

Executive Director Stovall:

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108, The Gate School (“TGS”) respectfully appeals the Metropolitan Nashville Board of Public Education’s denial of its amended charter application. The denial was contrary to the best interests of students, the LEA, and the Nashville community. Based on the denial reasons provided by MNPS, there are four key items that we would like for your consideration:

- 1) The amended application met the state standard
- 2) There is not substantive financial impact to MNPS
- 3) There is community demand for our model in the community.
- 4) Our strong leadership team

Amended Application Met the State Standard

TGS’s amended application reflected a strong, thoughtful, and increasingly developed plan to open a high-quality public middle school. MNPS concluded that both the Educational Program Design and Capacity section and the Operations Plan and Capacity section met the state standard. The review team specifically recognized the strength of the school’s educational model, community engagement, leadership and governance capacity, staffing plan, assessment systems, transportation plan, and operational readiness. The review also found that the amended application strengthened its revenue assumptions, staffing alignment, financial management systems, cash-flow projections, contingency planning, procurement processes, and long-term sustainability.

The Budget and Finance remained at Partially Meets Standard because MNPS concluded that “the amended application reduced the tenant improvement budget from approximately \$500,000–\$600,000 to \$100,000.” That reduction did not occur. Attachment 9, Year 0 Start-Up Budget, row 102, shows \$521,416 in facility costs, including “\$500K - tenant improvements; 2 months of lease.” The separate \$100,000 figure reflected the anticipated cost of improvements for the sites that were then under consideration. It was an estimate of expected work, not a reduction in the amount reserved. The full \$500,000 remained budgeted.

The school’s facility position has also advanced significantly from the time that we submitted the application. As of July 23, 2026, TGS entered into a fully executed purchase and sale agreement for the building intended to serve as its long-term home. The school is completing due diligence and planning the improvements necessary for the facility to be ready for students by fall 2027. Additionally, as of August 3, 2026, the school has secured \$1,020,000 in contributions and commitments to support its pre-opening and first two years of operation. Notably, \$485,000 has come from 23 Nashville-based donors, including two organizations that are first time charter school donors. This reflects meaningful local investment in the school’s success.

Fiscal Impact

The Board’s discussion of the amended application was rooted in the fiscal analysis prepared by MNPS staff, which formed the primary basis for denial. That analysis does not support a finding that TGS would create a substantial negative fiscal impact on the district. The analysis counts every dollar of per-pupil revenue as lost while crediting none of the cost the district would no longer incur, projecting a cost of \$1,873,855 in Year 1 and \$5,621,566 at full enrollment, or 0.13% and 0.39% of the district’s \$1.4 billion operating budget. MNPS’s own data undercuts that approach: more than 60% of state funding moves directly with the student, and only 35% of per-pupil costs are fixed, meaning



most of the revenue counted as lost would in fact be offset by reduced costs. The analysis also assumes all 360 of the school's seats will be filled by students already enrolled in MNPS, despite our research that 20 to 25% of its students will come from charter schools, private schools and homeschooling - students who generate no MNPS revenue today. Correcting for both factors puts the net fiscal impact at roughly \$469,000 in Year 1 and \$499,000 at full enrollment, about a quarter to a tenth of the amount cited in the denial or 0.033% and 0.035% of the district's overall budget respectively.

Two further points weigh against treating this as a substantial fiscal impact: 1) The analysis omits capital costs entirely. The TGS building will be privately financed at approximately \$36,000 per seat, compared to \$80,000 to \$127,000 per seat for district-built facilities. The MNPS fiscal impact analysis ignores the \$1.33 billion capital improvement budget and debt service fund, which could be decreased significantly by allowing charters to build separately and/or purchase/lease existing underutilized district facilities. 2) The premise that charter growth is straining district finances is not by way of the district's own numbers as charter enrollment's share of the district has fallen every year since 2020, while the district's operating budget has grown more than 14% over the past two years.

There is Community Demand

The need for a high-quality middle school option is evident across TGS's intended enrollment catchment and throughout Nashville. MNPS performance data¹ show that English language arts proficiency declines from 35.5% in elementary school to 27.4% in middle school, while mathematics proficiency declines from 36.5% to 29.3%. Across the nine middle schools in TGS's intended enrollment catchment, average proficiency is only 27.3% in ELA and 28.3% in mathematics. Stronger outcomes are concentrated in three schools that operate magnet or specialty programs, while the remaining six schools average just 16.5% proficiency in ELA and 17.2% in mathematics. This leaves many families without equitable access to a rigorous, nonselective middle school option.

Families are also leaving MNPS at the exact transition TGS is designed to serve - 6th through 8th grade. Approximately 1,300² students leave the district between elementary and middle school each year, reflecting significant family demand for additional middle-grade options.

TGS is designed to make middle school a period of acceleration rather than academic decline. Its model is built on three mutually reinforcing elements.

1. The Teaching Firm reorganizes the adult structure of the school around teaching and learning. Instructional leaders remain directly engaged with students teaching full class periods, while teachers work in collaborative teams, receive sustained coaching, and have opportunities to grow in leadership and compensation without leaving the classroom.
2. Students will participate in daily discussion-based learning - the Harkness Model. Through structured, evidence-based dialogue, students will learn to explain their reasoning, listen carefully, challenge ideas respectfully, and communicate with clarity.
3. The school will use artificial intelligence purposefully and responsibly to strengthen teaching and learning. AI-supported tools will help teachers provide more timely feedback, identify student needs, differentiate instruction, and create additional opportunities for revision.

¹ <https://www.mnps.org/students-families/portals/open-data-portal>

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TGS responds to clear and sustained family demand. To date, 211 families have submitted Intent to Enroll forms for their children. That number includes 91 students who will enter fifth grade during the 2026–27 school year and would therefore be eligible to join TGS’s founding sixth-grade class in fall 2027. These families are not expressing abstract support for additional school choice. They are identifying TGS as a school they want for their own children. Their response demonstrates demand for a rigorous public middle school centered on excellent teaching, student voice, communication, and thoughtful preparation for high school.

Approving TGS would benefit MNPS by expanding access to a rigorous, nonselective public middle school option at the precise point when many families leave MNPS-operated schools in search of stronger alternatives. It would help retain students within Nashville’s public education system, respond to documented family demand, and add a programmatically distinct option without duplicating existing schools. TGS also directly advances MNPS’s signature initiatives³ to empower leaders at all levels, create engaging, rigorous, and personalized learning experiences for all students, and identify and eliminate inequities. Its Teaching Firm model keeps instructional leaders connected to classrooms while creating meaningful leadership pathways for excellent teachers. Its discussion-based instructional model, responsible use of technology, and commitment to advanced coursework for all students support rigorous and personalized learning while directly addressing inequities in access to opportunities that are too often reserved for students in selective programs.

Our Leadership Team is Strong

The school will be led by two educators whose records demonstrate both the ability to build an operationally sound school and to deliver exceptional instruction, and whose partnership has already produced these results together. Jim Leckrone brings sixteen years of experience founding and leading East End Preparatory School, where he has overseen school operations and the academic program, with operations being what he will continue at TGS. Under his leadership, East End Prep has consistently outperformed MNPS while serving a substantially higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students; in 2024–25, the school’s whole-school mathematics proficiency reached 41%, more than eleven percentage points above the MNPS district average. Burrus Cox taught mathematics at East End Prep from 2020 to 2024, four school years working alongside Leckrone, and earned Level 5 TVAAS ratings for six years, with exceptional Algebra I and Integrated Math I outcomes. Their shared impact at East End Prep has been independently documented: Propel’s 2026 Black Paper found that, during this period, East End Prep achieved a 30 percentage-point gain in Black student math proficiency and a 20 percentage-point gain in ELA proficiency at the middle school level, ranking first among all Nashville middle schools in both subjects. Together, Leckrone and Cox combine proven school-building leadership with demonstrated instructional and operational excellence independently verified with a track record of producing strong outcomes.

We appreciate the review from the TPCSC review team. For these reasons listed, we believe the denial was contrary to the best interests of students, the LEA, and the Nashville community. TGS respectfully requests that the TPCSC grant this appeal and approve the amended charter application.

Respectfully submitted,

Burrus Cox

Co-Founder and Executive Partner TGS

³ <https://www.mnps.org/about/signature-initiatives>