

July 21, 2025

Tess Stovall Executive Director, Tennessee Public Charter School Commission
500 James Robertson Parkway 5th Floor
Davy Crockett Tower
Nashville, Tennessee 37243

Dear Executive Director Stovall:

On behalf of the Jackson Museum School team, we respectfully submit this letter as part of our formal appeal of the recent denial of our amended charter application by the Jackson-Madison County School System ("JMCSS"), pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated §49-13-108.

Jackson Museum School is a proposed free public K–6 charter school committed to cultivating academic excellence, student voice, and hands-on learning rooted in Tennessee’s cultural and historical richness. We engage students as explorers—immersed in a rigorous, real-world learning model designed to serve all children and close persistent achievement gaps across our community.

Our appeal is grounded in two primary items: (1) Our application met or exceeded the metrics outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education’s application scoring rubric. (2) The approval of the amended charter is in the best interests of students in the Jackson community.

1. Our application met or exceeded the metrics outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education’s application scoring rubric.

In April, the JMCSS charter review committee conducted a thorough evaluation of the Jackson Museum School (JMS) using the TDOE’s evaluation rubric and found that JMS met or exceeded expectations in all three core sections. The committee also initially recommended that the board vote to approve JMS. Working alongside the Jackson-Madison School District we completed the requested revisions to the 4 sub-sections (1.8, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6) that were rated as “partially meets” upon the initial review. Yet, the final amended review in July moved the goal-posts and rated 2 additional sub-sections as “partially meets” (1.2 and 3.2) while still overall providing a “meets or exceeds” rating in each core section. We believe the overall section rating of “meets or exceeds” is accurate, but that the Jackson-Madison evaluation overlooked critical details present in our application and provided narrow findings in their recommendation to the school board that unfairly influenced the vote. The recommendation to the board to deny included only the discussion of 12 “deficiencies” some of which are referencing sections that were deemed by the committee to “meet or exceed” those standards based on the TDOE rubric. Many deficiencies noted in the letter to the School Board (dated July 7) directly contradict the committee evaluation notes referenced in their initial and amended TDOE rubric. In particular, the recommendation to the board stated:

- “Place-Based Education (PBE) is mentioned as a key modality of instruction although limited research has been conducted on this teaching strategy, with challenges noted on how this specific environment hinders the teaching and learning process.” This analysis relied upon a single recent study ignoring hundreds of previous research studies. Yet the review committee reference stated “the academic focus for the school is comprehensive and thorough. The mission and goals are aligned to the academic plan. The education philosophy and innovative teaching methods are thorough.” (P. 12) This note directly contradicts the deficiency noted above and not discussed in the initial review.

- The application contained “no strategic plan is outlined for delivering professional development that is unique to the staff and students”, yet the rubric reference, completed by the review committee states this application contains “The professional development plan includes a detailed breakdown for Year 1” (p. 25). Necessary changes were made to ensure detail in the revision and yet these were not recognized by the review team.
- The JMS “budget relies heavily on unsecured external funding sources, including grants, philanthropic donations, and federal funding. These uncertain revenue streams, without documented commitments, pose a risk to the school’s sustainability”. This evaluation does not account for the \$475,000 in additional start-up funding that was obtained through Charter School Growth Fund, New School Venture Fund, and Building Excellent School grants that were obtained in the past two months for which we have documentation.

The clear bias in the letter sent on July 7, 2025 to the board and read in public comment influenced the vote of the Jackson-Madison School Board to deny. The district-appointed review committee agreed that the JMS application met or exceeded metrics outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education’s application scoring rubric and we ask the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission to uphold this initial recommendation.

2. The approval of the amended charter is in the best interests of students in the Jackson community.

With 64% of Jackson’s 4th graders below grade level in reading and 67% in math with the district falling into the bottom percentage of the state in 3rd grade literacy scores, there is an urgent need for solutions and choice. Our approach draws from successful museum schools across the country. According to the National Association of Museum Schools (NAMS), of the 53 documented museum schools nationwide, 32 of which serve a majority of economically disadvantaged students. Among these 53 museum schools, 55% are outperforming their local and state peers in at least one academic subject, and 38% are doing so at both levels. These results speak to the power of the museum school model to deliver strong academic outcomes, even in communities where opportunity gaps persist. Jackson Museum School offers a highly engaging, academically rigorous alternative focused on preparing students to think critically, communicate effectively, and explore the world with curiosity and confidence through our learning model that:

- Aligns with Tennessee standards while providing depth through real-world connections
- Advances the state’s priorities around early literacy and whole-child development;
- Broadens access to transformational learning experiences for all children in Jackson.

Jackson Museum School was designed in direct response to family input, academic needs based off of current performance within Jackson Madison County School System, and opportunity gaps in Jackson-Madison County. Families have demonstrated their interest as is evidenced by the 53 letters of intent to enroll by families in grades K-2 more than a year before opening. Our instructional model centers on three core, research-based pillars that differentiate our school from traditional public options:

Pillar 1: Immersive Learning Experiences

At the core of our instructional approach is a museum-based, inquiry-and project-based learning model that makes education meaningful and relevant. Students engage in nine-week interdisciplinary units that center around learning expeditions to 13 committed partners from local institutions such as the Memphis Zoo, Pinson Mounds, and the Jackson Arts Council. Experiences at these institutions are integrated with classroom learning and culminate in public exhibitions of

student work—authentically demonstrating knowledge and skills, not stopping at scripted performances. This approach fosters deep understanding, communication skills, and brings confidence in learners from the depth of material.

Pillar 2: Integrated Literacy Across All Content Areas

Literacy is embedded across every aspect of the school day. We utilize HMH Into Reading, a high-quality, research-backed program aligned with the Tennessee Literacy Success Act to ensure strong foundational skills in early grades. This is layered with authentic literacy experiences throughout the curriculum: students read primary and secondary sources, write in multiple genres, and present their work both orally and in writing across disciplines.

Whether writing field notes from an expedition, analyzing historical documents, or creating informational text for an exhibit board, literacy is active, contextual, and purposeful. This approach ensures that all children—regardless of background—develop the reading, writing, and speaking skills they need to thrive academically and beyond.

Pillar III: Collaborative Community Partnerships and Place-Based Learning

The success of our model is built on strong relationships with Jackson’s cultural, historical, and educational institutions. Our 13 confirmed education partners—including the Jackson Arts Council, Pinson Mounds State Archeological Park, Jackson Regional Airport, Discovery Park, and local community gardens among them—will serve not only as hosts for learning expeditions, but also as collaborators who deliver outreach lessons within our school walls. These lessons intentionally build upon field learning, deepening connections and ensuring accessibility for all students.

Through this place-based element, students will see their city as a living classroom. Fine arts are woven throughout our curriculum and enriched by our partners; our makerspace brings science, engineering, and art together—allowing students to prototype, build, and display their final projects during public exhibitions. This collaboration between school and community makes learning personal, dynamic, and memorable.

No other school in Jackson-Madison County currently offers a museum-based, inquiry- and project-based learning model that integrates real-world expeditions, community partnerships, and public exhibitions with integrated literacy as core components of its academic design. Jackson Museum School represents a unique, research-based innovation that complements existing district offerings rather than replicates them—filling a critical gap in the educational landscape.

At Jackson Museum School, we are committed to expanding strong public school options for Tennessee students. We value the importance of a review process that is equitable and transparent, and we appreciate the opportunity to present our appeal to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. As we move forward, we remain focused on the ultimate goal we all share: providing students and families with access to high-quality, student-centered educational opportunities.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jean A. Little

Proposed Executive Director
Jackson Museum School