



Executive Director's Recommendation Music City Academy Appeal

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated ("T.C.A.") § 49-13-108, sponsors proposing to open a new charter school may appeal the denial of its amended application by a local board of education to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("Commission"). On August 6, 2026, the sponsor of Music City Academy ("sponsor" or "MCA") appealed the denial of its amended application by the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools ("MNPS") 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 Music City Academy 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 MNPS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Music City Academy.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108 and Commission Policy 2.000, Commission staff and an independent charter application review committee conducted a de novo, on the record review of the Music City Academy amended application. In accordance with the Tennessee State Board of Education's Charter School Application Scoring Rubric ("rubric"), for an application to be deemed ready for approval, the summary rating for each of the major sections must meet the standard. In addition, the Commission is required to hold a public hearing in the district where the proposed charter school seeks to locate.²

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 scoring rubric and that approval of the amended charter application is in the best interests of the students, local education agency, or community.³ 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

¹ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

² T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

local board's decision to deny.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. On November 26, 2025, the sponsor submitted a letter of intent to Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools expressing its intention to file a charter school application.
2. The sponsor submitted its initial application for Music City Academy to MNPS on February 2, 2026.
3. MNPS assembled a review committee to review and score the Music City Academy initial application.
4. On March 26, 2026, the MNPS Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of Music City Academy.
5. The MNPS Review Committee reviewed and scored the Music City Academy initial application, indicating the application partially meets the standard because it lacked sufficient detail to demonstrate alignment with an athletics-centered model, governance and staffing.
6. On April 28, 2026, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the Music City Academy initial application.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for Music City Academy to MNPS on June 1, 2026.
8. The MNPS Review Committee reviewed and scored the Music City Academy amended application based on the scoring rubric and rated the academic section as meets the standard, operations as partially meets the standard finance as meets the standard.
9. On July 28, 2026, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Music City Academy.
10. The sponsor appealed the denial of the Music City Academy amended application in writing to the Commission August 6, 2026, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
11. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored the Music City Academy amended application using the state's scoring rubric.
12. The Commission's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of the Music City Academy leadership team on September 15, 2026 via Microsoft Teams.
13. On September 24, 2026, the Commission staff held a public hearing at Davy Crockett Tower in Nashville, Tennessee. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the

Commission's designee, heard presentations from the sponsor and the LEA and received public comment regarding the Music City Academy amended application.

14. After the capacity interview, the Commission's Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of the Music City Academy amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
15. The Commission staff conducted a full review of the record, which includes the initial and amended applications submitted by the sponsor, documentation submitted by MNPS, and the findings of the public hearing and public comment. The Commission's General Counsel conducted a full review and legal analysis of the record.

FINDINGS OF FACT

Substantial Negative Fiscal Impact Findings and Analysis

At the July 28, 2026 board meeting, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Music City Academy based on the consideration of the Charter School Review Team's evidence-finding report and the district's Estimated Fiscal Impact Summary, citing a substantial negative fiscal impact to MNPS.

A local board of education may consider whether the establishment of the proposed charter school will have a substantial negative fiscal impact on the LEA such that authorization of the public charter school would be contrary to the best interests of the students, LEA, or community.⁴ When a local school district has denied a charter school application on the basis of substantial negative fiscal impact, Commission Rule 1185-01-01-.01(4) states that, on appeal, the burden is on the district to establish that substantial negative fiscal impact. If there is a finding of substantial negative fiscal impact, the Commission shall not approve the application.⁵ The Commission staff applied the same general methodology used in previous evaluations conducted by the Office of the State Treasurer, the Tennessee State Board of Education, and the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission to determine if a substantial negative fiscal impact exists in this case. In keeping with the precedent set by these prior analyses, as well as the evidence and testimony presented by MNPS, the Commission considered the district's historical enrollment trends, annual average daily membership ("ADM") fluctuations, and projected enrollment shifts associated with the proposed school approval. The key question is whether the enrollment decline projected by MNPS is materially different from the enrollment gains and

⁴ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c).

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c).

losses the district has historically experienced, and whether those shifts are significant enough to constitute a substantial negative fiscal impact.

The following findings are based on information collected by Commission staff from MNPS regarding the substantial negative fiscal impact of Music City Academy:

1. Music City Academy's amended application states that in its first anticipated year of operation (SY 2027-28), the school will enroll a maximum of 120 students in grade nine; scaling to 480 students in grades nine through twelve at full build-out capacity.⁶
2. Commission staff requested from MNPS the historical trends of projected ADM for the current school year and the actual ADM for three preceding school years. The table below includes actual ADM by year, the MNPS charter school enrollment, the district's projected student growth per year, the actual student growth seen, and the actual percentage growth from the previous year.

Table 1. Historical Average Daily Membership ("ADM") and System Growth⁷

	Actual ADM	MNPS Charter Enrollment⁸	Projected Student Growth	Actual Student Growth	% Growth From Previous Year
SY26-27 (Projected)	78,026	11,969 (15.3%)	2,304	2,304	3.04%
SY 25-26	75,722	12,527 (16.5%)	64	-1,986	-2.56%
SY 24-25	77,708	12,690 (16.3%)	-27	314	0.41%
SY 23-24	77,394	13,283 (17.2%)	-178	203	0.26%
SY 22-23	77,191	13,088 (17.0%)	344	344	0.45%

3. In MNPS's analysis, the district identified eight schools that would see enrollment decreases because of the opening of MCA.

⁶ Amended Application, pg. 33

⁷ All data provided by Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools in response to the Commission's August 12, 2026 request for information.

⁸ Charter Fiscal Impact Summary, pg. 4. The included percentages are based on staff calculation of MNPS Charter Enrollment to Actual ADM.

Table 2. Projected Decrease in ADM Resulting from the Opening of MCA

Impacted School	ADM (SY25-26)	Projected Seats Lost (Year 1)	Projected % ADM Lost (Year 1)	Projected Seats Lost (Build Out)	Projected % ADM Lost (Build Out)
District Schools					
Hillsboro HS	1,170.6	25	2.1%	100	8.5%
Pearl-Cohn HS	485.7	20	4.1%	80	16.5%
John Overton HS	1787.3	15	0.8%	60	3.4%
Nashville School of The Arts	564.2	5	0.9%	20	3.5%
Martin Luther King Jr.	1,274.7	5	0.4%	20	1.6%
Hume-Fogg HS	883.4	5	0.6%	20	2.3%
MNPS Charters					
Lead Academy HS	453.4	15	3.3%	60	13.2%
STEM Prep HS	495.9	10	2.0%	40	8.1%
Other		20		80	
Total		120		480	

- The largest projected Year 1 impact to any district-operated school is approximately 4.1% of ADM, while several schools are projected to experience enrollment shifts below 1%.
- MNPS estimated that the total fiscal impact during Year 1 of Music City Academy's operations would be \$1,671,012, growing to \$6,684,049 at full build-out. This amount is based on the number of projected students multiplied by the estimated per-pupil allocation.
- In its analysis, MNPS localizes the substantial negative fiscal impact argument to the eight identified schools. The district's calculation applies proportional shares based on impacted schools' ADM. These calculations and impacted schools reflect a mix of traditional district schools and district-authorized charter schools. This data is reflected in Table 3.

Table 3. Projected Fiscal Impact at Year 1 and at Full Build-Out

Impacted School	Per Pupil Allocation	Fiscal Impact (Year 1)	Fiscal Impact (Build Out)
District Schools			
Hillsboro HS	\$15,836	\$395,895	\$1,583,579
Pearl-Cohn HS	\$17,548	\$350,952	\$1,403,808

Impacted School	Per Pupil Allocation	Fiscal Impact (Year 1)	Fiscal Impact (Build Out)
John Overton HS	\$17,374	\$260,616	\$1,042,465
Nashville School of The Arts	\$14,933	\$74,667	\$298,670
Martin Luther King Jr.	\$14,614	\$73,069	\$292,275
Hume-Fogg HS	\$14,525	\$72,625	\$290,502
MNPS Charters			
LEAD Academy HS	\$17,916	\$268,737	\$1,074,950
STEM Prep HS	\$17,445	\$174,450	\$697,799
Other	—	—	—
Total		\$1,671,012	\$6,684,049

7. For the traditional district schools, MNPS's calculation localizes all fiscal impact to the individual schools. However, MNPS's documentation and testimony state that approximately 40% of the per-pupil allocation stays at the central/district office level. Schools, through the district's School-Based Budgeting model, receive approximately 60% of the per-pupil allocation.
8. MNPS stated that fixed costs remain at the central office and school level even when 120 students leave the system.
9. MNPS's budget already accounted for the revenue allocated to its district-authorized charter schools. Because charter enrollment is already embedded in district operations, including district-authorized charters within the projected impact calculations makes it more difficult to identify the direct fiscal effect attributable to MCA.

ANALYSIS

After an in-depth analysis, the evidence presented by MNPS does not establish that approving Music City Academy's amended application would have a substantial negative fiscal impact on the LEA, such that authorization would be contrary to the best interests of students, the LEA, or the community. Therefore, I cannot conclude that MNPS has met its burden of proof under Commission Rule 1185-01-01-.01(4) and T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c).

The crux of the MNPS argument rests on the statutory requirement that districts transfer state and local allocations to a charter school, and the opening and operations of Music City Academy in Year 1 would result in a shifting of approximately \$1.67 million in per-pupil funding, growing to \$6,684,049 at full build-out. For context, the Year 1 projected fiscal impact represents

approximately 0.12%⁹ of the district's annual operating budget in Year 1, and the Year 1 enrollment of 120 represents 0.15% of the district's total enrollment for SY27-28. There is no evidence in the record establishing what percentage of the district's overall operating budget would be affected at full build-out, limiting the ability to assess whether the projected impact is truly substantial.

In analyzing MCA's fiscal impact, MNPS calculates the district's fiscal impact by multiplying the estimated student enrollment decline for each selected school by its estimated per-pupil allocation. The district's argument relies on the premise that projected enrollment shifts at identified schools are sufficient to establish a substantial negative fiscal impact. Additionally, the district stated that opening MCA would continue to dilute available resources for schools, despite overall district enrollment in MNPS remaining stable at roughly 77,000 students, as shown in Table 1.

The district's analysis leaves several relevant questions unanswered. First, the district failed to present evidence demonstrating that, due to the opening of MCA, the impact would be beyond any enrollment fluctuations within the district. 2024-25 to 2025-26 ADM declined by 1,986 students. MCA's Year 1 enrollment is only 120. Even assuming all Year 1 MCA students originated from MNPS, the projected enrollment effect would remain substantially smaller than enrollment fluctuations the district has previously experienced. Additionally, MNPS's documents project 3% growth in student enrollment for SY26-27. Historical enrollment figures demonstrate that MNPS has experienced comparable enrollment fluctuations over time.

Furthermore, the district's modeling relies on broad community-level impacts and incorporates other charter options, without clearly articulating how those shifts directly affect the LEA budget or traditional school operations under the School-Based Budgeting model. The district assumes that the total Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement ("TISA") amount contained in Table 3 represents a direct reduction to individual school budgets, yet district documentation and public hearing statements clarify that these figures do not reflect the actual amounts individual schools might lose. On average, only a portion of total TISA funding is distributed directly to schools through Student-Based Budgeting ("SBB"), with the remainder invested centrally. MNPS's fiscal impact calculations did not distinguish between the portion of funding distributed through School-Based Budgeting and the portion retained for district-level expenditures. Based on district testimony regarding SBB allocations, the projected school-level impact may be lower than the gross per-pupil allocation figures presented in the district's

⁹ Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Fiscal Year 2026-27 Operating Budget, June 23, 2026, at page 2.

analysis. However, MNPS did not calculate an actual projected fiscal impact on schools because the district used the full per-pupil allocation in its evidence.

To support the Commission's analysis of the evidence, Commission staff applied the district's testimony to the Year 1 fiscal impact figures provided by the district. This calculation reduces the impact on a school's revenue by 40%, aligning with how MNPS's per-pupil funding is distributed through School-Based Budgeting.

Table 4 Estimated School-Level Fiscal Impact Based on School-Based Budgeting Allocation

Impacted District School (Non-Charter)	Fiscal Impact (Year 1) Full PPA	SBB Revenue Amount (60% of PPA)
Hillsboro HS	\$395,895	\$237,537
Pearl-Cohn HS	\$350,952	\$210,571
John Overton HS	\$260,616	\$156,369
Nashville School of The Arts	\$74,667	\$44,800
Martin Luther King Jr.	\$73,069	\$43,841
Hume-Fogg HS	\$72,625	\$43,575
Total	\$1,227,824	\$736,694

Based on MNPS's testimony that approximately 60% of TISA funding is distributed through School-Based Budgeting, the projected school-level impact shown in Table 4 would be approximately \$736,694 across six schools. MNPS does not present evidence that this reduced amount has a substantial negative fiscal impact on the schools. While MNPS asserts that certain costs are fixed, the district did not quantify those expenditures or demonstrate how they translate into a substantial negative fiscal impact attributable to MCA. While the district attempts to localize the impact of opening a charter school to specific schools, the evidence presented does not establish that the projected fiscal effect is a substantial negative fiscal impact on the district.

The Commission also considered whether projected impacts on individual schools demonstrate a substantial negative fiscal impact on the LEA. While the potential impact on individual schools is acknowledged, evidence demonstrating a substantial negative fiscal impact for a district serving approximately 77,000 students cannot be limited to impacts at one or more schools. The statutory question is whether the district has demonstrated a substantial negative fiscal impact on the LEA as a whole.

Moreover, the district's full build-out projections assume the school reaches maximum enrollment, and that current fiscal and enrollment conditions remain unchanged throughout the

projection period. Table 5 reflects a steady increase in MNPS's total per-pupil allocation, which is a combination of state and local funding, over recent years.

Table 5. Total Per Pupil Allocation¹⁰

	Total State and Local TISA Revenue
SY2026-27 (Projected)	\$17,432
SY2025-26*	\$17,356
SY2024-25	\$15,307
SY2023-24	\$14,640

*awaiting final true-up.

In the aggregate, MNPS has not provided rigorous, direct evidence to meet the statutory burden of proving a substantial negative fiscal impact. The Tennessee legislature uses the term “substantial, negative fiscal impact” but does not define those terms in the statute. Where keywords are not defined, words are given their usual and accepted meaning. Substantial is defined as considerable in quantity; significantly great.¹¹ Based on the plain language definition, to meet the bar of being considered substantially negative, the fiscal impact of opening a charter school must rise above and beyond normal systemic fluctuations. The district also argues that additional charter schools affect the broader public-school ecosystem. However, that consideration is distinct from the statutory requirement that the district establish a substantial negative fiscal impact. The Commission, as an appellate body, regularly analyzes the impact on the surrounding community when acting on a new start application, a renewal application, or a revocation. The Commission is cognizant that its decisions, as with all authorizers’ decisions, impact students, families, and schools in the community.

However, that analysis is separate from the one required to prove a substantial negative fiscal impact in accordance with the statute. Because the district has historically managed normal enrollment shifts and benefits from broader funding growth, the evidence provided by MNPS does not substantiate a finding that the approval of Music City Academy will cause a substantial negative fiscal impact such that authorization would be contrary to the best interests of students, the LEA, or the community.

District Denial of Initial Application

The Review Committee assembled by MNPS to review and score the Music City Academy

¹⁰ Tennessee Department of Education Payments to the Charter Commission

¹¹ Substantial, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantial> (last visited Sept. 29, 2026).

initial application consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Cordarrell Cobb	Resource Strategy Coordinator
Ryan Latimer	Director of Boundary Planning and Enrollment Forecasting
Casey Megow	Executive Director of Facility Maintenance and Construction
Dr. Sudhir Sinha	Data Coach
Ken Stark	Executive Officer of Operations
Dr. Bill Warren	External Reviewer
Dr. David Williams	Deputy Chief of Academics

The Music City Academy initial application received the following ratings from the MNPS Review Committee:

Sections	Ratings
Educational Program Design and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Budget and Finance	Meets Standard

After the MNPS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its analysis was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on April 28, 2026, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of Music City Academy.

District Denial of Amended Application

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

Sections	Ratings
Educational Program Design and Capacity	Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Budget and Finance	Meets Standard

After MNPS Review Committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its analysis was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on July 28, 2026. At the July 28, 2026 board meeting, MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Music City Academy.

Commission Review Committee's Evaluation of the Application

Following the denial of the Music City Academy amended application and subsequent appeal to the Commission, Commission staff assembled a diverse review committee of internal and external experts to independently evaluate and score the Music City Academy amended application. This Review Committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Fatimah Fall	Commission Staff
Halli Faulkner	External Consultant
Beth Elpers	Commission Staff
Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore	Commission Staff
David Hartman	External Consultant

The Commission's Review Committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Music City Academy amended application, a capacity interview with the sponsor, and a final evaluation and scoring of the amended application resulting in a consensus rating for each major section. The committee's consensus rating of the Music City Academy application was as follows:

Sections	Ratings
Educational Program Design and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Budget and Finance	Meets or Exceeds Standard

The Review Committee recommends the approval of the amended application for Music City Academy because the applicant provided sufficient evidence in the academic, operational, and financial sections to demonstrate the application meets the required criteria of the rubric. The applicant proposes an innovative academic model that integrates physical wellness and academics with leadership capacity. The applicant presents proactive and thorough operational planning that demonstrates the capacity to launch the model, and the school has an aligned budget with sound financial plans.

Music City Academy proposes a comprehensive, mission-aligned educational model that emphasizes academic achievement while integrating wellness, athletics, character development, and postsecondary readiness. The program provides daily math and English language arts ("ELA") instruction through a modified block schedule, aligned Career and Technical Education ("CTE") pathways, movement-integrated and culturally relevant teaching practices, and high-quality curricula. MCA also demonstrated meaningful community engagement through listening sessions, surveys, events, sports clinics, and industry partnerships, with stakeholder feedback informing the academic model. The founding team brings extensive leadership experience and a

history of improving school performance.

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity meets the standard because the applicant has a diverse board that demonstrates strong governance, leadership and operational readiness with expertise in education, finance, athletics, and facilities. With thorough understanding of the school's plan, the board has recruited leadership with extensive experience in school leadership and charter school start-up, instructional improvement, athletics, and community engagement. Responsibilities are clearly defined and designed to support effective implementation by allowing the Chief Executive Officer ("CEO"), Chief Academic Officer ("CAO"), and General Manager to focus on their areas of expertise. MCA's detailed startup plan includes realistic timelines, clear accountability, and assigned owners across governance, operations, facilities, and school design. Its facilities strategy is also a strength, with multiple move-in-ready sites identified to reduce renovation costs and support a financially feasible launch. The team has also planned for its athletics-focused model through potential community and partnerships with higher education institutions while pursuing a permanent facility.

Music City Academy's Finance and Budget meets the standard by showing strong alignment between its budget, academic model, staffing, and enrollment projections. The leadership team secured more than \$712,000 in pre-opening funding and expects an additional \$625,000 in grants and donations upon approval, exceeding initial projections. The team also has a contingency plan for lower enrollment, including delaying nonessential positions while protecting critical student-support roles. Additionally, the governing board provides strong oversight, regular financial reporting, a goal of maintaining ninety days of cash on hand by year two, and sound fiscal policies, further demonstrating responsible financial management.

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

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

Public Hearing

Pursuant to statute¹² and Commission Policy 2.000, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director was held on September 24, 2026, representatives from Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools at the public hearing focused on the quality of the application review process, the support that was provided to the applicant throughout the review process, and the

¹² T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

reasons for denial of the application. Representatives from MNPS indicated that the Music City Academy amended application was denied due to deficiencies in the operations section of the application. MNPS representatives found that the facilities plans were underdeveloped. The district stated, given the necessity of a facility that included athletics facilities or a solid partnership with another institution, it was unlikely the school would be able to carry out its mission. Additionally, MNPS stated that the school relied on future hires to fill important responsibilities and that there was insufficient detail in health services and contingency planning.

Additionally, the MNPS stated that the application was denied under T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c), which allows an LEA to deny a charter school application on the basis that opening will cause a substantive negative fiscal impact on the district.¹³ MNPS provided a list of schools with projected student losses at year 1 through buildout and the subsequent revenue drops associated with the decline in enrollment. The MNPS Board of Education denied the application in a vote of seven to one, with one member abstaining.

In the sponsor's opening statement, the application stated MCA's goal is to unite academics, sports, and wellness. The applicant outlined a mission and vision of all students participating in wellness content daily to remain engaged in schooling. All students would follow one of four sports-related career and technical education ("CTE") pathways to ensure postsecondary preparedness. The proposed CAO spoke to the school's belief that students will show up daily for what they are passionate about, and with the focus on athletics, students will remain engaged and receive rigorous teaching. The proposed CAO also cited her instructional leadership experience, which included averaging one letter grade of growth per year as a principal at a Nashville charter school. MCA addressed MNPS's reasons for denial, stating that the per-pupil funding loss for the district represents about 0.028% of the district's budget in the first year. MCA leadership also reorganized its budget after learning that it was not awarded the Charter Schools Program ("CSP") grant. MCA testified that funding needs for its pre-opening year is \$825,000. While they originally budgeted to use \$325,000 in CSP funds, the sponsor testified to having raised over \$717,000 as of the date of the public hearing. They also expect another \$625,000 upon approval, which contributes to their Year 1 fundraising goals. The CEO also stated MCA has identified three viable facilities options that came in under budget, two of which currently house charter schools and therefore would require very few changes. MCA has also partnered with Tennessee State University ("TSU") regarding the use of their athletics facilities. The school is prepared to sign a lease for its facility upon approval. For operational

¹³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

preparedness, representatives from MCA stated they have received interest from sixty-two potential staff members, and their next hire will be a general manager to lead operations beginning in the pre-opening year. Finally, the school has received 162 letters of intent from students preparing to attend MCA when approved.

During questioning by the Executive Director, representatives from MNPS further explained how the operations plan did not meet the standard, specifically in the facilities plan, even though it is not a requirement of the application to have a named facility. MNPS representatives stated that because the model proposed integration of academics and athletics, the Review Team determined that the facility must be secured to meet the standard for approval. MNPS stated that while the amended application discussed a possible partnership with TSU, it did not provide concrete plans. The Commission then asked questions regarding MNPS's statement that the MCA team did not show capacity to execute the startup plan and open on time, especially given the addition of the CAO in the amended application, who has been an instructional leader at an MNPS charter school. MNPS representatives stated that while there was an improvement in the amended application, the school-based team only had some relevant experience, and some important positions were named but had yet to be hired.

The Commission's Executive Director then shifted to questions related to the MNPS finding of a substantial negative fiscal impact, first asking how the schools listed in the MNPS presentation were selected as the most affected by a new charter school potentially opening. MNPS representatives stated the MNPS Office of Zoning and Boundary Planning created the list using the historical record of charter school openings as well as the proposed charter school's proximity to the MNPS school and elements of the charter plan. MNPS representative stated that due to their use of student-based budgeting, funds follow students to the school they attend, with 60% of TISA funding going directly to the school. They stated that an increase in the number of charter schools in Davidson County would therefore be detrimental to the district as a whole, as approvals result in decreased funding for every school in the targeted community, as enrollment has remained stable at about 82,000 for the last few years.

The Executive Director then questioned the sponsor. The sponsor spoke to fundraising efforts since being informed that the school would not receive the CSP grant. They stated the school originally budgeted \$825,000 for the year and planned to use about \$300,000 of the needed funds from the CSP. However, since the grant was not awarded, the school has raised over \$717,500 for the pre-opening year with another \$625,000 committed on approval, which begins to cover the additional \$800,000 needed for year one of operation. The MCA team clarified the school's plans to locate in the core of Nashville. While two of the options are further towards South Nashville and Donelson, the team plans to provide transportation for those who need it. Additionally, they stated they have not signed a lease, as it would be fiscally

irresponsible to do so before approval. The MCA team also provided a status update on the athletics facilities plan. The team stated they have had further conversations with TSU and Vanderbilt about potentially using their athletics facilities. They have also discussed the possibility of local nonprofits providing access to buses for transportation to and from the athletics facilities, should they not be on campus. MCA also clarified that all facility options identified have the space to ensure all necessary CTE programming laid out in the mission. Finally, the Executive Director questioned MCA regarding its operational capacity, including its plans to hire for key positions and ensuring the split between governance and day-to-day management of the school. The CEO stated that bringing the CAO on board has been extremely helpful, and that a general manager will be the next critical hire for operational capacity in the pre-opening year. Finally, representatives from MCA stated they have added board members and will provide training on proper governance.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of twelve in-person comments, with two speaking in support of MNPS and ten speaking in support of Music City Academy. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received thirty-five written comments, with one writing in support of MNPS and thirty-four in support of Music City Academy.

Analysis

State law requires the Commission to review the decision of the local board of education and determine if the application “meets or exceeds the metrics outlined in the Tennessee State Board of Education’s application-scoring rubric and,” whether “approval of the application is in the best interests of the students, LEA, or community.”¹⁴ 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 LEA, 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 Music City Academy amended application did meet the standards required for approval.

¹⁴ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

I agree with the Review Committee that the application meets the standard for approval. The sponsor has designed a unique mission to blend academics, athletics, and wellness. The mission is defined, student-centered, and measurable. The sponsor intends to use athletics to create accountability metrics and drive student success. The sponsor proposed CTE pathways for all students and included movement throughout the school schedules. The sponsor's academic plan is closely tied to the school's culture. A strong school culture should be aligned with the mission and vision and describe specific strategies and practices that establish and reinforce a positive academic environment. MCA has designed a culture centered on three core plays: Team Over Self, Passion to Purpose, and Wellness for Life. The sponsor's plan includes applying the core plays across all aspects of the school. Also, the sponsor's plan implements a points system to reinforce student accountability and drive team culture, for example, by creating incentives like the MCA Cup. I believe the CEO is uniquely qualified to introduce this concept to entering students, bolstered by a detailed rollout plan to garner buy-in and support from the staff, students, and families. Additionally, the sponsor demonstrated a detailed plan for culture integration for students on day one as well as those who enroll after day one.

The sponsor provides a comprehensive description of the MCA educational program for its students. The application sufficiently details the learning environment to achieve its mission. A unique component of the sponsor's model is the requirement that all students participate in one athletic season per year. When questioned during the capacity interview and emphasized during the public hearing, the sponsor explained that student participation is not limited to being "on the field." Students are given the opportunity to contribute to the team in roles such as equipment manager or audio/visual production. I believe this goal is highly ambitious and requires solid operations and financial plans to support it. For the reasons explained in this analysis, I believe the governing board and founding leadership team are best positioned to fulfill the mission and vision of Music City Academy.

An academic mission like MCA's requires a strong show of community support. For over a year, the sponsor has continued to engage and interact with the community in a variety of ways, resulting in securing a number of community partnerships and 162 intents to enroll for a needed 120 students in Year 1. Additionally, the founding team is a noted strength of the sponsor's application. I agree with the review committee that the leaders have extensive educational experience and a track record of producing strong academic results. Dr. Dyson, the proposed founding CEO, has experience in Tennessee high schools, achieving a Reward School designation during his tenure. He is also distinctly situated to implement the athletic component of MCA's model. Christina McDonald, the proposed CAO, has opened charter schools and served in leadership positions within charter schools in Nashville and in Mississippi. Ms. McDonald has experience increasing proficiency in both ELA and math, as well as driving student growth across

a variety of content areas. The applicant team identified a gap in the leadership team, specifically the need for a general manager, who will serve in a director of operations role. As important to a successful application as detailed plans are, acknowledgment of gaps in the application with specific strategies to fill them is equally important. The sponsor emphasized during the public hearing that filling this position will remain a priority if approved, as it leads several key operational functions of MCA. I am confident that the sponsor has the funding to secure a general manager, but, more importantly, the school leadership understands the critical importance of operations and compliance within a successful charter school.

I agree with the Review Committee that the operations plan meets the standard for approval. The governing board is diverse and highly experienced across academics, operations, and finance. The sponsor has a detailed description of its members' powers and duties. The board was engaged and knowledgeable about Music City Academy's mission and goals during the capacity interview, and I feel confident in the legal relationship the Commission would have with this board, if approved.

I believe the sponsor also has a strong facility plan. The sponsor has identified multiple options for its temporary location and has engaged with currently operating charter schools for a co-location in its initial years of operations. Because the sponsor's model is tied specifically to athletics, the plan to ensure appropriate and adequate athletic space becomes especially important. The sponsor shared during the public hearing that MCA is in preliminary discussions regarding partnerships with multiple Nashville colleges and universities. This plan is realistic and supported by the budget.

The sponsor also has a detailed staffing plan including professional development and advancement opportunities within Music City Academy. The plan also includes benefits and structures that contribute to attracting and retaining quality teachers. The sponsor proposes a salary comparable to surrounding districts. The sponsor also testified at the public hearing that the school currently has sixty-two individuals interested in serving as teachers and staff.

Finally, I agree with the Review Committee that the Music City Academy financial plan meets the standard for approval. Since the loss of the CSP grant, the sponsor has filled that gap through fundraising to account for its budgeted Year 0 expenses. As of the date of the public hearing (September 24, 2026), the sponsor had raised \$717,000 through philanthropy and testified that another \$625,000 in grants and donations was expected upon approval. The sponsor has demonstrated an ability to secure funding in support of the school and quickly and effectively pivot when there is a change in funding. The sponsor has a realistic contingency plan should enrollment not materialize, with identified areas that can be sacrificed and/or delayed, as well as non-negotiables, such as the hiring of a dean of student supports. The governing board

demonstrated the expertise to oversee the school's budget. In the capacity interview, the governing board spoke extensively about the budget and managing cash flow. The sponsor for MCA has created a realistic and attainable budget to support a recommendation for approval.

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.

Part of the Commission's responsibility as a statewide appellate authorizer includes considering the effects of its charter school application approvals on local educational ecosystems. The Commission understands and regularly discusses how opening a new school will affect the intended community. This discussion includes the availability and quality of current options, enrollment trends, and demonstrated demand. While this is not a specific indicator in statute or in the State Board of Education's scoring rubric, this is always a consideration when evaluating the best interest of the students, the LEA, or the community.

The Commission is committed to being a high-quality authorizer and meeting the statutory obligations in each appeal process. When the Commission considers its standard, which includes "the best interest of the students, the LEA, or the community," it evaluates if the new school option has a high likelihood of success and would benefit the community. In this appeal, the sponsor has created a unique educational option designed for a targeted student population and has developed and implemented plans to increase student achievement and provide families with a high-quality educational option. For reasons previously detailed in this report, approval for Music City Academy does not have a substantial negative fiscal impact on MNPS such that the Commission is prohibited from approving the amended application. MNPS, based on the evidence and testimony presented, did not carry its burden to show that approval would cause a fiscal impact so significantly great to the district that approval is not in the best interests of the students, the LEA, or the community.

For the reasons expounded on in this report, I recommend that the Commission approve the Music City Academy amended application.



CONCLUSION

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tess Stovall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

October 9, 2026

Date



EXHIBIT A:
Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report

October 9, 2026

School Name: Music City Academy

Sponsor: Music City Academy

Proposed Location of School: Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

Evaluation Team:

- Beth Elpers
- Fatimah Fall
- Halli Faulkner
- Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore
- David Hartman



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 implement 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](#).



three sections of the application: Educational Program Design and Capacity, Operation Plan and Capacity, and Budget and Finance.

2. **Capacity Interview:** Based on the independent and collective review of the application, the Review Committee conducted a ninety-minute interview with the sponsor, members of the governing board, and identified school leadership 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 Evaluation:** A brief summary of the overall recommendation for the application.
3. **Analysis of each section of the application:** An analysis of the major sections of the application and the capacity of the team to execute the plan as described in the application.
 - a. **Educational Program Design and Capacity:** School overview; school mission and model; anticipated student population; family and community engagement and support; school culture and discipline; curriculum and instruction; special populations; student assessment and evaluation; educational program capacity; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - b. **Operations Plan and Capacity:** Governance; staffing; facilities; transportation; health and safety; insurance; food service; start-up plan; operations capacity; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - c. **Budget and Finance:** planning and budget worksheet; operating budget; budget and finance capacity; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.

The Commission's charter application Review Committee utilized the Tennessee State Board of Education's Charter School Application Scoring Rubric ("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

Each individual question will be rated "Meets," "Partially Meets," or "Does Not Meet." The rubric provides guidance within each question to aid reviewers in determining the extent to which each response meets the standard. Each major subsection will then be assigned an overall rating of "Meets," "Partially Meets," or "Does Not Meet" by averaging the ratings for each individual question within the subsection. Section summaries will then be determined by averaging subsection ratings.³

² Tennessee State Board of Education Policy 6.111

³ Tennessee State Board of Education's Charter School Application Scoring Rubric, pg. 3

Summary of the Application

School Name: Music City Academy

Sponsor: Music City Academy

Proposed Location of School: Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

Mission: At Music City Academy, we believe in the unifying power of academics and sports to drive student-athletes toward academic excellence, post-secondary opportunities, and wellness for life.⁴

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

Proposed Enrollment:⁵

Grade Level	Year 1: 2027-2028	Year 2: 2028-2029	Year 3: 2029-2030	Year 4: 2030-2031	Year 5: 2031-2032	At Capacity:
9	120	120	120	120	120	120
10	0	120	120	120	120	120
11	0	0	120	120	120	120
12	0	0	0	120	120	120
Totals	120	240	360	480	480	480

Brief Description of the Application

The sponsor, Music City Academy, is proposing to open a charter school in Davidson County and serve students in grades nine through twelve when fully built out. The school, Music City Academy ("MCA"), is a new-start school and would be the first school for the sponsor. The school intends to operate in Nashville and serve students throughout the city to provide a "team-centered, career-connected model." The school proposes to offer a connected academics and athletics-based model with career-connected learning and provide additional school options for students across Nashville.

The application states that a board of directors will govern the school and will include standing committees in finance, academic excellence, governance, development, with ad hoc committees established as needed. In Year 0, Music City Academy has budgeted \$1,075,000 in revenue, comprised of \$250,000 from the Nashville Funders Collaborative, \$250,000 from SCORE

⁴ Music City Academy Amended Application, pg. 14

⁵ Music City Academy Amended Application, pg. 33



Facilities, \$225,000 in individual grants and fundraising, and \$300,000 from the Charter Schools Program (“CSP”) grant and projects \$950,552 in expenses for the school. In Year 1, Music City Academy projects the school will have \$3,317,240 in revenue and \$3,021,813 in expenses, resulting in a balance of \$295,427. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$8,709,600 in revenue and \$7,752,525 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$2,604,873.⁶ The school anticipates that 34% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 12% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 24% of the student population will be English learners.⁷

⁶ Music City Academy Amended Budget

⁷ Music City Academy Amended Application, pg. 35

Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends the approval of the amended application for Music City Academy because the Educational Program Design and capacity, Operations Plan and Capacity, and Budget and Finance sections of the application all meet or exceeded the standard. The applicant proposes an innovative academic model that integrates physical wellness and academics with leadership capacity, the school's proactive and thorough operational planning demonstrates the capacity to launch the model, and the school has an aligned budget to the model with sound financial plans.

Music City Academy's Educational Program Design and Capacity section meets the standard because it proposes a comprehensive and mission-aligned academic model that prioritizes academic achievement while leveraging wellness and athletics to support student well-being, character development, and post-secondary readiness. The school's program includes daily math and English language arts ("ELA") instruction through a modified block schedule, participation in aligned career and technical education ("CTE") pathways, movement-integrated and culturally relevant instructional practices using high-quality curricula. MCA aims to rank among the top ten schools in Tennessee for academics, athletics, and postsecondary outcomes within its first eight years. The application also demonstrates strong community engagement through listening sessions, surveys, sports clinics, community events, and partnerships with industry organizations, with stakeholder feedback directly shaping key components of the academic model. Additionally, the founding team brings significant leadership experience and a proven record of improving academic outcomes and school performance in both charter and traditional school settings. The educational program is supported by a leadership structure that includes a dedicated operations leader to ensure instructional and operational excellence.

The application's Operations Plan and Capacity meets the standard because the application demonstrates strong governance, leadership, and operational readiness through an experienced and diverse board with expertise in education, finance, athletics, and facilities. Board members displayed a thorough understanding of the school's plans and have recruited an executive leadership team with deep experience in school leadership, charter school start-up, instructional improvement, athletics, and community engagement. The proposed three-person leadership structure at the school level consists of a chief executive officer ("CEO"), chief academic officer, and general manager. Responsibilities are clearly delineated, and the structure is designed to support effective implementation by allowing leaders to focus on their areas of expertise. Additionally, MCA's detailed start-up plan includes realistic timelines, accountability measures, and identified owners for key tasks across governance, operations, facilities, and school design. The facilities strategy is also a notable strength, with multiple viable, move-in-

ready school sites already identified, reducing renovation costs and supporting a financially feasible launch. The team has further demonstrated proactive planning for its athletics-focused model by securing potential access to athletic facilities through community partnerships and local institutions while continuing to pursue a long-term permanent facility.

Music City Academy's Budget and Finance meets the standard because it demonstrates strong alignment between the proposed budget, academic model, staffing structure, and enrollment projections. Although the school was not awarded the anticipated CSP and other competitive start-up grants, the leadership team successfully secured more than \$712,000 in start-up funding for the pre-opening year and expects an additional \$625,000 in grants and donations upon approval. This fundraising exceeds the amount originally projected from those funding sources. The team has also developed a realistic contingency plan for lower-than-expected enrollment, identifying specific nonessential positions that could be delayed while protecting key roles critical to student support and academic success. Furthermore, the governing board provides strong financial oversight, with regular budget monitoring, monthly financial reporting through back-office support, plans to maintain ninety days of cash on hand by the second year of operation, and sound fiscal policies that demonstrate responsible stewardship of public funds while ensuring the school can sustain its mission and vision.

Summary of Section Ratings

In accordance with the Tennessee State Board of Education's charter application scoring rubric, applications that do not meet or exceed the standard in all sections will be deemed not ready for approval and strengths in one area of the application do not negate weaknesses in other areas. Opening and maintaining a successful, high-performing charter school depends on having a complete, coherent plan and identifying highly capable individuals to execute that plan. The Review Committee's consensus ratings for each section of the application are as follows:

Sections	Ratings
Educational Program Design and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Budget and Finance	Meets or Exceeds Standard

Analysis of the Educational Program Design and Capacity

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Educational Program Design and Capacity meets the standard because it presents an innovative academic model that integrates physical wellness and academics in alignment with the mission and vision, a strong student recruitment plan, and a founding team with demonstrated capacity to implement the school's plan.

Music City Academy proposes an innovative academic model in which wellness supports students' academic progress and overall postsecondary preparedness. While movement and wellness are critical elements of MCA's mission, the school leadership affirmed during the capacity interview that MCA's first goal is students' academic achievement, with athletics supporting student well-being and character development. All students receive daily math and ELA instruction in a modified block schedule to ensure appropriate instructional time, and all students will participate in aligned CTE pathways. The instructional strategies within the application are grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy and, when appropriate, incorporate movement to effectively serve their target student population. MCA has selected high-quality curricula that supports flexible thinking and inquiry-based learning that will work to advance towards its mission of academic excellence and postsecondary preparedness.

The academic program is comprehensive and mission aligned. It clearly connects the school's instructional approach, student experience, and desired outcomes to MCA's stated mission. Music City Academy aims to be "Top 10 in the State" in academic performance, postsecondary outcomes, and athletics within the first eight years of operation. Elements of mission alignment within the academic program include movement-integrated instruction, team-based and collaborative learning, clear routines, personalized coaching and feedback, real-world career-connected learning, and integrated social emotional learning ("SEL") and wellness support. All students will be required to participate in at least one team sport each year, have daily movement and wellness, and will select one of the CTE pathways available in sports-related fields. MCA's ambitious goal to have high student achievement in academics, athletics, and postsecondary outcomes is reflected within the academic plan.

The application demonstrated meaningful, continued engagement with a variety of stakeholders within the Nashville community. Music City Academy has hosted listening sessions to hear from families, participated in community events, hosted sports clinics, conducted surveys, and developed relationships with industry-aligned organizations, as evidenced in letters of support. The survey found that 238 respondents said they would enroll their child in Music City Academy in 2027 upon authorization. Specific pieces of feedback were also used in the



creation of MCA's academic model. These included aligned career pathways, mandatory athletic participation, and a teacher-and-coaching staffing model that fosters strong relationships between teachers and families. Further engagement is planned for the beginning of their first school year, including hosting more sports clinics and participating in Nashville community events such as school choice fairs.

Members of the founding team have extensive experience running charter and non-charter high schools with strong academic results. Christina McDonald, the Chief Academic Officer, served as the Senior Director of Leadership and Executive Principal at a Nashville charter high school. Under her leadership, the school increased its accountability rating from a D to a B-rating in three years, math and ELA proficiency both increased considerably, and students achieved Level 5 Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System ("TVAAS") growth across 18 content areas. Dr. Kevin Dyson, the Chief Executive Officer, served as a high school principal, and, under his leadership, the school received its first Reward School designation and maintained a 96% graduation rate. Mr. Dyson also demonstrates athletics-based leadership in his former career as a National Football League athlete and later as a secondary coach. Both leaders have specific experience in instruction and academic coaching, student and teacher performance management, special populations oversight, and parent and community engagement. MCA also plans to hire a general manager or director of operations, who will oversee all operations for the school. This ensures that all leaders can lead according to their expertise without sacrificing capacity.

Analysis of the Operations Plan and Capacity

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity meets the standard because of its diverse and experienced governing board, thoughtful start-up plan and division of responsibilities, and its realistic facilities plan.

The application outlines an experienced, local, and diverse governing board, including members with educational, financial, sports, and facility expertise. The board spoke at length during the capacity interview regarding the academic, operations, and financial plans for the school, providing strategic governance aligned with the school's mission. The board has selected a CEO with relevant school leadership and operations experience, a passion for athletics, and deep connections to the Nashville community. Additionally, the CEO selected a chief academic officer with significant charter school start-up and instructional leadership experience in Nashville.

Music City Academy's start-up plan is detailed, with realistic deadlines for key deliverables in categories such as governance, school design, operations, and facilities, with specific owners of each task. MCA proposes a three-position leadership structure: the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Academic Officer, and General Manager. This division of duties allows for the academic leader to focus on curricular and cultural elements of the school, the general manager to oversee operational needs, and the executive leader to lead fundraising, community engagement, and any other gaps as needed. This plan will help ensure a smooth pre-opening and start-up year without stretching leadership too thin as they implement their model.

The facilities plan is also identified as a strength of the application. The applicant has identified multiple potential sites to house the school during the first few years of operation, while MCA searches for a permanent facility. During the capacity interview, the applicant stated the two top choices for facilities currently house charter schools that will soon outgrow the space within the greater catchment area. Choosing a facility that has already housed a school would reduce any necessary facility renovation costs within the budget by \$400,000. Therefore, either of these options is move-in ready and is financially realistic. The applicant stated that either facility could house MCA through the second year of operation, and the team will continue to search for the best permanent facility while they are renting. Due to the unique model of the school, it is integral for MCA to have access to athletics facilities if they are not located on site. The team clarified that one of the potential facilities does have athletic spaces, but they have also been working with Tennessee State University and other community partners should the school ultimately lease a facility without athletic spaces.

Analysis of the Budget and Finance

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Budget and Finance meets the standard because the operating budget aligns with the school's model, demonstrates the ability to meet fundraising goals, and has strong systems in place for the school's financial management.

The proposed budget was noted as a strength because it is thoughtfully aligned with the school's academic model, staffing projections, and growing enrollment. The original budget relied upon start-up funding through the CSP and other competitive national grants that were ultimately not awarded. However, the leadership team has worked quickly to secure necessary start-up funding without compromising the school model. At the time of the capacity interview, Music City Academy had secured over \$712,000 in start-up funding for the pre-opening year, with another \$625,000 in grants and donations expected once the school is approved to open. This amount exceeds what was budgeted for in the grants that the school did not receive. Dr. Dyson and members of the governing board stated during the capacity interview that the team is urgently continuing to fundraise for a strong start-up year.

The applicant provided a realistic plan for a minimum enrollment of ninety-six students, or 80% of the projected enrollment of 120 students, with specific positions that would be cut if needed, without sacrificing the school's academic model. If enrollment did not materialize as expected, the Chief Academic Officer stated in the capacity interview that the plan would be to delay hiring staff members, such as a staff recruitment manager. In addition to identifying positions they plan to eliminate or delay, the applicant also identified staff, such as a dean of student supports and exceptional education, and multilingual teachers, as non-negotiable and would not be cut even if there was a need to delay hiring. The Review Committee confirmed that the positions named in the capacity interview aligned with the minimum budget provided. The Music City Academy team has thoughtfully planned for minimum budget scenarios while keeping key positions to carry out its vision.

The governing board provides financial experience and sound oversight plans. The board treasurer confirmed during the capacity interview that he had carefully supervised the budget while the team worked to navigate start-up funding. He confirmed the board will receive and review financial statements monthly, provided by back-office support. Additionally, the school plans to have ninety days of cash on hand by year two, meet all financial reporting requirements set by the state and the district, and remain within the board-approved, publicly available budget. Additionally, financial policies are sound and demonstrate a commitment to being responsible fiscal stewards of public funds.



Evaluation Team

Beth Elpers is the Director of Authorizing for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. She is a Certified Public Accountant and has spent the last 15 years specializing in school finance and charter school oversight. Before working at the Commission, Beth worked as an administrator and charter school authorizer in California. She has also had the opportunity to serve as the Chief Business Officer of a charter school, an Executive Director of Fiscal Services for a school district with an annual budget of over \$500 million, and an auditor of charter schools and non-profit organizations. She earned her Master of Business Administration degree from California Baptist University, where she also received her B.S. in Business Administration.

Fatimah Fall serves as the Student Data Coordinator for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission, supporting charter schools with student information systems, state reporting, data quality, and compliance. A Memphis native, Fatimah is a Teach For America alumna and graduate of Middle Tennessee State University, where she earned degrees in Africana Studies and Psychology. She began her career as an elementary school teacher, spending her first two years teaching at the same Memphis charter school she attended as a student. Throughout her career, Fatimah has worked exclusively in the nonprofit and charter school sectors, with experience spanning classroom instruction, school-based data management, and state-level charter school support.

Halli Faulkner started her career as a middle school English teacher in East Los Angeles, where she earned her Masters in Secondary Education from Loyola Marymount University. After working as a teacher, Halli went on to earn her law degree from The George Washington University Law School and then work for over a decade in education policy at the state and federal levels. She is passionate about providing high-quality school options for all families.

Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore is the Authorizing Coordinator for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. She previously worked as the Student Data Analyst for the Commission. Prior to working at the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission, Sophie taught elementary school at a high performing charter school in the South Bronx. More recently, Sophie completed her Master of Public Policy from Vanderbilt University where she worked as a research assistant for the Fuchs Group. Sophie also holds a Bachelor of the Arts degree from Bowdoin College and a Master of Teaching from Relay Graduate School of Education.

David Hartman is the founder of Venn Education, he specializes in expert evaluation, smart change making, and high-stakes decisions based on evidence. He spent over 10 years as the Managing Director of Accountability and Authorizer Supports with SchoolWorks. He served the Minnesota Department of Education, where he led the design and implementation of the nation's first high-stakes charter school authorizer performance evaluation. Notable



engagements include leading and developing statewide charter school authorizer evaluations in Ohio and Tennessee, turnaround of an alternative high school, strategic planning for a state association, and numerous school reviews. In addition, David has taught in high schools and universities.