while still maintaining essential services like finance, IT, and legal. This planned reduction, combined with a prioritized cut list that moves expenses farthest from the classroom, minimizes the impact on direct student support. Additionally, the network's strong \$13 million cash reserve guarantees the capacity to utilize reserves effectively to manage any short-term transition costs or unexpected demands without compromising operational integrity.

The operator also adequately addressed the network's capacity to purchase and fund

significant capital improvements, particularly in the event a contingency facility is needed for Kirby Middle School and potentially another of IOTA's network schools, Hillcrest High School. During the capacity interview, the operator shared that the network's current cash on hand, coupled with its modest levels of debt positions, put itself with a strong financial foundation for any necessary facility costs. The debt carried by the organization includes the recent purchase of Wooddale Middle School. The financial modeling for a contingency facility assumed that renovations and acquisitions would be financially feasible for each school. Crucially, the plan for facilities funding anticipates securing traditional financing for the entirety of the acquisition and renovation cost, setting a high bar by including no assumption of donor giving or speculative funds in the final financing model. This strategy ensures the debt is serviceable solely by the school's operating income. Based on this high level of transparency, the demonstrated capacity to manage debt, and a strong financial standing, the Review Committee determined that the operator possesses the necessary financial resources and expertise to fund inevitable facility costs should Kirby Middle School be authorized to continue.

Beyond daily operational and long-term capital planning, the applicant demonstrates strong financial health indicators. IOTA's financial statements present a strong level of days' cash on hand, which provides an adequate buffer against unforeseen expenses, while the manageable debt service ratio indicates responsible debt management. The organization's commitment to financial accountability is reinforced by a sustained track record of nine consecutive clean audits. These factors, combined with strong reserves and a deep understanding of fiscal planning, provide compelling evidence of the applicant's ability to manage finances effectively and ensure long-term stability.

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 Kirby's low performance over the last ten years and the mixed results within IOTA's school portfolio.

Kirby's data shows that while modest gains in ELA and math TNReady scores have been achieved since 2021, overall proficiency rates remain in the single digits. These rates fall below both MSCS and the other middle school in IOTA's portfolio, Wooddale Middle School. Critically, Kirby received a TVAAS Level 1 composite score, the lowest possible, for the 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25 school years, which indicates students are not achieving expected academic growth. This is particularly concerning given the significant academic deficits present at entry, as only 11.5% of sixth graders enrolled were on grade level in reading and 10.7% enrolled were on grade level in math in 2023.

In the capacity interview, IOTA stated the inconsistent outcomes at Kirby are directly attributed to a lack of consistent leadership during the past ten-year term, specifically citing multiple principals within the last few years. This high rate of turnover makes it difficult to execute and sustain positive instructional and cultural shifts despite clear intentions at the network level. Although the current principal is now in his third year, making him one of the longest-serving administrators in the school's tenure, the inability to achieve meaningful cultural and academic gains across the whole school population remains a major weakness.

The Review Committee asked IOTA leadership during the capacity interview what long-term, ambitious goals they have for Kirby should they be renewed for another ten-year charter. While the leadership articulated a necessary operational goal focused on reducing chronic absenteeism, the goal was limited and lacked sufficient measurable targets for academic achievement and student growth over the next decade. Although reducing chronic absenteeism is a crucial foundational step to increase student learning time, the Review Committee found the response lacking specific goals and benchmarks for the necessary academic improvement.

The network's overall academic performance indicates that Kirby is not the only school in its 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



Hillcrest High School, another school in the IOTA portfolio, remains uncertain with its history of low academic performance and pending appeal to transition to the Commission this year. In totality, there is a lack of evidence of overall strength within the IOTA portfolio that would offset the performance concerns outlined within Kirby Middle School.

Strengths Identified by the Committee

Despite the aforementioned critical performance challenges, the applicant was forthcoming with the obstacles that Kirby 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 SEL 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.