

Members of the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission:

Thank you for this opportunity to be heard before you vote on our application for the chartering of Rutherford Collegiate Prep (“RCP”). We are honored your staff recently stated our team was the “model organization” for communicating, collaborating, and problem-solving with your staff. We have worked hard to gain your trust.

Your Executive Director and charter review team evaluated each of the district’s reasons for denying the RCP application. The district’s primary argument was that RCP would present a substantial negative fiscal impact. Your report found the opposite, citing “a lack of evidence” to support this finding (we appreciate your understanding regarding two stray typos in this section of our application). In no instance, did your team concur with any district finding regarding our application. Additionally, we provide the following clarification and continuation of our work:

- **Community and parent engagement.** The only parents to speak at the public hearing spoke for RCP. Despite the pandemic, through numerous meetings, surveys, and events we have garnered support of 100+ parents now on our communications list. Our supporters include Rutherford Students First, pastors of three substantial churches, and Rep. Mike Sparks. The report, quite correctly, finds Rutherford County fertile ground for charter options. So, too, does the relevant demographic and academic performance data. We believe this is why, on April 9, 2021, the Tennessee Department of Education authorized a \$265,000 grant to finance RCP’s community and parent engagement. But—and this is critical—the Department prohibited RCP from accessing the funds until it had a charter. We are grateful Tennessee recognizes the marketing challenges startup charters face in needful communities.
- **Budget flexibility.** The report correctly found that ReThink Forward adjusted its 2021-22 budget at Nashville Collegiate Prep to accommodate enrollments below initial projections. At RCP, however, the report finds “a lack of evidence contained within the amended application of how RCP and network would make [budget] adjustments.” These findings are contradictory. The evidence that ReThink Forward has contingency plans is we have carried them out successfully and transparently before you, our authorizer, at NCP.
- **Facilities.** The report says ReThink’s application “lacked any letters of support or commitment from developers who agree to the financing terms proposed in the application.” ReThink, however, has secured commitments for \$200 million in charter facilities funding in Tennessee, demonstrating expertise in this arena, which your scoring rubric requires. A representative of Hamlin Capital Management, the organization funding our Rutherford development, will discuss the terms in the public comment section.
- **Special populations.** The report indicated that special populations staff was not in the proposed school budget. In fact, the school anticipates 2 SPED teachers in year one and 11 teaching assistants/SPED assistants, growing each year until school is at capacity (see pages 149-50 in the amended application). We also will work with partner organizations, such as the Diverse Learners Cooperative, to ensure staff training and support for our SPED population.

Lastly, the three-month delay in this appeal—through no fault of yours—has prejudiced facility development. We were candid about this in our capacity interview and at the public hearing. We stand by our statements. In the interest of clarity, we offer this: Upon our chartering, we immediately will provide the Commission a development schedule with thresholds we all must reach to open a quality school by August 2022. If, working with you, we determine we cannot open a school to your standards and ours by then, we will exercise our option under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-110(b) to delay opening until August 2023. The Commission cannot condition a charter issuance. But the sponsor can act under § 110 to ensure the Commission’s expectations are met. This we will do.

The report states “it is clear from the evidence that a charter school could be successful in Rutherford County.” The RCP application, both in its letter and spirit; the outreach funding we have secured; the funding we have secured for facilities development; and our history with you all compel the conclusion that we have reached the time for a charter school to be successful in Rutherford County. That time is today.

Very truly yours,



Thomas H. Lee  
Vice Chair, ReThink Forward