



American Classical Academy Madison - Commission Appeal Statement

Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-105 and 49-13-108, we, the board members of American Classical Education (ACE), ask the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission (Commission) to follow the decision-making principles in its own [Policy 2.000](#) and overturn the decision by the Jackson-Madison County Board of Education (Board) to deny the application of American Classical Academy Madison (ACAM). We ask the Commission to do what the Board did not: keep politics out of the process, conduct a rigorous application review, and--if the application meets the standard and authorization is in the best interests of the students, district, or community--to approve the charter.

ACAM's amended application meets the standards for authorization.

ACAM's application includes detailed plans and demonstrates the capacity needed to meet the standards required in each area for approval: academic, operational, and financial.

Authorizing ACAM is in the best interests of the students, the district, and the community.

Achievement data from multiple classical public schools implementing ACAM's planned curricula and teaching strategies with fidelity shows students consistently scoring proficient in ELA and math at rates between 55 and 80 percent. Because the success of ACAM's students will be included in the district's results, authorizing ACAM is clearly in the best interests of the district because ACAM's students' success will contribute to a virtuous cycle of increasing student performance in district schools.

According to 2018-19 data, only 21 percent of JMCSS students were proficient in ELA and only 20 percent were proficient in math. JMCSS students grew at the lowest level of growth of schools across Tennessee, as measured by TVAAS.

We envision our teachers helping students develop "the intellectual and personal habits and skills upon which responsible, independent, and flourishing lives are built, in the firm belief that such lives are the basis of a free and just society." Authorizing ACAM will further diversify and enhance the cadre of educators in the community. Veteran, mid-career, and new teachers are attracted to the classical model. They will bring unique insights and gain exciting experience in a new type of public school. They will learn from and with peers across the district--through shared professional development or through informal community interactions.

Many families in the community expressed an interest in ACAM's school model, as demonstrated by the district's own survey responses, letters of support, and in community meetings facilitated by ACAM. Offering parents a wider range of educational options will make Jackson-Madison County a more attractive place for tax-paying families to live. The school will, through the renovation and repurposing of an existing but underused facility, strengthen the educational infrastructure of the community and turn an existing empty building into a shining asset for the community. (ACE currently has a signed LOI for this facility.)

The Board's reasons for denial are unfounded based on the application.

The Board's review process lacked the rigor and attention to detail required to make a decision in the best interests of the students, district, and the community. The scoring rubric and comments from the amended application suggest that reviewers misunderstood the applicable standards, failed to thoroughly review the application (initial or amended), and had widely different views of the quality of the application that were never normed or discussed to establish consensus. Here are some examples:

- In nearly every section of the amended scoring rubric, the review team stated simply, "same as initial," despite significant revisions made to the amended application, and despite all the questions the sponsor addressed in the review committee interview.
- In the facility section, reviewers wrote, "Until an actual site is named, this section does not meet the standard." Securing a facility at the time of application is impossible for almost all sponsors, who lack approval to open a school and an accompanying guarantee of funding. The reviewers' stated expectations do not adhere to the definition of "meets" in the rubric, which reflects this reality. The rubric states that the standard is met if sponsors include facility *plans* that demonstrate alignment with the proposed educational program, anticipated student enrollment, and the budget. And if sponsors demonstrate expertise in facilities acquisition and management, and submit a *plan* for identifying a facility. ACAM's application meets all these requirements.
- Reviewers marked the application as "partially meets" in six sections that were inapplicable, since the sponsor is a brand new nonprofit organization, not yet operating any charter schools. This is clear in the instructions at the top of the application form.
- Reviewers rated the Charter School Financing section "partially meets," in part because "there is not a contingency plan to meet financial needs, should the grants or other revenues discussed come through lower than anticipated/expected." However, if the conservative plans for per pupil state, local, and federal revenue, and the CSP grant are insufficient, ACAM will have access to a \$675,000 startup loan (at no interest) and a \$1 million line of credit. These financial resources are not speculative, but as clearly stated in the application, are in hand by ACAM.
- As evidence of the wide ranging reviews, the strengths listed in section 1.12 Parent and Community Engagement and Support are telling. Of the four reviewers, two found no strengths, citing one page, while the next two cited other pages and found a list of strengths that would typically have resulted in a "meets" rating.
- ACAM's academic model has been found to meet the rubric by other charter review commissions in Tennessee. Indeed, Clarksville-Montgomery School System (CMCSS) found that the identical academic program met the standard rubric this year. And CMCSS and Rutherford County Schools found that the identical Financial section met the standard.

The Board's decision is politically motivated instead of being grounded in the best interests of the students, district, and community.

Affirming the Board's decision will set a precedent that authorizers can exceed the authority granted by statute and enshrined in Commission rules. Those laws and the Commission's policies direct authorizers to approve or deny charter school applications based on the quality of sponsors' academic, operational, and financial plans and capacities and what is in the best interests of students, districts, and communities. The law does not allow authorizers to act based on what they think about statements made by anyone affiliated with organizations that provide products or services that a public school chooses to use to serve its students.

The Board repeatedly and intentionally tied ACAM's application to Hillsdale College. Working session and board meeting agendas listed the charter as being sponsored by "Hillsdale College." ACAM noticed

this and contacted Dr. Vivian Williams and was told that this was not an error but the correct agenda item. In the working session, Board Chair Mr. Darnell explained that he asked JMCSS legal counsel to draft a resolution “tying [ACAM] to Hillsdale College.” Immediately prior to the Board’s vote, Dr. Chandler, the lead reviewer, added to this mischaracterization by stating that “Hillsdale College submitted a request for a charter school” and that “representatives from Hillsdale College” attended the capacity interview. The application and process made it abundantly clear that ACE is a separate organization from Hillsdale College. The capacity interview was attended by ACE’s CEO, its general counsel, and the head of school of a public classical school operated by another nonprofit organization. None of those individuals is or ever has been employed by Hillsdale College.

Immediately after denying ACAM’s application, the Board passed [a resolution](#) repudiating statements by the president of Hillsdale College. Despite the statements having nothing to do with ACE or ACAM, or the free training and resources the college offers, the Board stated, “it does not believe it is in the best interests of the students in Jackson and Madison County, Tennessee to be exposed to a charter school with such close ties to Hillsdale College.”

ACAM will be operated by American Classical Education (ACE), a nonprofit organization separate from Hillsdale College. ACE’s initial board members were affiliated with Hillsdale College. But, since the initial founding, we have worked actively to localize the board and ensure alignment with the community. All current board members are residents of Tennessee and only one has any prior affiliation with Hillsdale, having graduated from there in 1977.

ACAM has chosen to apply for the free professional development and curricular resources Hillsdale offers to classical schools. These supports will enable our teachers to provide an excellent ELA education built around the Core Knowledge curriculum (used by thousands of public schools across the country), a strong math education based on Singapore Math (used around the world), and proven curricula for all the other subjects Tennessee students are required to master during elementary and secondary school.

As demonstrated by the record, the review committee’s recommendation was based on a substandard review process and the Board’s voted based on politics instead of the merits of the application. We ask the Commission to disavow the partisan nature of the Board’s decision and instead to rigorously evaluate this appeal consistent with the Commission’s policy and exemplary authorizing standards. We are confident that such a review, based on the merits of ACAM’s application and the best interests of the students, the district, and the Jackson-Madison County community, will result in authorization of ACAM’s charter.

Sincerely,

SIGNED by ALL BOARD MEMBERS

Dolores Gresham Dennis Pearson Michelle Garcia Rick Kucera