



Executive Director's Recommendation The Gate School 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 7, 2026, the sponsor of The Gate School ("sponsor" or "The Gate") 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 The Gate School 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 the MNPS Board of Education to deny the amended application for The Gate School.

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 Gate School 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 local board's decision to deny.

¹ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

² T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.



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 The Gate School to MNPS on February 2, 2026.
3. MNPS assembled a review committee to review and score The Gate School initial application.
4. On March 27, 2026, the MNPS Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of The Gate School.
5. The MNPS Review Committee reviewed and scored The Gate School's initial application, indicating the school partially met standard in education program design and capacity, operations plan and capacity and budget and finance because the application did not show a sound outreach plan to reach diverse student populations in the targeted community, did not demonstrate full understanding of facility requirements and did not clearly explain revenue expense projections to determine if the budget is viable if enrollment projections are not met.
6. On April 28, 2026, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny The Gate School's initial application.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for The Gate School to MNPS on May 27, 2026.
8. The MNPS Review Committee reviewed and scored The Gate School's amended application based on the scoring rubric and rated the educational program design and capacity and operations plan and capacity as Meets Standard and the budget and finance section as Partially Meets Standard.
9. On July 28, 2026, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of The Gate School.
10. The sponsor appealed the denial of The Gate School's amended application in writing to the Commission on August 7, 2026, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
11. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored The Gate School's amended application using the state's scoring rubric.
12. The Commission's Review Committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of The Gate School leadership team on September 9, 2026, via Microsoft Teams.

13. On September 25, 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 MNPS and received public comment regarding The Gate School amended application.
14. After the capacity interview, the Commission's Review Committee determined a final consensus rating of The Gate School 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 The Gate School 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 a 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

⁴ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c).

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c).

enrollment decline projected by MNPS is materially different from the enrollment gains and 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 The Gate School:

1. The Gate School's amended application states that in its first anticipated year of operation (SY2027-28), the school will enroll a maximum of 120 students in sixth grade; scaling to 360 students in grades six through eight 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 six schools that would see enrollment decreases because of the opening of The Gate.

⁶ Amended Application, pg. 32

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 The Gate

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					
West End MS	286.9	20	7.0%	60	20.9%
H.G. Hill MS	423.5	20	4.7%	60	14.2%
Bellevue MS	487.9	20	4.1%	60	12.3%
Moses McKissack MS	108.4	20	18.5%	60	55.4%
Head MS	327.9	10	3.0%	30	9.1%
MNPS Charter					
Nashville Prep	164.0	20	12.2%	60	36.6%
Other	—	10	—	30	—
Total		120		360	

- The largest projected Year 1 impact to any district-operated school is approximately 18.5% of ADM at Moses McKissack Middle School. This projected percentage impact is larger than impacts identified for other schools, in part because Moses McKissack Middle School serves a comparatively small student population. The projected impacts at the remaining district-operated schools range from 3.0% to 7.0% of ADM.
- MNPS estimated that the total fiscal impact during Year 1 of The Gate School's operations would be \$1,873,855, growing to \$5,621,566 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 six identified schools. The district's calculation applies proportional shares based on the 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			
West End MS	\$16,750	\$334,991	\$1,004,972
H.G. Hill MS	\$17,021	\$340,428	\$1,021,283
Bellevue MS	\$16,314	\$326,276	\$978,829
Moses McKissack MS	\$18,348	\$366,965	\$1,100,895
Head MS	\$15,402	\$154,024	\$462,071

Impacted School	Per Pupil Allocation	Fiscal Impact (Year 1)	Fiscal Impact (Build Out)
MNPS Charter			
Nashville Prep	\$17,559	\$351,172	\$1,053,516
Other	—	—	—
Total		\$1,873,855	\$5,621,566

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 The Gate School.

ANALYSIS

After an in-depth analysis, the evidence presented by MNPS does not establish that approving The Gate School'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 The Gate School in Year 1 would result in a shifting of approximately \$1,873,855 in per-pupil funding, growing to \$5,621,566 at full build-out. For context, the Year 1 projected fiscal impact represents approximately 0.13%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.

⁹ MNPS Fiscal Year 2026-27 Operating Budget, June 23, 2026, pg. 2.

In analyzing The Gate'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 The Gate 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 The Gate, the impact would be beyond any enrollment fluctuations within the district. 2024-25 to 2025-26 ADM declined by 1,986 students. The Gate's Year 1 enrollment is only 120. Even assuming all projected The Gate School students originated from MNPS, the projected enrollment effect would remain substantially smaller than enrollment fluctuations previously experienced by the district. Additionally, MNPS's documents projected 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 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-Charterers)	Fiscal Impact (Year 1) Full PPA	SBB Revenue Amount (60% of PPA)
West End MS	\$334,991	\$200,995
H.G. Hill MS	\$340,428	\$204,257
Bellevue MS	\$326,276	\$195,766
Moses McKissack MS	\$366,965	\$220,179
Head MS	\$154,024	\$92,414
Total	\$1,522,684	\$913,611

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 \$913,611 across five 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 The Gate. 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.

Given the inclusion of Moses McKissack Middle School within MNPS's presentation, it is important to include the school specifically in the analysis. At full build-out, the district projects an enrollment impact of more than half the school's current ADM and a school-level fiscal impact of approximately \$220,000 under the School-Based Budgeting allocation model. This projected percentage impact is larger than impacts identified for other schools, in part because Moses McKissack Middle School serves a comparatively small student population.

The potential impact on this individual school is acknowledged; however, evidence demonstrating a substantial negative fiscal impact for a district serving 77,000 cannot be limited to one school, a fact which MNPS acknowledges in response to questions at the public hearing. 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 The Gate School 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 Gate School initial application consisted of the following individuals:

¹⁰ Tennessee Department of Education Payments to the Charter Commission

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

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

The Gate School 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	Partially 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 The Gate School.

District Denial of Amended Application

The Review Committee assembled by MNPS to review and score The Gate School 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 or Exceeds Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Budget and Finance	Partially Meets Standard

After the 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, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of The Gate School.

Commission Review Committee's Evaluation of the Application

Following the denial of The Gate School 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 Gate School amended application.

This Review Committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Ariana Cahoon	Commission Staff
Halli Faulkner	External Consultant
Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore	Commission Staff
Whitney Noel	External Consultant
Lawrence Walker	Commission Staff

The Commission's Review Committee conducted an initial review and scoring of The Gate School 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 Gate School's 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 The Gate School 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 provides a comprehensive Educational Program Design and Capacity plan. The instructional leader, the Executive Partner, maintains a strong track record of accelerating student outcomes throughout his teaching career. Humanities courses are discussion-based and use the Harkness model to deepen student thinking, which all students and teachers will be trained to utilize. All courses will utilize artificial intelligence ("AI") to provide individualized, targeted feedback to families, students, and teachers meant to personalize learning. The applicant will also provide opportunities for coursework acceleration, such as offering Algebra I to all eighth graders to support high school readiness. The culture plan utilizes an adapted version of the nationally recognized culture framework from Valor Collegiate Academy, which the Executive Partner has experience utilizing. Lastly, recruitment and enrollment efforts that include deep engagement with families over the entirety of the application development and appeals have shown strong demand for the school.

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity demonstrate the ability to successfully launch a middle school. The applicant's board is comprised of experienced individuals with expertise in financial management, governance, academic accountability, and community engagement. The Operations Partner has experience launching and running a high-performing

charter school in Nashville for the last fifteen years. The start-up plan contains comprehensive contingency plans in case of delays in facilities or lower-than-expected enrollment. The Gate has also identified a facility to purchase in the proposed catchment area that can support the school at full-scale and is within budget. The staffing plan is also aligned to the instructional model which values teachers remaining connected to the classroom, offering teacher incentive through higher pay and leadership opportunities.

The Budget and Finance section meets the standard due to the financial capacity and realistic operating budget tied to the school's model. Funds are budgeted for key areas such as teacher salaries and external professional development, in alignment with the mission and vision of the school. The applicant urgently secured funds through fundraising once grants were not secured to ensure the model is not compromised and is viable to operate in its start-up years. To date, The Gate has raised enough start-up funds to fund its pre-opening year and has already started funding its first year of operation. The Operations Partner has previously managed finances for a Nashville charter school, proving the school has the operational capacity to maintain a sustainable budget. Additionally, financial policies are sound and reflect charter school best practices.

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

For additional information regarding the Review Committee's evaluation of The Gate School 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 25, 2026. Representatives from MNPS 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 reasons for denial of the application. Representatives from MNPS indicated that The Gate School amended application was denied based on deficiencies in the budget and finance section of the application. The amended application included a reduction of the tenant improvement budget from about \$500,000 to \$100,000 without justification. MNPS stated that facilities costs remain uncertain because specific properties have not been identified. As such, the budget could not be deemed sufficient to support the applicant's educational program. Additionally, the MNPS representative stated

¹² T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

the application was also denied pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c) stating that a LEA may 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 their proposed student losses at Year 1 through buildout and the subsequent TISA revenue drops associated with the decline in enrollment. The MNPS Board of Education denied the application in a vote of eight to one.

In the sponsor's opening statement, the applicant refuted the district's claims on substantial negative fiscal impact, stating MNPS's analysis overestimated the impact of the school and failed to consider funding MNPS would not have to provide if the school is approved. Representatives from the school also provided an update on The Gate's facility search. The sponsor has a signed agreement for a permanent facility in Metro Center and has revised its budget to include renovation targets. The applicant spoke to the strength of its founding team's experience in charter school operations and middle school instruction. They propose to open a middle school due to a noted decline in proficiency in math and English language arts during the middle school years. The Teaching Firm model will allow for strong instructors to stay in the classroom, the Harkness model to provide a basis for students to display their thinking, and thoughtful use of technology to elevate teaching and prepare students for high school. The applicant also provided an update on its current financial position. The school has raised \$1.1 million, made up of private donors, local foundations, the Nashville Incubator, City Fund, SCORE, and anonymous funders. The Gate has received 106 intents-to-enroll from current fifth graders, which the team attributes to its significant amount of time spent building relationships with families across Nashville. While early engagement was concentrated in West Nashville, the team has worked to engage families closer to the proposed school site while continuing to work with West Nashville families to ensure transportation options are available.

During questioning by the Commission, MNPS was asked to clarify its decision to rate the budget and finance section as Partially Meets Standard. When the amended application included only \$100,000 for tenant improvements, down from about \$500,000 in the initial application, the Review Committee marked the budget and finance section as partially meets standard and noted the facility plan did not meet standard because they were unable to estimate the sponsor's start-up costs. The representative explained that while securing a facility is not required, reviewers expect sufficient information about the properties being considered to evaluate whether the assumptions are reasonable.

The Commission then shifted questioning to fiscal impact. MNPS stated the schools most affected by the potential drop in enrollment included middle schools that would lose upwards of

¹³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(c).

\$1.1 million each. They stated that students moving does not equate to efficient resource reallocation, and a drop in funding likely means providing the same services with less money, even if there are fewer students overall. MNPS also stated that district enrollment has remained stable at approximately 82,000 students over the last few years, and that as more schools are added, schools receive less funding overall. Additionally, MNPS acknowledged middle school proficiency declines across the state and stated the district has been prioritizing this, resulting in an increase in MNPS middle school proficiency over the last six years.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor. The sponsor spoke to fundraising efforts since discovering the school would not be receiving the Charter Schools Program (“CSP”) grant. The sponsor stated that while they originally relied upon CSP funds for Year 0 and Year 1 operations, they no longer need those funds to be sustainable because they had already raised funds for Year 0 and only need \$115,000 more to be solvent in Year 1. The Commission asked why the applicant reduced the tenant improvement costs in the amended budget. Representatives for The Gate stated that this was a misunderstanding on the part of the MNPS Review Team and that the budget still references \$500,000 for tenant improvements. The \$100,000 improvement budget was noted in the facility section and stated as a possibility should the school select a facility that currently houses a school. The applicant then stated that since solidifying its facility plan in Metro Center, the team has worked with families to ensure this location would be feasible for those interested in enrolling initially. The Commission then questioned the applicant’s academic plans regarding acceleration balanced with remediation for students who may enter at different levels of proficiency. The applicant stated that strong Tier I instruction, paired with targeted, daily response to intervention will lead to readiness for more advanced coursework. When asked to clarify the staffing model, the applicant stated they are working to create a clear growth pathway for instructors. In the first year, the school plans to hire the most experienced staff it can find and incorporate more novice teachers into the model as the school expands. Finally, the Commission asked about the use of AI and technology at The Gate School. Representatives from the applicant stated that AI is simply one part of the instructional model, meant to help teachers respond more precisely and faster to student data, and that they are committed to not using AI to take the cognitive load off students.

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 The Gate School. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received sixty-six written comments, with one writing in support of MNPS and sixty-five writing in support of The Gate School.

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 Gate School amended application did rise to the level of meeting or exceeding the standards required for approval.

Public charter schools are designed to offer innovative methods to increase proficiency and achievement for Tennessee students. Because there is greater autonomy afforded to charter schools, the sponsors bear a greater responsibility to ensure, through the application process, that they have prepared to meet the standards of the State Board of Education’s scoring rubric. My analysis of the amended application concludes that The Gate School has developed a plan for a public charter school that meets the educational, operational, and financial standards of the scoring rubric.

The educational plan is unique and not currently offered in a public school in Nashville. The school’s leadership is strong and experienced. The academic program is comprehensive and aligned to the school’s mission and stated outcomes. The application contains thorough expectations for staff and students, including a daily schedule, progress reviews, strong board oversight, and clear communications to families and communities. I appreciate the planned rigor of The Gate School’s academic model, but paramount to this school’s success, if approved, is ensuring that students of all proficiency levels are supported. I do believe that the sponsor has a strong capacity to fill any critical gaps prior to a Fall 2027 opening, as evidenced by the sponsor’s fundraising efforts through the appellate cycle.

¹⁴ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

The State Board of Education rubric holds that an application meets the standard for approval if its academic plan includes a comprehensive description of the educational program. The sponsor's selection of the Harkness model for teaching has the potential to introduce a new academic model within Nashville's public-school ecosystem. To support this model, the school has executed memoranda of understanding ("MOU") and plans to provide extensive professional development and instructional support to implement the model. This evidence was included within the application and discussed in the capacity interview and public hearing.

The sponsor also demonstrated strong community support for the approval of the application. Intentional outreach serves to build public trust and, when successfully implemented, can help determine student enrollment. A strong recruitment plan contains evidence of a variety of outreach methods and a demonstrated understanding of the target population. At the time of the amended application, the sponsor had gathered eighty-two intents to enroll, which is near their enrollment operational minimum of eighty-five students. The sponsor demonstrated an understanding of the necessary ongoing outreach, which gives me confidence in the sponsor's projected enrollment. The sponsor's continued outreach through the appeal process has resulted in an increase in intents to enroll, now totaling 106. I appreciate that the sponsor conducted camps to garner interest in a new school choice and to inform its model. The sponsor used these camps to inform decisions about the design of the school (e.g., the commitment to a transportation plan) and introduce its academic model to the community and potential students. The sponsor's intentionality is a great strength of this application.

In review of The Gate School's founding team, I am particularly impressed by the governing board's selection of Burrus Cox as its Executive Partner, who then added Jim Lekrone to the leadership team as Operations Partner. Mr. Cox is an experienced educator in Nashville charter schools, producing the level of student academic achievement and success that supports approval. Further, Mr. Cox's hiring of Mr. Lekrone demonstrated an awareness of the need to fill the skills gap and areas for growth that will be critical to success. Mr. Lekrone has successfully opened and operated an MNPS-authorized charter school for over a decade. He brings tremendous operational and financial expertise to The Gate School.

Operationally, I agree with the Review Committee that the application meets the standard for approval. First, the governing board has diverse experience that is critical to successful oversight of a public charter school. The board showed an understanding of its responsibilities regarding The Gate School's academic performance and oversight of school leaders. Additionally, the board understands that it holds the legal obligations of a charter agreement, aligning with the State Board of Education rubric requirement. The sponsor's staffing structure presents a unique approach to the nationwide teacher shortage, utilizing the Teaching Firm model. This is a proven model with incentives built-in for leadership advancement. The

proposed Executive Partner has experience in other charter schools that use the Teaching Firm model, and the school will partner with organizations to provide professional development opportunities that help attract and retain high-performing teachers. The sponsor has developed a clear organizational chart detailing the growth of The Gate School's staff and leadership as the school expands year over year. The Gate School has a realistic start-up timeline, including facilities, even accounting for delays caused by appeals. While the sponsor has shifted from its originally named facility in West Nashville, the newly identified facility is in the original catchment area and includes a transportation plan to ensure the students who have completed intents to enroll can attend The Gate School.

Financially, the sponsor meets the standard for approval. Because the sponsor did not receive the CSP grant, there was a funding gap during the school's initial years. The sponsor secured funding that exceeded the CSP grant loss. As of the public hearing, the school had raised \$1.1 million, made up of private donors, local foundations, the Nashville Incubator, City Fund, SCORE, and anonymous funders. As previously noted, the sponsor is fiscally viable with a minimum enrollment of eighty-five students and, as of the public hearing, the sponsor garnered over 100 intents to enroll. The sponsor's budget includes teacher salaries that exceed the resident district, and the narrative identified the Operations Partner as the party responsible, which is a noted strength based on Mr. Lekrone's previous experience as a charter school leader. During the capacity interview, the board spoke in depth about the school's proposed budget and how the board and school leadership navigated not receiving the CSP grant. It is clear throughout the appeal that the school leadership and governing board have high capacity and clearly understand their roles and responsibilities.

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 as well as the geographic district in which a new school would be located. 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 The Gate School 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 Gate School 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 The Gate School was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or community. Therefore, I recommend that the Commission overturn the decision of the MNPS Board of Education and approve the amended application for The Gate School.



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: The Gate School

Sponsor: The Gate School

Proposed Location of School: Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

Evaluation Team:

- Ariana Cahoon
- Halli Faulkner
- Sophie Binenfeld Gilmore
- Whitney Noel
- Lawrence Walker



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](#).

three sections of the application: Educational Program Design and Capacity, Operations Design 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: The Gate School

Sponsor: The Gate School

Proposed Location of School: Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

Mission: The Gate School cultivates student independence, effective communication, and academic excellence in the middle grades through outstanding teaching and purposeful use of technology, preparing every student for success in high school and beyond.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:
6	120	120	120	120	120	120
7	0	120	120	120	120	120
8	0	0	120	120	120	120
Totals	120	240	360	360	360	360

Brief Description of the Application

The sponsor, The Gate School, is proposing to open a charter school in Davidson County and serve students in sixth through eighth grades. The school, The Gate School ("The Gate"), 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 prepare students for success in high school and beyond through discussion-based learning and purposeful use of technology.⁵ The school proposes to offer excellent teaching using the Teaching Firm and Harkness models and provide an opportunity for students in Nashville to have additional school options.

The application states that the proposed school will be governed by a board of directors with standing committees in finance, academic excellence, governance, development, and ad hoc, as needed. In Year 0, The Gate School has budgeted \$1,685,000 in revenue, receiving \$45,120 in private donations, \$250,000 from Charter School Growth Fund, \$250,000 from New Schools Venture Fund, \$250,000 from SCORE Facilities, \$410,000 from other grants, and

⁴ The Gate School Amended Application, pg. 12

⁵ The Gate School Amended Application, pg. 32

\$325,000 from the Charter Schools Program (“CSP”) grant. The applicant projects \$1,030,057 in expenses for the school. In Year 1, The Gate School projects the school will have \$2,813,112 in revenue and \$2,783,049 in expenses, resulting in a balance of \$30,063. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$6,049,336 in revenue and \$5,918,913 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$865,140.⁶ The school anticipates that 34% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 14% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 31% of the student population will be English learners.⁷

⁶ The Gate School Amended Budget

⁷ The Gate School Amended Application, pg. 33

Summary of the Evaluation

The Review Committee recommends the approval of the amended application for The Gate School because the Educational Program Design and Capacity, Operations Design and Capacity, and Budget and Finance sections all met or exceeded the standard. The applicant presented a robust academic plan grounded in excellent instruction. The school's proven leadership team and thoughtful start-up plan show the capacity to successfully launch a new school. These are supported by proactive budgeting and fundraising that demonstrate the school's ability to remain financially viable.

The applicant's Educational Program Design and Capacity section demonstrates thoughtful instructional planning and a strong culture system. The application is grounded in the idea of excellent instruction, led by a proven instructional leader. Discussion-based classes in the humanities courses will use the Harkness model, in which all teachers and students will be trained. All courses will use artificial intelligence to pinpoint individualized areas of need and communicate those with families, students, and teachers. Opportunities for acceleration will also be offered for all students to ensure academic preparedness for high school. The culture plan utilizes an adapted version of Valor Collegiate Academy's nationally recognized culture framework. Recruitment and enrollment efforts that include deep engagement with families have shown strong demand for the school.

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity section demonstrates the ability to successfully launch a middle school. The Gate School has an experienced and diverse board with expertise in financial management, governance, academic accountability, and community engagement. The proposed operations lead has successfully operated a charter school in Nashville. The start-up plan is comprehensive and contains contingency plans for key areas, such as potential delays in facilities or lower-than-expected enrollment. The staffing plan is clearly aligned to the instructional model, including higher than average teacher pay and opportunities for teachers to grow as leaders. The school has also secured a permanent facility within budget and within the proposed catchment area.

The Budget and Finance section meets the standard due to the team's financial capacity and a realistic operating budget aligned with the school's model. Funds are budgeted for key areas, such as teacher salaries and external professional development, in alignment with the school's mission and vision. The school demonstrated an ability to fundraise effectively to ensure its model is not compromised. The Gate School worked urgently to raise start-up funding once grants were not secured and is in a financially viable state to open and operate the school through its start-up years. Financial policies are sound, and the Operations Partner has a proven track record of managing finances for a Nashville charter school.

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 or exceeds the standard because it presents a robust educational model, strong student recruitment plans, and demonstrated ability to implement the plan with fidelity.

Key strengths of the academic model are its comprehensive approach to ensuring students are meaningfully engaged through rigorous discussion and practice, as well as a commitment to strong teaching. The Gate proposes using the Teaching Firm foundation, in which all instructional leaders continue to teach students daily. This ensures the strongest instructional staff are not promoted out of the classroom as teaching improves. The founder and Executive Partner, Burrus Cox, will continue his strong track record in accelerating learning while simultaneously taking on more administrative work. The curricula were specifically selected to align with the educational model, emphasizing creative problem-solving and effective communication. Additionally, artificial intelligence platforms will be used to provide personalized feedback for students. The Gate also proposes to use the Harkness model, an instructional model in which students engage in structured academic conversations, in humanities blocks. The school will work with partner organizations, such as The Ensworth School, to train its instructors in this strategy, and the applicant provided memoranda of understanding ("MOUs") to confirm these relationships in the application materials. Students will be graded on their communication and research using the Harkness model. Additionally, all students will be offered accelerated coursework such as high school computer science and Algebra I. These strategies are thoughtfully combined to provide students with rigorous academic preparation for high school.

The academic plan is paired with a robust culture plan, which adapts the nationally recognized Valor Collegiate Academy culture framework and system for The Gate School. The application outlines four core structures tailored to The Gate community to create an accountable schoolwide culture for all members, including parents, students, and teachers. The Path System, as it will be called at The Gate, reinforces positive behavior while holding students accountable through consistent feedback when they go "off path." The Executive Partner has experience using this model with fidelity, and there is dedicated time within professional development to ensure alignment across faculty. Additionally, the school proposes a ten-day launch period at the beginning of the school year to help students acclimate to the model.

The Gate School demonstrates a clear plan for community support and ongoing engagement. The sponsor participated in various listening sessions throughout the community

and has hosted multiple free camps and tutoring opportunities around Nashville to introduce students and families to their model. These camps have continued to attract families from across Nashville, and the school plans to host them throughout the school year to engage prospective students. At the time of the capacity interview, The Gate had received 102 intents to enroll from current fifth graders, all of whom would be eligible to enroll in the 2027-28 school year, many of whom attended one of the camps. Additionally, The Gate received around 300 responses to its interest and support form, and school leadership has held over forty individual meetings with families and educators to elicit feedback and inform key decisions at the school. The plan anticipates 120 sixth-grade students in its first year of operation, and while intentions to enroll cannot be taken as guaranteed, The Gate has shown a commitment to continuing to build connections and community support.

The proposed Executive Partner, Burrus Cox, has demonstrated success in achieving exceptional academic outcomes throughout his tenure teaching at Nashville charter schools. During his time teaching middle school mathematics, his students achieved above average growth in various measures. Mr. Cox maintained a Level 5 Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System ("TVAAS") rating for six years and maintained a TVAAS index of 10.85, which is ten times the district average. Additionally, his students achieved 210% of projected growth on the 2025 Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress ("NWEA MAP") assessment, and his Algebra I and Integrated Math I students reached proficiency above 92%. Letters of support throughout the application process praise his teaching skills and his thoughtful approach to developing a new school. The plan to use the Teaching Firm model allows Mr. Cox to continue providing strong instruction for a portion of the school day. The proposed Operations Partner, Jim Leckrone, has over twenty years of school leadership experience and has successfully founded and operated a Nashville charter school. Both partners have track records of success in their respective domains and have proposed a comprehensive plan with a strong chance of success at The Gate School.

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 the governing board and leadership team's proven operations experience and capacity, its facility plan, and its comprehensive start-up plan.

The application provides a clear, detailed description of powers and duties of the board. These include core legal and fiduciary responsibilities such as overseeing academic performance and compliance, setting school policy, approving contracts and legal agreements, hiring and managing the school leader, and ensuring compliance with charter terms and authorizer requirements. The proposed governing board includes individuals with experience and expertise in charter schools, governance, financial management, real estate, and community engagement. During the capacity interview, board members were engaged and knowledgeable about recent progress updates. Board members affirmed their commitments to compliant governance and their support for the school leader.

The Gate School plans to use the Teaching Firm model, which views teaching quality as the primary driver of student outcomes. Therefore, the school remains committed to attracting, developing, and retaining excellent teachers. A key element of this model is that all staff continue to teach, including the Executive Partner. There are various tiers of teachers with differing percentages of teaching and other responsibilities, including the partner, senior associate, mid associate, junior associate, co-teaching apprentice, and paraprofessionals. These varying levels of teaching also allow teachers to grow professionally by gradually moving towards coaching and mentoring more junior teachers as they gain experience. The Gate has clear plans to develop and support educators through a structured plan for novice teachers to curb burnout as well as professional development and collaboration for all teachers.

The start-up plan in the application materials included a detailed timeline that identifies major workstreams, key milestones, responsible individuals, and supporting personnel across operations, facilities, finance, enrollment, talent, school design, and governance. Detailed contingency plans are also included in the start-up plan, such as aggressive recruitment should recruitment and enrollment lag, a realistic staffing plan with staffing reductions, and multiple backup facility options should the primary facility plan experience delays.

The facility plan included in the application materials showed that high-capacity individuals with many partners were available to help select the best option. The Review Committee expressed concerns about a lack of long-term facility options in the amended

application. While the rubric does not specifically require a permanent facility to meet standard, the rubric does require the applicant to identify facility needs aligned to the instructional model and enrollment as well as provide progress regarding identifying a facility and naming the roles of individuals leading the facility search. However, the Executive Partner shared during the capacity interview that the school had entered into a sale agreement for a permanent facility in the last two months. Since then, The Gate has worked urgently with an architect to begin drawing plans and engaged with a lender to conduct financial modeling to ensure it is a viable option. The Executive Partner stated that the plan still allows the school to remain in the building by July 2027, enabling an on-time opening in August 2027. The facility is in Metro Center and is very accessible to families across Nashville due to its proximity to the interstate. While the facility is not located in West Nashville, it is still within the greater catchment zone provided within the application. The Gate polled families about using this potential space and received positive responses. Board members indicated their support for this facility option during the capacity interview, and the board has maintained ongoing communication with the Executive Partner throughout the process. Two backup facility options are also still available, although they are not in the proposed catchment area. These updates provided within the capacity interview ultimately led to the Review Committee's shifting of the facilities plan rating to meets the standard.

Analysis of the Budget and Finance

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The applicant's Budget and Finance meets or exceeds the standard due to the strong financial capacity of the applicant team and a realistic operating budget aligned with the model.

The proposed budget was noted as a strength of the application because of its alignment with the school's instructional model. Key design elements of the school are included within the budget, including a clear salary structure for different levels of teachers, external professional development, and specific curricula. The application references a commitment to developing and maintaining high-quality teachers, as they are the foundation of a school. As a result, the proposed teacher salary within the budget is, on average, 26% higher than that of MNPS teacher salaries.

An additional strength clarified during the capacity interview is the team's proven ability to secure funding. While the original budget referenced anticipated grants, the Executive Partner confirmed the school had not received funding they had originally believed critical to opening, such as the CSP grant and other competitive grants. However, the leadership team has worked diligently to maintain an agile budget and secure funding from other sources. The Executive Partner shared in the capacity interview that The Gate had raised enough money to ensure financial viability through the pre-opening and start-up year, with \$1.1 million dollars secured or committed. Additionally, leadership at The Gate affirmed the model will continue to be the most important part of the budget that cannot be sacrificed. The team stated the bare minimum enrollment that must be met is eighty-five students without compromising the core model of teaching. Items that would be cut should the enrollment fall to eighty-five students include reduction in nonessential staff such as teaching assistants as well as shifting to internally provided professional development.

Budget policies were also noted as a strength of the application, with effective financial oversight and sound plans and procedures. The Operations Partner will be responsible for overseeing financial operations of the school and will manage the relationship with a back-office provider. The Operations Partner has demonstrated his ability to do these tasks by successfully running a Nashville charter school. Additionally, the treasurer and other members of the board bring experience from working in the financial industry to ensure sound oversight of the school's finances.



Evaluation Team

Ariana Cahoon serves as the Federal Programs Coordinator for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. In this role, she works with charter schools across Tennessee to support the effective implementation, monitoring, and compliance of federal education programs. Prior to joining the Commission, she spent six years teaching in both traditional public and public charter schools, serving students from elementary through high school in general education and special education settings. Her experience spans inclusive education, instructional design, and supporting the academic success of diverse student populations. Ariana earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Inclusive Elementary and Special Education from Syracuse University and her Master of Education degree in Learning and Design from Vanderbilt University.

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.

Whitney Noel has served as a reviewer for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission since 2018. She is the Founding Curricular Solutions Architect at Brisk Teaching and has advised and worked in organizations including Newsela, Mosa Mack Science, Snorkl, and Gates Ventures on curriculum design and implementation. Whitney also worked with the International Bureau of Education at UNESCO, contributing to global efforts in curriculum and instructional design. Earlier in her career, she taught in public, private, and charter schools in Washington State, Honduras, and Nashville, TN. She holds a Master's degree in Education with certification in English Language Learning from the University of Washington and a Bachelor of Arts in History, Spanish, and Latin American Studies from Gustavus Adolphus College. Whitney is passionate about creating engaging, rigorous, and inclusive learning experiences for all students.

Lawrence Walker serves as the Director of Finance and Operations for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. He holds a B.S. in Business Administration from Alcorn State University (Lorman, MS) and an MBA from Union University (Germantown, TN). In addition to an



early professional career in insurance and financial services, Lawrence is a former High School Instructor and School-based Operations Leader who specialized in daily operations, assessments, data, and student information system management. As a proud native of Memphis, TN and successful product of Memphis City Schools, he takes pride in working with the many partners of the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. It is his goal to not only ensure schools and staff are supported, but most importantly to help provide outstanding educational experiences to students in Tennessee.