



## **Executive Director's Recommendation**

### **Novus SMART Academy 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 July 29, 2024, the sponsor of Novus SMART Academy ("sponsor" or "Novus") appealed the denial of its amended application by the Rutherford County Schools ("RCS") 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 Novus SMART Academy amended application was not contrary to the best interests of the students, local education agency ("LEA"), or community.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I recommend that the Commission uphold the decision of RCS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Novus SMART Academy.

### **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 Novus'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'."<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Commission is required to hold a public hearing in the district where the proposed charter school seeks to locate.<sup>3</sup>

In order to overturn the decision of the local board of education, the Commission must find that the application meets or exceeds the metrics outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education's application-scoring rubric and that approval of the amended charter application is in the best interests of the students, local education agency, or community.<sup>4</sup> 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. On December 1, 2023, the sponsor submitted a letter of intent to Rutherford County Schools expressing its intention to file a charter school application.
2. The sponsor submitted its initial application for Novus SMART Academy to RCS on February 1, 2024.
3. RCS assembled a review committee to review and score the Novus SMART Academy initial application.
4. On March 13, 2024, RCS's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of Novus SMART Academy.

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<sup>1</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

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

<sup>3</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

<sup>4</sup> Id.

5. RCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Novus SMART Academy initial application and recommended to the RCS Board of Education that the initial application be denied, indicating the academic, operations, and finance sections partially met standards.
6. On April 18, 2024, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the Novus SMART Academy initial application based on the Review Committee's recommendation.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for Novus SMART Academy to RCS on May 20, 2024.
8. RCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Novus SMART Academy amended application based on the charter application scoring rubric.
9. RCS's Review Committee rated each section of Novus SMART Academy's amended application as Meets Standard and recommended approval to the local board of education.
10. On July 17, 2024, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Novus SMART Academy, citing substantial negative fiscal impact.
11. The sponsor appealed the denial of the Novus SMART Academy amended application in writing to the Commission on July 29, 2024, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
12. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored the Novus SMART Academy amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school application scoring rubric.
13. The Commission's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of the Novus SMART Academy leadership team on September 4, 2024 via Microsoft Teams.
14. On September 9, 2024, the Commission staff held a public hearing at the RCS Board Room in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the Commission's designee, heard presentations from the sponsor and RCS and took public comment regarding the Novus SMART Academy amended application.
15. After the capacity interview, the Commission's Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of the Novus SMART Academy amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
16. The Commission staff conducted a full review of the record which includes the initial and amended applications submitted by the sponsor, documentation submitted by RCS, 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**

### **Substantial Negative Fiscal Impact Findings and Analysis**

At the July 17, 2024 RCS Board of Education meeting, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Novus SMART Academy on the grounds of substantial negative fiscal impact pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c). When a local school district has denied a charter school application on the basis of substantial negative fiscal impact, Commission Rule 1185-01-01-.01(4) states that, on appeal, the burden is on the district to establish that substantial negative fiscal impact exists such that approval of the charter school would be contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or the community. The Commission staff analyzed previous evaluations conducted by the Tennessee Department of Treasury and the State Board of Education and used the same general methodology

to determine if substantial negative fiscal impact exists in this case. In keeping with the analyses done by other entities, the key questions include: what are the historical enrollment fluctuations the school district has dealt with, and how does the enrollment decline that would result from the opening of the proposed charter school compare to these fluctuations?

The following findings are based on information collected by Commission staff regarding the substantial negative fiscal impact to RCS:

1. Novus's amended application states that in the 2025-26 school year, Novus's first anticipated year of operation, it will enroll a maximum of ninety-six students.<sup>5</sup>
2. Commission staff requested from RCS historical trends of projected Average Daily Membership ("ADM") versus actual ADM for the current and three preceding school years. The table includes actual ADM by year, the percentage growth from the previous year, the district's projected student growth for that year, and actual student growth seen. Projected ADM for the 2025-26 school year, the year the school proposes to open, is 53,022.

**Table 1. Historical ADM and System Growth<sup>6</sup>**

	Projected ADM	Actual ADM <sup>7</sup>	% Growth From Previous Year	Projected Student Growth	Actual Student Growth
<b>SY 24-25</b>	52,983	51,983	2.04%	953	1,037
<b>SY 23-24</b>	52,030	50,946	1.83%	981	917
<b>SY 22-23</b>	51,049	50,029	1.92%	2,305	943
<b>SY 21-22</b>	48,744	49,086	4.73%	N/A	2,216

3. RCS estimated that the total fiscal impact during Year 1 of Novus SMART Academy's operations would be \$998,400. This amount is based on the number of projected students of ninety-six multiplied by the average local and state per pupil funding, which is reflective of a per pupil rate of \$10,400.
4. The Commission staff reviewed the district's past audits and gathered the fund balance committed for education since 2020-21.

**Table 2. Unassigned Fund Balance<sup>8</sup>**

	Unassigned Fund Balance	% Growth From Previous Year
<b>SY 22-23</b>	\$115.8 Million	60.2%
<b>SY 21-22</b>	\$72.3 Million	11.7%
<b>SY 20-21</b>	\$64.7 Million	48.9%

<sup>5</sup> Amended Application, pg. 38

<sup>6</sup> All data provided by Rutherford County Schools in response to the Commission's July 30, 2024 request for information.

<sup>7</sup> Actual ADM provided by Rutherford County Schools Public Hearing Presentation

<sup>8</sup> Rutherford County, Tennessee Annual Financial Report for 2023, p. 326

## ANALYSIS

After an in-depth analysis of the data and information provided by RCS in support of its argument, I cannot conclude that RCS has carried its burden of proving that the approval of Novus SMART Academy's application will present a substantial negative fiscal impact on the district.

The crux of RCS's argument rests on the fact that the opening of Novus SMART Academy specifically would result in a budget deficit of approximately \$1 million because the district generates funding from the state based on prior year enrollment but is required to fund a charter school on projected enrollment. The district asserts that by the time the school meets the full capacity in Year 9 with 984 students, the impact to the district would be approximately \$10.2 million. The district further grounded its argument of fiscal impact into the greater landscape of recent charter school growth in the geographic area based on the recent addition of three charter schools. As stated in the public hearing, the district's argument presents the collective budgetary impact on the district, when all charter schools that are already open and operating are at full capacity, at over \$25 million.

While I understand the components of the RCS Board of Education's argument, several elements are outside of the Commission's charge in the analysis of a substantial negative fiscal impact. First, the overall impact of all public charter schools funded by RCS, in accordance with statute, is outside the purview of the Commission's charge. T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c) requires the district to carry the burden of proof that approval of the applicant's charter school will result in a substantial negative fiscal impact to the school district. As such, the question for the Commission's consideration is whether the opening of the applicant charter school results in a fluctuation so substantial to the district's overall budget that its approval would be contrary to the best interest of the students, LEA, or community. Second, the RCS Board of Education asserts that the way school districts are funded is not equitable because prior year enrollment of a school district generates the current year funding amount. As an example, for the 2024-25 school year funding, the basis of a district's funding is the 2023-24 school year's enrollment and student characteristics. Therefore, the district argues that it is required to budget for the 2024-25 school year's students based on the funds generated by the 2023-24 school year's students, which does not account for the enrollment growth in the school district. While I understand this argument, the basis of the argument is regarding the state's school funding formula, which is codified in statute. The funding formula for districts is outside the purview of the Commission; therefore, my analysis does not evaluate the process for generating school district funding.

Finally, the RCS Board of Education asserts that charter schools are funded on projected enrollment while districts are funded on prior year enrollment. As a result, this creates a budget deficit for the district. However, this statement misses a key part of the charter school funding process as outlined in statute and State Board of Education Rule 0520-14-01-.03. When a public charter school's grade levels are fully built out, a public charter school's prior year enrollment is the basis for their current year funding. However, for new charter schools with no prior year enrollment, statute and State Board of Education Rule hold that a charter school shall be funded based on a projected enrollment, which is agreed upon between the district and the school via a charter agreement, for the initial payments during a school year. Then, through a true-up process outlined State Board of Education Rule, a charter school's funding is reconciled based on actual enrollment in October, February, and June. In practice, this means that a charter school is only funded based on the actual enrollment of students in the building. Charter schools are not being funded for students who are not enrolled in and served by the school.

For the remainder of my analysis regarding the fiscal impact of Novus SMART Academy, I will evaluate the district's enrollment trends, the proposed charter school's impact on these enrollment trends, and an evaluation of the district's financial health as documented in its annual audits. Based on the district's enrollment data, the district has seen enrollment increases that, on average, represent approximately 2.5% of ADM since the 2021-22 school year.

There is clear evidence that the district's enrollment will continue to increase annually even with the addition of Novus SMART Academy. The district stated that enrollment has regularly grown by, on average, 1,000 students a year, and there is no sign that this trend is changing. It is clear from the enrollment data that RCS is a rapidly growing school district, and the school district must respond by adjusting its school and facility planning process to meet those needs.

The district's unassigned General Purpose School Fund balance has continued to increase annually since 2018, as evidenced by the Annual Comprehensive Financial Report for the year ended June 30, 2023.<sup>9</sup> Based on the data from Table 1, the district regularly manages to sustain its operations and financial sustainability despite rapid enrollment growth above and beyond the impact of opening the proposed charter school with ninety-six students in the first year. Moreover, the information contained within the past three years of audits reinforces the fact that RCS's financial position has continued to increase. This is shown by the healthy Unassigned General Purpose School fund balance that has grown annually for the past three years (Table 2) per the county's annual audits. This signals the likelihood of continued financial health and a strong financial position for the district even if Novus SMART Academy opened.

I understand the district's position of needing to quickly address a rapidly growing population within the county through the building of additional school facilities and expansion of current facilities. Charter schools can and should be a part of the district's overall portfolio of options, and charter schools can support the district's needs by providing additional options for families. While I understand that charter schools are new to RCS and the district and board are grappling with new challenges, there is simply not sufficient evidence provided by RCS to meet the burden of proving that the approval of Novus SMART Academy would constitute a substantial negative fiscal impact on the district. To meet the bar of being considered substantially negative, the fiscal impact of opening a charter school must be above and beyond the district's normal enrollment and budgetary fluctuation. After an analysis of the information from the district, the data demonstrates that the district's financial position continues to improve year over year.

Based on these findings of fact and analysis, I find that the evidence provided by RCS does not meet the burden of proving that the approval of Novus SMART Academy will constitute a substantial negative fiscal impact on the district such that approval of the school would be contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or the community.

### **District Denial of Initial Application**

The Review Committee assembled by RCS to review and score the Novus SMART Academy initial application consisted of the following individuals:

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<sup>9</sup> Id.

Name	Title
Jeff McCann	School Choice/Charter Coordinator, RCS
Trey Lee	Chief Operations Officer, RCS
Dr. Mark Gullion	Federal Programs Coordinator, RCS
Dr. Annie Ralston	Special Education Coordinator, RCS
Shannon Caywood	Special Projects Accountant, RCS
Anne Haley	Elementary Schools Coordinator, RCS
Barbara Powers	Middle Schools Coordinator, RCS
Dr. Kyle Nix	Principal, Christiana Middle School
Kelley Goostree	Principal, Brown's Chapel Elementary School
Eric White	Rutherford County Parent Representative
Victoria Fowler	Rutherford County Parent Representative
Claire Maxwell	Vice Chair, RCS Board

The Novus SMART Academy initial application received the following ratings from the RCS 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 RCS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its recommendation was presented to the RCS Board of Education on April 18, 2024. Based on the committee's recommendation, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of Novus SMART Academy.

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

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

Sections	Ratings
Academic Plan and Design	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard

After the RCS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its recommendation was presented to the RCS Board of Education on July 17, 2024. At the July 17, 2024 board meeting, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Novus SMART Academy based on substantial negative fiscal impact.

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

Following the denial of the Novus SMART Academy 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 Novus SMART Academy amended application. This review committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Kristine Barker	External Reviewer
Trent Carlson	Commission Staff
Beth Figueroa	Commission Staff
Autumn Hillis	External Reviewer
Alexander Burke Roberson	External Reviewer
Maggie Stampley	External Reviewer

The Commission's Review Committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Novus SMART Academy 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 Novus SMART Academy 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 denial of the application for Novus SMART Academy 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.

The Academic Plan and Design presented by the applicant partially meets standard because the proposed academic calendar will need significant modifications to allow for required summer programming in accordance with the state's promotion law, and these changes will significantly impact other elements of the academic plan. While the applicant's intention behind the proposed extended school year is commendable, the logistics of the plan will need to be fundamentally changed to be compliant with state law, which will have cascading effects across the proposed staffing and funding plans. Additionally, questions remained regarding the school's plan for serving English learners and the extent to which community engagement efforts will ensure enrollment meets projections included in the application.

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because evaluation and oversight procedures of the governing board have yet to be fully developed, an extensive number of pre-opening and Year 1 responsibilities fall on a small number of individuals without clear processes for monitoring performance and determining support, and the proposed staffing plan and pay schedule may not be adequate to allow for the hiring of experienced, highly qualified teachers. While the Review Committee found the facility plan to be a strength, as the applicant identified a location that has agreed to house the school, concerns regarding the feasibility of the start-up plan led the Review Committee to determine the operations plan partially meets standard.

The Financial Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because the budget operates on thin margins with understated assumptions of expenses, the estimated fund balance is unlikely to allow for fluctuations in expenses and revenues, and several of the operating expenses are estimated but not known. The Review Committee also noted concern with how the school will fund the additional school days proposed as part of the extended school year, as per-pupil state funding is not provided for the additional days, and this did not appear to be factored in the budget.

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 Novus SMART Academy amended application, please see **Exhibit A** for the complete Review Committee Recommendation Report, which is fully incorporated herein by reference.

### **Public Hearing**

Pursuant to statute<sup>10</sup> and Commission Policy 2.000, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director was held on September 9, 2024. RCS's presentation at the public hearing focused on how the RCS Board of Education determined the approval of Novus SMART Academy would create a substantial negative fiscal impact for the district. The representative from RCS explained that the Board was concerned regarding the overall impact of charter schools in Rutherford County, as the district does not receive per-pupil funding allocations for each school year until the subsequent year and charter schools divert money from the district based on their enrollment projections. According to the Board, RCS faces a deficit almost every year, as they are a growing school district and therefore typically have more students than factored in the previous year's allocations. The representative for RCS continued by discussing enrollment trends at schools nearby where Novus SMART Academy proposes to locate and charter schools authorized by RCS. One zoned elementary school has seen a reduction of seventy-one students, which they attribute to recent openings of three charter schools in the area; another zoned elementary school is at 115% capacity. However, due to the rezoning plan RCS has enacted, the district believes no schools will be over capacity in the 2025-26 school year, the year Novus SMART Academy proposes to open. The district also shared that the two district authorized charter schools that opened in the 2024-25 school year are under capacity and located in the same area that Novus proposes to locate.<sup>11</sup> Representatives from RCS indicated that Novus SMART Academy's amended application was denied based on the input of the RCS Board of Education and their determination that the school would create a substantial negative fiscal impact for the district.

In the sponsor's opening statement, the proposed CEO/Lead Founder of the school began by sharing the mission of Novus SMART Academy and highlighting the key design elements of the academic model. The sponsor went on to discuss the academic performance of RCS, pointing out that despite the district exceeding state averages, there are achievement gaps within the La Vergne and Smyrna areas. The sponsor explained that through local partnerships and community feedback, they have learned that there are families who are disappointed in the district's rezoning plan and desire another public option through an additional charter school. The sponsor continued by providing updates to the start-up plan, including community engagement efforts, financing, and the facility acquisition process. The sponsor shared that one of the facility options identified in the application will be the facility in which they will locate, and a lease will be signed upon approval of the charter application. The sponsor finished their presentation by providing updates on secured financing and sharing contingency plans.

During questioning by the Commission, the Executive Director of the Commission began by asking representatives of the district how the RCS Review Committee came to the determination that the sponsor's amended application met standards in the academics, operations, and finance sections. The district representative stated that the applicant adequately addressed all concerns the Review Committee raised between their initial and final review of the charter application. This was presented to the RCS Board, who ultimately voted against the RCS Review Committee's recommendation and denied the amended application based on substantial negative fiscal impact. The Executive Director then asked questions regarding the district's rezoning plan. The district representative explained that due to two crowded areas and continued growth across the district, a rezoning plan was developed which

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<sup>10</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(b)(i).

<sup>11</sup> In response to the Commission's October 4, 2024 request for information, RCS stated that there are approximately 233 available seats at the two charter schools in the region.

includes the construction of a new district school. The rezoning plan will result in the district schools no longer being at capacity. Lastly, the Executive Director asked about the specific reasoning that was used by the RCS Board to determine a substantial negative fiscal impact exists, considering the district's historical growth and projected enrollment increase, even with the addition of the proposed charter school. District representatives stated that the Board felt that with such a high impact of three newly opened charter schools, they could not afford an additional school. When asked if the district will be adjusting its budget in response to the true-up process, as new charter schools will only be funded based on actual enrollment, district representatives stated the Board is waiting to see what actual enrollment is before making changes to the budget.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor, first asking about specific community demand and the process the sponsor took to determine the proposed location of the school. The proposed CEO stated that to determine sufficient demand, they conducted a study and identified performance gaps within student subgroups in specific areas of the district. The Executive Director then asked about financial updates and contingency plans, as the budget provided operates on extremely tight margins. The sponsor shared that they have secured the Charter School Programs grant and funding from the Charter School Growth Fund. In terms of contingency planning, the sponsor stated that they will consider adding a line of credit if necessary. The Executive Director then asked for clarification as to the school's facility plan, to which the sponsor stated that there is an identified facility, who included a letter of intent as part of the application, that the school will locate in Year 1, and up to three to five years as needed. The sponsor stated a feasibility study has been conducted and determined that a conservative estimate for necessary upgrades is \$500,000. Lastly, the Executive Director asked questions surrounding the application's proposed pay scale for teaching staff and how the school plans to remain competitive in the hiring market. The sponsor stated there is a person on the founding team with human resources experience, and they will continue to review and reevaluate salaries. Additionally, the sponsor explained that the plan includes performance-based increases, a comprehensive benefits package, and tuition and professional development reimbursement for teachers.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of nineteen in-person comments, with nine speaking in support of RCS and ten speaking in support of Novus SMART Academy. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received 270 written comments, with forty-three writing in support of RCS and 227 writing in support of Novus SMART Academy.

### **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,"<sup>12</sup> whether "approval of the application is in the best interests of the students, LEA, or community."<sup>13</sup> In addition, pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the Commission adopted the State Board of Education's Quality Charter Authorizing Standards set forth in State Board Policy 6.111 and utilizes these standards to review charter applications received upon appeal. In making my recommendation to the Commission, I have considered the Review Committee's Recommendation Report, the documentation submitted by both the sponsor and RCS, the arguments made by both parties at the public hearing, and the public comments received by Commission staff and conclude as follows:

The Commission's charge is to conduct a "de novo on the record review" of the amended application. While the total Commission record does include the rubrics and presentations of the local district, the Commission's consideration and decision is a fresh review of the sponsor's amended application as submitted. Through that lens, the Commission's process may raise concerns with elements of the application that were not named in the local

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<sup>12</sup> T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(E).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

district's amended review. RCS, by and through their Review Committee, decided that the Novus SMART Academy amended application met or exceeded the Department of Education's scoring rubric. The rubrics of the district's Review Committee named strengths and weaknesses of the application, but in an appeal, the Commission is not required to rely on the local district's decision in its review. The appellate process is developed in accordance with statute, which may result in a different determination after reviewing an amended application. The Commission assembled a review committee who received training on the assessment of the amended applications using the Department of Education's scoring rubric and was not provided with the local district's review results as part of their record. Since the Commission may ultimately be the authorizer of any charter school application it approves, it needs to determine for itself whether the application and the applicant group meets the standards set forth in statute for opening a charter school.

When I considered the district Review Committee's executive summary of their analysis, the district's Review Committee named areas of concern and/or weakness in the amended application review even though the sections were rated as meeting the standard of the rubric. By contrast, the Commission's Review Committee, in accordance with the de novo review process and their independent rating, determined that some of those concerns were grave enough to rate the sections of the amended application as only partially meeting the standard. It is the Commission's Review Committee report that is considered and incorporated in my recommendation.

In considering the details of this application, Rutherford County is a rapidly growing district. The General Assembly has enacted legislation making high-quality public charter schools an option of partnership to offer to families. Rutherford County Schools testified that they have begun work rezoning in the district area that Novus SMART Academy proposes to locate, indicating an acknowledgment of the need for additional school capacity. At the public hearing, RCS argued that the district could not sustain the opening of any public charter school, based on the negative fiscal impact to the district. I believe this assertion goes beyond the intent of the statute. Each application must be assessed on its merits and whether the opening of the proposed school specifically will cause a "substantial negative fiscal impact" prior to citing this as a reason for denial. While I acknowledge that the establishment of a public charter school does impact the local district's overall budget, it is important to note that the statutory requirement is for denial due to a substantial negative fiscal impact. For the reasons already detailed in my recommendation, I do not find that the opening of Novus SMART Academy would create a negative fiscal impact so substantial to warrant a denial of the application for this reason.

As I do not find that approval of the sponsor's application would create a substantial negative fiscal impact, I will offer my recommendation and analysis on the application's merits, in accordance with T.C.A. § 49-13-108. The Review Committee's report and recommendations are thorough, citing specific examples in the application and referencing information gained in the capacity interview in support of its findings. For the reasons explicated in the report, I agree with the Review Committee that the application for Novus SMART Academy failed to provide sufficient evidence in the academic, operational, and financial sections to warrant a recommendation of approval.

I agree with the Review Committee that the mission and vision for Novus SMART Academy is clear and robust. I believe the sponsor has outlined an intention for the school to offer a unique educational choice to the families in Rutherford County. While I appreciate the intention behind the proposed academic model, I have significant questions that need to be addressed by the applicant regarding its planning for an extended school year, staffing plan and compensation, governance, and finances. Most consequently, the proposed school year and plans for an extended school year need to be reevaluated based on the recent statutory requirements around summer programming for elementary school students. While the idea of an extended school year is commendable, summer programming is a required element for elementary schools, and the funding for summer programming is different from the traditional school year funding. Moreover, schools are only funded for 180 days of instruction, and the school would receive no

additional funding for an extended year. These factors were not contemplated within the application's model, and the adjustments necessary will fundamentally impact the school's overall academic plan, calendar, student recruitment, teacher recruitment, and financing. These questions are too consequential to be left to the pre-opening process.

Moreover, I share similar concerns as the Review Committee to the applicant's staffing plan given the proposed school schedule and proposed salaries. The sponsor testified in both the public hearing and the capacity interview that their staffing model will attract teachers that believe in the academic model, rather than salary, and they would lean heavily on recruiting newly licensed instructors to fill those needs. While I understand the desire to be a mission-oriented school, the school will face challenges recruiting and retaining experienced staff at the proposed salary schedules. I cannot recommend an application for approval if the sponsor's plan for staffing teachers does not include realistic strategies for successful implementation.

I agree with the Review Committee that the sponsor's application partially meets the operational plan for approval. The sponsor has a highly dedicated governing board who have diverse expertise, but there was a lack of evidence within the capacity interview or the application to demonstrate that the board is sufficiently prepared for the necessary oversight of a public charter school. While the board is clearly committed to the mission of the school, the board needs to more clearly define the metrics that it will use to evaluate the success of the school leader and the school itself, and how the governing board will ensure that roles and responsibilities are spread throughout a leadership team prior to being ready for approval.

While I acknowledge the progress the sponsor has made on the facility, I have remaining concerns related to the sponsor's budget, including the facility costs. The proposed budget has slim margins with few opportunities for realistic contingency plans. The Commission's Review Committee noted concerns that many key expenditures were likely understated within the budget, and as referenced earlier, the proposed salaries for staff are not competitive within the current market. At the public hearing, the sponsor testified that the proposed renovation costs for the identified facility were approximately \$500,000, but this expense is not currently reflected in the budget. Opening a new charter school as a new operator in a new geographic area is financially challenging, and the operator must have significant contingency planning in place to weather the challenges it will face. While I commend the operator for securing some philanthropic dollars, my more significant concern is that the school's plan is currently not financially sustainable as proposed.

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. While I appreciate the passion and dedication of the Novus SMART Academy team to this application, I cannot recommend the application for approval with the outstanding concerns and questions I have laid out in this recommendation. I hope the applicant reviews these concerns and considers applying again in a future cycle with these issues addressed.

For the reasons expounded on in this report, I recommend that the Commission deny the Novus SMART Academy 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 Novus SMART Academy was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or community. Therefore, I recommend that the



Commission affirm the decision of the RCS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Novus SMART Academy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tess Stovall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'T' and 'S'.

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Tess Stovall, Executive Director  
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

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10/17/24  
Date



## **EXHIBIT A**

### **Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report**

October 17, 2024

School Name: Novus SMART Academy (K-8)

Sponsor: Novus SMART Academy (K-8)

Proposed Location of School: Rutherford County Schools

Evaluation Team:

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## Introduction

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

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

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

## Overview of the Evaluation Process

The Commission’s charter application Review Committee developed this recommendation report based on three key stages of review:

1. Evaluation of the Proposal: The Review Committee independently reviewed the amended charter application, attachments, and budget submitted by the sponsor. After an independent review, the Review Committee collectively identified the main strengths, concerns, and weaknesses as well as developed specific questions for the applicant in the 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 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 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 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 vision; enrollment summary; academic focus and plan; academic performance standards; 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; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
  - c. Financial Plan and Capacity: planning and budget worksheet; budget narrative; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.

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: Novus SMART Academy (K-8)

Sponsor: Novus SMART Academy (K-8)

Proposed Location of School: Rutherford County Schools

Mission: Novus SMART Academy (K-8) will provide all scholars access to rigorous curricula and high-quality academic instruction that fosters a love for learning, embraces innovation and creativity, and encourages personal growth to thrive in their chosen college and career paths, making a positive impact on society.<sup>2</sup>

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

Proposed Enrollment:<sup>3</sup>

Grade Level	Year 1: 2025-2026	Year 2: 2026-2027	Year 3: 2027-2028	Year 4: 2028-2029	Year 5: 2029-2030	At Capacity:
K	96	96	96	96	120	120
1		96	96	96	96	120
2			96	96	96	120
3				96	96	120
4					96	120
5						120
6						120
7						120
8						120
Totals	96	192	288	384	504	1,080

### Brief Description of the Application:

The sponsor, Novus SMART Academy (K-8) ("Novus SMART Academy" or "Novus"), is proposing to open a charter school in Rutherford County, Tennessee and to serve students in kindergarten through eighth grade when fully built out. The school, Novus SMART Academy, is a new-start school and would be the first school for the sponsor. The school intends to operate in the La Vergne and Smyrna communities of Rutherford County to "partner with Rutherford County Schools to establish an additional high-quality option for all scholars and families in Grades K-8 in the communities of La Vergne and Smyrna."<sup>4</sup> The school proposes to offer a two-teacher model incorporating inquiry- and project-based learning and provide an additional school option for students in Rutherford County.

The proposed governing Board of Directors will consist of academics, development, finance, and governance committees. In Year 0, Novus SMART Academy has budgeted \$542,000 of total revenue, receiving a \$250,000 grant from the Charter School Programs Grant, \$250,000 from the Charter School Growth Fund, and \$30,000 from the Build. Excel. Sustain. ("BES") Start-up Fund and projects \$382,209 in expenses for the school. Novus SMART Academy projects the school will have \$1,965,474 in revenue and \$1,960,761 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a balance of \$164,504. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$7,380,178 in revenue and \$6,557,542 in expenses, resulting in a

<sup>2</sup> Novus SMART Academy (K-8), Amended Application, pg. 9

<sup>3</sup> Novus SMART Academy (K-8) Amended Application, pg. 38

<sup>4</sup> Novus SMART Academy (K-8) Amended Application, pg. 24



positive ending fund balance of \$2,055,229.<sup>5</sup> The school anticipates that 21% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 9% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 23% of the student population will be English learners ("EL").<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Novus SMART Academy (K-8) Amended Budget

<sup>6</sup> Novus SMART Academy (K-8) Amended Application, pg. 39



### Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends denial of the application for Novus SMART Academy 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.

The Academic Plan and Design presented by the applicant partially meets standard because the proposed academic calendar would need significant modifications to allow for required summer programming in accordance with the state's promotion law, and these changes would significantly impact other elements of the academic plan. While the applicant's intention behind the proposed extended school year is commendable, the logistics of the plan would need to be fundamentally changed to be compliant with state law, which would have cascading effects across the proposed staffing and funding plans. Additionally, questions remained regarding the school's plan for serving English learners and the extent to which community engagement efforts will ensure enrollment meets projections included in the application.

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because evaluation and oversight procedures of the governing board have yet to be fully developed, an extensive number of pre-opening and Year 1 responsibilities fall on a small number of individuals without clear processes for monitoring performance and determining support, and the proposed staffing plan and pay schedule may not be adequate to allow for hiring of experienced, highly qualified teachers. While the Review Committee found the facility plan to be a strength, as the applicant identified a location that has agreed to house the school, concerns regarding feasibility and in-progress nature of much of the start-up plan led the Review Committee to determine the operations plan partially meets standard.

The Financial Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because the budget operates on thin margins with understated assumptions of expenses, the estimated fund balance is unlikely to allow for fluctuations in expenses and revenues, and several of the operating expenses are estimated but not known. The Review Committee also noted concern with how the school will fund the additional school days proposed as part of the extended school year, as the fact that per-pupil state funding would not be given for the additional days did not appear to be factored in the budget.

### 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 applicant's Academic Plan and Design partially meets standard because the proposed academic calendar would need significant modifications to allow for required summer programming in accordance with the state's promotion law, which would subsequently impact other elements of the academic plan. Additionally, the Review Committee noted outstanding questions regarding the school's plans to serve English learners and whether the applicant's community engagement plan will lead to enrollment that meets the projections included in the application.

While the Review Committee found the intentions behind the proposed extended school year to be commendable, as the applicant is dedicated to closing academic achievement gaps and providing families a solution to childcare challenges in the summer, the current academic plan does not align with required summer programming and therefore would have to be fundamentally changed to be compliant with state law. Through the application review and capacity interview, the Review Committee was not able to garner a clear plan for how the school would shift its academic calendar and programming to provide summer programming for students who do not reach proficiency on the TNReady English language arts ("ELA") assessment, while also operating an extended school year through the month of June. When pressed about the attendance requirements for students who could not attend for an extended year, the applicant stated that students would only be held to 180 days of attendance even though the school would be open for 195+ days. It is not clear how this proposed attendance plan would work in practice, particularly around accountability metrics such as attendance rates and chronic absenteeism. To comply with required summer programs, the school will have to rework its entire academic calendar which has cascading effects throughout the academic program, including adjustments to staffing plans and student schedules. Additionally, how the school plans to fund the proposed additional school days outlined within the calendar was not clear to the Review Committee and compounded concerns that academic plans are not yet fully developed. This is particularly concerning as the per-pupil state funding will not be allocated for additional days and summer programming is funded at a different rate.

The Review Committee also noted outstanding questions regarding the school's plan to serve English learner ("EL") students. Throughout the proposed plan, the applicant clearly demonstrates a commitment to serving all students, and the application projected a relatively high percentage of EL students to enroll in the school. The Review Committee found that, despite a strong mission to serve EL students, specifics were lacking regarding how the program will be staffed with highly qualified, experienced EL teachers and how those teachers will be trained and supported. During the capacity interview, the Review Committee sought to garner information regarding teacher development and training specifically for supporting EL students. Based on the applicant's responses, the Review Committee found that plans have yet to be fully developed. The Review Committee also found there to be minimal evidence as to how the project- and inquiry-based learning models the application calls for will be adapted to specifically support the needs of EL students. Given the fact that the application projects EL students to be the largest subgroup of students at the school, the Review Committee determined that the outstanding questions regarding the EL program were too large to fully meet standard.

Lastly, while the Review Committee found clear evidence of community engagement through external partnerships, the applicant did not satisfy the Review Committee's questions surrounding how many families of school-aged children they have already engaged such that they could meet the outlined enrollment targets. When asked for recruitment and enrollment updates during the capacity interview, the applicant spoke to the number of local daycares that they have partnered with, citing this as an anticipated source of enrollment; however, the Review



Committee determined that the applicant has yet to demonstrate specific evidence that the proposed school would be able to meet and sustain enrollment targets. Considering the recent entry of two new charter schools in the area that the application acknowledges, the Review Committee found this to be even more of a concern and could ultimately lead to enrollment not materializing as anticipated, which would impact all aspects of the academic model and financial plan.

**Strengths Identified by the Committee**

The Review Committee found that the applicant presented a strong mission and vision, demonstrating its intent to provide a specific, underserved community within Rutherford County an additional public school option. The Review Committee also noted that the applicant clearly wants to serve as a partner with the local district in its work to alleviate overcrowding in local district schools due to a quickly growing population.

## **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 evaluation and oversight procedures of the governing board have yet to be fully developed, an extensive number of pre-opening and Year 1 responsibilities fall on a small number of individuals without clear processes for monitoring performance and determining support, and the proposed staffing plan and pay schedule may not be adequate to allow for hiring of experienced, highly qualified teachers.

While the founding board members bring diverse professional expertise, the Review Committee found that board procedures for evaluating and monitoring the school's performance have not yet been fully developed. The governing board stated its commitment to supporting the school and the school leader during the capacity interview, but specific information regarding oversight and monitoring procedures to ensure consistent and effective oversight was lacking. Additionally, the Review Committee lacked clarity as to who held decision making authority for the school amongst the leadership team and board. These concerns were compounded by the fact that the pre-opening and Year 1 team consists of a small number of individuals tasked with extensive responsibilities across the academic and operations plans for the school. In the capacity interview, the Review Committee sought to garner further information as to how the board will ensure these individuals have the adequate amount of support needed, as well as specific benchmarks they will use to evaluate performance, but this was not adequately addressed. While the commitment of the board was evident, the Review Committee determined oversight and monitoring plans were not yet fully developed such that the school could open and operate successfully.

Another concern of the Review Committee was that the proposed staffing plan and pay scale may inhibit the school's ability to recruit and retain highly qualified, experienced teachers. The proposed pay scale is comparable to the local district, despite the academic plan calling for an extended school day and an extended school year. Also, the staffing plan and corresponding budgeted salaries indicate an intention to hire teachers at the beginning step of the pay scale, which is reflective of first year teacher salary. The Review Committee asked questions in the capacity interview regarding the staffing plan and the school's ability to hire more experienced teachers specifically at the proposed salary, and the applicant team stated that individuals want to join the staff because of the model rather than the salary. Additionally, the school stated a plan to rely heavily on new teachers to the profession to staff the model which raised concerns for the Review Committee because, as previously stated, the leadership team have numerous responsibilities and their capacity to ensure effective instruction and fidelity to the model will be a challenge.

Overall, the Review Committee found many of the plans, processes, and structures of the school's operations to be in progress rather than fully developed, and therefore determined the Operations Plan and Capacity partially meets standard.

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

The Review Committee found the applicant's facility plan to be a strength. A facility has been identified, a letter of intent from the facility owner was included as part of the application, and the applicant has partnered with an architect to conduct a feasibility study of the facility. The facility could meet the needs of the school for up to five years as the applicant continued the search for a long-term, permanent location.

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

*Rating: Partially Meets Standard*

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

The applicant's Financial Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because the budget operates on thin margins with understated assumptions of expenses, the estimated fund balance is unlikely to allow for fluctuations in expenses and revenues, and several of the operating expenses are estimated but not known.

The Review Committee found that many of the budget assumptions, including student materials, financial services, and tenant improvements to a facility, may not reflect the actual costs that will be incurred. While the CEO/Lead Founder has thought strategically about the different budgetary sections in the financial plan, there will likely be the need for an increased budget allocation in certain areas. For example, the budgeted salaries assume teachers with little to no experience on the salary schedule. Compensation may be more than identified and will significantly impact the budget should the school seek to hire staff with more experience or advanced degrees. Additionally, the applicant is proposing an extended school year calendar, though the school will be funded at the same per pupil level as other schools with fewer instructional days. Within the application and during the capacity interview, the applicant did not adequately address how the additional associated costs would be covered within the allocated budget or what impact it may have on the financial plan.

As there is little margin for higher than assumed expenses, especially in the beginning years of operation, the Review Committee found that the net income and fund balance were not sufficient to support fluctuations within the budget, namely lower than anticipated student enrollment and higher major expenses such as transportation, salaries, and facility improvements. The Year 1 budget is heavily dependent upon the rollover of revenues from the pre-opening year, with a net income of \$4,713 for the year. Additionally, revenues for Year 1 include negative operating income for several months. Given the small margins within the proposed budget, the Review Committee did not find that the contingency plans, as articulated in the application and capacity interview, were detailed enough to plan for unforeseen circumstances to ensure the financial security of the school.

While some additional information was provided in the capacity interview, the Review Committee had concerns that some of the major expenses are not yet known. For example, the applicant indicated in the capacity interview that a facility has been identified, though the costs associated with facility improvements and renovations are not yet known, which could have significant impacts on the budget. Additionally, the salary schedule was indicated to not yet be final which could also stress the already narrow margin. The Review Committee also noted that responses to some questions would involve allocating additional resources to new items, many of which were not reflected in the proposed budget.

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

The Review Committee found that the proposed board has significant financial expertise, and the CEO/Lead Founder has prioritized partnerships with individuals who can provide financial guidance. The board has established a finance committee structure that will monitor the school's financial health. Additionally, the applicant and board expressed their desire to protect the integrity of their academic model and vision in any budget contingencies.



## Evaluation Team

**Kristine Barker** has over fifteen years of experience designing and implementing solutions to improve outcomes for students from the school, CMO, district and state levels. Kristine has a focused skill set in developing and executing on innovative solutions to improve education policies and practices. At the state level, she was responsible for designing and refining authorization and oversight processes for all schools, sites and programs within the Office of School Choice. She served as the state's charter authorizing content expert for state and local charter schools, overseeing the charter application, opening, and school transition processes. She led cross-departmental collaboration within the Department of Education, assisting local superintendents throughout the state, and leading frequent informational sessions for potential applicants. At the district level, Kristine developed innovative long-term portfolio strategies to meet the needs of the public school system and leveraged data to drive policy and practices to ensure stability and long-term success of the district. She oversaw the charter application process from recruitment, application, and school opening processes, continually improving equity and transparency.

**Trent Carlson** is the Authorizing Coordinator for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Prior to joining the Commission, Trent worked in Nashville schools as a middle school teacher in both the public school district and a local public charter school. Trent was a Teach for America corps member and a Leadership for Educational Equity policy and advocacy summer fellow. Trent received an M.Ed. from Lipscomb University and a B.A. from the University of Alabama, where he studied Journalism, Political Science, and History.

**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 and serves as an adjunct professor teaching Government and Non-Profit Accounting.

**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.

**Alexander Burke Roberson** is a School Administration Consultant for Charter Schools at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, working with Wisconsin's thirty-two independent charter schools ("ICS") and five ICS authorizers. Primarily, Roberson provides guidance on issues related to establishing independent charter schools as Local Education Agencies ("LEAs") and provides technical assistance on meeting compliance and reporting obligations under state law. Prior to joining the Department of Public Instruction, he served as an advisor for school governance and compliance at Memphis-Shelby County Schools Office of Charter Schools, the largest charter school authorizer in Tennessee. His work included developing and implementing new systems of charter school oversight and accountability and defending local board new start, revocation, and non-renewal decisions before the Tennessee State Board of Education on appeal. Roberson earned his undergraduate degree in political science from Auburn University and both his graduate degree in political science and law degree from the University of Memphis. He lives in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin with his wife and their four pets.

**Maggie Stampley** 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.