



Executive Director’s Recommendation The Forge 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 June 20, 2025, the sponsor of The Forge School (“sponsor” or “The Forge”) appealed the denial of its amended application by the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (“MNPS”) 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 Forge School 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 MNPS Board of Education to deny the amended application for The Forge School.

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 Forge School 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 overturned, then the Commission can approve the application, and thereby authorize the school, or to affirm the local board's decision to deny.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. On December 3, 2024, the sponsor submitted a letter of intent to Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools expressing its intention to file a charter school application.
2. The sponsor submitted its initial application for The Forge School to MNPS on February 3, 2025.
3. MNPS assembled a review committee to review and score The Forge initial application.
4. On March 27, 2025, MNPS's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of The Forge.
5. MNPS's Review Committee reviewed and scored The Forge's initial application, indicating the application partially met standards because it lacked sufficient detail in several key areas including academic programming, demand, facilities and transportation plans, operational costs, funding, and financial expertise.
6. On April 22, 2025, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny The Forge initial application.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for The Forge to MNPS on May 23, 2025.
8. MNPS's Review Committee reviewed and scored The Forge amended application based on the charter application-scoring rubric and rated the academic, operations, and finance sections as partially meets the standard.
9. On June 10, 2025, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of The Forge.
10. The sponsor appealed the denial of The Forge amended application in writing to the Commission on June 20, 2025, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
11. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored The Forge amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school

⁴ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

application-scoring rubric.

12. The Commission’s Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of The Forge leadership team on July 31, 2025 via Microsoft Teams.
13. After the capacity interview, the Commission’s Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of The Forge amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
14. On August 8, 2025, the Commission staff held a public hearing at Davy Crockett Tower in Nashville, Tennessee. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the Commission’s designee, heard presentations from the sponsor and MNPS, and took public comment regarding The Forge amended application.
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 MNPS, 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 MNPS to review and score The Forge initial application consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Gay Burden	External Consultant
Cordarrell Cobb	Partner School Budget Strategy
Sonya Dobbs	Director Exceptional Education School Support
Ryan Latimer	Director Boundary Planning and Enrollment
Shawn Lawrence	Deputy Chief of Schools
Casey Megaw	Executive Director Facility Maintenance and Construction
Maggie Proffitt	Coordinator English Learners
Sudhir Sinha	Coach Data
Ken Stark	Executive Director Operations

The Forge initial application received the following ratings from the MNPS Review Committee:

Sections	Ratings
Academic Plan and Design	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard



After the MNPS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its analysis was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on April 22, 2025. The MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of The Forge.

District Denial of Amended Application

The Review Committee assembled by MNPS to review and score The Forge amended application mirrored that of the committee that reviewed the initial application. Upon resubmission, the MNPS Review Committee conducted a review of the amended application, and the amended application received the following ratings from the MNPS Review Committee:

Sections	Ratings
Academic Plan and Design	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

After the MNPS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its analysis was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on June 10, 2025. At the June 10, 2025 board meeting, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of The Forge.

Commission Review Committee’s Evaluation of the Application

Following the denial of The Forge 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 Forge amended application. This committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore	Commission Staff
Erin Conley	External Reviewer
Beth Figueroa	Commission Staff
Autumn Hillis	External Reviewer
Kristina McInerney	External Reviewer
Maggie Stampley	Commission Staff

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

Sections	Ratings
Academic Plan and Design	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

The Review Committee recommends the denial of the amended application for The Forge because the applicant failed to provide sufficient evidence in the academic, operational, and financial sections to demonstrate the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

In the academic plan, the school's enrollment projections were considered ambitious with a Year 1 enrollment target of 240 students in two separate grade levels. While the applicant provided a minimum viable enrollment of 90%, it lacked a detailed contingency plan to maintain academic quality if these targets were not met. Another major concern was the balance between career and technical education ("CTE") and core academics. The proposed schedule allocates only forty-five minutes per day for core subjects, which may present a challenge to achieving the necessary depth of instruction. The plan also lacked specifics on how teachers would be trained to integrate these concepts and did not include a plan to recruit leadership with specific CTE experience. Furthermore, the support for special populations, like students with disabilities and English learners, was found to be conflicting and may compromise their access to integral parts of the school's unique model.

The applicant's operations plan also raised concerns, primarily due to a lack of detail and an over-reliance on external support. The proposed administrative structure is notably lean, a significant workload on the executive director, who would be responsible for academic, operational, and cultural programs. Additionally, there was a lack of CTE or industry experience among the leadership team, and the plan for recruiting and retaining specialized CTE instructors was also found to be lacking in specifics, particularly regarding the process and timeline for helping them obtain teaching licenses. The plan to hire twenty-five full-time equivalents ("FTEs") in the first year was also deemed ambitious and lacking a clear strategy to meet these targets in a difficult labor market. Furthermore, the facilities budget was significant both in terms of improvements and long-term lease costs, compounding the sustainability concerns. Finally, the committee noted a heavy dependence on external partners for operational and financial expertise, raising questions about the school's internal capacity to effectively manage these relationships and ensure accountability.

The financial plan was considered unsustainable due to its heavy reliance on philanthropic funding and the limited financial capacity of the leadership team. The budget projects \$1.95 million in philanthropic funding over five years, with \$1 million needed by Year 1 and \$250,000 annually thereafter. Much of this funding is unsecured, creating a significant risk

to the school's long-term viability. The applicant's team could not clearly articulate a detailed contingency plan for funding shortfalls, nor could they explain how promised support from industry partners would translate into direct financial contributions. This lack of a clear plan is compounded by the ambitious enrollment targets that must be met for the school to remain financially viable. The budget itself was found to be inconsistent, with differing staffing projections and a lack of detailed breakdowns for crucial expenses like CTE materials, further compounding concerns about the school's financial stability. There were inconsistencies regarding the management of the school's finances and no designated individual with clear expertise on the team. In totality, the committee found that these factors contributed to the financial plan not meeting the standard for approval.

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 Forge 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 Commission's Executive Director was held on August 8, 2025. Representatives from MNPS at the public hearing focused on the district's charter school application review process and the primary reasons for denying The Forge's application, requesting that the Commission uphold their decision. Representatives from MNPS indicated that The Forge's amended application was denied based on deficiencies in all three sections of the application, academic, operations, and finance, leading all areas to partially meet standards. The district indicated that the proposed curriculum and partnerships were not innovative, citing that similar offerings already existed within the Academies of Nashville. Additionally, representatives cited that the academic plan was limited in detail, that the plan for ensuring college and career readiness is underdeveloped, and that the information provided within the application did not address the challenge of students losing interest in the specific pathway. MNPS representatives further stated that the application did not adequately address the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement ("TISA") and federal accountability measures, and that the plan for serving English learners is inadequately addressed. Operationally, the district cited a lack of leadership experience and deficiencies in the transportation and facility plans, with concerns that the timeline was unrealistic and that the plan for obtaining permits was vague. Financially, MNPS was concerned about the school's fiscal

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.



health, noting a lack of clarity on budget lines such as facilities and operational costs, ambitious enrollment and philanthropic goals, and a heavy reliance on a third-party for financial oversight.

In the sponsor's opening statement, the applicant highlighted The Forge's leadership team and addressed the deficiencies noted by MNPS by highlighting that their model is innovative and distinct from the district's programs. The applicant explained that The Forge's architecture, construction, and engineering ("ACE") model integrates the Tennessee Articulated Pathway Model framework in a collaborative manner and meets the twenty-first century needs of various construction occupations. The applicant noted it was a "first of its kind" academic model nationally. The applicant addressed its enrollment strategy explaining that the school is designed to serve a broad range of students from across Nashville, not just the proposed McGavock cluster, presenting data from recent recruitment and engagement efforts from across twenty-nine different zip codes and representing a total of 480 signatures of support. The applicant spoke to the school's academic model, which includes a focus on durable skills and provides a trajectory for students to earn up to seventeen industry certifications by the end of senior year. The applicant then detailed the comparison of The Forge's program to the Academies of Nashville, emphasizing that The Forge introduces career awareness as early as sixth grade, unlike the district's high school-only model. The presentation also detailed key partnerships with local organizations such as the Nashville Incubator, Persist Nashville, Lipscomb University, and Belmont University, which will provide mentorship, hands-on learning, and technical support. The Forge's closing argument reiterated that their model is not a duplication of existing programs but rather a unique and innovative option that would complement the educational landscape in Nashville.

During questioning by the Commission, MNPS representatives reiterated their concerns about the duplicative nature of The Forge's curriculum and argued that existing high school academies already provided similar opportunities. When questioned about the review process and timing of the application review, MNPS explained that the district's nine-member review team, which included eight internal and one external member, used a full workday to review the amended application. The review process involved independent review and scoring, followed by a collective discussion to reach a consensus on the deficiencies. The Commission's Executive Director also asked about the data used by the district to determine enrollment trends within the McGavock cluster, to which MNPS responded that the application contained outdated and incorrect data in some of its sections for determining capacity and need for the academic program. The district stated that the construction, architecture, and engineering academies within MNPS are open to students within the McGavock Cluster, and there is sufficient room in those academies to accept additional students, if students are interested.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor. During questioning by the Commission,

the Executive Director asked The Forge School to elaborate on several key areas of their application. When asked about their proposed enrollment target, the applicant clarified that the school would need at least a 90% enrollment rate to be financially viable and that staff reductions, including a principal, would be considered as a contingency plan. The Executive Director followed up by asking for more disaggregated data on the 281 signatures of support from families with school-aged children that were mentioned. The applicant stated they had not disaggregated the data to confirm if these families had children in the targeted sixth- and ninth-grade age ranges. The questioning also focused on the academic model and staffing. When asked who was responsible for the academic program's fidelity, the applicant's proposed founder cited her own background and explained that she would hire upper and lower school principals with CTE experience. She described a proactive recruitment strategy to find specialized pathways instructors through partnerships with institutions like Lipscomb University, Nashville Teacher Residency, and Teach For America. The Commission then specifically asked about how The Forge would support industry professionals in obtaining the necessary Tennessee occupational licensure, to which the applicant replied that they were exploring a limited occupational teacher program and partnering with University of Tennessee at Martin. Regarding the financial plan, the Executive Director questioned the school's reliance on philanthropy. The applicant responded that approximately 65% of the \$1.95 million goal had been secured and that the school's partnership with The Forge Nashville would provide access to makerspaces, which would reduce operational costs. When asked about how the governing board would determine the school's readiness to open, a member of the board indicated that they would utilize the Commission's ready to open checklist.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of sixteen in-person comments, with six speaking in support of MNPS and ten speaking in support of The Forge. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received fifty written comments, with fourteen writing in support of MNPS and thirty-six writing in support of The Forge.

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

⁶ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

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 MNPS, 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 The Forge amended application did not rise to the level of meeting or exceeding the standards required for approval at this point.

The Forge School proposes to provide an education model focused on architecture, construction, and engineering careers which is a workforce need. However, I agree with the Review Committee's assessment that the academic plan lacks sufficient, concrete plans and contingencies to meet the standards of the Tennessee Department of Education's scoring rubric. While I appreciate the sponsor's innovative academic approach, there are fundamental areas of the academic plan that need further development prior to meeting the bar for approval. These include a clearer plan to provide both the core academic courses as well as the unique CTE focus of the school. The plan to serve special populations was inconsistent between the application and the capacity interview, as there were different strategies and service plans outlined. For example, the sponsor stated that the "Forge Forum" time was when students would receive special education and English learner services, but this time was also named as the time "central to the academic model." It is unclear how students who require additional services will be able to participate in key aspects of the academic model with this plan.

One of the largest concerns of the academic section of the application is the plan to start with two distinct grades, sixth and ninth grade, with a projected enrollment of 240, and then grow two grades per year. While I appreciate the transparency that the applicant shared that it needs a 90% enrollment to remain sustainable, this enrollment target is a significant concern, as we regularly see new start charter schools enroll below their targeted enrollment. This is particularly true for schools in their first few years as they get established and build a strong reputation. Additionally, the recruitment plan for the school lacked clarity. In some parts of the application, the focus was on the McGavock Cluster. However, in the capacity interview and the public hearing, the focus was Nashville-wide. Additionally, when pressed for more specifics regarding the parent demand data the school had collected, the school stated they had not disaggregated the data to know the exact demand for sixth and ninth grades. Ultimately, I found The Forge's academic plan as currently written to lack key details in significant areas, and these need to be addressed prior to meeting the bar for approval.

The operations plan only partially meets the standard for approval. I want to commend the sponsor for building a diverse governing board with both industry experience and educational experience. Additionally, the proposed executive director has school leadership experience and demonstrated great passion to serve in her role. However, the staffing plan and plan for leadership capacity currently do not meet the standard for approval. First, there is no one currently on staff that has CTE and/or industry experience, and given the unique, first-of-its-kind academic model, this is a significant gap. While the executive director stated that they would hire principals with CTE experience, the job descriptions for these roles within the application do not specifically name any CTE experience being a requirement. On the whole it is unclear how the school will identify, recruit, and hire individuals with this highly specialized expertise. Without these individuals currently identified or clear description of what type of background the sponsor is recruiting for, it is difficult to assess the ability of the sponsor to implement the unique academic model as proposed.

In addition to the school leadership capacity, the current proposed staffing and recruitment plan do not meet the bar for approval. Because of the school's plan to open with two distinct grades, including one high school grade, the school must recruit and hire a significant number (twenty-five) employees for Year 1, including fifteen teachers. The national teaching shortage is a fact, and it is a difficult hiring environment for all schools. Moreover, The Forge needs individuals with specific licenses to teach CTE classes, and these individuals are more difficult to recruit and hire. While I appreciate the proposed partnerships with Teach For America and Nashville Teacher Residency, these partnerships are not unique, and the demand for high-quality teachers far outpaces the supply. This is an area that the school will struggle in, and when pressed at the public hearing about the recruitment plan, the sponsor did not provide a robust, detailed response to the real challenges the school will face. While the school did note a plan to support experts in industry to obtain a teaching license, this is an area of challenge for many schools implementing CTE programs as this process is complex and time intensive. To meet the bar for approval, the applicant needs to detail a clear and realistic staffing plan that acknowledges the challenges it will face. Currently, the plan as presented does not meet the bar for approval.

While I acknowledge the expertise the applicant has in facilities on their governing board, the proposed building improvement costs as well as long-term lease costs compound the school's sustainability concerns. The school's heavy reliance on philanthropy coupled with the ambitious enrollment projections raises questions about the school's ability to remain financially viable with the large facility costs.

Finally, I do not believe that the sponsor's financial plan meets the standard for approval. While I appreciated the board's explanation of their background and experience in finance

during the capacity interview, the lack of financial staffing or expertise at the staff level is of great concern. The job descriptions for the Year 1 staff do not require anyone to have financial experience, and the responsibility for working with the back-office provider is split across two roles. Moreover, the school does not plan to hire a finance director until Year 3 but expects to have nearly a \$10 million budget with significant philanthropy needs prior to the hiring. Compounding the concern was the sponsor's vague responses to specific questions around contingency planning both in the capacity interview and the public hearing as well as deferral to the third-party vendor for specific responses.

Additionally, as noted, the sponsor's plan relies significantly on strong enrollment and philanthropic grants to be sustainable. The school needs approximately \$1.95 million in philanthropy to be sustainable much of which is yet to be secured. The lack of clear contingency plans along with the lack of clear financial capacity on the staff level is concerning given the reliance on philanthropy for the school to be sustainable. Ultimately, the sponsor needs to provide more details regarding its contingency and sustainability plans as well as demonstrate financial capacity of the staff to meet the standard for approval. While I understand that all charter schools face financial uncertainty during the early years, the compounding of financial issues laid out within my recommendation lead me to the conclusion that the risk is too great to recommend approval of this application at this time.

I understand that the application process is long, and the decisions of a governing board are being made in an ongoing process, but the foundation of my recommendation is the sponsor's capacity and likelihood of success in opening a school based on the totality of the record. As outlined in my recommendation, I have significant remaining questions across the academic, operational, and financial plans that need to be addressed by the applicant prior to finding that the application meets the bar for approval and recommending approval of the application. 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 Forge 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 The Forge was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or community. Therefore, I recommend that the Commission affirm the decision of the MNPS



Board of Education to deny the amended application for The Forge.

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

August 27, 2025

Date



EXHIBIT A:
Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report

August 27, 2025

School Name: The Forge School

Sponsor: The Forge School

Proposed Location of School: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Evaluation Team:

- Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore
- Erin Conley
- Beth Figueroa
- Autumn Hillis
- Kristina McInerney
- Maggie Stampley



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](#).



three sections of the application: Academic Plan and Design, Operations Plan and Capacity, and Financial Plan and Capacity.

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 identified school leader (if applicable) to address the concerns, weaknesses, and questions identified in the application, and to assess the capacity to execute the application's overall plan.
3. **Consensus Judgment:** At the conclusion of the review of the application and the capacity interview, the committee submitted a final rubric and developed a consensus regarding a rating for each section of the application.

This recommendation report includes the following information:

1. **Summary of the Application:** A brief description of the applicant's proposed academic, operations, and financial plans.
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 three 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; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - c. **Financial Plan and Capacity:** planning and budget worksheet; operating budget; operating budget narrative; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.

The Commission's charter application Review Committee utilized the Tennessee Department of Education's Charter Creation Application Evaluation Guidance and Review Tool ("the 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: The Forge School

Sponsor: The Forge School

Proposed Location of School: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Mission: The Forge School (“The Forge”) empowers sixth- through twelfth-grade students to forge their own futures by combining academic excellence, hands-on learning, and real-world experiences to ensure that upon graduation students are prepared to enter an architecture, construction, or engineering career with the durable skills and experience needed to thrive in a high-wage high-demand industry.³

Number of Schools Currently in Operation by Sponsor: There are no schools currently in operation by the sponsor.

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	120	120	120	120	120	120
7	0	120	120	120	120	120
8	0	0	120	120	120	120
9	120	120	120	120	120	120
10	0	120	120	120	120	120
11	0	0	115	115	115	115
12	0	0	0	110	110	110
Totals	240	480	715	825	825	825

Brief Description of the Application

The sponsor, The Forge School, is proposing to open a charter school in Davidson County, Tennessee and serve students in sixth through twelfth grade when fully built out. The school, The Forge School, is a new-start school and would be the first school for the sponsor. The school intends to operate within the McGavock cluster of Davidson County to provide hands-on, career-connected learning in the architecture, construction, and engineering fields.⁵ The school

³ The Forge School Amended Application, pg.10

⁴ The Forge School Amended Application, pg. 101

⁵ The Forge School Amended Application pg. 10



proposes to offer a middle and high school experience from which students will leave with a certification in architecture, construction, and engineering pathways that places them on an accelerated track to a career in these fields and provide an opportunity for students in the Donelson area additional school options.

The proposed school will be governed by a board of directors that consists of community leaders, with standing committees focused on academics, community engagement and partnerships, finance, and governance. In Year 0, The Forge has budgeted \$1,350,000 in revenue, receiving \$500,000 from the Charter Schools Program (“CSP”) start-up grant, \$350,000 in philanthropy, and \$500,000 in other grants, comprised of the Tennessee Department of Education Competitive Facilities Grant, and projects \$1,302,707 in expenses for the school. The Forge projects the school will have \$4,997,440 in revenue and \$4,818,929 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a balance of \$375,805. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$14,458,076 in revenue and \$13,740,321 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$3,097,024.⁶ The school anticipates that 42% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 14% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 18% of the student population will be English learners.⁷

⁶ The Forge School, Amended Budget

⁷ The Forge School Amended Application p 101

Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends denial of the application for The Forge School because the applicant did not provide sufficient evidence in the academic, operations, and financial sections to demonstrate the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

The Academic Plan and Design section for The Forge School partially meets the standard because of ambitious enrollment targets and elements of the academic plan lacking detail. The school's Year 1 enrollment projection is 240 students serving two distinct grades, but there was a lack of evidence that this enrollment target was reasonable and achievable to ensure the viability of the school. While the school's mission to integrate career and technical education ("CTE") with core content is innovative, questions remain regarding the feasibility of delivering core education content while also implementing the proposed CTE model with fidelity. The plan also lacked specifics on how teachers would be trained to integrate these specialized concepts, and the application does not include a plan to recruit leadership with specific CTE experience. Furthermore, the plan for supporting special populations is ambiguous, with conflicting information on how services would be delivered to these students as well as concerns regarding the capacity to oversee and deliver required services.

The Operations Plan and Capacity section for The Forge School partially meets the standard due to gaps in leadership and a heavy reliance on external support. The administrative structure is lean, placing a potentially unsustainable workload on the executive director, who is responsible for a wide range of academic and operational duties. A plan to recruit school leadership with specific CTE experience is not included, and the job descriptions provided do not require this expertise, raising concerns about the fidelity of the unique academic model's implementation. The application also lacks a clear plan to meet its ambitious staffing targets. Furthermore, the plan for facilities relies heavily on philanthropic grants and third-party partnerships for a significant budget of \$1.3 million in tenant improvements over the first five years of operations, creating risk for the school's ability to cover these costs if plans do not go as expected. This combination of limited internal capacity and an over-reliance on external parties for critical functions raises doubts about the school's ability to execute its operations plan with fidelity.

The Financial Plan and Capacity section for The Forge School partially meets the standard because of the school's heavy and unsustainable reliance on philanthropic funding and lack of financial capacity to execute the proposed plan. This funding is critical for the school to operate, but the application provides no clear contingency plan if this revenue is not fully realized. The financial model is also built on an ambitious 95% annual enrollment rate, with a minimum of 90% needed for financial viability. This high target creates a significant risk. Additionally, the

internal leadership team has limited documented financial expertise and capacity, leading to a heavy reliance on an external back-office provider. The application also notes that a dedicated operations and finance director is not formally hired until Year 3, which raises further concerns about the school's ability to hold external partners accountable and make high-stakes financial decisions. This lack of internal capacity, coupled with the ambitious revenue and enrollment projections, raises serious concerns about the school's long-term financial stability.

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	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

Analysis of the Academic Plan and Design

Rating: Partially Meets Standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee

The Forge School's Academic Plan and Design partially meets the standard, as the Review Committee found several areas that lacked sufficient detail and raised concerns about the school's long-term feasibility.

The school's enrollment projections centered on ambitious targets and the assumption that the interest shown during the application phase would translate directly into confirmed student enrollments. In Year 1, the school projects to open with two grades, sixth and ninth grades, with a projected enrollment of 240 students. The school then proposes to grow by two grades each year for the first three years of operation. Further, the application sets a 95% annual enrollment rate to operate sustainably, a rate that is higher than what is typically achieved by new charter schools. In the capacity interview, the applicant clarified that the minimum number of students needed to be financially viable was 90% but provided no clear contingency plan beyond cutting non-essential staff if these targets were not met. This raised significant questions about how the school could maintain its core academic program with a smaller-than-projected staff. While the school shared during the capacity interview that they had 281 signatures from families with school-aged children, there was no evidence provided of how many of the signatures were from students who were in the school's target grades and whether the families would be interested in enrollment. Additionally, the targeted recruitment area lacks clarity. The application speaks to targeting the McGavock cluster but also refers to a broader city-wide recruitment focus. Therefore, the lack of detailed recruitment plan coupled with the lack of evidence that the school can meet the enrollment targets do not meet the standard for approval.

Another area of concern revolved around the balance between career and technical education ("CTE") and core academic content. While the application outlines an innovative model that integrates industry-based learning with core subjects, the specifics of this integration were found to be ambiguous. Reviewers noted that the proposed schedule allocates only forty-five minutes per day for core subjects like English language arts and math. This presents a challenge to achieving the necessary depth of instruction, particularly given the school's focus on serving students who are academically underperforming and need to close achievement gaps. The committee also noted the lack of a specific plan for how core content teachers would be trained or supported to effectively integrate CTE concepts, particularly given the limited number of administrative leaders with CTE content expertise in the initial years. The school's proposed

academic model, while unique as the first of its kind in the country, raises questions about its full implementation in practice.

Additionally, the plan for supporting special populations, including students with disabilities and English learners (“EL”), also raised questions about the school's operational capacity and instructional model. The application and the capacity interview provided conflicting information on how services would be delivered to these students. For example, the school's schedule places pull-out services during the "Forge Forum," an advisory block described as an integral part of the school's culture and curriculum. This suggests that students requiring these services may miss a critical part of the school's unique model. The executive director will be tasked with managing special education and EL programs in the first few years, as the school's staffing plan does not include a dedicated director for these programs until Year 4. This workload presents a challenge for effective oversight and the delivery of high-quality services while also being responsible for executing a first-of-its kind academic model.

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant presents an innovative academic plan that aligns with its mission and the needs of the Nashville community. The school's mission to prepare students for careers in the growing fields of architecture, construction, and engineering (“ACE”) directly responds to a documented local workforce need. The application details a robust assessment framework, called the "Forge Calibration," which includes state-mandated tests and internal metrics to continuously monitor student progress. The school also has a thoughtful plan for student culture, emphasizing a positive environment, strong relationships, and a "Forge Forum" advisory program that is intended to foster belonging and a focus on durable skills like collaboration and leadership. This combination of a clear mission, a comprehensive assessment plan, and an intentional culture demonstrates a clear vision for these areas of the academic plan. The plan for an extensive number of industry-aligned connections and events for students is also a noted strength, as it provides unique opportunities for mentorship, internships, and work-based learning that are directly linked to high-demand careers.

Analysis of the Operations Plan and Capacity

Rating: Partially Meets Standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee

The Forge School's Operations Plan and Capacity partially meets the standard, as the Review Committee found a lack of detailed plans and a heavy reliance on external support in key operational areas.

While the application includes a comprehensive staffing structure, the committee identified gaps within the school's leadership capacity. The administrative structure is notably lean, placing an extensive workload on the executive director, who is tasked with overseeing academic, operational, and cultural programs simultaneously. Additionally, there is no identified leader with direct industry experience or with the unique CTE model of architecture, construction, and engineering, and it is unclear who will manage the implementation of this program to ensure fidelity. While the sponsor stated that the school plans to hire principals to execute the academic model, the job descriptions provided do not require CTE expertise or experience in the specific career areas noted within the academic plan. Therefore, there is no clear plan at the leadership level to ensure there is experience, knowledge, and capacity to implement the CTE-focused parts of the academic plan with fidelity.

Additionally, the plan for recruiting and supporting highly specialized pathways instructors with industry expertise also lacks specificity. The plan to hire twenty-five full-time equivalents ("FTEs") in the first year, including fifteen teachers, is ambitious in the current climate of a national teacher shortage, and many of the individuals will need more specialized CTE licenses. While the applicant notes plans to partner with Teach For America and Nashville Teacher Residency, these partnerships are similar to the ones that exist with charter schools and districts across the city. The application lacks a clear plan as to how the school will effectively recruit the individuals needed for the school, given the difficult and challenging teacher labor market. Additionally, although the application states the school will support industry professionals in obtaining a teaching license, it does not detail the process or provide a timeline, which raises doubts about the school's ability to hire and retain a sufficient number of qualified instructors.

Concerns over operational functions and related costs were also identified in the facilities and transportation plans. The budgeted tenant improvement amount, including the needs of the CTE program, is \$1.3 million over the first few years of operations and reliant upon philanthropic grants and/or third-party partnerships. The costs for a facility large enough for the student body and program are projected to scale significantly over the first few years, with an estimated annual cost of \$1.8 million once the facility is fully built out. The school's reliance on

philanthropy and its limited financial position, combined with ambitious enrollment projections, raises questions about its ability to cover these costs if plans do not go as expected.

Finally, the committee found an over-reliance on external parties for both operational and financial expertise. While the applicant has brought on board members with relevant experience and plans to hire a back-office provider, there are questions about the internal capacity to manage these relationships and provide effective oversight. This was evident during the capacity interview when the applicant stated the executive director would manage the financial relationships, which is a contradiction to the application. The application notes that a full-time operations and finance director is not formally hired until Year 3 and instead assigns responsibility for working with the back-office provider in the initial years to the community and operations director and an operations coordinator. The provided job descriptions for these roles do not specify financial responsibilities or required expertise in this area. Additionally, during the capacity interview, the executive director and community and operations director did not provide specific answers to financial questions; instead, they deferred to the back-office provider, who only provided general information. This lack of specificity and inconsistent information across the interview and application, combined with the reliance on third-party support to respond to questions during the capacity interview, raises doubts about whether the school's leadership team has the internal capacity to hold these external partners accountable and make high-stakes operational decisions with fidelity. This concern is compounded by the overall financial sustainability questions that the committee highlighted throughout its review of the application.

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The governing board is a particular asset, comprised of members with extensive experience in real estate, development, and school operations. During the capacity interview, the board demonstrated their direct ties to the architecture, construction, and engineering industries, which lends credibility to their ability to navigate the complexities of launching the school. The start-up plan also provides a detailed timeline with specific milestones, showing a high level of intentionality in the planning process. The application's comprehensive approach to additional operations, such as food service and school safety, also demonstrates a commitment to providing a supportive and compliant environment for students and staff.

Analysis of the Financial Plan and Capacity

Rating: Partially Meets Standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee

The Financial Plan and Capacity partially meets the standard because the operating budget places a heavy and unsustainable reliance on continued philanthropy for the school's long-term viability, the lack of clear evidence that this philanthropy can be achieved, and the lack of demonstrated financial capacity within the leadership team.

The budget projects \$1.95 million in philanthropy over five years, with approximately \$1 million needed by Year 1, and \$250 thousand needed annually thereafter to operate sustainably. While the applicant has secured a portion of this funding and demonstrated support from industry leaders, the majority of this revenue remains unsecured. It is unclear how this support from industry partners will translate into direct philanthropic contributions. This reliance on non-guaranteed funds creates a significant risk, as the school's financial health hinges on these ambitious goals being met. When pressed about financial contingencies in the capacity interview, the team could not clearly articulate a plan for shortfalls, making it difficult to determine if the school could be successful if this funding were not fully realized.

The financial plan also lacks a clear and detailed contingency plan for a number of potential shortfalls. As noted earlier, the school must recruit two specific grade levels, sixth and ninth grade, and reach a 90% enrollment rate to remain sustainable. This is a higher target than is typically achieved by a new school and presents a major risk. While the applicant's team mentioned that staffing and operational costs could be reduced in a contingency scenario, this plan was not articulated in detail. With a lean administrative staff and the need for specialized personnel and equipment, any reductions could directly impact the quality of the academic program. The budget itself contains inconsistencies, such as differing staffing projections in the application's various sections, and lacks detailed breakdowns for crucial expenses, such as CTE materials. This lack of transparency, combined with the heavy reliance on external support, creates a significant risk for the school's financial stability.

Lastly, as noted in the operations section, there is a lack of financial capacity within the current and proposed leadership team. During the capacity interview, the proposed executive director stated she would be the staff member in charge of finances in the early years, but this information contradicts what was provided within the application. In the application, the sponsor notes that the community and operations director and an operations coordinator will work with the back-office provider in Year 0 through 3. However, the provided job descriptions for these roles do not specify financial responsibilities or required expertise in this area. Additionally, within the capacity interview, neither the executive director nor community and



operations director answered specific questions on the proposed finances, deferring most questions to the external back-office provider. In totality, there is a lack of evidence throughout the application and the capacity interview that the financial plan meets the standard for approval.

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The five-year budget is comprehensive and projects a positive fund balance each year, demonstrating an effort to build fiscal sustainability. Additionally, the budget includes salary projections that are competitive with the local district, which is a factor in attracting and retaining qualified staff. Finally, the inclusion of a board member with experience on other charter school finance committees provides a level of oversight that will be beneficial to the school's financial management.



Evaluation Team

Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore is the Authorizing Coordinator for the Tennessee Public Charter School 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.

Erin Conley serves as an expert reviewer for a number of charter school authorizers across the country. Over the last fourteen years in the field of education, she has served in roles focused on survey development, data analytics and visualization, research, board development, compliance, school operations, and policy analysis. Erin has expertise in charter authorization and laws that impact charters and networks. Erin began her career teaching in the Chicago Public School district. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English and Secondary Education from Michigan State University and a master's in public policy from Vanderbilt University with a focus on K-12 education policy.

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.

Autumn Hillis has spent her career serving students as a classroom teacher, curriculum writer, instructional coach, and a school principal. She has worked in both traditional public schools and in charter schools throughout her career. Her career interests and projects include effective science instruction for K-12 students and restorative justice practices in schools as a response to decreasing the school to prison pipeline. Dr. Hillis is a product of Nashville public schools and is excited to continue serving students in Nashville and across the state.

Kristina McInerney is a special education teacher with seven years of experience. She earned her bachelor's degree in K-12 multi-categorical special education, with a minor in Spanish, from Coastal Carolina University. Kristina also holds a master's degree in educational leadership from Carson Newman University. Throughout her career, she has been dedicated to supporting



students with diverse learning needs, drawing on her expertise in special education and her leadership training to foster inclusive and effective learning environments.

Maggie Stampley is the Director of School Programs and Supports for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. She is an educator who has worked in both traditional public and public charter schools in the Nashville area. Throughout her time in teaching, Maggie has specialized in teaching math and special populations. She has worked as an administrator in both the instructional and operational fields, serving middle and high school students. Maggie received her M.A.E from Belmont University and B.A. from Auburn University.