



Executive Director's Recommendation Rocketship TN 4 Appeal

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated ("T.C.A.") § 49-13-108, sponsors proposing to open a new charter school may appeal the denial of its amended application by a local board of education to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("Commission"). On August 1, 2025, the sponsor of Rocketship TN 4 ("sponsor") 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 Rocketship TN 4 amended application was contrary to the best interests of the students, local education agency ("LEA"), or community.¹ Therefore, I recommend that the Commission overturn the decision of RCS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Rocketship TN 4.

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 the Rocketship TN 4 amended application. In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education's Charter Creation Application Evaluation Guidance and Review Tool ("rubric"), "[t]o be eligible for approval, an application must receive a "Meets or Exceeds Standard" rating for all applicable sections [(academic plan and design, operations plan and capacity, financial plan and capacity, and portfolio review and performance record)]."² In addition, the Commission is required to hold a public hearing in the district where the proposed charter school seeks to locate.³

In order to overturn the decision of the local board of education, the Commission must find that the application meets or exceeds the metrics outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education's application-scoring rubric and that approval of the amended charter application is in

¹ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

² Tennessee Department of Education's Charter Creation Application Evaluation Guidance and Review Tool, pg. 3.

³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

the best interests of the students, local education agency, or community.⁴ If the local board of education's decision is appealed, then the Commission can approve the application, and thereby authorize the school, or can affirm the local board's decision to deny.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. The sponsor submitted its initial application for Rocketship TN 4 to Rutherford County Schools on January 31, 2025.
2. RCS assembled a review committee to review and score the Rocketship TN 4 initial application.
3. On March 27, 2025, RCS's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of Rocketship TN 4.
4. RCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Rocketship TN 4 initial application, indicating the academic, operations, finance, and portfolio review and performance record sections as partially meets standard.
5. On April 24, 2025, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the Rocketship TN 4 initial application.
6. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for Rocketship TN 4 to RCS on June 2, 2025.
7. RCS's Review Committee reviewed and scored the Rocketship TN 4 amended application based on the charter application-scoring rubric and rated the academic, finance, and portfolio performance sections as partially meets standard, and the operations section as meets or exceeds standard.
8. On July 24, 2025, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Rocketship TN 4.
9. The sponsor appealed the denial of the Rocketship TN 4 amended application in writing to the Commission on August 1, 2025, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
10. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored the Rocketship TN 4 amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school application-scoring rubric.
11. The Commission's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members

⁴ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

of the Rocketship TN 4 leadership team on September 15, 2025, via Microsoft Teams.

12. On September 19, 2025, the Commission staff held a public hearing at the Rutherford County Schools 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 received public comment regarding the Rocketship TN 4 amended application.
13. After the capacity interview, the Commission's Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of the Rocketship TN 4 amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
14. 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

District Denial of Initial Application

The Review Committee assembled by RCS to review and score the Rocketship TN 4 initial application consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Angela Barnes	Principal, Wilson Elementary School
Ynetia Campbell	Principal, Kittrell Elementary School
Shannon Caywood	RCS Special Projects Accountant
Dr. Season Epps	RCS K-5 Mathematics Instructional Specialist
Dr. Mark Gullion	RCS Federal Programs Coordinator
Lisa Kegler	RCS K-5 ELA Instructional Specialist
Trey Lee	RCS Chief Operations Officer
Emily Madison	Parent Representative
Julia McKenna	Parent Representative
Dr. Jeff McCann	RCS Coordinator of Choice and Charter Schools
Dr. Annie Ralston	RCS Special Education Coordinator
Frances Rosales	Rutherford County School Board Member
Dr. Larissa Westerfield	RCS Coordinator of Teaching and Learning

The Rocketship TN 4 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
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	Partially Meets Standard

After the RCS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its analysis was presented to the RCS Board of Education on April 24, 2025. The RCS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of Rocketship TN 4.

District Denial of Amended Application

The Review Committee assembled by RCS to review and score the Rocketship TN 4 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	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	Partially Meets Standard

After the RCS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its analysis was presented to the RCS Board of Education on July 24, 2025. At the July 24, 2025 board meeting, the RCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Rocketship TN 4.

Commission Review Committee's Evaluation of the Application

Following the denial of the Rocketship TN 4 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 Rocketship TN 4 amended application. The Review Committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Adam Aberman	External Reviewer
Kristin Barnhart	External Reviewer
Arabella Fumia	External Reviewer
Rebecca Ledebuhr	Commission Staff

Name	Title
Maggie Lund	Commission Staff
Alexander Roberson	External Reviewer

The Commission's Review Committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Rocketship TN 4 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 Rocketship TN 4 application was as follows:

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
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	Meets or Exceeds Standard

The Review Committee recommends the approval of the amended application for Rocketship TN 4 because the applicant meets or exceeds standard for all four sections of the application.

The Academic Plan and Design meets or exceeds standard because of the robust academic systems and the supportive school culture outlined in the application. The proposed school is supported by a local network and reputable national charter management organization ("CMO") and the sponsor's plan outlines data-driven instructional practices. The applicant makes a strong case for expansion to a new county given the outlined community support and demand and proximity to one of its other Nashville charter schools. The applicant outlined strong recruitment plans for students and a clear plan to serve special populations of students.

The applicant's Operational Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds standard because the applicant has a robust governing board of fourteen individuals with diverse experience and backgrounds, and the network outlines realistic growth plans. The sponsor spoke directly to successes and challenges the network has faced with Nashville schools and demonstrated the capacity to expand to a new county. Additionally, the sponsor's start-up and facility plans are reasonable, stating their intent to incubate in an existing facility. Finally, the applicant outlined an adequate staffing plan stating that they already have numerous teachers within the network that live in Rutherford County and would be interested in teaching at the new school.

The Financial Plan Design and Capacity meets or exceeds standard because the applicant demonstrates sound financial practices, a realistic and sustainable budget, and has demonstrated experience operating financially sustainable schools within Tennessee. The

sponsor has a proven track record of fiscal management, access to philanthropic funds and grant opportunities, and has demonstrated its capacity to manage resources to ensure the financial viability of the proposed school.

Lastly, the Portfolio Review and Performance Record meets or exceeds standard because the applicant provided evidence of network academic success, operational stability, and financial viability. The applicant also provided further details regarding their underperforming school, Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary ("RNNE"), during the capacity interview addressing the questions of the Review Committee. Overall, the network is academically strong and has clear plans to address underperformance going forward.

For the aforementioned reasons, the Review Committee found that the sponsor did meet or exceed the standard for approval based on the state's scoring rubric.

For additional information regarding the Review Committee's evaluation of the Rocketship TN 4 amended application, please see **Exhibit A** for the complete Review Committee Recommendation Report, which is fully incorporated herein by reference.

Public Hearing

Pursuant to statute⁵ and Commission Policy 2.000, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director was held on September 19, 2025. Representatives from RCS focused on the review process conducted and the reasons for denial of the application. Representatives from RCS indicated that the Rocketship TN 4 amended application was denied based on the findings within the Charter Review Committee Report which include concerns within the academic, finance, and past performance sections of the application. Representatives from RCS provided further detailed concerns within the academic section of the application, including insufficient time allotted for science and social studies coursework. Additionally, the district noted concerns with the "Life Skill Development" programming as outlined in Rocketship TN 4's application not aligning with RCS Board of Education's requirements for social-emotional learning. Additionally, there were outlined errors within plans to serve English learner students and success rates for the Rocketship Education Tennessee ("Rocketship TN") network, in some areas, did not match RCS data. Representatives from the district provided further success rate data within their presentation along with community survey results demonstrating that there was little support for approval of the school. Enrollment trends for schools within the La Vergne and Smyrna area were also shared showing roughly 586 seats available in the area. While the operations section of the application met standard, the committee found issues within the financial section

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

including issues regarding class-sizes that would require waivers and no school counselors within the budget. The concerns with the past performance section were also outlined stating that there are fluctuating success rates within the network and concerns with chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, teacher credentialing, and a lack of ownership of previous denials by another authorizer.

In the sponsor's opening statement, representatives from Rocketship TN 4 focused on the mission of the school and the fact that while past performance of the network has not been perfect, it has been strong. The sponsor clarified the rationale for focusing on data from their school, Rocketship Drean Community Prep ("RDCP"), given its proximity to the proposed area the new school intends to locate. The students at this school on average perform about twenty percentage points higher than their geographic district peers. The sponsor also emphasized that their work in Nashville is not unique to this area but is supported by a nationally recognized academic model. The sponsor then focused on the need for another high-quality school option within RCS, stating that RDCP outperforms most schools within the La Vergne and Smyrna area. The sponsor spoke specifically to the outlined reasons for denial by the district, stating that their English learner students are meeting growth targets and that a fixed time for a science or social studies block is not mandated by state law. The sponsor also stated that while RCS criticized them for not having enough teachers for class size requirements, they have consistently met standards with this same model by other authorizers. Further, they have clean financial audits, and the concerns about school counselors within the budget are an issue with semantics. Finally, the sponsor reiterated that the focus on past performance from the district was largely focused on one underperforming school and did not consider the success of the network. The network is targeting support for RNNE, their underperforming school, and they have had a strong start to the year so far.

During questioning by the Commission, representatives from RCS clarified that they currently have 586 open seats within the area the applicant intends to locate, and they project having roughly 350 open seats next year, which reflects 3.5% growth. Representatives from the district also shared enrollment trends for other charter schools within the district during their opening statement and clarified that the charter schools within their jurisdiction are currently operating grades K-6 and are authorized to be K-8 schools. Representatives from the Commission then clarified with RCS that the survey that was distributed to the community was sent to all RCS parents and included links to the charter school application for review. The Commission then questioned the district regarding their comments about the school's lack of recognition of shortcomings with their renewal denial of RNNE by another authorizer. Representatives from the district clarified that they would have liked to have heard from the operator what was being done differently at the proposed school to ensure the same results are

not replicated. Finally, representatives from the district clarified that they did review success and growth rates from district schools that are in the intended location for Rocketship TN 4. While the sponsor provided growth information, the district also analyzed differences in success rates between the network of schools in Nashville and those in RCS.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor by asking about the waitlist and enrollment numbers at the network's schools in Nashville. The sponsor replied that all schools operate at or near capacity, which demonstrates the strength of the brand. This is particularly true for RDCP, which is near the proposed new school, and the sponsor stated that they have received applications from approximately one hundred Rutherford County families at RDCP. However, since the families lived in a different county, the students could not attend RDCP. The sponsor also stated that approximately a dozen staff members live in Rutherford County and would be interested in working at Rocketship TN 4. When asked about community engagement efforts conducted thus far, the sponsor spoke to engagement efforts that began eighteen months ago with attendance at family meetings and visits to local daycares. The outlined enrollment of 250 in Year 1 is less than what they have accomplished at the Nashville schools and is intentionally modest, but they could operate with 220 students and remain financially viable. The sponsor then spoke to teacher hiring and recruitment, stating that the regional team is ready to support once approved, and they have a few viable principal candidates, which they expect to hire this fall. The Commission then questioned the sponsor about their choice not to utilize RNNE as their low-performing example within the past performance section of the application. The sponsor responded that due to data availability timelines, they had not adequately analyzed the data, as it had just been released before winter break. Therefore, the sponsor did not want to provide anything incorrect or misleading within the application. When questioned further about the performance at RNNE, the sponsor shared that it is likely a product of leadership instability and the model being inconsistently applied, particularly in math. The regional team, along with the support of the national CMO, believes that they can support the school to correct the issues. Finally, the sponsor spoke to the network's capacity to expand to a new county. The network has the support from the national CMO and strong leadership teams at three of their schools, and they have the capacity to open the new school in Rutherford County.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of nine in-person comments, with one speaking in support of RCS and eight speaking in support of Rocketship TN 4. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received 177 written comments, with three writing in support of RCS and 174 writing in support of Rocketship TN 4.

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,” whether “approval of the application is in the best interests of the students, LEA, or community.”⁶ 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 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 explained in the report, I agree that the Rocketship TN 4 amended application did rise to the level of meeting or exceeding the standards required for approval.

I agree with the Review Committee that the application for Rocketship TN 4 meets or exceeds the state’s scoring rubric for approval in all applicable areas. Rocketship TN has a proven track record of academic success in Tennessee as well as on a national level. The application evidences a mission-aligned plan that has been successful in a variety of geographic areas. The academic plan evidenced a strong plan and demonstrated experience in successfully serving all populations of students, including students with disabilities and English learners. The sponsor has demonstrated that its academic plan, specifically its community-centered school culture plan, serves a targeted population in Tennessee. I believe the sponsor’s plan to continue developing its culture plan specific to Rutherford County is sound and will contribute to the school opening successfully.

Having successfully opened several schools throughout Davidson County, the sponsor has developed a strong recruitment plan for its expansion into Rutherford County. The sponsor demonstrated that the families in the desired location, the La Vergne and Smyrna areas, have expressed interest in the Rocketship TN academic model as a choice option in the Rutherford County area. I appreciate the intention of the sponsor, evidenced by the time spent engaging with the community over the past year to determine the interest and likelihood of success if the application is approved. Through its engagement efforts, the sponsor determined that the

⁶ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.



Rocketship TN model would be successful in Rutherford County based on the similar demographic makeup of its current student population within its southeast Nashville schools. This intentional engagement builds confidence that the sponsor is likely to reach its enrollment target of 250 students for Year 1, serving grades K–4. Additionally, the sponsor has dedicated staff to ongoing recruitment and enrollment efforts to achieve the enrollment target.

Should the application be approved and the enrollment target met, I believe the sponsor is prepared to serve all populations of students, including students with disabilities and English learners. The sponsor's team has experience serving student populations, including identification, evaluation, and implementation of Individualized Education Programs, Individualized Learning Plans, and 504 plans when required. The sponsor's application also demonstrates an ability to adjust its staffing model if the need arises based on its enrollment of students.

I agree with the Review Committee that the sponsor's operational plan meets the standard for application approval. The governing board for Rocketship Tennessee has proven to be diverse in its experience and background, with committee structures that include community members and a plan for overall governance. Rocketship TN 4, if approved, will join a network of schools governed by a local board that will contract with Rocketship Education as a CMO. I appreciate the candor that the sponsor had regarding the challenges at RNNE, and within the public hearing and the capacity interview, Rocketship set forth a clear plan of how they are addressing the deficiencies and improving performance. Rocketship TN has significant experience in Tennessee of more than a decade serving a large population of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and it has demonstrated reflection and improvement across its network. The sponsor has demonstrated strength at both the governance and network level that will support the opening of a new school in a new school district.

The sponsor also detailed a facility plan for short- and long-term viability. Understanding the real estate landscape across Middle Tennessee, the sponsor decided to incubate within one of its identified facilities for the early years while searching for a long-term facility to serve students for the remainder of its charter term. The applicant demonstrated a deep understanding of managing a complex facility market and necessary costs and planning needed to successfully open the school. As the authorizer for one of the Rocketship Education Tennessee locations (Rocketship Dream Community Prep) during a successful facility acquisition and opening, I believe the sponsor has a full understanding of the realities of real estate acquisition and is prepared to continue working to secure a facility for a timely opening.

I am also encouraged by the sponsor's staff recruiting and hiring plan. The network has successfully navigated a change in leadership over the last year as well as transitions of long-

term principals within its network. While staffing will always be a challenge, the sponsor has established and sustained a successful track record in recruiting and retaining licensed teachers. The sponsor has indicated a realistic timeline for hiring staff, chiefly indicating that current staff at other Rocketship TN network locations have expressed an interest in working at the new school. As is the requirement of all charter schools, the network will need to ensure all schools are properly and accurately staffed, and the network demonstrated an understanding and a commitment to this for a new school.

I also agree with the Review Committee in finding that the sponsor's financial plan meets the standard for application's approval. The sponsor has presented a sustainable budget that is bolstered by its historical financial success across the network. The sponsor understands financial management principles aligned to the school's mission and academic plan. The sponsor's financial plan includes anticipated revenues and expenditures. The sponsor indicated a plan to offer a salary and benefits package that exceeds those offered by Rutherford County. The sponsor is supported by the national CMO whose financial model will assist with the sustainable operation of a new school. The sponsor has demonstrated financial viability, conservatively utilizing the Charter School Programs grant in Year 0 and establishing a sound contingency plan should there be a need based on enrollment.

Finally, I agree with the Review Committee that the sponsor's application meets the standard for approval in the portfolio review and performance record section. The sponsor is an established national network that has experienced success across a variety of schools. The sponsor's academic model has resulted in Reward School designations and high TVAAS scores in its Tennessee schools, which is commendable. When I looked at the performance of RCS schools in the La Vergne and Smyrna area compared to the performance of Rocketship's portfolio, I found multiple instances where Rocketship Dream Community Prep outperforms the RCS schools. In the 2024-25 school year English language arts ("ELA") estimated overall success rate, RDCP outperformed ten of the twelve RCS elementary schools in the area. In math estimated overall success rate, RDCP outperformed eight of twelve RCS elementary schools. When I looked at subgroup performance in publicly available data, RDCP's success stood out. Economically disadvantaged students and English learners at RDCP outperformed ten of eleven RCS schools in ELA/math. I see this data as evidence that the Rocketship TN model could be a value-add to the area to provide a high-quality option for parents, particularly serving students qualifying as special populations.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the struggles of RNNE, which weighed heavily in my consideration. RNNE is under the Commission's portfolio, and I care very deeply about its ultimate academic success. I also understand the charge of the Commission to only approve schools of high quality with a likelihood of success. It is imperative that schools have sound

academic and operational plans, supported by strong fiscal viability. During the capacity interview and the public hearing, the sponsor was pressed to share learning, adjustments, and improvements at RNNE, and I appreciated hearing the sponsor speak to the reallocation of resources to stabilize leadership and turnaround performance. The sponsor's testimony indicated an understanding of the importance of improving the performance of RNNE and ensuring that those students receive a high-quality education. Therefore, in totality, my finding is that the Portfolio Review and Performance Record section meets the standard for approval, and the Rocketship academic model has a high likelihood of strong academic results in Rutherford County.

Any authorized public charter school is entrusted with the great responsibility of educating students and a significant amount of public funds. For these reasons, the Commission expects that only those schools that have demonstrated a high likelihood of success and meet or exceed the required criteria in all areas will be authorized.

For the reasons expounded on in this report, I recommend that the Commission approve the Rocketship TN 4 amended application.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons, and for the reasons stated in the Review Committee Recommendation Report attached hereto as **Exhibit A**, I do believe that the decision to deny the amended application for Rocketship TN 4 was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or community. Therefore, I recommend that the Commission overturn the decision of the RCS Board of Education to approve the amended application for Rocketship TN 4.



Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

October 16, 2025
Date



EXHIBIT A:
Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report

October 16, 2025

School Name: Rocketship TN 4

Sponsor: Rocketship Education Tennessee

Proposed Location of School: Rutherford County Schools

Evaluation Team:

- Adam Aberman
- Kristin Barnhart
- Arabella Fumia
- Rebecca Ledebuhr
- Maggie Lund
- Alexander Burke Roberson



This recommendation report is based on a template from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.



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Introduction

Tennessee Code Annotated (“T.C.A.”) § 49-13-108 allows the sponsor of a public charter school to appeal the denial of an application by the local board of education to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission (“Commission”). In accordance with T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the Commission shall conduct a de novo, on the record review of the proposed charter school’s application, and the Commission has adopted national and state quality authorizing standards to guide its work. As laid out in Commission Policy 3.000 – Core Authorizing Principles,¹ 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

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

four sections of the application: Academic Plan and Design, Operations Plan and Capacity, Financial Plan and Capacity, and Portfolio Review and Performance Record.

2. **Capacity Interview:** Based on the independent and collective review of the application, the Review Committee conducted a ninety-minute interview with the sponsor and members of the governing board to address the concerns, weaknesses, and questions identified in the application, and to assess the capacity to execute the application's overall plan.
3. **Consensus Judgment:** At the conclusion of the review of the application and the capacity interview, the committee submitted a final rubric and developed a consensus regarding a rating for each section of the application.

This recommendation report includes the following information:

1. **Summary of the Application:** A brief description of the applicant's proposed academic, operations, and financial plans.
2. **Summary of the Recommendation:** A brief summary of the overall recommendation for the application.
3. **Analysis of each section of the application:** An analysis of the four sections of the application and the capacity of the team to execute the plan as described in the application.
 - a. **Academic Plan and Design:** school mission and goals; academic focus and performance standards; assessments; school calendar and schedule; recruitment and enrollment; parent and community engagement and support; school culture and discipline; special populations; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - b. **Operations Plan and Capacity:** governance; facilities; start-up plan; personnel/human capital; professional development; transportation; additional operations; charter management organizations; network vision, growth plan, and capacity; network governance; network management and personnel; school replication; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - c. **Financial Plan and Capacity:** planning and budget worksheet; operating budget; operating budget narrative; network financial plan; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - d. **Portfolio Review and Performance Record:** school portfolio summary; academic performance record; fiscal and operational performance record.

The Commission's charter application Review Committee utilized the Tennessee Department of Education's Charter Creation Application Evaluation Guidance and Review Tool ("rubric"), which is used by all local boards of education when evaluating an application. The rubric states that authorizers should adopt the State Board of Education's ("SBE") Quality Authorizing Standards, which establishes rigorous decision-making criteria. Specifically, SBE Policy 6.111 states a "quality authorizer requires all applicants to present a clear and compelling mission, a quality educational program, a demonstration of community support, a solvent and sustainable budget and contingency financial plans, a clear demonstration of the effectiveness of the model for the target student population, effective governance and management structures and systems, founding team members demonstrating diverse and necessary capabilities in all phases of the school's development, and clear evidence of the applicant's capacity to execute its plan successfully. An application that merits a recommendation for approval should satisfy each of these criteria."²

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

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

² Tennessee State Board of Education Policy 6.111

Summary of the Application

School Name: Rocketship TN 4

Sponsor: Rocketship Education Tennessee

Proposed Location of School: Rutherford County Schools

Mission: The mission of Rocketship Public Schools is to catalyze transformative change in low-income communities through a scalable and sustainable public-school model that propels student achievement, develops exceptional educators, and partners with parents who enable high-quality public schools to thrive in their community.³

Number of Schools Currently in Operation by Sponsor: The sponsor currently has one operating charter school authorized by Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools and two operating charter schools authorized by the Commission.

Proposed Enrollment:⁴

Grade Level	Year 1: 2026-2027	Year 2: 2027-2028	Year 3: 2028-2029	Year 4: 2029-2030	Year 5: 2030-2031	At Capacity:
K	96	96	96	96	96	96
1	48	96	96	96	96	96
2	48	48	96	96	96	96
3	24	48	48	48	96	96
4	24	24	48	48	96	96
5	0	24	24	24	48	96
Totals	240	336	408	408	528	576

Brief Description of the Application

The sponsor, Rocketship Education Tennessee (“Rocketship TN”), is proposing to open a charter school in Rutherford County, Tennessee and serve students in kindergarten through fifth grade when fully built out. The school, Rocketship TN 4, would be the fourth school for the sponsor. The proposed school will be organized under Rocketship Education Tennessee and contract directly with Rocketship Education (“RSED-National” or “Rocketship Public Schools”) as its charter management organization (“CMO”). The school intends to operate in the La Vergne

³ Rocketship TN 4 Amended Application, pg. 10

⁴ Rocketship TN 4 Amended Application, pg. 65

and Smyrna neighborhoods of Rutherford County⁵ and aims to accelerate academic achievement for all students through a community school model. The school proposes to offer personalized instruction and a holistic college and career-ready education and provide students in the La Vergne and Smyrna areas of Rutherford County an additional school option.

The proposed school will be governed by a fourteen-member governing board with diverse professional and community experience. In Year 0, Rocketship TN 4 has budgeted \$240,000 in revenue, receiving \$240,000 from the Charter School Program (“CSP”) grant and projects \$239,075 in expenses for the school. Rocketship TN 4 projects the school will have \$3,450,620 in revenue and \$3,425,394 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a balance of \$26,151. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$6,469,365 in revenue and \$6,116,107 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$644,169.⁶ The school anticipates that 25% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 10% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 40% of the student population will be English learners.⁷

⁵ Rocketship TN 4 Amended Application, pg. 10

⁶ Rocketship TN 4 Amended Budget

⁷ Rocketship TN 4 Amended Application, pg. 65

Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends the approval of the amended application for Rocketship TN 4 because the applicant meets or exceeds the standard for all four sections of the application.

The Academic Plan and Design meets or exceeds standard because of the strong academic systems and the robust school culture outlined in the application. The proposed school is supported by a strong local network and reputable CMO and the sponsor's plan outlines data-driven instructional practices. The applicant makes a strong case for expansion to a new county given the outlined community support and demand and proximity to one of their other Nashville charter schools. The applicant outlined strong recruitment plans for students and a clear plan to serve special populations of students.

The applicant's Operational Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds standard because the applicant has a strong governing board of individuals with diverse experience and backgrounds and the network outlines realistic growth plans. The sponsor spoke directly to successes and challenges the network has faced with Nashville schools and demonstrated the capacity to expand to a new county. Additionally, the sponsor's start-up and facility plans are reasonable stating their intent to incubate in an existing facility. Finally, the applicant outlined a strong staffing plan stating that they already have numerous teachers within the network that live in Rutherford County and would be interested in teaching at the new school.

The Financial Plan Design and Capacity meets or exceeds standard because the applicant demonstrates sound financial practices, a realistic and sustainable budget, and has demonstrated experience operating financially sustainable schools within Tennessee. The sponsor has a proven track record of fiscal management, access to philanthropic funds and grant opportunities, and has demonstrated their capacity to manage resources to ensure financial viability of the proposed school.

Lastly, Portfolio Review and Performance Record meets or exceeds standard because the applicant provided evidence of network academic success, operational stability, and financial viability. Additionally, the applicant provided further details regarding their underperforming school, Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary ("RNNE"), during the capacity interview addressing the questions of the Review Committee. Overall, the network is academically strong and has clear plans to address underperformance going forward.

Summary of Section Ratings

In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education's charter application scoring rubric, applications that do not meet or exceed 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	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Portfolio Review and Performance Record	Meets or Exceeds Standard

Analysis of the Academic Plan and Design

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Academic Plan and Design meets or exceeds standard because of the strong academic systems and the robust school culture outlined in the application. The applicant makes a strong case for expansion to a new county given their proximity, mission, and demographics. The applicant also outlined reasonable plans for recruiting and enrolling students, and a clear plan to serve special populations of students.

Rocketship TN 4's application presents a mission-aligned academic plan that is supported by both the local network and the national CMO. This plan is comprehensive and has been successfully implemented both locally and in other states. The academic plan is well-suited for the target population and aims to accelerate academic achievement for all students, including those in subgroups, such as English learners, through strong data measurement and tracking systems that include both internal and external data outcomes measures. A key component of the Rocketship TN network's model is its community-centered school culture plan. The plan emphasizes joyful reinforcement for students, has strong positive behavior intervention systems, and incorporates "Life Skill Development" programming. The application outlines a process for ongoing data collection in relation to the culture plan and strong systems that inform support for students.

Rocketship TN 4 aims to locate in the La Vergne and Smyrna areas of Rutherford County, which is in relative proximity to one of their other schools, Rocketship Dream Community Prep ("RDCP"). During the capacity interview, representatives from Rocketship TN 4 described that many of their families from the southeastern Nashville area have relocated to Rutherford County in recent years for a variety of reasons, and many families have expressed interest in the expansion of another Rocketship TN network school in Rutherford County. The sponsor provided numerous letters of support from prospective families and clarified during the capacity interview that these families reside in Rutherford County. The sponsor also stated that their engagement efforts in the area have been ongoing for the past year, and they will continue to have dedicated staff on the ground to support enrollment efforts. The sponsor cited that the demographic population in their target location is similar to RDCP and would continue to be in line with their mission and model. The application outlines that the population growth happening in Rutherford County, particularly in the La Vergne and Smyrna areas, demonstrates a need for another high-quality school option, and the school aims to open with 250 students in Year 1 serving kindergarten through fourth grade. These projections are conservative in comparison to the other schools that the network has opened within Nashville to ensure



enrollment materializes as their brand recognition and community engagement efforts in the new county continue for subsequent years.

Finally, the applicant outlines a strong plan to serve special populations of students. The Rocketship TN network has demonstrated success over time in its service of English learner populations within its other Nashville schools. The sponsor has an experienced team to provide oversight of the service of special populations of students and outlines a compliant system for identification of students and providing the continuum of services. The projections within the application are reasonable and in line with other area schools, and the applicant provided sound contingency plans for staffing during the capacity interview should the needs or number of students requiring services be different than projected.

Analysis of the Operations Plan and Capacity

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Operational Plan and Capacity meets or exceeds standard because the applicant has a strong governing board of individuals with diverse experience and backgrounds, the network outlines realistic growth plans, the sponsor's start-up and facility plans are reasonable, and there is a clear staffing plan.

The governing board for Rocketship TN 4 is comprised of fourteen members who have a diverse range of expertise. The local board, while a relatively new entity, served in an advisory role previously to the national board and has recently shifted to contract with RSED-National as a CMO. The board has outlined committee structures for effective oversight, community leaders are represented, and a clear plan for governance success is outlined. During the capacity interview, Rocketship TN outlined reasonable growth and expansion plans and explained how the organizational structure of the network supports sustainable growth while maintaining academic excellence and operational efficiency. The leadership team spoke about the challenges the network has faced with the performance in one of its network schools, RNNE, during the capacity interview and described their plan to allocate sufficient resources to improve performance at that school while expanding to a new county. Ultimately, through the evidence provided in the application and the responses provided in the capacity interview, the Review Committee determined that the capacity of the network leadership and governing board supports the organization's ability to open, operate, and expand high quality schools in Tennessee.

The applicant provides detailed start-up plans within the application that outline all tasks the governing board and leadership would need to complete to ensure an on-time opening. During the capacity interview, the sponsor demonstrated clear experience regarding the difficult real estate landscape and timeline challenges faced by many new charter schools. The applicant outlined a clear facility plan within the application and provided updates to this plan during the capacity interview. The applicant plans to incubate or locate in a temporary facility within the La Vergne and Smyrna area for a few years prior to finding a long-term home for the school. The applicant also provided some specific locations for incubation within the targeted area. The sponsor has experience opening and completing facilities for on-time openings and is working with a trusted partner to ensure they can do so in a new county.

Finally, the sponsor provided a clear process for recruiting and hiring talent. During the capacity interview, the sponsor acknowledged the challenges in hiring and retaining highly



qualified and licensed staff to serve students, though they emphasized their successful track record in doing so. The sponsor acknowledged that with the new executive director coming on board in January 2025, there was some staff and leadership turnover, though this has begun to stabilize across the network. The applicant also shared, during the capacity interview, their reflections on how to improve staff retention. The sponsor discussed the implementation of new strategies based on feedback, and they provided a timeline for hiring a principal for the new school, stating that they have a few candidates in the pipeline. The sponsor further clarified that they are in a strong position to staff the new school, given they have numerous staff already residing in Rutherford County who have expressed interest in working at the school.

Analysis of the Financial Plan and Capacity

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Financial Plan Design and Capacity meets or exceeds standard because the applicant demonstrates sound financial practices, a realistic and sustainable budget, and has demonstrated experience operating financially sustainable schools within Tennessee. The sponsor has a proven track record of fiscal management, access to philanthropic funds and grant opportunities, and has demonstrated its capacity to manage resources to ensure the financial viability of the proposed school.

Rocketship TN 4 presents a reasonable budget, demonstrating a strong understanding of financial management principles. The budget aligns with the school's mission and academic plan and allocates resources strategically to support its staffing model, professional development, and instructional materials. The projections outlined account for both anticipated revenues and expenditures, including realistic enrollment figures and competitive salary and benefits packages for staff that are higher than Rutherford County. The applicant acknowledged the challenges faced by many operators regarding staffing and reiterated that through the outlined budget and offerings for development of staff, they intend to continue to recruit and retain highly qualified and licensed staff.

The Rocketship TN network benefits from strong experience at both the local network and the national CMO. As an established network of schools, Rocketship TN has a proven track record of successful fiscal management and has developed a financial model that enables its schools to operate sustainably as they grow. The network has clean audits and is supported by the national CMO's business team that has more than fifty years of combined charter school experience. The sponsor budgeted conservatively, utilizing the CSP grant of \$750,000 for Year 0, but not including any philanthropy to demonstrate financial viability.

Finally, the sponsor clarified financial contingency plans for the network during the capacity interview, particularly surrounding projected enrollment and subsequent revenue for one additional school in the 2026-27 school year. The sponsor stated that they projected enrollment conservatively at 250 students in Year 1. Further, the sponsor explained that the CMO may waive the outlined fee for schools in their start-up years as a contingency and provided an example of a school within the portfolio that has done this. The sponsor also clarified the long-term outlook of the network's financial viability during the capacity interview and explained that they approach financial viability at a school level. Thus, each school remains financially sound and ensures the network is also financially sound.

Analysis of the Portfolio Review and Performance Record

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Portfolio Review and Performance Record meets or exceeds the standard because the applicant provided evidence of network academic success, operational stability, and financial viability. Additionally, during the capacity interview, the applicant provided further details regarding an underperforming school, RNNE, that addressed the Review Committee's questions.

Within the Portfolio Review and Performance Record section of the application, the sponsor outlined how the academic model, supported by the national CMO, has closed achievement gaps and accelerated growth for students from historically underserved communities. As evidenced by the 2023 National Charter School Study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes ("CREDO"), Rocketship Education was highlighted as providing the equivalent of ninety-six additional days in reading and 138 additional days in math, which can greatly impact student learning and growth over time. At the local network level, the sponsor provided internal Northwest Evaluation Association ("NWEA") assessment data demonstrating that between 2021 and 2024, Rocketship TN nearly doubled the percentage of students at or above grade level in math and reading. The network has earned high TVAAS scores through the 2022-23 school year, and Rocketship United Academy earned Reward School designation for two consecutive years following the pandemic. The sponsor also provided evidence of operational strength and fiscal solvency with clean audits and no major findings from other authorizer reports. Overall, the sponsor provided sufficient evidence to demonstrate the academic strength, operational soundness, financial viability, and past performance of the network.

Within the application narrative on portfolio performance, the network identified an underperforming school in Wisconsin as the case study to describe. When asked about this during the capacity interview, the sponsor stated that they intended to provide an example of a turnaround school within the network and how RSED-National implemented supports and resources to turn around an underperforming school. However, they acknowledge that this did not demonstrate what they had hoped. The Review Committee asked multiple questions during the capacity interview about the lowest performing school in the Tennessee portfolio, RNNE. The applicant clearly explained the struggles with consistent leadership and effective implementation of the model within the past years as the likely cause of the dip in performance at the school. The network reassured the Review Committee that they are allocating significant resources to the school to ensure they stabilize leadership and turnaround the academic



performance of RNNE. The applicant's response to the performance of RNNE during the capacity interview satisfied the rubric requirements of outlining strategies, interventions, and support systems to correct outlined issues, and therefore, the Review Committee determined that the applicant's past performance meets or exceeds the standard.



Evaluation Team

Adam Aberman is the CEO and Founder of The Learning Collective. Adam has a 25+ year track record in numerous educational venues from traditional public schools to school district administration trainings. Adam has evaluated over 300 current, and 100 proposed, charter schools nationally (California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York and Washington), including lead writer for charter renewal visit reports. For the past several years, Adam has led a team of reviewers conducting approximately 60 renewal visits for Chicago Public Schools. Overall, Adam has conducted over 2,500 classroom observations. Adam has led teams of reviewers of charter school applications, submitting the finalized application reviews to boards of education. Adam is currently leading the New Orleans Public Schools' and Mississippi Charter School Authorizer Board's charter application evaluation reviews. Adam worked with the Tennessee State Board of Education to lead its strategic planning and goal-setting process. Adam co-authored a report of findings and recommendations, supported by Central Michigan University (CMU), to inform 57 charter schools across Michigan how to effectively and strategically plan for the 2022-23 school year. Adam has worked with CMU and other authorizers to update their performance frameworks. Adam has worked with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) and other organizations on evaluation and strategic planning projects regarding Florida, Idaho, Minnesota, New York, Oklahoma and Ohio authorizers. Adam leads much of TLC's work with boards, leading board retreats and board strategic planning for charter management organizations – such as Beginning with Children Foundation and TMSA – and independent charter schools. Other TLC clients have included Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, College Board, Inglewood Unified School District, KIPP, Tiger Woods Foundation and UCLA. Adam is also the founder, former acting board member and current board member emeritus of www.icouldbe.org, the non-profit Internet-based career mentoring program that has served over 25,000 students, and hundreds of schools, nationally since 2000. Adam began his career in education as a Spanish bilingual public school teacher in Los Angeles. Adam earned a B.A. from Vassar College and Master in Public Policy, with an emphasis on Education, from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Kristin Barnhart brings over 15 years of experience in education, specializing in special education, curriculum design, and school leadership. She holds a Master's in Special Education from Vanderbilt University and certifications in both Special Education and English as a Second Language. Kristin has served in founding leadership roles at several Nashville-based charter schools, where she developed systems for student support, teacher coaching, and academic growth. She also managed the creation of a multi-state K-5 durable skills curriculum and has



served as an adjunct professor for secondary mathematics and teacher prep. Her areas of expertise include: program evaluation, compliance, and instructional quality.

Arabella Fumia is a Tennessee educator and special populations leader with experience in both Metro Nashville Public Schools and Nashville Classical Charter School. She began her career as a 2018 Teach For America corps member and taught special education at the elementary and middle school levels for four years before moving into leadership. Bella has served as a lead mentor teacher, assistant principal of K–4 scholar supports, and most recently as vice principal of K–8 scholar supports at Nashville Classical. Her work has focused on IDEA compliance, MTSS implementation, evidence-based literacy interventions, and data-informed decision-making to improve outcomes for diverse learners. Bella holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in special education and is currently pursuing a second graduate degree, an Education Specialist (Ed.S.) in School Psychology. She brings both classroom and leadership experience and a strong commitment to equitable access and high expectations for all students.

Rebecca Ledebuhr is the Data and Accountability Coordinator at the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Before taking on her role at the Charter Commission, Rebecca spent fourteen years working in public schools in North Carolina and Tennessee. Most recently, she served as an instructional coach for mathematics at an MNPS public charter school. Rebecca has served on the Nashville Public Education Foundation's and Mayor's Teacher Cabinet, as a mentor teacher for the Nashville Teacher Residency, and as a Tennessee Educator Fellow for the State Collaborative on Reforming Education ("SCORE"). Rebecca holds a B.A. in Philosophy and Religion from James Madison University.

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

Alexander Burke Roberson is a School Administration Consultant for Charter Schools at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, working with Wisconsin's thirty-three 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.