

*Via Email and Hand-Delivery*

June 18, 2025

Tennessee Public Charter School Commission  
Attn: Tess Stovall, Executive Director  
Beth Figueroa, Director of Authorizing  
500 James Robertson Parkway 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Davy Crockett Tower Nashville, TN 37243  
CharterSchool.Appeals@tn.gov

**Re: Appeal of Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Denial of Rocketship TN5's New Start Application**

Dear Ms. Stovall and Ms. Figueroa,

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Section § 49-13-108, Rocketship Education Tennessee ("RSED-TN") submits this letter to initiate its appeal before the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("TPCSC") of the June 10, 2025, decision made by the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools ("MNPS") Board ("MNPS Board") to deny RSED-TN's amended new start charter application (the "Application") of Rocketship TN5 ("TN5").

The MNPS Board's decision does not reflect the full merits of the Application, which, when reviewed, meet or exceed the standards outlined by the Tennessee Department of Education. As approval of TN5 is in the best interests of students, families, and the community, and the Application meets or exceeds evaluation standards, TPCSC should approve the Application and authorize TN5 for operation within Davidson County.

**1. Approval of the Application Is in the Best Interest of Students, Families, and the Community.**

For over a decade, the Rocketship Network ("Rocketship") has delivered high-quality education in Tennessee, operating safe, joyful learning environments within modern, well-equipped facilities. The three Rocketship Tennessee schools have earned recognition for their impact on student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Based on their track records, two of the three schools each recently received unanimous charter renewals, one from MNPS and one from the TPCSC, permitting Rocketship to continue service to its students and families for another ten years.

In recognition of the strength of its offerings, Rocketship was awarded two FY26 Charter School Program grants<sup>2</sup> to support TN5 and another charter new start application in Rutherford County ("TN4"). Together, these recognitions, approvals, and financial investments<sup>3</sup> demonstrate support for the expansion of the Rocketship model in Tennessee and confidence in Rocketship's ability to deliver transformative student outcomes.

Rocketship's elementary-only model is centered on accelerating academic growth for all students through personalized learning and by fostering close partnerships with families and the communities served.<sup>4</sup> This approach has delivered positive results.<sup>5</sup> Between Fall 2021 and Spring 2024, Rocketship schools in Tennessee nearly doubled the percentage of students performing at or above grade level on the nationally normed NWEA MAP assessment.<sup>6</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> The State of Tennessee designated Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary as a Reward School in 2018–19 and Rocketship United Academy in 2017–18, 2021–22, and 2022–23. RDCP earned a Level 5 on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System for 2022–23.

<sup>2</sup> The federal Charter School Program is a competitive grant designed to expand access to high-quality charter schools and empower parents to choose the educational option that best meets their child's needs.

<sup>3</sup> A broad coalition of private, national, and local education investors including City Fund, Charter School Growth Fund, and Scarlett Family Foundation support Rocketship's growth in Tennessee.

<sup>4</sup> Engaged parents are a core pillar of Rocketship's model and critical to our Rocketeers and their long-term success. Beyond supporting their own students, the community is improved by parent voice in our daily work and as external advocates on Parent Organizing Committees.

<sup>5</sup> Rocketship's national network of public elementary schools has demonstrated strong educational performance, as shown in a 2023 Stanford University CREDO study of over 3 million students. The study found that public charter school students outperform traditional public school students and identified Rocketship as a "gap-busting" network within the charter sector.

<sup>6</sup> Between Fall 2021 and Spring 2024, the percentage of RSED-TN students performing at or above grade level rose from 27% to 53% in math, and from 25%

2024 alone, Tennessee Rocketeers achieved an average of 1.38 years of growth in reading and 1.29 years in math on the NWEA MAP, marking the region's highest gains in three years. This is equivalent to an additional 68 days of learning in reading and 52 additional days in math within a single school year.

Students are best served when they have access to high-quality school options that support their academic and developmental goals. The MNPS Board's focus on *seat availability* as the sole measure of need in the Antioch/Cane Ridge area<sup>7</sup> overlooks the core issue of quality. Simply adding seats to underperforming schools<sup>8</sup> does not improve access or academic outcomes. By contrast, Rocketship offers quality seats. For years, Rocketship Tennessee schools have consistently outperformed their local cluster schools, earning higher rates of Level 4 and 5 TVAAS scores. Students in the Antioch/Cane Ridge cluster deserve access to quality seats at schools with a proven record of strong academic growth.

## **2. The Application Meets or Exceeds the Metrics Outlined in the Department of Education's Application Scoring Rubric.**

On June 10, 2025, the MNPS board voted to deny the Application based upon the Charter School Evidence Findings Report ("Report"), indicating the Application did not meet or exceed all standards on the required sections of the Tennessee Charter New Start Application Rubric (the "Rubric"). RSED-TN maintains that the Application does meet or exceed the standards of the Rubric, and on that basis, it appeals the MNPS decision.

Concerns raised by the review committee in the Report were based on fundamental mischaracterizations and misinterpretations of the record associated with the Application. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the committee could have carefully reviewed the Application and the fully responsive and well-supported subsections, while arriving at ratings of "partially meets," ultimately bringing down the overall section approval rating. A few examples of these misinterpretations are provided below:

- The review committee asserts that significant demographic differences between Rocketship Dream Community Prep ("RDCP") and the Antioch/Cane Ridge cluster limit the validity of subgroup performance comparisons. Although some demographic differences exist<sup>9</sup>, labeling them as significant is misleading. RDCP's close approximation of the targeted area's profile makes it the most relevant and reliable benchmark within the Rocketship portfolio, and any differences do not materially affect the validity of the performance comparisons presented in the Application.
- The committee notes that 70% of students at RDCP and Rocketship United Academy ("RUA") are not categorized as economically disadvantaged, questioning alignment with Rocketship's mission to serve low-income communities. It is important to clarify that all RSED-TN schools are public charter schools, schools of choice, open to all families in Davidson County, with active recruitment efforts focused on the surrounding area. Rocketship's mission as stated guides Rocketship's efforts, however, enrollment ultimately depends on family choice. Notably, across all three RSED-TN schools, 39.5% of students are economically disadvantaged, exceeding the MNPS average of 31%, and demonstrating Rocketship's commitment to serving low-income students.
- The review committee cites enrollment figures, with RDCP at 29% below capacity and RUA at 12% below capacity, as evidence of low community demand in the Rocketship program. This misinterprets enrollment data by

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to 55% in reading, based on NWEA MAP assessment data.

<sup>7</sup> At its June 10, 2025 meeting, Board Member Elrod cited plans to add 1,000 seats at Lakeview and Paragon Elementary by the 2025–26 school year as a reason to deny the Application suggesting additional facility capacity makes TN5 "not needed."

<sup>8</sup> In 22-23, Lakeview Elementary earned a composite TVAAS score of 2 and a letter grade of C.

<sup>9</sup> Demographics for School Year 2023-2024: RDCP enrolled 30% Economically Disadvantaged students, 11% Students with Disabilities, 40% English Language Learners (ELL). In comparison, the Antioch/Cane Ridge cluster averaged 30% Economically Disadvantaged, 12.5% Students with Disabilities, and 57% ELL. Several cluster schools reported ELL rates similar to RDCP, for example Eagle View (40%) and Cane Ridge (46%).

conflating *charter-approved caps* with phased internal targets, and attributing future growth plans<sup>10</sup> to current figures. This conclusion ignores the analysis of demand and the enrollment strategy<sup>11</sup> articulated in the TN5 application.

- The review committee frequently referenced new, expanded facilities at Lakeview Elementary and Paragon Mills Elementary as the solution to the long-standing overcrowding in the Antioch/Cane Ridge cluster. This reflects several misunderstandings. First, Paragon Mills is located within the Glenclyff cluster, not within the Antioch/Cane Ridge clusters, and should not be considered when assessing capacity in the target clusters. Second, even accounting for: (a) all existing schools, (b) Lakeview's August 2025 anticipated expansion, and (c) all planned charters authorized to open in SY25-26, a need will remain as Antioch/Cane Ridge cluster elementary schools are still projected to reach 102% utilization<sup>12</sup>. In short, even at full capacity, the currently planned additional elementary school expansion efforts in these clusters will remain unable to meet the existing and growing demand for elementary school seats, while the Application offers a clear way of adding high-quality public school seats in the cluster.
- The review committee marked the entire subsection 1.6 as "partially met," based solely on the number of letters in Attachment D, and a unilateral discounting of the authors' expressed interests based on letter format. This overly narrow reading is counter to the direction on the Rubric<sup>13</sup> and ignores the broad evidence presented elsewhere in the Application, including a clearly defined parent engagement process, current school waitlists, and parent satisfaction surveys at RDCP (the existing Rocketship school serving the cluster). Collectively, these elements provide strong and credible evidence of parent demand and support for the Rocketship program.<sup>14</sup>

Under the Rubric,<sup>15</sup> the Application should have been approved. Accordingly, RSED-TN submits this appeal to TPCSC seeking its independent review of the Application with the belief that this Application will achieve a score of "Meets" or higher in all required sections.

Should your team have additional questions regarding this appeal, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Sincerely,



Eric Dailey  
Executive Director  
Rocketship Education Tennessee

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<sup>10</sup> Both RDCP and RUA were recently approved for charter amendments adding a full fifth grade, significantly increasing each school's enrollment cap beginning in the 2025-26 school year. Referencing these future capacity figures in the committee's analysis is inappropriate and misrepresents current enrollment performance.

<sup>11</sup> Since opening in 2022, enrollment at RDCP has been strategically grown year-over-year, consistently meeting its annual targets. Each school year begins with a robust waitlist, which grew from 45 families in 2023-24 to over 100 families for 2024-2025. Rocketship's start up model has always contemplated building enrollment over multiple school years in an intentional and thoughtful manner. In each year of its existence, RDCP has met its enrollment target for that year. Also, in each year of its existence, at the start of each school year, RDCP has had a healthy waitlist of interested families. For the '24 - '25 school year, this waitlist was more than 100 families, growing from 45 at the start of the '23 - '24 school year.

<sup>12</sup> For the 2024-25 school year, the cluster enrollment totaled 9,675 students. This enrollment exceeds the expected 2025-2026 expanded cluster capacity of 9,456, for an overutilization rate of 102%.

<sup>13</sup> The Rubric states "a single qualitative rating of "Does Not Meet Standard" or "Partially Meets Standard" on a subsection does not necessarily prevent an entire section from earning a "Meets or Exceeds Standard" rating overall."

<sup>14</sup> For the 2024-25 school year, RDCP maintained a waitlist of over 100 families, increasing by roughly eight applications per week. This sustained growth underscores strong demand for high-quality school options in the Cane Ridge and Antioch clusters and ongoing interest in Rocketship education.

<sup>15</sup> The Rubric states "To be eligible for approval, an application must receive a "Meets or Exceeds Standard" rating for all applicable sections within the Application Review Tool".