

Still I Rise Academy was awarded a \$750,000 startup grant by the Tennessee Department of Education—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to launch a transformative Opportunity School—yet MSCS has abandoned its obligation to support this urgent, community-led effort.

## I. WHY THE DENIAL IS CONTRARY TO THE BEST INTERESTS OF STUDENTS

Shelby County’s educational crisis is neither theoretical nor fixable with cosmetic change. It is structural, generational, and deeply urgent. Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) leads the state in:

- Dropout rates
- Truancy levels
- Teen pregnancy
- Juvenile justice involvement

Despite vast resources and multiple reform attempts, MSCS continues to fail the very populations Still I Rise Academy is designed to serve: academically behind students, teen parents, chronically absent students, and disconnected youth. Our model, tailored explicitly for this “Opportunity” demographic, offers a research-based, trauma-informed, and career-aligned education—filling a gaping hole in the current educational landscape.

Denying Still I Rise is denying hope to the very students the MSCS district has failed year after year.

By contrast, our application outlines:

- A Wraparound Service Model, including mental health counseling, food support, and family outreach.
- A Career and Technical Education (CTE) track to re-engage disconnected youth with real economic pathways.
- A low student-to-teacher ratio ensuring personalized instruction.
- An admissions policy without barriers, serving all students, regardless of academic history.

## II. WHY THE DENIAL IS CONTRARY TO THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE LEA (MSCS)

The Tennessee General Assembly has clearly mandated that districts must support Opportunity Charter Schools as part of the solution to chronic underperformance. Yet the MSCS board rejected our application aligned with this very mandate.

In addition to academic failure, MSCS's defiance of state law further compromises its credibility and undermines the statutory purposes of Tennessee's public charter school law. Most egregiously:

- MSCS's refusal to uphold Tennessee's mandate against Sanctuary jurisdictions exemplifies its growing detachment from lawful governance, accountability, and alignment with statewide educational priorities- positioning itself as a rogue district beyond the reach of legislative oversight.
- MSCS defiantly, has failed to prioritize Opportunity Charter School development, despite clear legislative intent to create options for at-risk students.

Instead of embracing that mandate, the LEA acts as a gatekeeper protecting an unsustainable monopoly. By denying Still I Rise Academy, the local board is not protecting educational quality—it is protecting a status quo that has categorically failed thousands of low-income youth.

## III. WHY THE DENIAL IS CONTRARY TO THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE COMMUNITY

Community members, leaders, and families in Memphis overwhelmingly support alternative models that see their children, not just their scores. Still I Rise Academy's grassroots support includes:

- Over 2000 surveys were sent to parents and guardians, local pastors and nonprofits, business owners, and politicians showing overwhelming support over 90% for the mission of Still I Rise Academy.
- Collaboration agreements William & Johnson Career College for student support and dual enrollment.
- Letters of support from key stakeholders

The denial of Still I Rise Academy is both procedurally flawed and morally indefensible. It:

- Ignores the catastrophic academic and social outcomes within Memphis-Shelby County Schools—outcomes that are the worst in the state by nearly every meaningful metric, including dropout rates, truancy, teenage pregnancy, and juvenile justice involvement.
- Defies the express intent of the Tennessee General Assembly, which established Opportunity Charter Schools to give at-risk students the second chance they are systematically denied under traditional models.
- Undermines educational equity by blocking a school designed specifically for chronically underserved and disconnected youth—students MSCS has failed to support with consistency or urgency.
- Disregards the voices of the community—including over 2,000 survey recipients across Memphis and Shelby County, the overwhelming majority of whom expressed strong support for Still I Rise Academy as a necessary alternative to the status quo.
- Contradicts the support of parents, community organizations, and state legislators across party lines who view Still I Rise not as a critical lifeline.
- Blocks a lawful, research-based, and financially viable plan to close equity gaps without offering any superior or evidence-based alternative.

To deny Still I Rise Academy is to perpetuate failure—not reform it. It is to silence community demand, ignore legislative mandates, and write off the very children public education was created to uplift.

To approve Still I Rise Academy is to affirm that every child matters, that lawful innovation is welcome, and that Tennessee's public education system will not bow to bureaucratic protectionism at the expense of student lives.

We respectfully urge the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission to reverse this denial in defense of equity, justice, and the clear public will.



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Monique Wade

Board Chair - Humanitarian Outreach Development Group

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