



Executive Director's Recommendation

Nashville School of Excellence 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 1, 2024, the sponsor of Nashville School of Excellence ("NSE" or "sponsor") appealed the denial of its amended application by the Metro 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 NSE 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 NSE.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108 and Commission Policy 2.000, Commission staff and an independent review charter application review committee conducted a de novo, on the record review of NSE's amended application. In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education's charter application scoring criteria, "[f]or an application to be deemed eligible for approval, the summary ratings for all applicable categories [(academic plan and design, operations plan and capacity, financial plan and capacity, and portfolio review and performance record)] must be 'Meets or Exceeds the Standard'."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 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 affirm the local board's decision to deny.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. The sponsor submitted a letter of intent to Metro Nashville Public Schools expressing its intention to file a charter school application.
2. The sponsor submitted its initial application for Nashville School of Excellence to MNPS on February 1, 2024.
3. MNPS assembled a review committee to review and score the NSE initial application.
4. On March 21, 2024, MNPS's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of NSE.

¹ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

² Tennessee Department of Education's Application to Create a Public Charter School Scoring Criteria, pg. 2.

³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

⁴ Id.



5. MNPS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the NSE initial application indicating the academic, operations, finance, and past performance sections partially met standards.
6. On April 23, 2024, MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the NSE initial application.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for NSE to MNPS on May 24, 2024.
8. MNPS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the NSE amended application based on the charter application scoring rubric and rated each section of NSE's amended application as partially meets standard.
9. On July 23, 2024, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of NSE.
10. The sponsor appealed the denial of the NSE amended application in writing to the Commission on August 1, 2024, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
11. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored the NSE amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school application scoring rubric.
12. On September 16, 2024, 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 NSE amended application.
13. The Commission's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of the NSE leadership team on September 19, 2024 via Microsoft Teams.
14. After the capacity interview, the Commission's Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of the NSE 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 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 NSE initial application consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Tieawasa Hodak	Director of Exceptional Education
Casey Minshall	Coordinator of English Learners
Robert Wallace	Executive Office of Resource Strategy
Ken Stark	Executive Director of Operations
David Williams	Executive Officer of Teaching and Learning
Sudhir Sinha	Data Coach of Research Assessment and Evaluation
Ryan Latimer	Director of Boundary and Planning
Casey Megow	Director of Facilities and Planning and Construction
Cordarrell Cobb	Partner School Budget Strategy
Gay Burden	External Consultant



The NSE 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
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	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 23, 2024. The MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of NSE.

District Denial of Amended Application

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

Name	Title
Tieawasa Hodak	Director of Exceptional Education
Casey Minshall	Coordinator of English Learners
Robert Wallace	Executive Office of Resource Strategy
Ken Stark	Executive Director of Operations
Sudhir Sinha	Data Coach of Research Assessment and Evaluation
Ryan Latimer	Director of Boundary and Planning
Casey Megow	Director of Facilities and Planning and Construction
Cordarrell Cobb	Partner School Budget Strategy
Gay Burden	External Consultant

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
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	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 July 23, 2024. At the July 23, 2024 board meeting, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of NSE.

Commission Review Committee’s Evaluation of the Application

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



Name	Title
Sophie Binenfeld	Commission Staff
Dave Hartman	External Reviewer
Maggie Lund	Commission Staff
Whitney Noel	External Reviewer
Claire Seguin	Commission Staff

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

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	Meets or Exceeds Standard

The Review Committee recommends denial of the application for Nashville School of Excellence because the applicant failed to provide sufficient evidence in the academic and operations sections of the application to demonstrate the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

The Academic Plan and Design for Nashville School of Excellence partially meets standard because the Review Committee cited a lack of strong evidence of support and demand for the school in its proposed community. The location outlined along Nolensville Road is large, and the area already contains other educational options, including several charter middle and high schools. The application also lacked sufficient evidence of demand as the applicant was inconsistent in the proposed targeted communities between the application and capacity interview. The application lacked memorandums of understanding (“MOUs”) and letters of support to demonstrate support in the intended community, and the Review Committee could not verify information shared about a community interest survey demonstrating families intending to enroll. Additionally, there were noted concerns of oversight, including of special populations of students given the coordinator overseeing this work would be in Memphis.

The Operations Plan and Capacity also partially meets standard due to an underdeveloped network expansion plan, questions surrounding the long-term strategic vision of the network, and limited evidence of success for the school’s start-up plan. The Review Committee also cited concerns about how professional development across the geographic locations would function in practice, and the reliance on virtual and asynchronous methods raised questions around effectiveness. Additionally, there are unresolved questions about the facility’s location, further complicating operational readiness. The applicant outlines a strong governing board with diverse experience, though the representatives from the governing board did not speak during the capacity interview when called upon.

Conversely, the Financial Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds standard as the network is in strong financial health with \$8 million in cash reserves and a \$1 million allocation from The Read Foundation for start-up costs for the school. The budget reflects realistic revenue and expense assumptions, allowing flexibility for early operational years. The network plans to hire a business manager and utilize a back-office provider for financial management, ensuring sound fiscal oversight. The application also meets or exceeds standard for the Portfolio Review and Performance Record as the network of schools has demonstrated success, particularly in student growth, in previous years. The applicant was able to adequately address how they have responded to challenges faced, particularly in situations of

underperformance. Overall, while the network of schools is strong and demonstrates a track record of success in Memphis, questions surrounding the organizational vision of expanding to Nashville, a lack of a clear location, and a lack of demonstrated community support within the application led the Review Committee to determine that the applicant requires additional planning to ensure a successful expansion.

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 NSE 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 16, 2024. MNPS's presentation at the public hearing focused on the charter school office's mission, application review process, reasons for denial for the application, and a request that the Commission uphold MNPS's decision to deny NSE's amended application. Representatives from MNPS indicated that NSE's amended application was denied based on partially meeting standards for academics, operations, finance, and portfolio review and performance record. The district stated that the academic plan was not compelling in relation to other MNPS schools and what is offered through the outlined science, technology, engineering, and mathematics ("STEM") curriculum. Additionally, MNPS stated that the application did not meet early release day requirements, and the applicant did not display sufficient parent demand. The district cited that the operational plan also had deficiencies surrounding Nashville representation on the board and the outlined facility plan lacked specifics. The financial plan included unrealistic enrollment projections for the area, and the district's presentation outlined data regarding saturation of fourteen other school options within the proposed location area. Finally, for portfolio review and performance record, the district cited that the applicant did not sufficiently address the underperformance of their Memphis schools and stated the average ACT score reported by the network's Memphis schools is lower than the MNPS average.

In the sponsor's opening statement, the applicant discussed the mission and vision for the network of charter schools. The applicant outlined their rigorous STEM-based curriculum offerings with social and emotional support. The applicant's presentation outlined the experience of both the board and leadership team for the network of schools and clarified that one of their board members recently moved to Nashville in the last six months. The central office leadership team includes twenty-seven members split into both academic and operations functions. The network has received numerous awards for their Memphis schools, including being ranked in the top five charter schools in Tennessee, Promising Practices awards, Purple Star Award, and being designated as a Reward school for the 2021-22 school year. The applicant also laid out the STEM designations received by three of their four campuses. The applicant explained the history of the network's expansion, starting in 2010 in the Hickory Hill area of Memphis, and their subsequent additions of campuses in the Mendenhall and Cordova areas. The applicant stated that they have roughly 1,650 students in their network with a robust waitlist. Operationally and financially, The Read Foundation has a clean financial history, over \$8 million in cash reserves, \$3 million of which is available cash in the bank. They have a five-year strategic plan for expansion, and they want to open NSE with 330 students in sixth through ninth grade, expanding to a fully built out school serving sixth through twelfth grade with 750 students. The applicant also spoke about the fact that they have met with community organizations and other charter schools in the area to help them decide on their Nashville location.

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(b)(i).

During questioning by the Commission, representatives from MNPS discussed the requirements for a 6.5-hour school day as outlined in Tennessee state law and the rationale for NSE not meeting standard due to this requirement. They stated that MNPS charter schools have early release days but meet the 6.5-hour school day requirement. The district representatives also elaborated on their concerns surrounding the outlined enrollment projections provided by the applicant, stating that there are nine middle schools and six high schools in the targeted area, and therefore 330 students in Year 1 is not reasonable due to fifteen other schools already being in the area. Representatives from MNPS also outlined that the district's Review Committee was not satisfied with the provided letters of support nor evidence of community engagement, as most of the letters provided were from entities wanting to do business with the school or were in Memphis. These items did not provide sufficient evidence of parent demand to the district's Review Committee, in alignment with the scoring rubric. Finally, representatives from MNPS outlined that their Review Committee was unclear how the board would function given many members identified are not in Nashville.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor. The applicant stated that they are currently using early release days in their Memphis schools and are satisfying the requirements of state law. The applicant outlined a continuous outreach process, including more recent partnerships with the Salahadeen Center of Nashville and engagement efforts with the Middle Eastern community in Nashville. The applicant mentioned attending church services, meeting with other charter leaders, attending community events, and doing presentations about the school to engage the community. The applicant provided updates on a survey that included 621 students expressing interest in enrolling in Year 1 and outlined the marketing and social media efforts they will execute to ensure further interest. The applicant stated the minimum number of students needed to remain financially viable in Year 1 is 250 students. The applicant then further explained the rationale for the chosen location of the school explaining that The Read Foundation chose this area strategically given the long waitlists of other charter schools in the area, which indicate demand for another charter school. The applicant outlined a potential facility within the Aramark building, though they have not signed a letter of intent, and stated that they aim to locate in the southern Nolensville Pike area. The applicant admitted that facilities may be a challenge, but depending on where they are able to locate, they plan to provide adequate transportation to students. The applicant addressed concerns surrounding leadership capacity given the differing geographic areas, stating that the Executive Director has experience doing this in Texas and would leverage virtual communication options with leadership team members, visiting the NSE campus frequently. Finally, the applicant addressed questions surrounding the low students with disabilities percentages in its Memphis schools, stating that due to the way their funding is allocated, MSCS provides support in serving students with disabilities. However, when they receive the appropriate funding to serve students with disabilities in their Nashville school, they will do so.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of ten in-person comments, with eight speaking in support of MNPS and two speaking in support of NSE. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received nineteen written comments, with one writing in support of MNPS and eighteen writing in support of NSE.

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,"⁶ whether "approval of the application is in the best interests of the students, LEA, or community."⁷ In

⁶ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(E).

⁷ *Id.*

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 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 explicated in the report, I agree that the NSE 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 academic plan for Nashville School of Excellence partially meets standard for approval. My biggest concern regarding the academic plan and application is the lack of clear and evidence-based justification for the sponsor's expansion into the Metro Nashville area. I believe that NSE has an established mission and vision for its academic model. I believe that the model has proven successful in the Memphis-Shelby County area. However, there are additional considerations lacking in this application for it to meet the standard of approval and demonstrate that the sponsor would have a high likelihood of success in its expansion in Nashville.

The sponsor named Nolensville Road as its targeted location for opening. However, in describing why it chose the Nolensville Road area as its targeted location, the applicant stated it was due to the large number of charter schools already operating in this area of Nashville. Given the fact that there are several charter middle and high schools open in the Nolensville Road area, and there is little brand recognition of Memphis School of Excellence in Nashville at this point, there is not sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the school could meet its enrollment projections. The sponsor testified at the public hearing that they have received interest from approximately 620 students, with the highest interest being 122 students eligible for seventh grade enrollment. While these numbers are promising, the lack of a clear targeted location in an area with a significant number of educational options is not sufficient evidence that the operator has a strong likelihood of meeting its enrollment projections.

Additionally, the application lacks detail related to community support for NSE, and therefore, it is unclear how the school will meet the needs of the community. At the public hearing and in the capacity interview, the sponsor stated that south Nashville has a large Kurdish community, and the sponsor stated that those families expressed interest in NSE being approved for authorization. However, this statement was not supported by evidence, nor any supporting documentation submitted for the Commission's consideration. At the public hearing in fact, the public commenters in support of the school were limited and often indicated a financial interest in the approval of the application. While I believe that the academic model is well established in Memphis, I do not believe that the sponsor fully considered the context of Nashville prior to submitting its application. Additionally, it is important for any sponsor that is opening a school in the Metro Nashville area to fully immerse itself in the community and establish strong connections that will make the charter school successful. The sponsor testified that they are relying on The Read Foundation to drive the interest in the targeted location. The sponsor spoke to the waitlist of other neighboring charter schools, and they believe that the demand for charter schools exceeds the availability in the area. However, there was no data presented to support this statement, and there is little brand recognition within Nashville regarding The Read Foundation or Memphis School of Excellence. The applicant needs to provide more concrete evidence of demand and community support within its targeted community to meet the standard for approval.

Further, the proposed academic model assumes support from a large portion of the network's leadership, which will remain in Memphis. I do not believe this plan as presented will ensure the model is implemented with fidelity in Nashville. The sponsor indicated on numerous occasions that they would make frequent trips to Nashville

to engage with the staff and the community. However, the work of opening and operating a successful charter school requires a significant time investment within the community and the school. I am concerned that this has not been appropriately considered by this application. The sponsor's reliance on asynchronous methods for professional development, and their named intent to travel from Memphis to Nashville, only gives me partial confidence in the operations plan. I believe that The Read Foundation is an established network that understands the work of charter schools. I do, however, still have questions about the ability to successfully open a charter school in a new area without more of a physical presence. The application and statements by the NSE team appear to underestimate the amount of involvement required in expanding to a new city, particularly when coupled with enrollment and/or recruitment concerns. The sponsor's testimony was that there is currently one board member from Nashville, as well as a board member based in Cookeville. From the testimony at the public hearing, the sponsor has put some reliance on those members' connections in Nashville to drive relationship and interest. I do not discount the board members' connections to Nashville, but I believe this cannot be the driving connection to Nashville School of Excellence for potential staff and students. The sponsor is experienced in governing a charter school, as evidenced by the Memphis School of Excellence campuses, but I think more time and effort is needed to develop a comprehensive plan for expansion.

I agree with the Review Committee that the sponsor's financial plan meets the standard for approval. The sponsor's budget is sound and shows a history of clean audits that establish solid fiscal practices. I am confident that the network is in a strong financial position, as they have provided evidence of \$8 million in cash reserves. Additionally, The Read Foundation committed to providing \$1 million in start-up costs, should Nashville School of Excellence's application be approved. I think that the sponsor's plan to hire a business manager in Year 0 is a responsible decision and believe that they are prepared for unknown variables that could occur post authorization. Likewise, I also agree that the sponsor's past performance record meets the standard for approval. The success rate of the Memphis School of Excellence campuses is the strongest quality of the sponsor's application. Beginning with its inaugural 2014 class, the sponsor has an extremely high graduation rate – one that exceeds the rates of the neighborhood, Memphis-Shelby County Schools, and the State of Tennessee. They have had consistently high TVAAS scores in the last eight years and multiple campuses have been designated as a Reward school or acknowledged for outstanding STEM programming. I believe the sponsor understands the importance of implementing changes to the academic programs to address identified gaps, and the knowledge of the network is a strength of the application that would serve them well as part of a fully realized expansion plan.

The sponsor has a lot of bright spots in the application, and there may be an identified need for more STEM specific programming in Nashville. However, my recommendation must be based on finding that the application meets the Department's scoring rubric in all applicable areas. I do not find that to be the case here, and based on that assessment, I cannot recommend this application for approval. If the operator desires to expand to Nashville in the future, it needs to demonstrate more understanding of the Nashville community, clear community support and parent demand, and a detailed plan for network support of the new school.

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 NSE 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 NSE 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 NSE.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tess Stovall". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

10/18/24

Date



EXHIBIT A

Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report

October 18, 2024

School Name: Nashville School of Excellence

Sponsor: The Read Foundation

Proposed Location of School: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Evaluation Team:

- Sophie Binenfeld
- Dave Hartman
- Maggie Lund
- Whitney Noel
- Claire Seguin

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 Principles¹, 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 four sections of the application: Academic Plan and Design, Operations Plan and Capacity, Financial Plan and Capacity, and Portfolio Review and Performance Record.
2. Capacity Interview: Based on the independent and collective review of the application, the Review Committee conducted a ninety-minute interview with the sponsor, members of the governing board, and identified school leader to address the concerns, weaknesses, and questions identified in the application, and to assess the capacity to execute the application’s overall plan.
3. Consensus Judgment: At the conclusion of the review of the application and the capacity interview, the committee submitted a final rubric and developed a consensus regarding a rating for each section of the application.

This recommendation report includes the following information:

1. Summary of the Application: A brief description of the applicant’s proposed academic, operations, and financial plans, and performance review.

¹ All Commission rules and policies may be found on the Commission’s [website](#).



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 vision; enrollment summary; academic focus and plan; academic performance standards; high school graduation and postsecondary readiness; assessments; school calendar and schedule; special populations; school culture and discipline; recruitment and enrollment; parent and community engagement and support; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - b. Operations Plan and Capacity: governance; start-up plan; facilities; personnel/human capital; professional development; insurance; transportation; food service; additional operations; network vision, growth plan and capacity; network management; network governance; network wide personnel and human capital projections; school replication; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - c. Financial Plan and Capacity: planning and budget worksheet; budget narrative; network financial plan; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - d. Portfolio Review and Performance Record: past performance.

The Commission’s charter application Review Committee utilized the Tennessee Department of Education’s Application to Create a Public Charter School Scoring Criteria (“the rubric”), which is used by all local boards of education when evaluating an application. The rubric states:

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

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

Rating	Characteristics
Meets or Exceeds Standard	The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It clearly aligns with the mission and vision of the school. The response includes specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation.
Partially Meets Standard	The 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 response is incomplete; demonstrates lack of preparation; does not align with the mission and vision of the school; or otherwise raises significant concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant’s ability to carry it out.



Summary of the Application

School Name: Nashville School of Excellence

Sponsor: The Read Foundation

Proposed Location of School: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Mission: Each student is empowered to succeed in college and their career by mastering a rigorous, STEM-focused curriculum; experiencing a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment; receiving individual academic, social, and emotional support; and working alongside families and community partners.²

Number of Schools Currently in Operation by Sponsor: The sponsor currently has four operating charter schools authorized by Memphis-Shelby County Schools.

Proposed Enrollment:³

Grade Level	Year 1: 2025-2026	Year 2: 2026-2027	Year 3: 2027-2028	Year 4: 2028-2029	Year 5: 2029-2030	At Capacity:
6	120	120	120	120	120	120
7	90	120	120	120	120	120
8	60	90	120	120	120	120
9	60	60	90	120	120	120
10	0	60	60	90	120	120
11	0	0	60	60	90	90
12	0	0	0	60	60	60
Totals	330	450	570	690	750	750

Brief Description of the Application:

The sponsor, The Read Foundation, is proposing to open a charter school in Davidson County, Tennessee and serve students in sixth through twelfth grades when fully built out. The school, Nashville School of Excellence (“NSE”), is a new-start school and would be the fifth school for the sponsor, the first in Nashville. The school intends to operate in the Nolensville Pike area of Nashville in zip code 37211 to provide a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math)-focused education option to an area that is experiencing population growth.⁴ The school proposes to offer small class sizes and a rigorous, STEM-focused curriculum with individualized support to ensure postsecondary success for students.

The proposed school will be governed by The Read Foundation, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to quality education and the promotion of STEM. In Year 0, NSE has budgeted \$1 million from The Read Foundation and projects \$410,513 in expenses for the school. The applicant projects the school will have \$5,432,630 in revenue and \$5,424,698 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a balance of \$597,420. In Year 5, the school projects \$12,283,250 in revenue and \$11,897,500 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$2,076,019.⁵ The school anticipates that 34% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 10% of the student population will be students

² Nashville School of Excellence Amended Application, pg. 12

³ Nashville School of Excellence Amended Application, pg. 24

⁴ Nashville School of Excellence Amended Application, pg. 29

⁵ Nashville School of Excellence amended budget.



with disabilities, and 52% of the student population will be English learners.⁶

⁶ Ibid, p. 24



Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends denial of the application for Nashville School of Excellence because the applicant failed to provide sufficient evidence in the academic and operational sections to demonstrate the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

The Academic Plan and Design for Nashville School of Excellence partially meets standard because the Review Committee expressed concerns regarding the support and demand for the school in its proposed community. The location outlined along Nolensville Road is large and the area is already saturated with other educational options, including several charter middle and high schools. Although the operator noted potential enrollment through community interest surveys and more targeted community outreach during the capacity interview, the application lacked concrete evidence demonstrating sufficient demand. Additionally, there were noted concerns regarding oversight of special populations of students, given the coordinator overseeing this work would be located in Memphis. In terms of strengths, the applicant presents a clear mission with a strong STEM focus, a comprehensive assessment plan to track student progress, and a robust school culture plan emphasizing family engagement and small class sizes, which could contribute positively to student outcomes.

The Operations Plan and Capacity also partially meets standard due to an underdeveloped network expansion plan, questions surrounding the long-term strategic vision of the network, and limited evidence of success for the school's start-up plan. The Review Committee also cited concerns about the effectiveness of professional development, which relies heavily on virtual and asynchronous methods. Additionally, there are unresolved questions about the facility's location, further complicating the operational readiness. The applicant outlines a strong governing board with diverse experience, though the representatives from the governing board did not speak during the capacity interview when called upon.

Conversely, the Financial Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds standard as the network is in strong financial health with \$8 million in cash reserves and a \$1 million allocation from The Read Foundation for start-up costs for the school. The budget reflects realistic revenue and expense assumptions, allowing flexibility for early operational years. The network plans to hire a business manager and utilize a back-office provider for financial management, ensuring sound fiscal oversight. The application also meets or exceeds standard for the Portfolio Review and Performance Record as the network of schools has demonstrated success, particularly in student growth, in previous years. The applicant was able to adequately address how they have responded to challenges faced, particularly in situations of underperformance. Overall, while the network of schools is strong and demonstrates a track record of success in Memphis, questions surrounding the organizational vision of expanding to Nashville, a lack of a clear location, and a lack of demonstrated community support within the application led the Review Committee to determine that the applicant requires additional planning to ensure a successful expansion.

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	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	Meets or Exceeds Standard

Analysis of the Academic Plan and Design

Rating: Partially Meets Standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Academic Plan and Design partially meets standard because the Review Committee had remaining questions about sufficient support and demand for the school in the proposed location, concerns that enrollment projections would not be met, and a lack of clarity for appropriate oversight of services for special populations of students.

The school intends to open with 330 students in sixth through ninth grades in Year 1, and there are concerns regarding demonstrated engagement and demand in the area such that there is sufficient interest to fulfill the enrollment projections. The sponsor outlines the desire to locate along Nolensville Road, which encompasses a large geographic area from south of downtown Nashville to southeast Antioch. There are numerous other school options in the targeted area, including six other charter middle and high schools. During the capacity interview, the operator cited population growth in the area and the presence of other charter schools with waitlists as factors influencing their decision of where to locate the school. However, there was no evidence within the application to demonstrate this demand, which is particularly concerning in an area with a significant number of charter middle and high schools already available.

Within the application, there is reference to an interest survey that was conducted by the operator, but no details were provided as to what the contents of the survey are nor how many families with the intent to enroll their student in Nashville School of Excellence completed the survey. In the capacity interview, the operator stated there were 621 families interested in the school, but the Review Committee could not verify this statement. Additionally, during the capacity interview, when asked about the targeted population served by the school, the operator mentioned the desire to expand the network to serve a Middle Eastern, immigrant population in Nashville, though this was not detailed within the application. While the operator cited partnerships, such as the Salahadeen Center of Nashville, the application lacks the necessary letters of support or memorandums of understanding ("MOUs") to substantiate these relationships. The Review Committee found that the application lacked specificity regarding the targeted community served by the school, as well as demonstrated demand to ensure enrollment projections would be met.

As outlined within the application, the network leadership team is to remain in Memphis while the school team will reside in Nashville. The application lacked details in terms of a long-term vision of network support to ensure academic success at the Nashville school, particularly given the geographic distance. More specifically, it was not clear how the network would provide the necessary support regarding the delivery of services to special populations to the school's leadership. The school projects a 52% English learner population, which is a higher percentage than any other school within the network's portfolio and would mean an allocation of significant staff and support to serve this population. While the operator spoke to their ability to adapt the academic model in their Memphis schools to serve higher numbers of English learners in the past, this level of service and support to such a large population would be new for the network. While there is a coordinator on the network team to provide support for services for special populations of students, this coordinator would not only support the growing EL population in Memphis, but also the large projected population in Nashville. It was unclear within the outlined plan as to how this coordinator would provide effective and consistent support to the school teams, especially given the geographic distance.

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant outlines a sound mission, vision, and academic model that is STEM-focused. The school outlined



a robust assessment plan that ensures adequate tracking of student academic achievement and growth throughout the year. The school's proposed postsecondary plan is also robust and ensures that students are set up for success in college or career. Finally, the operator included a strong school culture plan within the application that utilizes Positive Behavior Intervention Systems, prioritizes engaging families, and provides the rationale behind the approach of utilizing small class sizes.

Analysis of the Operations Plan and Capacity

Rating: Partially Meets Standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because the applicant lacked a clear vision for the proposed expansion of the network into Nashville, particularly during the start-up and early years of the school, raising concerns about a successful opening and management of the new school. Additionally, the Review Committee has concerns regarding the outlined professional development plan, and the applicant has made limited progress in identifying and moving forward in a facility acquisition.

Nashville School of Excellence is a proposed expansion of a network of schools in Memphis. Much of the operations plan outlined within the application is Memphis-centered, and the outlined strategic vision for network expansion and oversight of a new school in a new geographic area is limited. The Review Committee asked questions surrounding the network's vision and rationale for expansion into Nashville and the plan for a successful start to the school, but the response from the network team was limited in detail. While the application outlines that the network team will travel frequently to Nashville and leverage virtual platforms, there was a lack of evidence from the application and the capacity interview of a detailed vision and expansion plan to ensure a successful school opening in a new geographic area. The outlined start-up plan within the application also has inconsistencies in network support and the budget. Additionally, when the Review Committee directly asked the governing board questions about the long-term vision and strategic planning of the network during the capacity interview, neither board members on the call responded, raising concerns about the board's understanding, oversight, and involvement in this potential expansion.

Another concern is the applicant's professional development plan. While the Memphis network of schools is operationally successful and offers robust professional development, it is unclear how these opportunities will be provided with the same fidelity and success at the proposed Nashville school. Within the application, the school proposes for some professional development take place in person in Memphis, but it is unclear if sufficient professional development opportunities will exist in Nashville for staff that are not able to travel to Memphis. Additionally, the applicant stated they would leverage virtual and asynchronous professional development options for Nashville-based staff, but the application did not provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate that these options would be adequate to meet the needs of Nashville staff.

Operationally, the most significant gap within the applicant's plan is the lack of network-level support for the school in Nashville. The proposed plan puts significant operational responsibility on school level leadership, while the network staff would travel back and forth between Memphis and Nashville. Although the network in Memphis has demonstrated operational success, plans for the expansion efforts to Nashville are underdeveloped and need significantly more planning prior to being ready for approval.

Finally, while the applicant had identified potential facility options within the application, the options were geographically very different. During the capacity interview, the operator clarified the preferred facility as stated within the application, but little progress toward a purchase, lease agreement, or letter of intent for the property has been made. Given the tight timeline to successfully open a charter school, there was insufficient evidence within the application and the capacity interview that the school could secure the desired facility and complete the necessary renovations to successfully open by the 2025-26 school year.

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The network has a governing board outlined with diverse experience. Though the governing board did not



engage in active questioning with the Review Committee during the capacity interview, the application demonstrates that the governing board has robust and diverse experience. The applicant's outlined personnel plan and aligned compensation are also strong. The applicant outlines salary schedules for personnel that are competitive for the area, ensuring that they can staff the school effectively. Additionally, the network has demonstrated strong management of the organization in Memphis, and the network itself is operationally sound and successful.

Analysis of the Financial Plan and Capacity

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Financial Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds standard because the network is in strong financial standing, the outlined expenses are reasonable, revenues within the budget are realistic, and the applicant plans to contract with a back-office provider to help manage finances.

The network has a history of clean audits and strong structures in place for adequate financial management. The network is in a strong financial position with \$8 million in cash reserves, as outlined within the network budget. The Read Foundation allocated \$1 million for start-up funding for Nashville School of Excellence which ensures a strong starting position. While the applicant would likely seek additional grants and funding to support the start-up of the school, these funds are not allocated within the budget due to not being secured yet. This demonstrates conservative and realistic revenue assumptions and budgetary flexibility in the start-up and early years of the school. Additionally, the applicant also outlined reasonable expense assumptions within the budget, including rent, debt service to finance the buildout and renovations for the facility, and staffing assumptions. The operator will offer competitive salaries for staff, and this is reflected within the budget. The network has facility debt on their Memphis facilities and would take additional debt for facility renovations and improvements in Nashville, which has been clearly outlined within the provided budget.

The applicant states that the school will hire a business manager in the start-up year to aid in managing the finances of the school, though most of this will be overseen by the network staff. The network also contracts with a back-office provider who assists in administrative functions for the organization.

Analysis of the Portfolio Review and Performance Record

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Portfolio Review and Performance Record meets or exceeds standard because the network of schools in Memphis has demonstrated a history of strong performance. The network of schools has graduated nearly 100% of seniors each year since 2014, which is higher than Memphis-Shelby County Schools, Metro Nashville Public Schools, and the State of Tennessee. The applicant also outlined strong TVAAS scores of either 4s or 5s in eight of the last eleven years. During the capacity interview, the Review Committee asked the operator about the decline in TVAAS scores in 2023 for Memphis School of Excellence Cordova Elementary, and the applicant was able to describe the shifts the school made to address this performance. The applicant also highlighted that this same school was designated by the Tennessee Department of Education as a Reward school in 2022.

Additionally, the high school in the Hickory Hill area of Memphis was designated with prestigious recognition for outstanding STEM programming and three of the network's campuses earned International Technology and Engineering Educators Association ("ITEEA") STEM School of Excellence Designations. According to the US News and World Report Rankings, in 2022, schools within the network were ranked in the top five charter schools in Tennessee. The applicant also outlined their improvement in ACT scores and college matriculation data that demonstrates high college acceptance rates and scholarship amounts for students. The applicant adequately addressed challenges within the past performance section of the application, demonstrating the changes they made to address challenges, such as shifts to curriculum, additional staff, and better services for English learner students, which is a growing population in their schools. The applicant also has strong organizational and financial performance and has not received any notices of concern nor issues of noncompliance from other authorizers.



Evaluation Team

Sophie Binenfeld is the Student Data Analyst 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 Masters 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 Masters of Teaching from Relay Graduate School of Education.

Dave Hartman is the founder of Venn Education, he specializes in expert evaluation, smart change making, and high-stakes decisions based on evidence. He spent over 10 years as the Managing Director of Accountability and Authorizer Supports with SchoolWorks. He served the Minnesota Department of Education, where he led the design and implementation of the nation's first high-stakes charter school authorizer performance evaluation. Notable engagements include leading and developing statewide charter school authorizer evaluations in Ohio and Tennessee, turnaround of an alternative high school, strategic planning for a state association, and numerous school reviews. In addition, David has taught in high schools and universities.

Maggie Lund is the Deputy Director of Authorizing at the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Additionally, she serves as an adjunct professor in the Lipscomb College of Education Master's Program, teaching Planning, Instruction, and Assessment and Building Classroom Communities. Prior to her role at the Charter Commission, Maggie served as a school administrator at a Nashville public charter school. Maggie was a Teach for America corps member and served as an 8th grade teacher in a charter school for four years. Maggie holds a B.A. in Business Administration and Marketing from Loyola University New Orleans, a Doctor of Education degree, and a Master of Education degree with a specialization in English Language Learning from Lipscomb University. Her dissertation research focused on Restorative Justice Practices and school culture. Most recently, her research article, Mindsets Matter for Equitable Discipline was published in the Middle School Journal.

Whitney Noel started her career as an elementary educator and received her Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, with an ELL endorsement, from the University of Washington. In her years of teaching, she taught nationally and internationally, across a variety of school settings - including in Metro Nashville Public Schools. Aside from being a classroom teacher, Whitney has experience in curriculum writing, professional development, and education-related research. Whitney now works for Mosa Mack Science - partnering with districts in selecting and implementing inquiry-based science material.

Claire Seguin is serving as the Federal Programs Coordinator at the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Prior to joining the Commission, Claire served as the Director of Student Supports where she oversaw the Exceptional Education, Intervention, Gifted, and English Learner programs and was a founding teacher and administrator. Claire holds a BA in Sociology and Disaster Science Management from Louisiana State University, a Master of Education from Lipscomb University, and graduate certificates in Autism Studies and Applied Behavior Analysis from the University of Memphis and Arizona State University respectively. She has contributed to published research on the impact of parental involvement on academic achievement and currently provides advocacy support for families of students with disabilities in public schools.