



Statement to the TN Public Charter School Commission

We are grateful for the opportunity to submit an appeal of the Metro Nashville Public School's Board of Education's denial of Saber STEM Academy to the Tennessee Charter School Commission. We valued the feedback from the initial MNPS review and believe the amended application for Saber STEM Academy meets and exceeds the standards outlined in the Tennessee Department of Education. We also believe the establishment of Saber STEM Academy is in the best interest of students of an underserved population in Southeast Nashville. In this Letter of Intent to Appeal, we plan to highlight areas in which we believe the MNPS New Charter Review Team failed to recognize and therefore scored Saber STEM Academy's application low.

In the original review, the MNPS review team cites a study by the Thomas Fordham Institute and Basis Policy Research that states that "charter schools that exhibit low performance in their first year of operation are less than 1% likely to improve after five years." The Saber STEM Academy team agrees and has a history of establishing and leading high quality charter schools. The schools in which our team has extensive experience are in serving high needs and underserved communities, especially those that are foreign born and English learning. The review team in its original review stated that the application did not have a plan to reduce the achievement gaps, however the beginning of our application focuses the academic plan on reducing the learning gap as well as providing equitable opportunities for all students. This is in fact in alignment with MNPS District Goals to "Identify and eliminate inequities." The SSA initial and amended new start charter application accomplishes that goal.

Our team has a long history of improving student performance and we believe the MNPS denial of the original and amended new start charter school application for Saber STEM Academy was not in the best interest of students, the LEA and the community. Saber Stem Academy is planned to specifically address this gap. Salman Community Services (the sponsor) supported schools managed by EMAN have a history of closing the achievement gap and academic performance over a period of time. Prior to the pandemic, fully managed EMAN charter schools saw a seventy (70%) percent growth in proficiency in English Language Arts and a 102% growth in Math proficiency over the years of 2014/15 to 2018-2019. Emerging from the pandemic and the resulting shutdowns, EMAN managed schools saw a fifteen percentage point advantage over the State of Michigan's report on English Language Learners and their progress on the WIDA assessment (48% as compared to 33%).

With the most recent TNReady data that was published in early July 2022, students meeting or exceeding expectations for MNPS third through eighth graders is as follows:

MNPS Grades	MNPS ELA	MNPS Math
K-8 All Students	25.6% Met or Exceeded	21.3 Met or Exceeded
K-8 Economically Disadvantaged Students	13.5% Met or Exceeded	11.0% Met or Exceeded
K-8 English Learners	11.2% Met or Exceeded	12.9% Met or Exceeded

It is clear that a significant achievement gap still exists for economically disadvantaged students and English Learners within MNPS and Saber STEM Academy would be able to meet those needs.

The SMART goals referenced in the application, not only provide access to an equitable education, but these goals are a result of the Saber STEM team’s years of experience. As a leadership team, we know the challenges our families and students face and our track record of success is the foundation on which we plan to build in Tennessee. Our amended application added important statistics around the graduation rate of female students and how our network’s focus on culturally relevant pedagogy and positive school climate have attracted many students to our school community and helped them attain success. This is further evidence of our network’s history in providing a high quality education option that is in the best interest of students, the LEA and the community.

Although not a concern in the initial review, the MNPS charter review team made a point to highlight our application’s cited example of the Kurdish population. The report states “Kurdish speaking students have declined 9% over the last four years in MNPS. The declining numbers mean that a school cannot rely on Kurdish speaking students for consistent enrollment.” The SSA team would agree that reliance on one nationality would be an impediment and there is nowhere in our original or amended application that demonstrates a reliance on Kurdish speaking students. The growth that Davidson County has experienced from countries like Somalia, Nigeria, Egypt, Iraq, India and other Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian nations provides the basis for SSA’s targeted English Learner population. The SSA team is experienced in serving this underserved population and believes the trend of foreign born students will continue to expand not only in SE Davidson County but further into Rutherford County.

Since its inception in 2003, EMAN and its non-profit, Salman Community Services have fully managed six charter schools and have provided back office support to another nineteen. In the review of the amended application, the MNPS review team raised concern about how would SSA be managed by a group from Michigan. Just as other operators in Tennessee have headquarters outside of the state but have teams on the ground, SSA’s operator, EMAN will have a fully operational leadership team in Nashville. Currently, EMAN provides full leadership and management to three schools in Michigan, including a STEM certified school through the National Institute of Stem Education (NISE) and back office support to five schools. EMAN has demonstrated the capacity to lead and manage multiple schools with various needs and the ability to do so with a leadership team in Nashville would be no different.

The MNPS review team twice made reference to EMAN, as a management company losing contracts and voiced concern, enough to make that a part of their public presentation to the MNPS BOE. We would respond that, **NO schools have terminated their contracts with EMAN in the past eight years.**

Hamilton Academy was a charter school authorized by Detroit Public Schools. It was a pilot program that DPS tried in order to advance student achievement in its lowest performing schools and was subsequently returned to the District's portfolio as a traditional public school. Hamilton Academy is the only school (in EMAN's portfolio) that opted to exit its contract with EMAN prior to the specified term. Arbitration that was conducted ruled in favor of EMAN that the contract was terminated improperly. Academy of Waterford was originally founded and managed by the Leona Group who also owned the academy's facility that was an aging building. EMAN was asked to step in for the final two years when the Board decided to close the school due to ongoing facility issues. EMAN effectively closed the school in accordance with the State of Michigan's dissolution process and ensured that all vendors and staff were fully paid. Wolverine Academy was a specialized school for adjudicated youth. EMAN was asked by the authorizer to help launch the school in partnership with Wolverine Services, a social services agency. Enrollment was dictated solely by the students who were residents in the lockdown facility within the offender system. Declining enrollment forced the school to close.

Saber STEM Academy is in the best interest of the greater Antioch community. While we realize there have been an influx of new charter schools within the past three years, we believe the focus on STEM learning and activities will have a positive impact on all learners, but especially those in the English Language community. Our nationally certified STEM program, along with our social-emotional learning focus with Leader In Me aligns well with the teaching and learning standards from the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching.

The MNPS Review team highlights the organizational structure between Salman Community Services, EMAN and the facility owner. The Board of Directors for Saber STEM Academy are a separate entity from the sponsor, Salman Community Services and the proposed management company, Education Management and Networks (EMAN).

Salman Community Services and Education Management and Networks have a long history of providing high quality charter schools to students in English Learner and underserved communities. We have a strong passion for our students to be able to both envision and realize goals and dreams that they may not have deemed possible. We believe that our experience in not only managing schools but in establishing them from the ground up will be an impactful asset to the community, which is ultimately in the best interests of the students.

As a team, we look forward to being active members of the Tennessee Charter School community and would respectfully ask the commission to overturn the denial of the Saber STEM Academy new start application.

Sincerely,

Saber STEM Academy Leadership Team