



Executive Director’s Recommendation
Tennessee Volunteer Military 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 Volunteer Military Academy (“sponsor” or “TVMA”) appealed the denial of its amended application by the Memphis Shelby County Schools (“MSCS”) 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 Volunteer Military 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 MSCS Board of Education to deny the amended application for Tennessee Volunteer Military 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 the Sponsor’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 to affirm the local board’s decision to deny.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. The sponsor submitted its initial application for Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy to MSCS on January 31, 2022.
2. MSCS assembled a review committee to review and score the TVMA initial application.
3. On March 9, 2022, MSCS’s review committee conducted a capacity interview with representatives of TVMA.

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.



4. MSCS's review committee reviewed and scored the TVMA initial application and recommended to the MSCS Board of Education that the initial application be denied, indicating it did not meet standards on academics, operations, and finance.
5. On April 27, 2022, MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the TVMA initial application based on the review committee's recommendation.
6. The sponsor amended and resubmitted its application for TVMA to MSCS on May 27, 2022.
7. MSCS's review committee reviewed and scored the TVMA amended application based on the charter application scoring rubric.
8. MSCS's review committee rated each section of the amended application as does not meet standard and recommended denial to the local board of education.
9. On July 26, 2022, the MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of TVMA.
10. The sponsor appealed the denial of the TVMA amended application in writing to the Commission on August 2, 2022, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.000.
11. The Commission's review committee independently analyzed and scored the TVMA amended application using the Tennessee Department of Education's charter school application scoring rubric.
12. The Commission's review committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of TVMA on September 20, 2022 via Microsoft Teams.
13. On September 22, 2022, the Commission staff held a public hearing at Barnes Auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the Commission's Designee, heard presentations from the sponsor and MSCS and took public comment regarding the TVMA amended application.
14. After the capacity interview, the Commission's review committee determined a final consensus rating of the Tennessee Volunteer Military 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 MSCS to review and score the Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy initial application consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Titles
Arlandra Parker	MSCS Charter Office
Virginia Rodgers	MSCS Finance
Erica Evans	MSCS Legal
LaTonya McGowan	MSCS Safety & Security
Sean Isham	MSCS Facilities & Business Operations

Name	Titles
Eugene Lockhart	MSCS School Operations
Deanna Tatum-Cross	MSCS English as Second Language
Brian Davis	MSCS Curriculum & Instruction
Tiffany Boyle	MSCS Professional Development
Tracy Tapp	MSCS Special Education
Kendra Hargrove	MSCS Student Supports
Gina Faulkner	MSCS Mental Health
Jim Harbin	MSCS Coordinated School Health
Walleon Bobo	MSCS JROTC
Amber James	MSCS Human Resources
Alexander Roberson	External Reviewer
Anthony Oliver	External Reviewer
Erin Conley	External Reviewer
Jack Vuylsteke	External Reviewer
Edranyce Monroe	Community Representative

The Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy initial application received the following ratings from the MSCS review committee:

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

After the MSCS review committee completed its review and scoring of the initial application, its recommendation was presented to the MSCS Board of Education on April 27, 2022. Based on the review committee's recommendation, the MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the initial application of Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy.

District Denial of Amended Application

The review committee assembled by MSCS to review and score the amended Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy mirrored that of the committee that reviewed the initial application. Upon resubmission, the



MSCS review committee conducted a review of the amended application, and the amended application received the following ratings from the MSCS review committee:

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

After the MSCS review committee completed its review and scoring of the amended application, its recommendation was presented to the MSCS Board of Education on July 26, 2022. At the July 26, 2022 board meeting, the MSCS Board of Education voted to deny the amended application of Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy.

Commission Review Committee’s Evaluation of the Application

Following the denial of the Tennessee Volunteer Military 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 Volunteer Military Academy amended application. This review committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Trent Carlson	Commission Staff
Serenity Greeno	External Reviewer
Melanie Harrell	Commission Staff
Kelly Inouye	External Reviewer
Maggie Lund	Commission Staff

The review committee conducted an initial review and scoring of the Tennessee Volunteer Military 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 Volunteer Military Academy application was as follows:

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

The review committee has recommended denial of the application for Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy because the sponsor failed to provide sufficient evidence in the academic, operational, and financial



sections to meet the required criteria of the rubric.

The review committee found that the sponsor's academic plan does not meet standard. There is a substantial lack of clarity within the academic plan, as the section did not outline its grade and class structure, instructional model, or curricula. Additionally, there is a lack of evidence regarding planning for identifying and serving students with disabilities and English Learners (EL). The applicant indicated special education services will be offered during a study hall staffed by trained tutors and volunteers, which is not in compliance with state or federal law. Additionally, the application did not include any letters of support which was a concern to the review committee, as it calls into question whether the school will be able to recruit and enroll its targeted student population.

The review committee held that the sponsor's operations plan does not meet standard because of an unclear relationship with Charter One, a for-profit education management organization with whom the applicant has partnered, unknown roles and responsibilities within the school, and concerns regarding recruiting and retaining licensed staff. The review committee found that the operational plan does not clearly describe how the operations of the school will function and fails to explain how day-to-day roles and responsibilities will be handled. The reliance on Charter One became a glaring issue for the review committee, as conflicting statements regarding the relationship between the two entities were made in the application and capacity interview. In addition, the review committee had concerns about the applicant's ability to recruit and retain licensed teachers, which stemmed from the fact that the school signaled it will rely heavily on a nontraditional teacher pool. The review committee understood that staffing military veterans is in alignment with the school's mission and vision, but when the applicant was asked to explain its plan for ensuring licensure, the review committee noted the absence of a plan.

Finally, the review committee found that the sponsor's financial plan does not meet standard, as the budget includes unreasonable assumptions, there was a lack of demonstrated charter school finance experience, and the school's pre-opening budget relied entirely on unguaranteed funds. The review committee indicated that there were key personnel, including special education and EL teachers, not adequately represented in the budget. Additionally, the applicant was not able to clarify to the review committee how they determined budget assumptions to be reasonable, or the procedures and policies they will put in place to ensure that the school's finances are sound. The concerns the review committee had regarding the financial plan were compounded by the fact that the pre-opening budget submitted by the applicant is entirely reliant on funds that are not yet secured. While the applicant indicated that there are pledged donations pending authorization, no documentation or evidence was included within the application. In addition to these concerns, the review committee noted that Charter One's role in the finances and back-office support for the school remains unclear. The applicant stated in the capacity interview that negotiations with Charter One regarding services, and fees the school will pay Charter One for services, were still ongoing. For these reasons, the review committee found that the financial plan did not meet standard.

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 Volunteer Military 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 22, 2022. Memphis-Shelby County's presentation at the public hearing focused on the reasons for denial within academics, operations, and finance per the review committee report. Representatives from MSCS indicated that Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy's amended application was denied based on an overall lack of response to feedback between the initial and amended applications and unclear plans that led to concerns about service of special populations, Tennessee graduation requirements, contingency planning, and the financial and operational sustainability of the school. Within the academic section, MSCS stated that the applicant failed to provide details that the school could meet the needs of all students and subgroups, have robust RTI² and special populations identification processes, ensure alignment to Tennessee state standards, and satisfy all Tennessee graduation requirements. Additionally, it was noted that the applicant was unclear as to which community in Memphis they intended to locate as they named options within the application scattered across the city. Within the operations section of the application, MSCS named similar concerns regarding an unclear facility acquisition plan given their diversity of location options, concerns regarding missing staff recruitment and hiring timelines, concerns with adequate training for the governing board, and an unclear partnership with Charter One. MSCS expressed confusion as to if Charter One would serve as simply a supporting entity or a charter management organization (CMO). Finally, MSCS cited misalignment in finance and budgeting with no financial expertise represented on the governing board. There was no contingency planning provided within the application and budget, particularly for non-secured funding, and very little evidence of secured funding. Ultimately, MSCS concluded that the application did not meet standard within the academics, operations, or financial sections.

In the sponsor's opening statement, Antwane Bohanon, the board chair of Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy, began by addressing concerns and adding clarity from the previous capacity interview that was held with the Commission's review committee. He stated that the school does intend to provide transportation to students, and they have included information to purchase buses within the application. He stated that the school's contingency plans for lower enrollment would be to reduce facility expenses and staff. Mr. Bohanon stated that Charter One would be a service provider that would offer support with RTI², MTSS, and all back-office services. Mr. Bohanon also added that the school would aim to waive any aspects of state charter school law as needed, including out-of-district enrollment, and that they will satisfy licensure requirements by having one commissioned officer, not one per classroom, as previously described within the capacity interview. He also stated that there were concerns with the MSCS application process as it was his understanding that MSCS would provide all necessary special education services. According to Mr. Bohanon, this is why the school did not include special education staff within their budget or personnel. Additionally, when the school received the 55-page feedback document from MSCS, it required a charter agreement to be signed and returned with the submission of an amended application. The operator disagreed with this agreement and chose to resubmit the amended application without signing the charter agreement. Finally, Mr. Bohanon spoke about the partnership with Charter One, stating that they have a record of achievement and would support the school's back office, allowing the board to provide proper oversight in the startup of the school. Mr. Bohanon stated that Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy believes in putting kids first in a caring 6-12 environment that provides valuable opportunities, including taking pride in their neighborhoods and communities, providing CTE pathways and

⁵ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(b)(i).



internships, and achieving a graduation rate of over 95%.

During questioning by the Commission staff, MSCS clarified concerns regarding the applicant's recruitment plan, stating that the applicant's location is not clear and cites different areas of the city in the application. The facilities plan within the application also does not match the neighborhoods mentioned, and the school plans to recruit students from all over the city to match demographics. The district said this does not seem feasible, particularly because of the lack of contingency plans should enrollment not materialize. When questioned regarding the applicant's lack of response to feedback between the initial and the amended application, MSCS stated that ask each applicant to specify in gray shading any changes to the application when it is resubmitted, and the district noted significant concerns had not been addressed by the applicant. Feedback was provided in more than seven sections that the applicant chose not to amend in the application. When asked about the applicant's statement regarding MSCS providing services for special populations, the district clarified that schools work with district-employed special education advisors to ensure fidelity of services for students and, in some cases, services may be provided by the district. However, the district stated a charter school must have licensed and certified staff to serve special populations within the building. MSCS also stated that, during the capacity interview, they attempted to learn more about the applicant's partnership with Charter One. MSCS said they did not garner the clarity needed as Charter One plans to provide a large number of services, and the school chose not to respond to feedback requesting additional clarity on this topic. Finally, MSCS responded to questions surrounding the charter agreement. MSCS includes the charter agreement with the submission of the amended application to be reviewed and signed during this process, so the applicant has a better understanding of the terms of authorization and expectations before approval. MSCS was in communication with the Tennessee Department of Education on this matter, but they do not recall any communication with Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy surrounding this item.

The Commission then questioned the sponsor about the intentional diversity of the student population they aim to achieve to mimic the diversity of the military, as stated within the application. The applicant stated that they would not limit enrollment based on demographics to satisfy quotas, but they will conduct social media and marketing campaigns, along with grassroots efforts, targeted for specific zip codes. In response to questions about demonstrated community support and demand, the applicant stated that they had a Facebook page with 170 families citing interest, they have spoken with many other charter leaders across the state for support, and they have new letters of recommendation for the school signed by local politicians and elected officials. Regarding facility planning, the operator stated they have three options for facilities that can be adjusted based on enrollment, and they plan to share an underutilized facility with the district. They also said they will engage a commercial realtor and contractor to move forward on this facility once they receive authorization. The Commission then questioned the sponsor regarding their lack of response to feedback between the initial and amended applications submitted to the district. The sponsor stated that often communication gets lost in emails and that they would have liked the opportunity to sit down with the district to get more clarity, as the process to apply for a charter school is long. They acknowledged they could have been more detailed oriented. They said they chose not to accept feedback regarding certain standards within the application, as they believe the district misconstrued them as an instructional model, which they are not. Finally, the applicant stated that they chose to contract with Charter One to help them start the school, but they only intend to have Charter One serve as an advisor for the first three years to avoid any pitfalls.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of zero in-person



comments. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received 40 written comments in favor of Tennessee Volunteer Military 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 MSCS, 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 Volunteer Military Academy amended application did not rise to the level of meeting or exceeding the standards required for approval. While I believe the sponsor does have a vision and strong desire to bring a military-based education program to the selected area, there remain fundamental questions surrounding this academic model that must be considered. The sponsor did not offer a clear plan for serving students with disabilities and English Learners, and I cannot recommend approval of an application that does not give full consideration to all populations of students. This application also lacked sufficient evidence of community demand for this school as the amended application did not contain letters of support. While the Commission received approximately forty (40) written public comments after the public hearing, these comments reflect an interest in the school model and are not necessarily indicative of meeting the school’s enrollment projections. Further, the sponsor has not shown a contingency plan to support the school in the event they do not meet their enrollment projections.

With regard to the sponsor’s operations plan, my biggest concern is the unclear relationship between Charter One and Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy. T.C.A. § 49-13-124 prohibits a charter school from contracting with a for-project entity for the management and operations of a school. The sponsor explained in both the capacity interview and public hearing that, while Charter One would not be signed on as a part of the board or within the charter agreement, they would provide either advisory services and/or management services for a three (3) year relationship. The title of the relationship is immaterial, as their contracted services would be prohibited under Tennessee law for an approved charter school. Additionally, without the expertise that the sponsor relied on from Charter One, I am less confident that the sponsor has an established governance structure in place to operate a successful charter school.

I also have questions about the sponsor’s plan for a facility. In the public hearing, the sponsor stated that the school intended to secure an underutilized and/or unused property as a facility, but there is a lack of detail regarding any capital improvements or renovations necessary for the school to be ready to operate by

⁶ T.C.A. § 49-13-108(5)(E).

⁷ *Id.*



August 2023. I also agree with the review committee in their finding that the sponsor does not have a clear plan to recruit and retain licensed teachers. The sponsor indicated an intent to hire veterans as teachers and/or volunteers to fulfill their staffing model. While I understand how the staffing plan aligns with the mission of the school, it does not meet the statutory requirements for all teachers to be appropriately licensed and endorsed.

Finally, I agree with the review committee that the sponsor's financial plan does not meet the standard for approval. The sponsor does not have a reasonable budget for the school, with many of the responsibilities being contracted out to Charter One. As in my earlier explanation, the relationship with Charter One is flawed and contrary to Tennessee law. The sponsor indicated that each class would contain two (2) teachers; however, the budget does not reflect this plan. The sponsor also indicated that it would attempt to secure a startup grant and/or obtain a line of credit. However, these financial contingencies are too uncertain to give me the confidence to recommend approval. The sponsor did not provide evidence of anticipated costs nor the governing board's expertise necessary to navigate the financial responsibilities of establishing a charter school. Without a solid financial budget or the experts necessary to create a plan, I cannot recommend approval of this amended application.

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. Based on the totality of the evidence, I determine that the amended application for TVMA does not meet the standard for approval.

For the reasons expounded on in this report, I recommend that the Commission deny the Tennessee Volunteer Military 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 Volunteer Military 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 Memphis-Shelby County Board of Education to deny the amended application for Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tess Stovall".

Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

10/18/22
Date



EXHIBIT A

Charter Application Review Committee Recommendation Report

October 18, 2022

School Name: Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy

Sponsor: Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy

Proposed Location of School: Memphis-Shelby County Schools

Evaluation Team:

- Trent Carlson
- Serenity Greeno
- Melanie Harrell
- Kelly Inouye
- Maggie Lund

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 and members of the governing board 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; start-up 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.
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.



Summary of the Application

School Name: Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy

Sponsor: Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy

Proposed Location of School: Memphis-Shelby County Schools

Mission:¹ Our mission is to provide Cadets with a targeted and rigorous educational experience in a focused military environment where cadets will graduate as physically prepared, academically developed leaders, poised for continued success.

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:
6	80	95	105	110	120	120
7	80	95	105	110	120	120
8	80	95	105	110	120	120
9	80	95	105	110	120	120
10	80	95	105	110	120	120
11	50	75	95	100	100	100
12	35	50	75	85	100	100
Totals	485	600	690	735	800	800

Brief Description of the Application:

The sponsor, Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy, is proposing to open a charter school in Shelby County, Tennessee and serve students in 6th through 12th grades when fully built out. The school, Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy, is a new-start school and would be the first school for the sponsor. The school intends to operate in the Cordova/East Memphis area of Shelby County to provide “a basis for a structured academic environment within which Cadets receive a comprehensive program of instruction that will enable them to maximize their individual potential.”³ The school proposes to offer the structure and discipline of a military environment and provide an opportunity for students in Memphis-Shelby County Schools additional school options.

The proposed school will be governed by a Board of Directors, comprised of five members. In Year 0, Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy has budgeted \$350,000, receiving \$250,000 from the Charter Schools Program Startup Grant and \$100,000 from fundraising and philanthropy, and projects \$5,385,822 in revenue and \$5,087,166 in expenses in Year 1, resulting in a balance of \$396,289⁴[\[OBJ\]](#). By Year 5, the school projects to have \$9,587,075 in revenue and \$8,046,232 in expenses, resulting in a positive ending fund balance of \$4,818,489.⁵[\[OBJ\]](#)



The school anticipates that 85% of the student population will qualify as economically disadvantaged, 18% of the student population will be students with disabilities, and 10% of the student population will be English Learners.⁶



Summary of the Evaluation

The review committee recommends denial of the application for Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy because the applicant failed to provide sufficient evidence in the academic, operations, and financial sections to demonstrate the application meets the required criteria of the rubric.

The academic plan presented by the applicant does not meet standard. There was a substantial lack of clarity as to what the academic plan is, as the section failed to specifically outline the daily school schedule and class structure, instructional model, and curricula. There were also significant concerns regarding the school's lack of planning for identifying and serving students with disabilities and English Learners. Notably, the applicant indicated special education services will be offered during a study hall at the end of the day, which will be staffed by trained tutors and volunteers. This does not demonstrate evidence that it complies with Tennessee law for serving those populations of students. Additionally, the review committee could not determine if there was community demand or support for the proposed school, as the application did not include any letters of support. Overall, there was a lack of evidence to meet the standard set forth in the rubric of demonstrating "evidence that community feedback is incorporated in the application," and the review committee could not determine the school will be able to recruit and enroll its targeted student population.

The applicant's operations plan does not meet standard due to an unclear relationship with Charter One, a for-profit education management organization with whom the applicant has partnered, unknown roles and responsibilities within the school, and concerns regarding recruiting and retaining licensed staff. Similar to some of the significant issues with the applicant's academic plan, the operations plan does not clearly describe how the operations of the school will function and who will be responsible for executing necessary tasks. The reliance on Charter One was found to be problematic for the review committee, as conflicting statements regarding the relationship between the two entities were made in the application and capacity interview and the level to which Charter One will be involved on a day-to-day basis remains unknown. In addition, the review committee had concerns about the applicant's ability to recruit and retain licensed teachers, which stemmed from the fact that the school signaled it will rely heavily on a nontraditional teacher pool. While staffing military veterans is in alignment with the school's mission and vision, when the applicant was asked to explain their plan for ensuring licensure, the review committee noted that the absence of a clear plan was evident.

Lastly, the financial plan does not meet standard because unreasonable assumptions are made in the budget, which include the applicant overlooking significant positions within the organization, a lack of internal and external financial expertise, and uncertainty regarding Charter One's role in the finances of the school. The review committee found that the issues within the budget were indicative of a lack of expertise with charter school financing. While the applicant stated Charter One would assist in back-office functions of the school, it was not shared who specifically would be responsible for internal financial oversight between the executive director or Charter One. Furthermore, the applicant stated that the terms and conditions of their partnership with Charter One, including how much Charter One will charge for service fees, were still being negotiated. Overall, significant gaps remain regarding the applicant's financial plan.



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 approval⁷ 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
Academic Plan Design and Capacity	Does not meet standard
Operations Plan and Capacity	Does not meet standard
Financial Plan and Capacity	Does not meet standard



Analysis of the Academic Plan Design and Capacity

Rating: Does not meet standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:

The applicant's Academic Plan Design and Capacity does not meet standard because it exhibits a lack of specificity and intentionality, particularly in terms of the proposed instructional model and curricula. Due to this lack of specificity, there are also significant concerns regarding the proposed school's capacity to serve special populations, including students with disabilities and English Learners. Additionally, because of the absence of a clear and detailed plan, as well as the absence of demonstrated community support, there remain questions surrounding the proposed school's ability to recruit and enroll students.

First, the application fails to clarify the instructional model and curricula the school intends to use. Throughout the academic plan, there is no differentiation between the middle and high school grades of the proposed school, and the application fails to outline what the different classes between the grade levels offered will entail. The school's proposed curriculum, Core Knowledge, only goes through eighth grade, and within the application, the applicant did not clarify the curricula that will be used at the high school level. The review committee found there was a lack of evidence that the curriculum is robust and supportive of the growth of all students, and therefore, it did not meet the characteristics of a strong response as set forth in the rubric. In addition to the absence of specificity regarding the instructional model and curricula of the school, there is a lack of clarity regarding who in the organization will oversee and manage the academic program. For example, at times within the application the Executive Director was cited as responsible for oversight, and in other sections of the application, it was assigned to the principal. Moreover, the proposed board members do not have experience overseeing or running schools, and in the capacity interview, many questions regarding the instructional model or curricula the school will implement were directed to the school's partner organization, Charter One, who spoke in generality about potential services and support they offer schools. No clarity was garnered by the review committee to be able to effectively evaluate the academic design of the school.

Along with the lack of specificity of the proposed academic model, there was a lack of evidence regarding a comprehensive special populations plan, and overall, the RTI and MTSS plans were unclear. Within this section of the application, there were components that were copied and pasted from previous parts of the application, and much of the applicant's responses focused on definitions of methods for identifying and supporting special populations of students, rather than explaining the actual processes the school will take. Not only did the application fail to outline clear processes for student identification, services, and analyzing and responding to student data, it states that special education services would be provided during a study hall block at the end of the day, which will be staffed by tutors and volunteers. This plan was confirmed by the applicant in the capacity interview. The review committee questioned whether this is in alignment with Tennessee law and signaled that it illustrates the lack of intentionality throughout the academic plan. A similar issue was found with the school's proposed culture and RTI behavior plans, as the application explicitly states it will not differentiate its student handbook and code of conduct to accommodate students with disabilities. When asked to speak about this issue in the capacity interview, the applicant laid out the discipline tiers listed in the code of conduct and did not address any processes to ensure protection of the rights of students with disabilities. Overall, the review committee noted a lack of clear planning for service of special populations in both the academic plan and discipline protocol of the proposed school.



The application proposes opening all grades, sixth through twelfth, in the first year of operation with a total enrollment of 485, scaling year over year to a total enrollment of 800. There is an overall lack of evidence throughout the application that the applicant can meet its enrollment targets. Additionally, the applicant failed to provide any letters of support for the school, so it was difficult for the review committee to determine what, if any, demand for the school existed within the area they intend to locate. When asked about the absence of demonstrated demand in the capacity interview, the applicant expressed regret not knowing this was a requirement, as they have over 100 people who have pledged support and at least one letter from an elected official. No further details were given on who these supporters were, whether they lived in Shelby County, or if they have school-aged children who may enroll in the school. Therefore, the review committee determined evidence of community support and demand to be insufficient to meet the requirements of the rubric. Furthermore, no contingency plan was addressed in either the application or capacity interview should full enrollment not materialize, other than the applicant stating it will scale the proposed facility plans and staffing. Due to the totality of concerns and remaining questions, the academic plan design and capacity does not meet standard.

Analysis of the Operations Plan and Capacity

Rating: Does not meet standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:

The applicant's Operations Plan and Capacity does not meet standard because of an unclear relationship with Charter One, a lack of experience on the proposed board, an unclear organizational chart and delineation of responsibilities, and concerns regarding recruiting and retaining experienced, licensed teachers.

The proposed governing board contained within the application lacked the necessary experience to open, govern, and monitor a new charter school. Throughout the review of the application, there was a lack of clarity as to the nature of the partnership between the applicant and Charter One, a for-profit education management organization based in Arizona. When attempting to clarify the relationship within the capacity interview, it became more unclear. In the capacity interview, there were three of the proposed board members on the call, along with three representatives of Charter One. Despite maintaining its independence and autonomy from Charter One, the applicant directed a significant number of questions to Charter One representatives throughout all sections of the capacity interview. Charter One's answers to the review committee's questions were general about the types of services they offer schools and did not address specifics pertaining to Tennessee Volunteer Military Academy. Furthermore, the applicant stated that the exact terms and fee for services to be provided by Charter One on behalf of the school were still in negotiation. It remains unclear who will be responsible for most aspects of the school's operation and oversight. Additionally, during the capacity interview, board members alluded to their relative inexperience in charter schools and demonstrated an overall lack of expertise required to successfully open and operate a charter school.

Along with the lack of clarity regarding the capacity and responsibilities of the board, the delineation of responsibilities throughout the entirety of the organizational chart was inconsistent from the application. The chart provided as part of the application included only the titles of roles, did not expound upon the responsibilities given to each, and did not correspond with other sections of the application. During the capacity interview, further descriptions of roles were not offered, and the applicant did not clarify who in the organization would be responsible for most of the day-to-day operations. For example, the sponsor was not able to speak to who would be responsible for curriculum planning, instructional coaching, and other administrative tasks of the school, instead relying on representatives of Charter One to field questions related to these topics.

Within the application, there was a lack of clear plans to recruit and retain licensed, highly qualified teachers. While the application lists traditional recruitment sources for teacher candidates, it was notable to the review committee that the design of the school is based around staffing military veterans in teaching and leadership roles. While this is consistent with the mission and vision of the school, there was a lack of a clear plan for how the applicant will ensure appropriate licensure among its staff. Additionally, the applicant suggested a material number of their staff, including those staffed to provide services for students with individualized education plans (IEPs), would likely be volunteers, which raises more concerns regarding appropriate certification and licensure of staff for compliance according to Tennessee law. In totality, the review committee found the operations plan to be lacking substantial details and determined it does not meet the standard laid out in the Tennessee Department of Education Scoring Rubric.

Analysis of the Financial Plan and Capacity

Rating: Does not meet standard

Weaknesses Identified by the Committee:

The applicant’s Financial Plan and Capacity does not meet standard because there are understated expenditures that suggest unreasonable assumptions, a lack of internal and external financial expertise, and uncertainty as to the individuals who will oversee finances within the organization. Additionally, the entirety of the pre-opening revenue listed in the budget is based upon funding that is not guaranteed. The applicant notes they will attempt to secure a charter school startup grant, and if not awarded, will “obtain a line of credit.” However, no further detail is given within the application. The applicant also notes that, once approved, they will have \$100,000 worth of donations committed, but no proof or documentation of these commitments.

In the application and in the capacity interview, the applicant stated there will be two teachers per classroom across the school. However, the budget is not reflective of that plan. There are eight “Education Assistants/Aides,” which may account for a portion of the proposed plan; however, that is not enough personnel to fulfill the academic plan, and these roles are slated as part-time. The budget also fails to include adequate funding for servicing special populations, with zero EL teachers or specialists listed in the budget. It was clear to the review committee that the applicant failed to fully account for necessary expenditures, and when asked to clarify in the capacity interview, the applicant was unable to provide rationale for the assumptions used to prepare the budget. Overall, there are inconsistencies between the budget, academics, and operations sections of the application, as well as significant oversights regarding expenses necessary to fulfill the academic and operational plans, and the applicant did not adequately address the noted gaps.

While the review committee attempted to ascertain a clear picture of the financial relationship between the applicant and Charter One, it remains unknown who in the respective organizations are responsible for overseeing finances and carrying out back-office requirements. The applicant indicated there will be fees paid to Charter One for their services, but during the capacity interview, the applicant was unable to give a proposed cost for Charter One services, as they stated the terms of the agreement are still being negotiated. Representatives of Charter One did not speak about the costs they would charge nor about the negotiations in process. Given the aforementioned uncertainties in the budget, an additional large expense for a vendor such as Charter One could have a material effect on the financial solvency of the school. It was also unclear who within the organizational leadership team would oversee finances and the consultation partnership with Charter One. In addition, there were limited contingency plans should startup funding and enrollment not materialize. There was an overall lack of evidence regarding the applicant’s ability to execute the proposed school’s finances to ensure financial solvency, and as such, the review committee determined the financial plan and capacity does not meet the standard outlined in the scoring rubric.



Evaluation Team

Trent Carlson is the Authorizing Coordinator for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. Prior to joining the Commission, Trent worked in Nashville schools as a middle school teacher in both the public school district and a local public charter school. Trent was a Teach for America corps member and a Leadership for Educational Equity policy and advocacy summer fellow, in which he co-authored the American Federation for Children – Tennessee’s report, *The Warmth of Other Schools: Supporting Underrepresented Students in Private Schools*. Trent received an M.Ed. from Lipscomb University and a B.A. from the University of Alabama, where he studied Journalism, Political Science, and History.

Serenity Greeno is an educator with over 15 years of expertise in a variety of educational settings. As a public classroom teacher at the elementary and middle school levels, she has guided countless students to educational success. After serving as an online teacher at a public charter school, she transitioned into leadership roles within the school. Outside of her formal roles in education, she continues to pursue academic success for students through private tutoring. In addition, she writes for the online publication, *The Chalkboard Review*. Mrs. Greeno holds a Masters of Education in Educational Leadership and is certified to teach in California and Tennessee.

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.

Kelly Inouye is currently an Administrator for the Charter Schools Unit with the Riverside County Office of Education in California, where she works on oversight and authorizing for the County Board’s approved charter schools, including reviewing new and renewal charter school applications. She has spent nearly 20 years working in education as a teacher and school leader both in traditional districts and public charter schools prior to her work in authorizing. Kelly holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Liberal Studies and a Master of Arts degree in Educational Administration from California Polytechnic University, Pomona.

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.