



DRAFT Executive Director's Findings and Recommendation

Charter School Renewal Application for LEAD Neely's Bend

October 30, 2024

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated ("T.C.A.") § 49-13-121, Commission Policy 3.600¹, and charter renewal guidance issued by the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("Commission") and the Department of Education, the authorizer shall provide a school with the opportunity to make a clear and compelling case for renewal. As part of Commission Policy 3.600, following the public hearing and the review of the renewal application, the Executive Director of the Commission shall provide a final recommendation to the Commission. The Executive Director shall consider the report of the Renewal Review Committee, the site visit, and the public hearing in the final recommendation to the Commission.

Based on a preliminary review of the cumulative performance of the school, the additional information gathered by the Commission staff through the renewal process including a site visit, and the Review Committee Report, I believe that LEAD Neely's Bend is on track for renewal for a new, ten-year charter term. Upon the conclusion of the public hearing, set for November 6, 2024, I will finalize my recommendation.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Pursuant to Commission Policy 3.600, the Commission staff completed an application review process. The Commission assembled a renewal 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 review committee members to ensure consistent standards and fair treatment of all applications.

The Commission's Charter Renewal Application Review Committee utilized the Commission's Charter Renewal Application Rubric², which is used by the Commission when evaluating an application for renewal. In alignment with the State Board of Education's Quality Authorizing Standards in Policy 6.111, the authorizer "[e]stablishes and clearly communicates a renewal policy which requires the thorough analysis of a school's comprehensive body of objective evidence defined by the performance framework and is consistent with the charter agreement and state law, including any policy changes thereto." In addition, the Commission is required to hold a public hearing in the district where the charter school is located and conduct a renewal site visit in the school's tenth year of its charter agreement.

The Commission has the ability to approve the charter school's renewal application, with authorization to continue under the Commission for a new ten-year charter term, or deny the application. If denied, the school would close at the end of the academic year.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. LEAD Neely's Bend opened in the 2015-16 school year and was authorized by the Achievement School District.
2. LEAD Neely's Bend transitioned to the Commission in the 2023-2024 school year and serves 300 students in the 2024-2025 school year.

¹ All Commission rules and policies may be found on the Commission's [website](#).

² This rubric was updated in March 2024 by the Commission.

3. On December 27, 2023, the Commission provided the operator a cumulative performance report outlining the school's performance over the last ten years in alignment with the specified renewal criteria.
4. The governing board of LEAD Neely's Bend submitted a renewal application to the Commission on April 1, 2024.
5. The Commission's Review Committee independently analyzed and scored the LEAD Neely's Bend application using the Commission's Charter Renewal Application Scoring Rubric.
6. On June 17, 2024, the Commission conducted a capacity interview with the applicant to address questions that arose from the review of the renewal application, specifically in the areas of finance and operations.
7. The Commission's Review Committee determined strengths and areas of question or concern of the LEAD Neely's Bend renewal application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Report attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
8. On September 11, 2024, the Commission completed a full-day site visit to LEAD Neely's Bend to interview stakeholders, discuss the Review Committee Report with school leadership, and observe classes.
9. Commission staff determined strengths and addressed challenges and concerns during the site visit to LEAD Neely's Bend and outlined within the Renewal Site Visit Report attached hereto as **Exhibit B**.
10. The Executive Director of the Commission reviewed the record including the Review Committee Report and the Site Visit Report to write a preliminary recommendation for LEAD Neely's Bend and outlined whether or not the school is on track to be renewed or nonrenewed.
11. Commission staff will hold a public hearing at LEAD Neely's Bend in Nashville, Tennessee on November 6, 2024. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the Commission's Designee, will hear the school address the preliminary Executive Director's recommendation and hear public comment.
12. After the public hearing, the Executive Director will determine a final consensus rating of the LEAD Neely's Bend application and complete a final Executive Director's Recommendation Report.

Commission's Review Committee's Evaluation of the Application

Commission staff assembled a diverse review committee of internal and external experts to independently evaluate and score the LEAD Neely's Bend renewal application. This review committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Michelle Doane	External Reviewer
Rebecca Ledebuhr	Commission Staff
Maggie Lund	Commission Staff

The Review Committee conducted a review of the LEAD Neely's Bend renewal application in alignment with the Commission's Renewal Application Scoring Rubric and held a capacity interview. The strengths and weaknesses of the renewal application are outlined in **Exhibit A**. The Review Committee also conducted a site visit to the school to evaluate the effectiveness of the school in alignment with the Commission's School Performance Framework, the renewal criteria, and the challenges and concerns outlined within the Review Committee Report. The full Site Visit Report is provided as **Exhibit B**. The following is a summary of the Review Committee Report and Site Visit Report:



The evaluation of LEAD Neely's Bend, a charter school under the LEAD Public Schools network, highlights notable strengths and challenges since its acquisition in 2015. Originally one of Tennessee's lowest-performing middle schools when the LEAD network acquired the school, it has shown consistent improvement, exiting the Achievement School District ("ASD") in 2023, and demonstrated strong student growth through high scores on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System ("TVAAS"). Observations at the site visit noted high student engagement in classrooms, a strong school culture where students feel safe and supported, and effective governance from a well-informed board. This strong school culture, bolstered by data-driven practices, has also contributed to strong family engagement and low suspension rates. However, questions remained regarding achievement gaps for specific student subgroups, English learner ("EL") proficiency, and chronic absenteeism rates. The Review Committee discussed these concerns with network and school leadership during the site visit. In response to this data, the school has adjusted the master schedule to allow for more intervention time and have made updates to how they use and leverage internal assessment data for both English language arts ("ELA") and math instruction, with a focus on foundational concepts and scaffolded learning. To address EL proficiency, adjustments have been made to the curriculum and an additional EL instructor has been added to support this subgroup of students. For the 2023-24 school year, the school reduced its chronic absenteeism, which they attribute to the consistent focus on attendance from both a network and school level, leveraging class-wide incentives and parent communication.

The LEAD network's governing board is proactive in strategic planning and has demonstrated consistent and effective oversight of the network. School leadership emphasized the importance of teacher support and retention through professional development programs and opportunities for growth within the network. LEAD Neely's Bend faces challenges with declining enrollment due to recent zoning adjustments from Metro Nashville Public Schools ("MNPS") and changes within the neighborhood, even as there has been a temporary uptick due to students transferring from the closure of LEAD Brick Church. During both the capacity interview and site visit, network leadership spoke to the intent of keeping the school within the current facility. Upon receipt of a renewed charter agreement, the network will initiate negotiations with MNPS on the property and hope to come to an agreement to purchase or continue leasing the property.

LEAD Neely's Bend operates in a strong financial position, with healthy cash reserves and positive margins despite current enrollment challenges. During the capacity interview conducted by the Review Committee, it was confirmed that the school can operate with a minimum of 200 students without resorting to accessing reserves or making reductions in spending. Plans for enhancing student recruitment are underway, and the network's financial stability supports the school's ongoing operations and upcoming facility acquisition.

Future planning for LEAD Neely's Bend includes ambitious goals to enhance academic performance and expand the school's offerings. The network was recently awarded a new elementary school in Southeast Nashville, aiming to create a comprehensive K-12 educational experience. Network leadership outlined contingency plans should they be unable to reasonably acquire the current facility from MNPS, and the network is experienced in the facility acquisition and renovation process. Overall, during the last ten years, LEAD Neely's Bend has made significant strides in student performance and school culture. While some challenges persist, it is clear that the LEAD Public Schools network provides robust support to the school, ensuring effective response to data and strong operations.

For additional information regarding the Review Committee's evaluation of the LEAD Neely's Bend application, please see **Exhibit A** for the complete Review Committee Report, and for additional information regarding the renewal site visit and subsequent findings, please see **Exhibit B** for the complete Renewal Site Visit Report. Both reports are fully incorporated herein by reference.



Public Hearing

Pursuant to Commission Policy 3.600, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director will be held on November 6, 2024.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Under T.C.A. § 49-13-121 and Commission Policy 3.600, the Commission is charged with determining if a charter school currently operating under the Commission will continue its authorization under the Commission for another ten-year charter term. In making my recommendation to the Commission, I will consider the Review Committee Report, the Renewal Site Visit Report, the discussion at the public hearing, and the public comments received by Commission staff.

The LEAD Public Schools network acquired LEAD Neely's Bend in the 2015-16 school year, and at that time, Neely's Bend was one of the lowest performing middle schools within the state of Tennessee. While school turnaround work is complicated and performance is often not linear, the LEAD Public Schools network is a data-rich organization and has demonstrated a consistent ability to adjust to ensure improved outcomes for students. This culture is evidenced by routines and systems that include student data analysis and robust analysis of special populations outcomes. The school's TVAAS scores also demonstrate considerable growth for students. In Year 3 and 4 of the initial ASD charter term, LEAD Neely's Bend scored TVAAS composite scores of Level 5, and since 2021, the school has consistently achieved Level 5 TVAAS scores. As a result of this academic performance, the school earned priority exit status in alignment with the state's accountability system, and in January 2023, the school was approved to join the Commission.

While student growth is a strength of the school, LEAD Neely's Bend has seen challenges in academic proficiency data as the school has not demonstrated a consistent upward trajectory of achievement, particularly in subgroup performance. During its tenure, LEAD Neely's Bend has not consistently closed achievement gaps for subgroups of students in ELA and math in comparison to the resident district. However, through the Review Committee's questioning at the site visit regarding the school's focus on these subgroups, I feel confident that the data-driven nature of the school and network, coupled with some critical shifts cited, will ensure the school adequately addresses these challenges. Additionally, chronic absenteeism at LEAD Neely's Bend has been inconsistent since the pandemic, even increasing in years when chronic absenteeism averages in the state began to decrease. At the site visit, school leadership spoke to their efforts to combat chronic absenteeism and stated that they are expecting a continued decrease.

My primary concern for LEAD Neely's Bend is ensuring stable enrollment over a new ten-year charter term, if approved. MNPS made shifts to zoning within the Madison neighborhood of Nashville that has affected enrollment at LEAD Neely's Bend. This, coupled with the shift from being a zoned to an open-enrollment school, has presented a challenge for the school. While the enrollment cap per the charter agreement is 600 students, in recent years LEAD Neely's Bend has operated with around 250 students. The school experienced an increase in enrollment in the 2024-25 school year due to the closure of LEAD Brick Church and a transfer of some students to LEAD Neely's Bend; however, this increase in enrollment is temporary as these students will eventually matriculate out of the school. During the capacity interview and site visit conducted by the Review Committee, the network spoke to the concerted focus on recruiting and retaining students at LEAD Neely's Bend. Leaders clarified that the school is operational with 200 students, and any less than that would result in the school needing to dip into cash reserves. The network's Director of Family Engagement spoke about new marketing and advertising efforts and that they are intentionally expanding their reach into surrounding neighborhoods from which they have previously not targeted for enrollment. Additionally, the school is updating its transportation system to have more targeted reach of surrounding areas.



Finally, school leadership spoke to collective ownership of the recruitment and enrollment process from all stakeholders, including teachers and families, to encourage multiple touchpoints for potential families considering enrolling. While these efforts are promising, this will need to be a continued focus for the school to ensure stability in the next charter term, should they be renewed.

Finally, the operator has demonstrated strong organizational compliance and good partnership throughout their short tenure with the Commission. LEAD Neely's Bend adequately serves special populations of students and remains in compliance with state and federal requirements. While the transition from the ASD to the Commission is not without its challenges, and the network must navigate the challenges of having multiple authorizers across a network of schools, the LEAD Public Schools network has navigated these challenges successfully to ensure continued service to students. The network is in a strong financial position and has demonstrated long-term strategic thinking with its recent expansion to a fully K-12 network. Additionally, the school is well poised for the upcoming facility acquisition and has a clear plan in place to acquire the facility along with adequate contingency plans. The governing board is robust, mission-aligned, and effectively supports the network to ensure positive student outcomes. Through my analysis of the totality of the evidence presented from the Review Committee's in-depth review of the school's performance over time, the school has demonstrated a commitment to the community and students it serves, a dedication to high quality instruction, a strong and safe school culture, and individualized student support. The operator has demonstrated the ability to acknowledge and respond to challenges effectively, which gives me confidence in this operator to continue a trajectory of improving student outcomes, ensuring student growth, and closing the achievement gap.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons, and for the reasons stated in the Review Committee Report attached hereto as **Exhibit A** and the Renewal Site Visit Report attached hereto as **Exhibit B**, I believe that the performance of the school is on track for a ten-year renewal term.

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

Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

Date