

Executive Director's Recommendation

Tennessee Nature Academy Appeal

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.) § 49-13-108, sponsors proposing to open a new charter school may appeal the denial of their amended application by a local board of education to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("Commission"). On August 2, 2022, the sponsors of Tennessee Nature Academy ("sponsor" or "TNA") appealed the denial of its amended application by the MNPS Board of Education to the Commission.

Based on the procedural history, findings of fact, analysis, and Review Committee Report, attached hereto, I believe that the decision to deny the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application was not contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA or the community.¹ Therefore, I recommend that the Commission uphold the decision of MNPS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Tennessee Nature Academy.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108 and Commission Policy 2.000, Commission staff and an independent review charter application review committee conducted a de novo, on the record review of Tennessee Nature Academy's amended application. In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education's charter application scoring rubric, "applications that do not meet or exceed the standard in all sections (academic plan design and capacity, operations plan and capacity, financial plan and capacity, and, if applicable, past performance) . . . will be deemed not ready for approval."² In addition, the Commission is required to hold a public hearing in the district where the proposed charter school seeks to locate.³

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 department of education's application-scoring rubric and that approval of the amended charter application is in the best interests of the students, local education agency (LEA), or community.⁴ If the local board of education's decision is overturned, then the Commission can approve the application, and thereby authorize the school, or affirm the local board's decision to deny.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. On December 3, 2021, the sponsor submitted a letter of intent to MNPS expressing its intention to file a charter school application.
2. The sponsor submitted its initial application for Tennessee Nature Academy to MNPS on February 1, 2022.
3. MNPS assembled a review committee to review and score the Tennessee Nature Academy initial application.
4. On March 24, 2022, MNPS's review committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of Tennessee Nature Academy.

¹ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

² Tennessee Charter School Application Evaluation Rubric – Ratings and Scoring Criteria, pg. 1.

³ T.C.A. § 49-13-108.

⁴ Id.

5. MNPS's review committee reviewed and scored the Tennessee Nature Academy initial application and recommended to the MNPS Board of Education that the initial application be denied, indicating it partially met standards for academics and operations and did not meet standards for finance.
6. On April 26, 2022, MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the Tennessee Nature Academy initial application based on the review committee's recommendation.
7. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for Tennessee Nature Academy to MNPS on May 26, 2022.
8. MNPS's review committee reviewed and scored the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application based on the charter application scoring rubric.
9. MNPS's review committee rated the academics and operations sections of Tennessee Nature Academy's amended application as partially meets standard and the finance section as does not meet standard, and recommended denial to the local board of education.
10. On July 12, 2022, the MNPS Board of Education postponed a vote on the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application, following concerns brought up by the sponsor to the MNPS Board of Education about the MNPS review process.
11. On July 25, 2022, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Tennessee Nature Academy.
12. The sponsor appealed the denial of the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application in writing to the Commission on August 2, 2022, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
13. The Commission's review committee independently analyzed and scored the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school application scoring rubric.
14. On September 7, 2022, 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 took public comment regarding the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application.
15. The Commission's review committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of the Tennessee Nature Academy leadership team on September 13, 2022 via Microsoft Teams.
16. After the capacity interview, the Commission's review committee determined a final consensus rating of the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.

FINDINGS OF FACT

District Denial of Initial Application

The review committee assembled by MNPS to review and score the Tennessee Nature Academy initial application consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Titles
Dr. David Williams	MNPS Executive Officer, Teaching and Learning
Kenneth Stark	MNPS Executive Officer of Operations
Connor Rayel	MNPS Data Analyst, Research Assessment and Evaluation
Molly Hegwood	MNPS Executive Director, Office of English Learners
Debra McAdams	MNPS Executive Director of Exceptional Education
Dr. Elisa Norris	MNPS Executive Officer, Strategy Performance Management
Casey Meow	MNPS Assistant Director of Facility Planning & Construction
Ryan Latimer	MNPS Director of Boundary Planning and Enrollment Forecasting
Dr. Alyson Lerma	MNPS Director of Grants Management
Dr. Gay Burden	External Reviewer

The Tennessee Nature Academy initial application received the following ratings from the MNPS review committee:

Sections	Ratings
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Does Not Meet Standard

After the MNPS review committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its recommendation was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on April 26, 2022. Based on the review committee's recommendation, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of Tennessee Nature Academy.

District Denial of Amended Application

The review committee assembled by MNPS to review and score the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application mirrored that of the 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
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

Financial Plan and Capacity	Does Not Meet Standard
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After the MNPS review committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its recommendation was presented to the MNPS Board of Education on July 12, 2022. At the July 12, 2022 board meeting, the MNPS Board of Education voted to hold a special-called meeting on July 25, 2022 to vote on the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application. At the July 25, 2022 special-called meeting, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Tennessee Nature Academy.

**Tennessee Public Charter School Commission Application Review Committee’s
Evaluation of the Application**

Following the denial of the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application and subsequent appeal to the Commission, Commission staff assembled a diverse review committee of internal and external experts to independently evaluate and score the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application. This review committee consisted of the following individuals. Additional information about the review committee’s expertise can be found in Exhibit A.

Name	Title
Melanie Harrell	Commission Staff
Maggie Lund	Commission Staff
Lawrence Walker	Commission Staff
Cheryl Green	External Reviewer
David Hartman	External Reviewer

The review committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application, a capacity interview with the sponsor, and a final evaluation and scoring of the amended application, resulting in a consensus rating for each major section. The review committee’s consensus rating of the Tennessee Nature Academy application was as follows, and the expertise of the review committee is detailed in Exhibit A.

Sections	Ratings
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

The review committee has recommended denial of the application for Tennessee Nature Academy because the sponsor failed to provide sufficient evidence in the financial section to meet the required criteria of the rubric.

The review committee found that the sponsor’s academic plan meets the standard because the applicant presented a compelling description of how the school will provide an additional option within the community it is intended to serve, a clear academic plan aligned to the nature-based mission of the school, and a detailed plan to serve special populations. The review committee noted that the student-focused model is

innovative within the proposed community, and the applicant provides a plan to orient both students and the community to the unique project-based learning model. The review committee also found the school provided demonstrated community support and evidence of demand within both the application submitted and the capacity interview.

The review committee also found the sponsor's operations plan meets the standard, as the applicant presented a sound facilities plan, including both temporary and long-term options, a clear organizational chart and staffing plan, and a robust professional development plan for teachers. While the review committee cited some concerns regarding the capacity of both the executive director and director of operations positions within the first two years, overall, the staffing plan scales to have an adequate delineation of responsibilities in subsequent years. Additionally, given the unique model of the proposed school, the review committee found the applicant aligned the facility plan to the mission and model by ensuring adequate outdoor space within both the temporary and long-term facilities, as well as presenting a staffing plan that will attract and retain highly qualified and licensed staff.

Finally, the review committee found that the sponsor's financial plan partially meets standard because although the applicant has a clear plan for identifying vendors for back-office support, the review committee noted a lack of evidence of financial oversight within the school's leadership team, lack of clarity about who on the staff will provide ongoing financial oversight of the school, and lack of evidence of access to the funds necessary to begin operations. Moreover, the review committee noted a lack of financial contingency planning should startup funding not materialize. Finally, the review committee cited concerns with the expense assumptions noted within the budget as they appear to be understated. The stated revenue in year zero combined with the concerns over cost assumptions could affect the school's ability to remain fiscally solvent in years zero and one.

For the aforementioned reasons, the review committee found that the sponsor did not meet or exceed the standard for approval based on the state's scoring rubric.

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

Public Hearing

Pursuant to statute⁵ and Commission Policy 2.000, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director was held on September 7, 2022. MNPS's presentation at the public hearing focused on their process of reviewing new start applications, along with the reasons for denial for Tennessee Nature Academy. Representatives from MNPS indicated that Tennessee Nature Academy's amended application was denied due to the application not meeting standards because of a lack of evidence provided for intervention support for special populations. Additionally, MNPS stated that projections show no issue of overcrowding in the Antioch and Cane Ridge clusters, and there were compliance issues regarding student-to-teacher ratios, accessibility challenges with the proposed unique structure for students with disabilities, and the budget lacking depth and adequate assumptions.

In the sponsor's opening statement, Jay Renfro, Founder and Executive Director, contested that the denial of Tennessee Nature Academy was contrary to the best interest of the students, LEA, or community, and

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(b)(i).

that the report produced by MNPS's review committee was not accurate. Renfro spoke about the mission, vision, and instructional model for Tennessee Nature Academy, along with its community-based programming. He stated that this outdoor, nature-based learning model has been incubating in the community since 2014, and in 2016 had grown to about 1,000 students participating. Renfro attempted to bring this model to MNPS in 2019 but was confronted with little desire to invest in this type of learning and a general lack of available resources for relevant coursework. Constituents within the area continued to push for more sustainability and outdoor programming for MNPS. According to Renfro, MNPS Board of Education members stated off the record that they wished they could support this unique programming as it would be good for the community, but they could not because it was a charter school. Renfro then spoke about why the Cane Ridge and Antioch communities were chosen for the proposed school, referencing low achievement scores that are underperforming the district and state, along with cited dissatisfaction at the middle school in the area, Oliver Middle School. Additionally, he believes that MNPS's claim that there is not a need for this school in the area due to available seats and capacity is false. He stated that the decline in enrollment in MNPS is not an overall enrollment problem, but rather a MNPS retention problem, as home school, charter school, and private school enrollment rates are increasing. He also cited that there are over 30 portables in use at schools within the Antioch and Cane Ridge areas. Renfro stated that, during the review process, MNPS made claims regarding the application that were incorrect, citing missing information that was included within the application, and citing general or unfounded concerns. Tennessee Nature Academy sent a 51-page report addressing these errors to MNPS and has also included this document within the record for the appeal. Finally, Renfro thanked the community members and supporters that were in the audience.

During questioning by the Commission staff, MNPS clarified that the reasons for denial as stated within the public hearing presentation were the reasons for denial as outlined within the review committee report. Additionally, MNPS clarified that a board member misspoke in her motion to deny Tennessee Nature Academy when stating that the application was denied based on the criteria set forth by the Charter Commission and should have stated instead by the criteria set forth by the department of education's rubric. The Commission then questioned MNPS regarding issues cited by Tennessee Nature Academy about the MNPS review committee report and the reasons that the MNPS Board of Education delayed the vote on the amended application. MNPS stated that the staff reviewed the concerns presented by the applicant and responded to them using the state's scoring rubric. After this review, the MNPS review committee determined that their concerns with the application remained, and the district's responses to the letter were then provided to the MNPS Board of Education ahead of the special-called meeting. The Commission questioned MNPS about the discussion at the MNPS Board meeting regarding the utilization report for the Antioch and Cane Ridge areas. MNPS responded that they did consider the new development in the area within this report, including dwelling units within both clusters (1,158 units for the Antioch cluster and 5,967 units for the Cane Ridge cluster). MNPS stated that the developments within the area do not necessarily generate more students, as it often takes four to five dwelling units to generate one student.

MNPS then responded to a line of questioning regarding grade structure and requirements for charter schools to abide by MNPS's ReminaginEd structure, which was stated as a reason for denial for Tennessee Nature Academy. MNPS stated that the ReminaginEd plan has been communicated publicly through board meetings and the website. Although charter school applicants are not required to adopt the model, MNPS stated that applicants should be aware of the model to support their fiscal and enrollment projections. MNPS stated three charter schools have adopted the new configurations to support their projections, and the majority of

traditional public schools have transitioned to this model such that in the next two years all MNPS schools will be fully transitioned to the new grade structure. Finally, MNPS spoke to how community support was assessed within the review committee report, as an MNPS board member raised questions at the board meeting. MNPS noted that the review committee reviewed the 250-signature petition but noted that 140 of those signatures were from out of the county, which raised concerns for the review committee.

The Commission staff then questioned the sponsor. When questioned about choosing the Antioch and Cane Ridge communities for their school location, Tennessee Nature Academy restated that they had been incubating in that community for years, so siblings and families were familiar with the program. The Commission then asked Tennessee Nature Academy to speak to why a majority of the signatures within their included petition were from outside Davidson County and how this translates to their enrollment projections. Renfro responded that the purpose of the petition was not to demonstrate projected enrollment, but instead to show widespread support. He continued that since they are proposing to locate near two county lines, they had support from outside of the county. Tennessee Nature Academy has been tracking data regarding enrollment and prospective educators through their mailing list, and he reported that the school currently has 204 self-reported parents and 46 self-reported educators on the mailing list. They also launched an intent to enroll process and already have 40 students citing they wish to enroll. Tennessee Nature Academy then provided updates regarding their facility plan, stating a developer in the area has agreed to provide 23 acres of land, which will serve as the permanent site. For the temporary facility, Tennessee Nature Academy has selected a site that is currently being used as a church, which requires only minimal updates to fit the school's unique model. The Commission then questioned the sponsor regarding startup funding and contingency planning should the projected startup funds not materialize. Tennessee Nature Academy had originally planned for \$233,000 in CSP funds, but since that grant may not be allocated, they have fundraised \$238,000 in committed, unbound funds. Tennessee Nature Academy also clarified why their net income diminishes in years three through five, as they no longer have large startup funds and are relying solely on per pupil revenue. Renfro also noted that they budgeted conservatively, and they anticipate more fundraising revenues than stated within the budget. The Commission then questioned who will oversee finances within the organization. Renfro stated that they have contracted with Fourth Sector for back-office support. Tennessee Nature Academy also has great financial experience amongst the board, as members have worked in non-profit sectors and as consultants for government agencies. Tennessee Nature Academy is also currently undergoing an annual audit to fine-tune systems.

The Commission asked questions regarding appropriate staffing for EL teachers, and Tennessee Nature Academy responded that they project 45% EL representation in alignment with their proposed community. The sponsor continued that they have budgeted for five language specialists to serve grades five through eight and an additional five in grades nine through twelve. This satisfies the required ratios, but they also aim to hire teachers with dual certification. Finally, Tennessee Nature Academy answered why they chose a fifth through eighth-grade structure and their contingency plans should enrollment not materialize. Tennessee Nature Academy chose this model as per experience from other charter schools, MNPS did not make it easy to change grade structures through amendments. Additionally, they claimed that families are choosing where students attend because of where they want their child, not what the grade structure is. They also hope to have the new Rocketship elementary school in the area as a feeder school.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of eight in-person comments, with zero speaking in support of MNPS and eight speaking in support of Tennessee Nature Academy.

The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received four written comments, with zero writing in support of MNPS and 27 writing in support of Tennessee Nature Academy.

ANALYSIS

State law requires the Commission to review the decision of the local board of education and determine if the application “meets or exceeds the metrics outlined in the department of education’s application-scoring rubric and⁶,” whether “approval of the application is in the best interests of the students, LEA, or community⁷.” In addition, pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the Commission adopted the State Board of Education’s quality public charter schools 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 MNPS, 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 explicated in the report, I agree that the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application did not rise to the level of meeting or exceeding the standards required for approval. The amended application and the sponsor have clear strengths present that would lend themselves to a strong educational option. However, the uncertainty regarding the financial plans for the school does not support a recommendation of approval of the application at this time.

The sponsor put forth a strong academic model and plan aligned with its mission. There is clear community support for this unique model, and the sponsor has a robust plan to serve special populations. The sponsor is intentional about its community engagement and has undertaken the work to solicit and implement feedback from various communities to be served by this school. The application included thirteen (13) letters of support and had clear evidence of interest as shown by the petition signatures. I do want to acknowledge that many of the petition signatures are from outside the targeted neighborhood; however, in the public hearing, the applicant spoke in detail about the use of the petition in the development of the application and the process they use to determine if outreach is from a prospective parent, prospective educator, or a community member. I believe the Antioch/Cane Ridge area could be well served by this unique model given its landscape and population, and the proposed school has a strong curriculum to meet the needs of its targeted populations and its academic model.

I agree with the review committee that the sponsor’s operations plan meets the standard in the state’s scoring rubric. The sponsor has set forth a strong plan for obtaining short-term and long-term facilities. While the amended application did not have a determined long-term facility, the sponsor showed evidence of potential spaces for the facility necessary to accommodate its mission and vision in the short term. The sponsor detailed facility updates during the capacity interview, inclusive of securing a line of credit for updates to a temporary facility. I appreciate the sponsor’s diligence in its staffing plan and the outreach done to engage potential faculty for the school if approved. However, I do have remaining questions as to whether the named executive team for the school, currently two (2) people, is fully prepared to engage in the pre-opening process and meet all the necessary benchmarks for a successful August 2023 start. The pre-opening and startup process

⁶ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(E).

⁷ *Id.*

for a school is significant, and, if approved, the team would need to focus significant attention on the operational and financial expertise and capacity of the team, not just the academic components of the model. However, the sponsor stated a commitment to building out the executive team, including a director of operations, and prioritizing the hiring of licensed teachers and teachers certified to serve special populations.

Any recommendation for approval must be based on each section of the amended application meeting and/or exceeding the metrics of the state's scoring rubric. As strong as I believe the evidence is presented in the academic and operations sections of the amended application for Tennessee Nature Academy, I am left with questions regarding the financial plan and capacity. I agree with the review committee that the sponsor's plan does not include a realistic plan sufficient to support the opening of a new charter school. The internal leadership team currently lacks sufficient financial expertise to oversee and manage the school from pre-opening through opening. Although the sponsor stated an intent to engage an outside vendor for financial management, I have outstanding questions about the delegation of daily financial responsibilities, as the sponsor indicated a reliance on board members and external vendors for these functions. One of the primary reasons that charter schools fail or run into trouble is issues with financial oversight, and there is currently a lack of evidence within the record to give me confidence that the proposed school team is fully prepared to manage the significant financial responsibilities for the school.

While I commend the sponsor for their efforts in securing additional funding to replace the lack of the Charter School Program grant, there is no evidence of this additional funding within the amended application. The lack of documentation is concerning because the school would be fully reliant on these supplemental funds to remain financially stable within the pre-opening process. Because the Commission is charged with conducting a de novo review of the amended application reviewed by the district, the Commission is limited in what additional, material information it can collect and supplement with what was reviewed by the district. Accordingly, the budget available to both the district and the Commission states that the school will significantly rely on a grant that will not materialize. Therefore, I have significant concerns about the financial viability of the school without this funding.

Moreover, I have concerns regarding the sponsor's stated contingency plan. The sponsor indicated that "extras" would be cut if funding for the school did not materialize. With such a unique school model and a budget that is already extremely limited, I am left with questions as to how this would affect the academic model and whether such changes, if necessary, would affect my recommendation with regard to that academic plan. Finally, I agree with the review committee that the sponsor lacked evidence that certain budgetary items, including the budgeted special education services, are reasonable. I do not have confidence in the sponsor's plan to offer a lower salary to special education teachers but seek to recruit teachers with dual certification. I have concerns as to whether the sponsor will be able to properly recruit and retain teachers for their unique model in a way that serves all special populations with the projected salaries allocated within the budget. I understand that starting a new charter school is challenging and that plans evolve. However, one expected challenge for any school is the need to have sufficient financial reserves and contingency plans to weather unexpected issues. While I appreciate the passion of the sponsor of the proposed school, I did not find sufficient evidence within the record that the plan, in its current form, has a high likelihood of financial viability.

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. Because I cannot affirm that the sponsor's amended application meets the standards in all areas

of the State’s scoring rubric, I cannot recommend approval of this application.

For the reasons expounded on in this report, I recommend that the Commission deny the Tennessee Nature Academy amended application.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons, and for the reasons stated in the Review Committee Report attached hereto as **Exhibit A**, I do not believe that the decision to deny the amended application for Tennessee Nature Academy was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or community. Therefore, I recommend that the Commission affirm the decision of the MNPS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Tennessee Nature Academy.



Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

10/18/22
Date



TENNESSEE
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION



EXHIBIT A

Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report

October 18, 2022

School Name: Tennessee Nature Academy

Sponsor: Tennessee Nature Academy

Proposed Location of School: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Evaluation Team:

- Cheryl Green
- Melanie Harrell
- David Hartman
- Maggie Lund
- 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 (Charter Commission). In accordance with T.C.A. § 49-13-108, the Charter Commission shall conduct a de novo, on the record review of the proposed charter school's application, and Charter Commission has adopted national and state quality authorizing standards to guide its work. As laid out in Charter Commission Policy 3.000 – Core Authorizing Principles, the Charter 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 Charter Commission adopted Charter Commission Policy 2.000 – Charter School Appeals. The Charter Commission has outlined the charter school appeal process to ensure the well-being and interests of students are the fundamental value informing all Charter Commission actions and decisions. The Charter 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 Charter 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 Charter Commission's charter application review process is outlined in T.C.A. § 49-13-108, Charter Commission Policy 2.000 – Charter School Appeals, and Charter Commission Policy 2.100 – Application Review. The Charter 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 Charter Commission provided training to all review committee members to ensure consistent standards and fair treatment of all applications.

Overview of the Evaluation Process

The Tennessee Public Charter School 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 three sections of the application: Academic Plan Design and Capacity, Operations Plan and Capacity, and Financial Plan and Capacity.
2. **Capacity Interview**: Based on the independent and collective review of the application, the review committee conducted a 90-minute interview with the sponsor, members of the governing board, and identified school leader 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 recommendation: A brief summary of the overall recommendation for the application.
3. Analysis of each section of the application: An analysis of the three sections of the application and the capacity of the team to execute the plan as described in the application.
 - a. Academic Plan Design and Capacity: school mission and goals; enrollment summary; school development; academic focus and plan; academic performance standards; high school graduation standards; assessments; school schedule; special populations and at-risk students; school culture and discipline; marketing, recruitment, and enrollment; community involvement and parent engagement; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - b. Operations Plan and Capacity: governance; startup plan; facilities; personnel/human capital; professional development; insurance; transportation; food service; additional operations; waivers; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.
 - c. Financial Plan and Capacity: budget narrative; budgets; cash flow projections; related assumptions; financial policies and procedures; and the capacity to implement the proposed plan.

The Charter Commission's charter application review committee utilized the Tennessee Department of Education's Charter School Application Evaluation Ratings and Sample Scoring Criteria (the rubric), which is used by all local boards of education when evaluating an application. The rubric states:

An application that merits a recommendation for approval should present a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; be detailed in how this school will raise student achievement; and inspire confidence in the applicant's capacity to successfully implement the proposed academic and operational plans. In addition to meeting the criteria that are specific to that section, each part of the proposal should align with the overall mission, budget, and goals of the application.

The evaluators used the following criteria and guidance from the scoring rubric to rate applications:

Rating	Characteristics
Meets or Exceeds Standard	The response reflects a thorough understanding of key issues. It clearly aligns with the mission and goals of the school. The response includes specific and accurate information that shows thorough preparation.
Partially Meets Standard	The response meets the criteria in some aspects, but lacks sufficient detail and/or requires additional information in one or more areas.



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Does Not Meet Standard	The response is significantly incomplete; demonstrates lack of preparation; is unsuited to the mission and vision of the district; or otherwise raises significant concerns about the viability of the plan or the applicant's ability to carry it out.
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Summary of the Application

School Name: Tennessee Nature Academy

Sponsor: Tennessee Nature Academy

Proposed Location of School: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Mission:¹ The mission of Tennessee Nature Academy (TNA) is to cultivate happy and healthy young adults who are knowledgeable about the world, passionate about the outdoors, and motivated to do good work.

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

Proposed Enrollment:²

Grade Level	Year 1: 2023-2024	Year 2: 2024-2025	Year 3: 2025-2026	Year 4: 2026-2027	Year 5: 2027-28	At Capacity:
5	81	81	81	81	81	81
6	81	81	81	81	81	81
7	0	81	81	81	81	81
8	0	0	81	81	81	81
9	0	0	0	90	90	90
10	0	0	0	0	90	90
11	0	0	0	0	0	90
12	0	0	0	0	0	90
Totals	162	243	324	414	504	684

Brief Description of the Application:

The sponsor, Tennessee Nature Academy, is proposing to open a charter school in Davidson County, Tennessee and serve students in 5th through 12th grades when fully built out. The school, Tennessee Nature Academy, is a new-start school and would be the first school for the sponsor. The school intends to operate in the Cane Ridge and Antioch communities of Davidson County to offer “a nature-based, public charter school for students in grades 5-12 and is committed to preparing students for a sustainable life.”³ The school proposes to offer adventurous, project-based learning and provide students in the southeast Nashville area additional school options.

The proposed school “will be governed by a non-profit Board of Directors, with a minimum of three (3) and a maximum of fifteen (15) community members with a broad range of backgrounds and areas of

¹ Tennessee Nature Academy Amended Application, pg. 15

² Ibid, pg. 31

³ Ibid, pg. 15



expertise.”⁴ In Year 0, Tennessee Nature Academy has budgeted \$806,173 in revenue, receiving \$233,333 from the Charter Schools Program (CSP) startup grant⁵, \$116,667 from the Charter Growth Fund⁶, \$241,173 from the Charter School Expansion Grant, and \$215,000 from the New School Venture Fund^{7,8}, and projects \$594,473 in expenses for the school.⁹ Tennessee Nature Academy projects the school will have \$2,611,458 in revenue¹⁰ and \$2,180,982 in expenses in Year 1,¹¹ resulting in a balance of \$642,177. By Year 5, the school projects to have \$6,943,180¹² in revenue and \$6,857,476 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$1,668,346¹³

The school anticipates that 42% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 12% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 45% of the student population will be English Learners.¹⁴

⁴ Ibid, pg. 131

⁵ The applicant cited in the capacity interview that they would no longer receive these funds, but through fundraising have made up for the difference.

⁶ During the capacity interview, the applicant confirmed that they have not been awarded these funds.

⁷ During the capacity interview, the applicant confirmed that they have not been awarded these funds.

⁸ Ibid, pg. 287

⁹ Ibid, pg. 288

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 293

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 295

¹² Ibid, pg. 299

¹³ Ibid, pg. 300

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 31



Summary of the Evaluation

The review committee recommends denial of the application for Tennessee Nature Academy because while the academic and operational plans meet the standard, the applicant failed to provide sufficient evidence in the financial section to demonstrate the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

The applicant's Academic Plan Design and Capacity meets the standard because the applicant presented a compelling description of how the school will provide an additional option within the community it intends to serve, a clear academic plan aligned to the nature-based mission of the school, and a detailed plan to serve special populations. This student-focused model is innovative within this community, and the applicant provides a plan to orient both students and the community to the unique project-based learning model. The school also provided demonstrated community support and evidence of demand within both the application submitted and the capacity interview.

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity also meets the standard because the applicant presented a sound facilities plan including both temporary and long-term options, a clear organizational chart and staffing plan, and a robust professional development plan for teachers. While the review committee cited some concerns regarding the capacity of both the Executive Director and Director of Operations positions within the first two years, overall, the staffing plan scales to have an adequate delineation of responsibilities in subsequent years. Additionally, given the unique model of the proposed school, the applicant has aligned the facility plan to the mission and model by ensuring adequate outdoor space within both the temporary and long-term facilities, in addition to a staffing plan that will attract and retain highly qualified and licensed staff.

The applicant's Finance Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because although the applicant has a clear plan for identifying vendors for back-office support, there is a lack of evidence of financial oversight within the school's leadership team, lack of clarity about who on the staff will provide ongoing financial oversight of the school, and lack of evidence of access to the funds necessary to begin operations. Moreover, there was a lack of financial contingency planning should startup funding not materialize. Contingency planning was found to be critical because the startup funds included in the budget have only partially materialized. Finally, the review committee cited concerns with the expense assumptions noted within the budget as they appear to be understated. The stated revenue in year zero combined with the concerns over cost assumptions could affect the school's ability to remain fiscally solvent in Years 0 and 1.

Summary of Section Ratings

In accordance with the Tennessee Department 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 approval¹⁵ 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	Rating
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¹⁵ Tennessee Charter School Application Rubric-Evaluation Ratings and Sample Scoring Criteria, pg. 1.



TENNESSEE
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Meets Standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Meets Standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Partially Meets Standard

Analysis of the Academic Plan Design and Capacity

Rating: Meets Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee:

The applicant's Academic Plan Design and Capacity meets the standard because the applicant presented a compelling description of how the school will serve as an additional option in the intended community, a successful academic plan aligned to the mission of the school with a clear plan to serve and support all students, and evidence of support and demand from the community.

The applicant's academic plan directly aligns with the school's mission to provide options for parents to meet educational needs of students with a nature-based school experience, project-based curriculum, and learning approach that differentiates for various learning styles. The applicant presents an academic program, standards-aligned curricula, and instructional methods that are thoroughly researched and cited throughout the proposal. The planned curriculum aligns with Tennessee academic standards, Advanced Placement frameworks, and College and Career Readiness standards. The applicant plans to employ a variety of methods to support learning. For ELA, this includes writing workshops, independent reading, and guided reading. For Math, this includes computational fluency, problem solving, schema-based instruction, and conceptual understanding for Math classes. The applicant's nature-based learning approach is a new model to the community and relies on intentional strategies of orienting new students and students who may struggle with the student-centered approach of the model. Middle school students begin project-based learning experiences that are inquiry-based and immersive, while high school student experiences are longer in duration and rely more on community and collaboration.

The applicant details a diverse set of groups from whom they sought feedback, including organizations like the Tennessee Charter School Center and the Hispanic Family Foundation, on design features such as proposed policies, curriculum, calendar, and procedures. The applicant also outlines compelling evidence of community support and has included 13 letters of support from the community and over 260 individuals who signed a petition in support of the proposed school. The applicant also stated in the capacity interview that they received 40 intent to enroll forms in just one month, which they anticipate will continue to rise upon authorization. In addition to existing support, the applicant plans to increase their marketing efforts by offering free art and nature camps for families of Southeast Nashville, and promoting on radio, social media, and other marketing venues. Once in operation, the applicant plans to offer families mission-aligned programming, including Friday farm nights and opportunities for families to engage with nature, such as hiking trails and floating on rivers. The applicant plans to implement methods of continuous improvement, including training educators on community building, partnering with organizations such as Roots ConnectED to create intentionally integrated and diverse communities, and conducting internal equity audits to ensure representation in their student population and that all populations are being adequately served.

The applicant presents a sound plan to serve special populations. The applicant's plan rests on its mission and vision to use the nature-based focus to enhance personalized learning experiences for students with special needs. The applicant plans to align with legal expectations and includes detailed service schedules for students with disabilities and English Learner students in the application. In year two of operation, the applicant plans to hire a director of learning and language support, a counselor, and social worker to serve



special populations. The applicant plans to provide teachers with professional development on the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, restorative practices, and trauma informed teaching practices to ensure proper service for special populations.

Overall, the applicant presented a comprehensive and clear academic plan that meets or exceeds the standard of the rubric because of the compelling and well-researched academic model, their commitment to support all students, and their clear demonstration of community support and engagement. Based on the evidence found in the application and information provided in the capacity interview, the review committee rated this section as meeting the standard.

Analysis of the Operations Plan and Capacity

Rating: Meets Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee:

The applicant’s Operations Plan Design and Capacity meets or exceeds the standard because the applicant presented a description of how the school will acquire a short- and long-term facility, organize and recruit high-quality staff, and provide professional development to support staff to implement their academic model.

The applicant’s facility plans align to the mission and vision by ensuring there is adequate outdoor space for the required programming. According to the application and capacity interview, the applicant’s board members and leadership team are knowledgeable in facilities negotiations and acquisition. The applicant has identified potential spaces for temporary and permanent school locations, both with indoor and outdoor space needed to accommodate the school and its unique model. During the capacity interview, the applicant provided an update regarding the status of facilities acquisition and improvements. The applicant has secured a line of credit to be used for upgrades to an identified temporary facility. While the application noted the facility plan as a work-in-progress, the applicant presented additional details regarding progress in facilities acquisition during the capacity interview. They shared that the school has identified an incubator (short-term) site and completed ADA and other walkthroughs with the potential landlord, noting that minimal improvements were needed. The applicant mentioned that they have engaged a partner with expertise in facility development, providing additional confidence that the team has all the expertise needed to execute the improvements to the temporary facility within a reasonable timeline.

The applicant presented an organizational chart within the application that detailed clear plans for hiring staff through years six and seven and included positions with delineated roles and a clear reporting structure. At this point, the Executive Director and Chief Academic Officer have been identified and will lead the school during the phased opening structure. The applicant’s timelines for hiring staff via local and regional sources are appropriate and identify a priority on hiring staff that reflect the diversity existing in the 37013 zip code where the applicant proposes to locate. The applicant believes that their unique model will attract teachers and support staff, and they shared that they already have 16 teachers that have demonstrated interest in joining if the school is authorized, and that 46 educators signed the petition. This is promising as Tennessee Nature Academy aims to hire roughly 17 full-time staff members in Year 1. The applicant is committed to ensuring all teachers are appropriately licensed, and, given the anticipated significant population of English learners, the applicant plans to give preference to teacher candidates with ESL certification. While the application identifies a minimal executive team to serve as the leadership during the initial two years, the applicant recognizes the need for the school to prioritize the Director of Operations position (not slated to join until mid-year of pre-opening), since the existing leaders do not currently possess those described skills.

The applicant presents a sound plan for staff professional development with a robust menu of offerings and delivery modes, including opportunities for whole staff, differentiated staff, grade-level team meetings, content area team meetings, and instructional coaching. The applicant’s professional development plan includes 166 hours of planned content for teachers throughout the school year, beginning in the summer with a focus on culture, academics, systems, and community-building. During the first school year, the applicant



plans to provide 52 hours of professional development via periodic staff development days, weekly sessions, and individualized instructional coaching. Finally, the applicant plans for 30-40 minutes of weekly or bi-weekly instructional coaching throughout the year. The applicant plans to have the executive team lead this coaching during the first two years and allocate the responsibilities to principals and assistant principals in subsequent years. The applicant plans to employ equity audits to address the differentiated needs identified among the teaching staff throughout the year.

Overall, the applicant presented a comprehensive and clear operations plan that meets or exceeds the standard of the rubric because of the plans for facilities, staffing, and professional development. Based on the evidence found in the application and information provided in the capacity interview, the review committee rated this section as meeting the standard.

Analysis of the Financial Plan and Capacity

Rating: Partially Meets Standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:

The Financial Plan and Capacity partially meets standard because the operating budget is based on understated expense assumptions, there is a lack of clarity regarding internal financial expertise and oversight, and there are inadequate contingency plans based on a lack of evidence that the school has access to the funds necessary to begin operations.

While the applicant stated that they intend to contract with 4th Sector Solutions for financial management, the applicant has not demonstrated financial expertise amongst the applicant's internal team members in line with the department's scoring rubric. The Executive Director cited experience with grant management, but the management of a multi-million-dollar budget for a charter school includes managing cash flow, negotiating complex debt instruments, and maintaining adequate internal control sufficient to protect public funds. In response to questions regarding the capacity of internal team members to manage and oversee finances, the applicant relied primarily on the experience of board members and the external vendor. The review committee found this to be problematic as it is the board's responsibility to provide governance and not be involved in day-to-day operations and finances. Further, the vendor and applicant did not clearly articulate what daily financial management functions would be led by school staff versus by the vendor, keeping responses vague and stating that "it depends." For example, it was noted that the Director of Operations would have some involvement in payroll and the vendor would have some responsibilities for management. There was a general lack of clarity as to what would be managed by the school and by the vendor, and who primarily will own day-to-day financial oversight for the school. Ultimately, the review committee found that the collective experience of the internal school team and the outlined processes for financial management were not sufficient evidence to meet the characteristics of a strong response in the Tennessee Department of Education scoring rubric.

During the capacity interview, the review committee asked the applicant about contingency plans should anticipated revenues be less than estimated. The startup budget that was submitted contained revenue from grants that the school has not been awarded, including the New School Ventures Grant of \$215,000, the Charter Growth Fund of \$116,667, and the Charter School Program (CSP) grant of \$233,333, for a total of \$565,000. While the school shared in the capacity interview that they have raised funds through City Fund and Volunteer Schools sufficient to cover the absence of the CSP grant, this information is not contained within the amended application to be reviewed and verified. Further, the review committee found that the lack of funds from New Schools Venture Fund and the Charter Growth fund result in the applicant needing to acquire additional funding to maintain a positive cash and fund balance to open the school. Further, this results in the school applying contingency plans as early as Year 0 and 1 to remain fiscally viable and solvent. While the school cited in the budget narrative that they have secured a line of credit for \$120,000, this would not be sufficient to cover the potential deficit caused by the lack of these funds.

In regard to contingency planning, the Executive Director mentioned within the capacity interview that their contingency plan, should anticipated revenues not materialize, would include cutting costs by holding off on purchasing items that school leadership identified as extra or "bells and whistles". However, the review

committee did not find that the budget included cushion or extra expenses beyond that which would be necessary to carry out the academic model as proposed. It was also stated in the capacity interview that the applicant may negotiate delayed payment terms with vendors should they not have sufficient cash to pay bills. This contingency plan is not considered sound by the review committee because delaying payments does not help the school's already tight cash flow and may only lead to greater financial cash difficulties in subsequent fiscal years.

Finally, in alignment with the Tennessee Department of Education's scoring criteria requirement of including reasonable expense assumptions, the review committee lacked evidence that some of the costs outlined within the budget, including supplies, furniture, facilities, contracted SPED services, and tenant improvements, were reasonable. Within the application's budget worksheet, there was only \$500 per full-time employee and \$250 per student budgeted for furniture, \$250 per full-time employee and \$100 per student for supplies, and only \$2,000 per student for contracted SPED services. Within the budget, special education teachers also were slated to earn a salary \$10,000 less than other instructional staff, although the applicant stated in the budget narrative that they anticipate a high percentage of special education students and prefer dual certification of employees. Additionally, the budget for tenant improvements in Year 1 for the temporary facility was only \$43,700. As stated in the budget narrative, if an outdoor classroom, which aligns to the applicant's unique model, is budgeted at \$20,000, that leaves only \$23,700 for additional improvements. During the capacity interview, the Executive Director and external vendor spoke to their intentionally conservative estimated BEP payments and stated they anticipate having higher revenues to cover higher expenses; however, it is unclear if the applicant will have an adequate margin to absorb higher costs, particularly in Year 0 and 1. Due to the totality of the evidence presented, the review committee determined that the Financial Plan and Capacity section of the application partially meets standard.

Strengths Identified by the Committee:

While the Financial Plan and Capacity partially meets standard due to the weaknesses stated above, the review committee identified strengths regarding the applicant engaging in independent annual audits, as the school is already going through an audit process to become familiar. The applicant also demonstrated sound criteria and procedures for selecting contractors for administrative services, as they have identified 4th Sector Solutions who has experience in charter school financial services.



Evaluation Team

Cheryl Green is the Director of the Aspen Young Leaders Fellowship (AYLF), where she oversees the AYLF Learning Strategies team, informs AYLF strategy, and ensures the design and implementation of culturally responsive programming. At her core, Cheryl is an educator, having served as a teacher, principal, and district leader in multiple school districts. After ten years living and working as an educator in Mississippi, Cheryl moved to Memphis, Tennessee and took on multiple roles with New Leaders, Inc. and later Insight Education Group. Since 2015, Cheryl has used her expertise in organizational development to lead her own consulting practice. Her work is centered on supporting organizations in creating systemic change, resolving conflict, helping teams work more efficiently, and moving projects from strategy to action. Cheryl has a B.S. in Secondary Education from Alabama A&M University, an M.Ed. from Delta State University, and is certified in the field of Human Systems Dynamics.

Melanie Harrell is the Director of Finance and Operations for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Prior to working at the Commission, Melanie worked as a fiscal consultant for RePublic Charter Schools, and as the Charter School Program manager at the Tennessee Department of Education. She was a Teach For America corps member and spent three years as a classroom teacher at a charter school in Dallas County, TX where she also served as the Humanities Department Chair. She received her M.P.P in Education Policy from Vanderbilt University, and her B.A. in Political Science and Philosophy from TCU.

David Hartman is the founder of Venn Education, he specializes in expert evaluation, smart change making, and high-stakes decisions based on evidence. He spent over 10 years as the Managing Director of Accountability and Authorizer Supports with SchoolWorks. He served the Minnesota Department of Education, where he led the design and implementation of the nation's first high-stakes charter school authorizer performance evaluation. Notable engagements include leading and developing statewide charter school authorizer evaluations in Ohio and Tennessee, turnaround of an alternative high school, strategic planning for a state association, and numerous school reviews. In addition, David has taught in high schools and universities.

Maggie Lund is the Deputy Director of Authorizing at the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Additionally, she serves as an adjunct professor in the Lipscomb College of Education Master's Program, teaching Planning, Instruction, and Assessment and Building Classroom Communities. Prior to her role at the Charter Commission, Maggie served as the Director of Family Engagement at STEM Prep Academy where she led all community engagement efforts for two schools along with enrollment, school culture, and operations pieces. Maggie holds a BA in Business Administration and Marketing from Loyola University New Orleans, a Doctor of Education degree, and a Master of Education degree with a specialization in English Language Learning from Lipscomb University. Her dissertation research focused on Restorative Justice Practices and school culture. Most recently, her research article, Mindsets Matter for Equitable Discipline was published in the Middle School Journal. Maggie is a teacher at heart and has a passion for ensuring the most vulnerable populations in Nashville receive a high-quality education.

Lawrence Walker serves as the Coordinator of Data 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 a professional background 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 Tennessee Public Charter School Commission, both as a Staff Member and as a Review Committee Member. It is his goal to provide outstanding educational experiences to students in Tennessee.