



Executive Director's Findings and Preliminary Recommendation

Charter School Renewal Application for Lester Prep

Date: October 27, 2023

The following recommendation is preliminary and will be updated upon completion of the public hearing.

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.) § 49-13-121, Commission Policy 3.600, and charter renewal guidance issued by the 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. On December 29, 2022, the Commission provided Lester Prep with a cumulative performance report and renewal criteria. On March 31, 2023, Lester Prep submitted a renewal application to the Tennessee Department of Education and the Commission.

As part of Commission Policy, 3.600, Commission staff shall provide the operator with a preliminary renewal recommendation ahead of the public hearing. This is a preliminary recommendation for Lester Prep.

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, and Review Committee Report, I believe that Lester Prep is on track for a renewal recommendation in January 2024.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Pursuant to Commission Policy 3.600, the Commission's staff completed an application review process. The 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 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 Tennessee Public Charter School Commission's Charter Renewal Application Rubric, 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, in which the school would close at the end of the academic year.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. Lester Prep was opened in School Year 2014-2015 under Capstone Education Group (CEG) and was authorized by the Achievement School District (ASD).
2. Lester Prep earned priority exit status on the state's accountability system in 2021, and the school was approved to transition to the Commission for the 2022-23 school year. Lester Prep serves 226 students in School Year 2023-2024.

3. On December 29, 2022, the Commission provided the school a cumulative performance report outlining the school's performance over the last ten years in alignment with the specified renewal criteria.
4. The school submitted a renewal application to the Commission on March 31, 2023.
5. The Commission's review committee independently analyzed and scored the Lester Prep application using the Commission's Charter Renewal Application Scoring Rubric.
6. On June 29, 2023, the Commission conducted a capacity interview with the school to address questions that arose from the review of the renewal application.
7. The Commission's review committee determined strengths and weaknesses within the Lester Prep renewal application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Report attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
8. On September 20, 2023, the Commission completed a full day site visit to Lester Prep to interview stakeholders, discuss the review committee report with school leadership, and to observe classes.
9. During the site visit to Lester Prep, Commission staff determined strengths and addressed challenges and concerns. These strengths, questions, and concerns are outlined within the Renewal Site Visit Report attached hereto as **Exhibit B**.
10. The Executive Director of the Commission reviewed the record including the cumulative performance of the school, the submitted renewal application, the Review Committee Report, and the Site Visit Report and has determined whether Lester Prep is on track or off track for a renewal recommendation for consideration at the January 2024 Commission meeting.
11. The purpose of this report is to provide a preliminary recommendation to Lester Prep prior to the public hearing scheduled for November 8, 2023.

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 Lester Prep renewal application. This review committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Michelle Doane	External Reviewer
Maggie Lund	Commission Staff, Deputy Director of Authorizing
Trent Carlson	Commission Staff, Authorizing Coordinator

The review committee conducted a review of the Lester Prep renewal application in alignment with the Commission's Charter Renewal Application Scoring Rubric and held a capacity interview. The strengths and weaknesses of the renewal application are outlined within **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, renewal criteria, and challenges and concerns outlined within the review committee report. A full site visit report is provided as **Exhibit B**. The following were key takeaways from both the review committee and site visit reports:

Lester Prep demonstrated clear strengths academically, operationally, and financially. A key strength of Lester Prep and the CEG network is their data-driven mentality when making academic and operational decisions for the school. As a result of underperformance post-pandemic, CEG restructured and replaced the Lester Prep leadership team and many of the staff for the 2022-2023 school year. Lester Prep improved their internal student growth and proficiency data as a result of this change and earned a TVAAS composite score of 4 in 2022 and a 5 in 2023.

Classrooms observed at Lester Prep were calm and productive, evidencing a strong school culture and clear behavior expectations. Another key strength of Lester Prep is their service to a highly mobile community. Lester Prep's enrollment fluctuates by 20-30% each school year due to high mobility rates within the neighborhood, which is why the school focuses heavily on growing students each year. Lester Prep does this successfully with the majority of students scoring at or above the 80th percentile on the NWEA MAP National Growth Percentile in 2022. A final key strength is the CEG network and the outlined blueprint for success for their schools. While Lester Prep earned priority exit status in 2021 and was approved to join the Commission in 2022, their performance has been somewhat mixed over time, particularly as a result of the pandemic. The CEG network has stepped in, in many instances, to ensure that there is an adequate and timely response to data through staffing, curriculum, and operational changes to drive academic success. At the site visit, it was clear that Lester Prep teachers and staff are receiving support in differentiated instruction, data-driven instruction, and ensuring that students are progressing academically. Another strength to note is that after replacing the leadership team and most of the staff in 2022, Lester Prep retained 75% of teachers for the 2023-2024 school year.

The review committee identified areas of growth or concern within the application review process as well. The review committee addressed the financial and operational areas of concern during a capacity interview conducted on June 29, 2023. While the network is fiscally sound with substantial financial reserves, the school has a projected negative net income for the next three years which is due to conservative budgeting, without including additional grant funds, and lower enrollment within the school. In interviews with CEG leadership, the network states they will continue to support the school, and the network believes that the school is trending to continue increasing enrollment year over year such that they will have a positive net income within three years. The school has hired new network positions to support enrollment, and there are new apartment complexes being built in the neighborhood that will also potentially increase enrollment at the school. The review committee also discussed the impending facility acquisition process during the capacity interview given the school will either need to purchase or lease the facility they are currently located in within three years of renewal. The operator stated that they have already begun discussions with Memphis-Shelby County Schools regarding this facility acquisition and feel confident that they can reach an agreement. Lester Prep intends to remain in their current facility as they aim to be a true community school.

The review committee outlined some academic and operational concerns and questions that were addressed at the site visit. These questions included further explanation surrounding service of special populations of students, particularly students with disabilities, and shifts made to the RTI² programming in response to academic data. Additionally, the review committee discussed instructional shifts that were made as a result of the turnaround efforts, particularly with the new leadership team, and preliminary indicators of success in terms of academic growth and proficiency. The review committee also asked the school leadership team to address chronic absenteeism, enrollment, and family engagement. Shifts to professional development and school culture were also questions raised by the review committee and discussed at the site visit.

While Lester Prep is currently under enrolled in terms of its charter agreement, a strength of Lester Prep was that they increased their enrollment year over year due to increased family engagement and recruitment efforts. Additionally, families interviewed during the site visit cited overall satisfaction with the school, and some families referenced the clear communication and focus on attendance. Students referenced feeling safe at school and that the school community feels like a family. In alignment with service of special populations, Lester Prep has remained in compliance with all required items and provides appropriate services to support special populations in all areas. Teachers noted receiving robust support from leadership in service of special populations, particularly students with disabilities. Leadership also noted shifts to professional development efforts to focus on data-driven instruction for the 2023-2024 school year. Commission staff affirmed the school's self-reported area of focus regarding academic



rigor for students given that this year the school's focus has shifted to meaningful differentiation in response to student data. While Commission staff observed notable gains in these areas during classroom observations, there is also room for improvement around the level of teacher questioning and checks for student understanding. Finally, while Lester Prep met their double Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) for chronic absenteeism and has made clear improvements, there is still room for continued improvement in this area. For example, Lester Prep staff reported that 40 students were four questions away from earning proficiency on last school year's TNReady test and almost all those students were chronically absent. Lester Prep continues to focus on family engagement and communication to combat chronic absenteeism for students and its effects on academic achievement.

For additional information regarding the review committee's evaluation of the Lester Prep 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.



PRELIMINARY 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 final recommendation to the Commission, I will consider the review committee's report, the Renewal Site Visit Report, the discussion at the public hearing, and the public comments received by Commission staff.

The CEG network acquired Lester Prep in the 2014-2015 school year, and at this time, Lester Prep was one of the lowest performing middle schools within the state of Tennessee. While school turnaround work is not straightforward and often results in mixed performance over time, the CEG network has demonstrated a commitment to responding to academic data in a meaningful way to improve student academic performance. For three consecutive years (2017-2019), Lester Prep scored a composite TVAAS 5 demonstrating strong student growth. As a result of achieving priority exit status on the state's accountability system, Lester Prep was approved to join the Commission in 2022. However, as many schools did, Lester Prep struggled to keep their strong growth trajectory through the 2020 pandemic, scoring a TVAAS 1 in 2021 and receiving a priority school designation based on school year 2021-22 achievement. The CEG network stepped in and responded to this academic deficit by enacting another turnaround of the school, as the entire school leadership team and most teachers were replaced. The school first focused heavily on foundational skills for teachers including effective teaching and strong school culture. The school leadership and network team also heavily analyzed student academic data making key shifts to instruction, curriculum, and support for teachers. As a result of these intentional changes, Lester Prep earned a TVAAS 4 in 2022 and a 5 in 2023. I commend the CEG network for their timely and effective response to academic data to ensure quality service for students.

I also want to acknowledge the population served at Lester Prep. Lester Prep is located within the Binghampton neighborhood of Memphis. Many portions of this neighborhood have been historically underserved, and the student population is considered highly mobile, as 20-30% of students leave Lester Prep annually. The reasons for departure from the school are typically outside of the control of the school and are due to factors such as housing instability as confirmed through exit interviews with families. Lester Prep has struggled with enrollment in previous years which impacts their financial stability and future budget projections. Additionally, high student mobility also can impact academic proficiency scores as students frequently join Lester Prep multiple grade levels behind and may only stay at Lester Prep for a short time. Through the review committee's analysis of the application and the site visit, Lester Prep owned and addressed these challenges stating that they have a commitment to being a neighborhood school and successfully serving the community. They adequately addressed financial concerns and enrollment challenges with new network staff devoted to recruitment and retention of students and families, along with increased measures for family engagement to combat chronic absenteeism. Additionally, the school and network spoke to the importance and emphasis of tracking and improving student growth due to student mobility. Lester Prep has numerous internal assessments that drive instruction throughout the year, including NWEA MAP assessments where the majority of students are scoring within the 80th percentile on the National Growth Percentile. This coupled with strong TVAAS scores demonstrates a successful commitment to growing students while they are at Lester Prep.

Finally, the operator has also demonstrated strong organizational compliance and good partnership throughout their short tenure with the Commission. Lester Prep adequately serves special populations of students and remains in compliance with all state and federal items. Lester Prep has also met organizational performance and financial standards on the Commission's school performance framework for the previous year. While the transition from the ASD to the Commission is not without its challenges, the CEG network has navigated these challenges successfully to ensure adequate continued service to students. 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 not only a commitment to the community and students it serves, but also a dedication to high quality academic instruction and student support. The operator has consistently demonstrated an ability to acknowledge and respond to challenges effectively to ensure positive student academic outcomes. I believe that Lester Prep is poised to continue on their trajectory of improving student outcomes and closing the achievement gap, and I feel confident that as challenges arise, the operator has the capacity to effectively respond.

PRELIMINARY 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 is on track for a ten-year renewal term. Commission staff look forward to the upcoming public hearing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tess Stovall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

10/27/23

Date