



Opportunity Youth Academy Brief Statement

On Tuesday, July 28, 2026, the Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) Board voted to deny Opportunity Youth Academy's (OYA) application to open an Opportunity Charter Public School in the Frayser neighborhood of Memphis. OYA seeks to serve young people aged 16 to 21 who have dropped out of school, are on the cusp of doing so, or have otherwise become disconnected from their education. As outlined in our application, there is a distinct and urgent need for our school in Memphis. Specifically, Memphis is home to a significant population of young people who have disconnected from school - these are the students we seek to serve. As such, OYA is not designed to compete for students who are successfully enrolled in existing Memphis-Shelby County Schools high schools. OYA is designed to serve students who have already left school or are persistently disengaged and at significant risk of dropping out and responds to a need that is both educational and economic. Young people who leave school without a diploma or viable postsecondary pathways face reduced access to stable employment, lower lifetime earnings, and greater difficulty achieving economic mobility. Memphis also loses the talent, productivity, and leadership of young people who have not been successfully supported by existing systems.

OYA will provide a structured route toward a diploma, credentials, employment, and continued postsecondary success for Memphis' disconnected youth. More specifically, OYA offers a model that is informed by the work of LEAD Charter School in Newark, New Jersey, where students who were previously disconnected from education have reengaged in learning, earned diplomas, developed workforce skills, and prepared for postsecondary pathways. The LEAD schools recently earned their second charter renewal after meeting applicable academic, operational, and financial standards. That renewal affirmed the strength of the schools' academic program, governance, operations, and continued ability to serve a highly specialized student population. Like LEAD, OYA is supported by an education service provider (ESP) with more than 20 years of experience serving opportunity youth. That experience includes the operation and development of schools and programs specifically designed for young people who have experienced educational disconnection, academic disruption, and complex barriers to completion.

We share the Board's commitment to ensuring that every educational option available to Memphis students is of the highest quality. However, we respectfully assert that denying our application is contrary to best interests of the young people of Memphis and further disagree with the decision to deny for two interconnected reasons: first, several aspects of the application review do not appear to align fully with the information contained in the application or the requirements of the rubric; and second, the resulting evaluation does not fully reflect the substance, experience, and demonstrated strengths of the proposed model. We remain confident in the merits of our application and in the value OYA will bring to Memphis. At the same time, we welcome constructive feedback and remain committed to engaging openly, thoughtfully, and collaboratively in each step of the appeal process.

Application Review. We respectfully raise the following concerns regarding the application review process.

Rubric Ratings and Feedback: The rubric ratings that informed the recommendation for denial appear, in many instances, either not to align with information contained in the application or to request information beyond the requirements of the rubric. The initial review included approximately 120 statements of critical feedback. Through a detailed review of those comments, we identified roughly 50 instances in which the feedback states that information had not been provided, although the information appears in the original application. We also identified approximately 35 comments that appear to request a level of detail beyond the stated rubric criteria. Together, these comments represent approximately 70 percent of the initial feedback. This made it difficult to determine which revisions were necessary to address the reviewers' concerns most effectively. We did, however, amend the application in response to the feedback that we understood to be actionable and aligned with the rubric. We respectfully offer the following examples to clarify where the written feedback and the application record may not have been fully aligned.

MSCS Feedback	What Was Contained in the Original Application
Although the applicant included its mission, it fails to include a measurable component to determine if goals are being met.	The original application included nine mission-aligned SMART goals with clearly defined targets. These goals were designed to measure progress toward a mission centered on helping students develop the essential skills required for success in postsecondary education, careers, and community leadership.
The application does not address how the sponsor will communicate progress on goals with internal and external stakeholders.	The original application included a communication plan describing how progress toward mission-specific goals would be shared. The plan identified the relevant stakeholder groups, communication methods, frequency, and the information to be communicated.
While the applicant identified some formative assessments, it does not clearly demonstrate how assessments are aligned with Tennessee Academic Standards and the school's curriculum and instructional model.	The original application included a chart identifying each assessment and explaining how it aligns with Tennessee Academic Standards, the curriculum, and the instructional model.
Although the applicant intends to replicate the staffing structures already in place, clarification is needed regarding how the structures will be adjusted to the Tennessee context.	As required by the rubric, the original application described the proposed leadership and staffing structure in detail.
There is no mention of how the applicant will determine a free and reduced-price lunch rate for each student or implement a point-of-sale method to ensure proper state reimbursement.	As required by the rubric, the original application stated that the school would contract with MSCS or an external food-service provider through an RFP process. It also identified the Operations Manager as responsible for oversight and stated that the selected provider would plan, prepare, deliver, and serve meals.
The sponsor failed to provide a detailed and realistic long-term funding plan consisting of sustainable revenue sources and did not provide contingencies for potential funding gaps.	The original application projected that, by Year 5, the school could sustain its core programming through public revenue without relying on philanthropy. It also identified contingency strategies for lower-than-anticipated enrollment or revenue and higher-than-anticipated expenses, including strategic cost reductions and support from the ESP.

Voting: We also respectfully raise concerns regarding how the applications were presented and considered during the voting process. Neither the MSCS Charter Schools Office (CSO) nor the Board discussed our application publicly before the initial denial in April 2026. Unlike prior application cycles, the initial vote occurred through adoption of the consent agenda. As a result, it was not clear to us at the time that a final action had been taken on the application. We learned of the denial after receiving notice from the CSO the following day. Discussion did occur before the final vote in July 2026. During that discussion, MSCS Board members expressed support for OYA, highlighting the model as innovative, reiterating the need to serve disconnected youth, and seeking clarity about the grounds for denial. In response to the Board's support and questions, the CSO responded with several statements that appear to reflect possible misunderstandings about the application. We provide the following clarifications respectfully and in the interest of ensuring that the complete record is considered.

- **Academic and non-academic supports:** The CSO stated that the application lacks sufficient detail regarding how OYA would meet students' academic and non-academic needs. We respectfully disagree with this

characterization. The application describes a comprehensive model that includes personalized academic planning, rigorous instruction, intensive student supports, workforce development, industry-recognized credentials, and postsecondary transition support.

- **Fiscal impact of the target population:** There was discussion and questions regarding the fiscal impact of OYA, with specific emphasis on OYA serving students between the ages of 16-21 and a subset of our students legally being adults while they attend OYA. To expound, the CSO compared the fiscal impact of OYA with that of the Excel Center Memphis, an adult education school, stating that MSCS is obligated to loan funds to Excel that may never be recouped. Board members then expressed concern about the impact of being obligated to loan money to OYA as MSCS does to Excel. However, we assert that this discussion conflated OYA as an adult education school. Excel is designated as an adult education school and, therefore, is funded differently than a public charter school. We are seeking to open a type of charter school and will not hold an adult education school designation. To this end, we respectfully assert that this erroneous information may have negatively influenced board members' understanding of our school's designation and fiscal impact to the district. Further, this funding concern was not raised in any of the feedback provided from the initial review. We also respectfully assert that this concern presents a review inconsistency as the Urban Dove applications that were approved during the same meeting also seek to serve an overage, under-credited population.
- **Facility:** The MSCS CSO indicated that both OYA and Urban Dove named the same building as a viable option for location. We appreciate that both schools may not be able to operate in the same location. Given Urban Dove's approval, we are actively enacting contingency plans to secure another facility option, including securing an experienced commercial real estate agent such as Daryll Cobbins. While we recognize the need to locate another facility, we assert that the facility plans were evaluated inconsistently as citing the same facility was a key reason for denial for our application but was not named as concern in Urban Dove's application. Further, the facility in question was named in both original applications, but the MSCS CSO did not provide any feedback expressing concern in the initial rubric feedback, presenting another inconsistency.
- **Location of the education service provider:** The New Jersey location of OYA's ESP was identified as a concern, despite acknowledgment of its successful experience operating opportunity schools. During the same meeting, the Board approved two Urban Dove applications supported by an ESP based in New York. We recognize that the applications may differ in other respects, but we respectfully ask that the location of an out-of-state provider be evaluated consistently and in relation to the provider's experience, local implementation plan, governance, and operational capacity. In short, despite neighboring each other in location (NJ and NY), only the location of our ESP was cited as a key reason for denial, again raising the issue of inconsistency.
- **Response to initial feedback:** It was stated that OYA did not respond adequately to the CSO's initial feedback. As noted above, our review found that a significant portion of the feedback either related to information already included in the application or appeared to seek detail beyond the expressed rubric criteria. Nevertheless, we amended the application in response to the actionable feedback provided and remain open to addressing any additional areas that require clarification.
- **Combined vote:** OYA's application and another application recommended for denial were presented for a combined vote. Unlike our application, which as noted above, was discussed favorably by Board members, the other application was not discussed at all during the meeting. Because separate votes were not held, it may have been unclear whether Board members could approve or deny each application individually. We raise this concern respectfully because past practice has been to hold an individual vote for each application.

Outcome of the Evaluation. Given the concerns outlined above, we respectfully submit that the outcome of the evaluation does not fully reflect the substance and merit of the OYA application and is contrary to the best interest of the young people we seek to serve. We are grateful for the opportunity to progress through the appeal process. We welcome the Commission's questions and constructive feedback and remain committed to completing each step with openness, professionalism, and integrity. Our goal is to work collaboratively toward a shared outcome: ensuring that Memphis young people who have become disconnected from education have access to a high-quality school designed specifically to help them reengage, earn a diploma, develop workforce skills, and pursue a promising postsecondary future.