



Tennessee Nature Academy
5844 Pettus Rd.
Antioch, TN 37013

August 2, 2022

Tennessee Public Charter School Commission
500 James Robertson Parkway
5th Floor, Davy Crockett Tower
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Tennessee Public Charter School Commission,

We humbly request that the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission appeal the Metropolitan Nashville Public School's (MNPS) decision to deny Tennessee Nature Academy's (TNA) charter application. Tennessee Nature Academy is a proposed single-site, public charter school serving Nashville-area students and families in grades 5-12. Our mission is to cultivate happy and healthy young adults who are knowledgeable about the world, passionate about the outdoors, and committed to doing good work. TNA's model is informed by research on the effects of nature on students' wellbeing and success, years of community-based programming, and input from community members and practitioners who are excited about what our model has to offer. We believe that TNA stands to serve the best interests of Nashville's students, the Southeast Nashville community, and Metro Nashville Public Schools. We therefore submit our appeal on the following bases:

1. The MNPS Board's decision to deny Tennessee Nature Academy's application was against the best interests of the pupils of the community.

Tennessee Nature Academy plans to locate in Southeast Nashville in proximity to the Antioch, Cane Ridge, and Overton school clusters. Schools across Southeast Nashville achieve lower-than-expected academic performance outcomes compared with city-wide and state-wide averages, and these disparities in outcomes have persisted over time. Section 1.2 in our application illustrates that the middle schools in our target area, as a whole, demonstrated lower TCAP success rates than the district and state averages in all subject areas (ELA, math, science, and social studies) in 2021. High schools in our target area demonstrated lower ACT scores and Ready Graduate achievement rates than the district and state averages in 2021 as well. TCAP success rates, ACT scores, and Ready Graduate achievement rates were also lower among economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities in our area. These lower-than-expected performance outcomes demonstrate the achievement gaps that affect students in our community. TNA's academic program, social-emotional learning program, and culture of resilience and well-being are uniquely designed to support students to overcome these disparities.

Tennessee Nature Academy will provide an innovative and unique school model to Nashville's students and families. Although nature-based learning has many documented, well-researched effects on students' learning and well-being, it is not widely integrated into public school classrooms in Middle Tennessee. Section 1.3 of TNA's application details how we will leverage the best practices of nature-based and



project-based learning to boost students' academic achievement, and Section 1.9 demonstrates the benefits of nature-based learning for students with diverse learning needs. TNA is also a diverse-by-design school model. Through a fellowship with the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition, our co-founders have designed TNA's school model in alignment with the growing body of research that suggests that a racially and socioeconomically integrated student body produces educational benefits for all students, specifically at-risk students. In addition, TNA emphasizes college and career readiness throughout our program by providing students with the opportunities to participate in Advanced Placement and work-based learning opportunities and earn industry credentials in the Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources career cluster— preparing students to participate in Tennessee's largest industry.

2. The MNPS Board's decision to deny Tennessee Nature Academy's application was against the best interest of the Antioch-Cane Ridge community in which the future school will be located.

TNA's application demonstrates community demand and support in the following ways:

- The Cane Ridge Community Club voted unanimously to support Tennessee Nature Academy's efforts to center our work within the community (our target area). TNA has also received organizational letters of support from Friends of Mill Ridge Park; Teach For America, Nashville-Chattanooga Chapter; Middle Tennessee State University, Environmental Science Department; Diverse Charter School Coalition; Cane Ridge Community Land Trust; Bloomsbury Farms; Our Joyful Learning Community; The Positivity Project; The Tennessee Concrete Association; Southern Adventist University; Charter Schools Development Corporation; The Village Nashville; and the Cumberland River Compact.
- During the summer of 2022, TNA provided two weeks of free educational programming for our community through our Wild Discovery Art and Nature Camp. Our programming was designed to include students who would make up our first few founding classes and served as a way for potential founding families to test-run our nature-based model. Programming occurred concurrently with MNPS' Summer Scholars program and was a perfect case study to demonstrate demand. Despite having only 90 spots available for students, TNA received 121 registrations for our summer educational programming. TNA has and will continue to offer educational programming for students in our community throughout the summer and fall as our current grant funding allows.
- TNA's mailing list of families grew by 400% to 149 families between the submission of our initial and amended applications and has grown by 32% to 196 families since then. This demonstrates a continued and growing interest from the community in our work.

3. The MNPS Board's decision to deny Tennessee Nature Academy's application was against the best interest of the school district itself.

TNA addresses five priorities that MNPS considers in applications for new charter schools:

- (1) Advance academic achievement for students currently enrolled in schools that underperform. TNA will leverage our nature-based, project-based academic program, purposeful instructional strategies, data from regular assessments, and comprehensive intervention systems to eliminate achievement gaps between student subgroups and support all students in outperforming local and statewide comparison groups on key outcome measures, including measures of proficiency in math and English.



- (2) Add to the number of schools with student enrollment diversity in Nashville. TNA's diverse-by-design model promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout our model. Our enrollment goals aim to reflect the diversity of our Southeast Nashville community.
- (3) Improve academic achievement in literacy. TNA's instructional and assessment systems, daily schedule, and staffing model support academic achievement in literacy.
- (4) Improve academic achievement for English language learners and (5) for students with disabilities. TNA's comprehensive, inclusive education model supports students with diverse learning needs. While we demonstrate this support in Section 1.9 specifically, we detail our strategies to improve academic achievement for English language learners and students with disabilities throughout our application.

The MNPS Board's vote to decline TNA's application was based on recommendations shared by the district's charter review team. TNA has publicly noted that errors had been made in the review process that we believe incorrectly justified partially-meets and does-not-meet ratings of our application. We look forward to discussing these errors with the Commission's Review Team.

Additionally, the MNPS Board's discussion prior to the vote to deny our application suggested a belief that TNA's seats were not needed because the schools in our community were sufficiently enrolled. On the contrary, recent enrollment metrics demonstrate that high schools in our cluster are above capacity and expect a capacity utilization of 101% (at Antioch High School), 102% (at John Overton High School), and 115% (at Cane Ridge High School) in SY 2022-2023.¹ While it is true that enrollment in MNPS has recently declined, we believe that current trends demonstrate an increased demand for charter school seats. Although enrollment in MNPS has declined by 11,094 students, charter school enrollment has increased by 9,675 students.² Furthermore, MNPS lost 4,000 students during the COVID-19 pandemic to other districts, homeschooling, or private schools. TNA's model has been popular with such families and stands to bring families back to the district.

Furthermore, MNPS has not incurred any costs for TNA's incubation and planning year. Through our private-public partnerships and as a recipient of the Tennessee Charter School Expansion Grant, TNA has attained financial support and sustainability for its first two years of operation (FY2021 and FY2022). Due to our work in the community, TNA has lined up to be in receivership of a 23-acre parcel of land for the future school site, further solidifying the organization's financial sustainability and expanding TNA's financial capacity in a way beyond the district's other traditional zoned schools.

We appreciate your consideration and look forward to engaging with you in the appeals process.

Sincerely,

Tennessee Nature Academy
(629) 259-2429
rrenfro@tennesseenatureacademy.org

¹ Metro Nashville Public Schools. (2022, April 27). *MNPS school enrollment and utilization.*

² Mangrum, M. (2022, June 26). Enrollment in Metro Nashville Public Schools is declining - but that's not the whole story. Here's what to know. *The Tennessean.*
<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2022/06/27/tennessee-metro-nashville-public-schools-enrollment-declining-charter-schools-ga-in-trend/7706586001/>