



Executive Director's Findings and Recommendation

Charter School Renewal Application for LEAD Neely's Bend

January 24, 2025

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 recommendation to the Commission. The Executive Director shall consider the report of the Renewal Review Committee, the site visit and the public hearing, as well as performance of the charter school over the length of the expiring charter term in the final recommendation to the Commission.

Based on a review of the cumulative performance of the school, the additional information gathered by the Commission staff through the renewal process including a site visit, the Review Committee Report, and the public hearing, I recommend LEAD Neely's Bend for a new, ten-year charter term.

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 ("the operator" or "the school") opened in the 2015-16 school year and was authorized by the Achievement School District ("ASD").

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.

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.
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 Commission's 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 determined the school was on track for renewal. This was provided to the operator a week prior to the public hearing.
11. Commission staff held 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, heard the school address the preliminary Executive Director's recommendation and received public comment.
12. After the public hearing, the Executive Director completed 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 ASD in 2023, and has 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 positive school culture, bolstered by data-driven practices, has also contributed to strong family engagement and low suspension rates. Based on the committee's review of the application, there were questions 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 adjusted the master schedule to allow for more intervention time and updated 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, the school adjusted the curriculum and added an EL instructor to support this subgroup of students. In the 2023-24 school year, the school reduced its chronic absenteeism rate, which the leadership attributes to the consistent focus on attendance from both a network and school level, leveraging class-wide incentives and parent communication.

The LEAD 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. 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.

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. 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 continued 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 was held on November 6, 2024. In the opening statement, the operator spoke to the school's responsiveness to data and performance over its charter term. The school and network have demonstrated a commitment to their mission by ensuring the school is a quality choice option for students. In videos played during the opening statement, parents spoke about their satisfaction with the school and the school's family-like atmosphere. The principal of LEAD Neely's Bend discussed how the school is the best option for families in Madison due to its strong school culture and academic performance. Leadership has worked to ensure appropriate support for diverse learners and operates the school with a students-first mindset. The history of LEAD Neely's Bend is demonstrative of growth and improvement, and the operator anticipates this will continue for years to come.

During questioning from the Executive Director, representatives of LEAD Neely's Bend discussed the school's data-driven culture. The leadership team sets and continuously monitors priorities around creating a foundation for a strong school culture and closing academic differentials. In response to the data, the staff adjusted to reading curriculum, intervention programming, and newcomer programming to address academic gaps over time. The leadership also spoke to new robust teacher coaching strategies and a new external partnership to better support coteaching planning to better include subgroups of students. Representatives from LEAD Neely's Bend then addressed questions surrounding chronic absenteeism, stating that they have made significant reductions in the last two years to meet their goals, and attendance continues to be a school-wide push. The school has numerous opportunities to engage families throughout the year, and the school developed an incentive plan to encourage strong student attendance. The Commission's Executive Director then asked about enrollment at LEAD Neely's Bend as this has been in decline for the last few years. Representatives from LEAD Neely's Bend spoke to recent enrollment challenges due to MNPS restructuring the zoning patterns of surrounding schools. The operator is working to expand their reach to surrounding communities, creating new digital and media campaigns, and hosting more community events to increase enrollment. They are also working to improve student retention year over year. Leadership also stated that the school's robust provision of support and services to families is part of what makes LEAD Neely's Bend unique. When looking at the next ten years, the network leadership spoke to continuous board and leadership development. The network has a succession plan for the CEO and has executive leadership review internal talent annually. Finally, the school intends to stay in the current facility and will engage MNPS in negotiations regarding the facility once a renewal decision is rendered. The network is proactively working on a contingency plan to relocate to another facility, if needed, and the network has relationships with several real estate brokers who can assist with this.

The public hearing concluded with a closing statement from the LEAD Neely's Bend principal and the receipt of nine in-person comments speaking in support of the LEAD Neely's Bend renewal. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received forty-five written comments in support of renewal for LEAD Neely's Bend.

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. My recommendation also considers the performance of the charter school over the length of the expiring charter term.

The LEAD Public Schools network acquired Neely's Bend Middle School in the 2015-16 school year, and at that time, the school 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 Years 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 consistent 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, attendance rates at LEAD Neely's Bend have been inconsistent since the pandemic, with chronic absenteeism rates increasing in years when averages in the state began to decrease. At the site visit and the public hearing, school leadership spoke about their efforts to combat chronic absenteeism, and the school reduced its chronic absenteeism rate for the 2023-24 school year.

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 a one-time 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 would result in the school needing to dip into cash reserves. At the site visit and public hearing, the network's Director of Family Engagement spoke about new marketing and advertising efforts and stated the school is intentionally expanding its reach into surrounding neighborhoods from which it has previously not targeted for enrollment. Additionally, the school is updating its transportation system to have more targeted reach to 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. The network has successfully navigated a transition of authorizer as well as working with multiple authorizers across the network. The network is in a strong financial



position and has demonstrated long-term strategic thinking with its recent approval to expand to a fully K-12 network. Additionally, the school is well poised for the upcoming facility acquisition and will begin negotiations with MNPS upon the rendering of the renewal decision. 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 warrants a new ten-year term. Therefore, I am recommending LEAD Neely's Bend for renewal.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tess Stovall". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

1/24/2025

Date