



## **Executive Director's Findings and Recommendation**

### **Charter School Renewal Application for Lester Prep**

**January 26, 2024**

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.) § 49-13-121, Commission Policy 3.600, and charter renewal guidance issued by 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. As part of Commission Policy 3.600, following the public hearing and the review of the renewal application, the Executive Director of the Commission shall provide a final recommendation to the Commission. The Executive Director shall consider the report of the Renewal Review Committee, the site visit, and the public hearing in the final recommendation to the Commission.

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, the Review Committee Report, and the public hearing, I believe that Lester Prep should be renewed for a new, ten-year charter term.

#### **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 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. If denied, the school would close at the end of the academic year.

#### **PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

1. Lester Prep was opened in SY14-15 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 SY22-23. Lester Prep serves 226 students in SY23-24.
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 determined whether Lester Prep is on track or off track for a renewal recommendation. The preliminary recommendation report was provided to the applicant on October 27, 2023, ahead of the public hearing and noted Lester Prep was on track for a renewal recommendation.
11. On November 8, 2023, the Commission staff held a public hearing at Lester Prep in Memphis, Tennessee. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the Commission’s Designee, heard the school address the preliminary Executive Director’s recommendation and heard public comment.
12. After the public hearing and receipt of public comment, the Executive Director completed this final recommendation.

**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:

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

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 in **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, the renewal criteria, and the 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 demonstrates 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 SY22-23. Lester Prep improved its 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, providing evidence of a strong school culture and clear behavior expectations.

Another key strength of Lester Prep is its 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 academically each year. Lester Prep does this successfully, with the majority of students scoring at or above the 80<sup>th</sup> 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. In many instances, the CEG network has stepped in 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 SY23-24.

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 due to lower enrollment within the school. While the network intentionally uses a conservative budgeting approach and does not include additional projected grant funds within its budget, the overall financial health of the school will need to remain a focus. In interviews with CEG leadership, the network stated they will continue to financially support the school and believe that the school is trending to continue increasing enrollment such that they will have a positive net income within three years. The school has hired new network positions to support enrollment, and new apartment complexes are being built in the neighborhood that will 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 its current facility to remain 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 services for special populations of students, particularly students with disabilities, and shifts made to the RTI<sup>2</sup> 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. Questions regarding shifts to professional development and school culture were also 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 is that they increased their enrollment from SY22-23 to SY23-24 due to intentional 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 as strengths. 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 for services of special populations, particularly for students with disabilities. Leadership also noted shifts to professional development efforts to focus on data-driven instruction for SY23-24. 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 in SY22-23 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.

### **Public Hearing**

Pursuant to Commission Policy 3.600, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director was held on November 8, 2023. The Executive Director of CEG spoke about the mission of the school, which is focused on educating the whole child through wisdom and knowledge while building character. He also mentioned that context matters when discussing the population served at Lester Prep as 98% of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders served at Lester Prep in SY22-23 did not start their educational career with CEG and came in multiple grade levels behind. Therefore, Lester Prep focuses heavily on growing every student toward grade level, and for SY22-23, Lester Prep was able to double math proficiency and saw notable increases in ELA and science proficiency. The Executive Director stated that ultimately, the CEG network believes that if students can stay in CEG schools, they will grow to grade level.

The principal of Lester Prep then spoke about how the school responds to data, noting that they earned a TVAAS 5 for SY22-23 and want to continue to push students towards grade level by intentional planning and preparation for coursework, appropriate and strong lesson execution for teachers, and rapid response to data. Teachers have robust professional development to assist in lesson and curriculum alignment to standards, student ownership of the cognitive load, and a 48-hour reteach plan in response to student data. The Executive Director of CEG then addressed enrollment, stating that since they intend to operate as a neighborhood school, their enrollment trends often follow the fluctuations of the neighborhood. However, enrollment has steadily increased, and they have a plan to continue increasing enrollment. The Executive Director specifically pointed out the new apartment complexes being built within the neighborhood. Also, the school leadership mentioned the new club programming that involves many community partners has been a way to increase enrollment. These programs are of interest to students and a positive recruiting tool within the community.

Next, the school leadership addressed chronic absenteeism. While the school had a 16% reduction from SY21-22 to SY22-23, and met their double AMO, the school stated that there is still work to be done. Lester Prep holds many school-wide celebrations around attendance and has robust family engagement plans including calls, texts, and meetings regarding attendance. CEG's Chief Academic Officer then described the continued plans for professional development, including pushing teachers to make learning visible, tiered instruction based on academic gaps, and a continued focus on proficiency such that students can perform on grade level.

The Commission then questioned the school to garner additional information related to the school's planning and performance, long-term facility plans, governance, and strategic planning. The school provided additional context about the consistency in planning and performance at a network level. CEG utilizes a network-wide blueprint that

ensures consistency in school culture and curriculum, and the network team conducts campus walkthroughs in both the elementary and middle schools. These walkthroughs ensure consistent feedback for leaders across the network and help maintain a continuous, high-quality learning experience for students. The Commission then questioned the operator about plans to acquire their current facility from Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS). The operator stated that they have submitted an offer to MSCS and have already received an appraisal on the building. MSCS will post the building for sale, and ultimately, CEG will bid on the property. Should MSCS choose not to sell to CEG, they will then explore lease options for the property. CEG is already responsible for the operating costs of the building, so they expect to purchase the building using cash reserves.

The operator then spoke to network and board succession plans for long-term organizational sustainability. A focus of the leadership and governing board is the retention of leadership and the creation of a teacher-leader program to ensure long-term sustainability at the school and network. Two new members have just been added to the governing board, and the board chair is in his second year, providing consistency to the board. A new parent representative has also been added to the board to better represent the needs of the community. Additionally, the network regularly revises its network-wide blueprint and holds itself to critical goals to determine what is being executed successfully and consistently across schools. This is a key component of their plan for the next ten years as this blueprint allows the network to see what they have learned and make changes in a replicable way.

The public hearing concluded with a closing statement from the school leadership, who spoke to the strong commitment of the staff to their community, and the receipt of five in-person comments supporting Lester Prep's renewal. The Commission also accepted written comments and received 43 in support of the renewal of Lester Prep.

### **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 considered 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 SY14-15, and at that 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 its strong growth trajectory through the pandemic, scoring a TVAAS 1 for SY20-21 and receiving a priority school designation for SY21-22. 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 a strong school culture. The school leadership and network team also deeply 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 SY21-22 and a TVAAS 5 in SY22-23. I commend the CEG network for its timely and effective response to academic data to ensure quality service for students. As noted in the Renewal Review Committee Report and stated in the public hearing, Lester Prep also saw TNReady proficiency scores increase across grade levels and subjects in SY22-23. The school earned a C letter grade

for SY22-23 on the State's new accountability system. This is evidence of successful turnaround efforts made by the network and school, and it will be important that student proficiency scores continue to increase.

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, which is confirmed through exit interviews with families. Lester Prep has struggled with enrollment in previous years, which impacts its financial stability and future budget projections. Additionally, high student mobility also impacts 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 are committed to being a neighborhood school and successfully serving the community. They adequately addressed financial concerns and enrollment challenges with new network staff devoted to the 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 aims to grow every student 1.5 grade levels every year and has numerous internal assessments that drive instruction throughout the year, including NWEA MAP assessments, where the majority of students score within the 80<sup>th</sup> 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. Lester Prep saw gains in proficiency for SY22-23, doubling math proficiency and making gains in both ELA and science. The CEG network believes that if students stay in the network, they have demonstrated the ability to grow students to grade level.

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 SY21-22. Lester Prep met organizational performance standards again in SY22-23; at the time of this recommendation, the financial section for SY22-23 is pending, as it is determined after finalization of schools' audits for the previous fiscal 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. The school has also begun the process of working with MSCS to acquire their school building and have the cash reserves to cover the cost of purchasing the building, should they be able to do so. The CEG network remains committed to staying within their building as they aim to continue serving the Binghampton community in the historic building, and they have made many capital improvements to the facility during their tenure there. Through the use of their network blueprint, the operator and governing board also have clear plans to ensure consistency and longevity in staff and leadership for the next ten years. The governing board chair is in his second year in the position, and they have added new members to the governing board, including a parent representative to better accommodate the needs within the community. Lester Prep has demonstrated strong retention of leadership year over year since their turnaround in SY21-22 and aims to continue working to establish longevity with their staff through their teacher-to-leader programming.

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 growth and 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 its trajectory of improving



student outcomes and closing the achievement gap, and I feel confident that as challenges arise, the operator can effectively respond.

If granted a new, ten-year term, it is important to highlight the significance of the interim review process. The Commission conducts an interim review of its schools in the fifth year of their charter term to evaluate their performance, determine if they are on-track or off-track for a renewal, and identify if any immediate corrective action needs to take place. Given Lester Prep's transition from the Achievement School District into the Commission during SY22-23, at this point, the school has only been under the authorization of the Commission for one complete school year. While I have determined the school's performance warrants a renewal, it will be important for the school to continue to stabilize and improve student academic performance in its next charter term. The Commission will plan to use the interim review as a high-stakes process to determine if they should continue operation for the remainder of their new ten-year term.

### 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 warrants a new ten-year renewal term. Therefore, I recommend Lester Prep for renewal.

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

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Tess Stovall, Executive Director  
Tennessee Public Charter School Commission

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1/26/2024

Date