



Executive Director's Findings and Recommendation

Charter School Renewal Application for Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary School

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.) § 49-13-121 and Commission Rule 1185-01-01-.02, the governing board of a public charter school may appeal a decision by the local board of education to deny a renewal application to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("Commission" or "Charter Commission").¹ On December 8, 2023, the governing board of Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary School (RNNE or "operator") appealed the denial of its renewal application by the Metro Nashville Public School Board of Education (MNPS) 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 RNNE renewal application was not in the best interest of the students, local education agency (LEA), or community. Therefore, I recommend that the Commission overturn the decision of the MNPS Board of Education to deny the renewal application for RNNE and approve the renewal application.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-121, Commission Policy 2.200, and Commission Rule 1185-01-01-.02, Commission staff conducted a review of the documentation included in the notice of appeal and the decision to deny the renewal application, including additional information gathered by Commission staff. The Commission assembled a charter application review committee comprised of highly qualified internal and external evaluators with relevant and diverse expertise to evaluate the 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 Department of Education's Charter Renewal Application and Model Scoring Rubric. The renewal process and renewal decisions are based on "thorough analyses of a comprehensive body of objective evidence defined by the performance framework in the charter agreement" and "[g]rants renewal only to schools that have achieved the standards and targets stated in the charter agreement, are organizationally and fiscally viable, and have been faithful to the terms of the contract and applicable law." In addition, the Commission held a public hearing in the district where the charter school is located.

To overturn the decision of the local board of education, the Commission must find that the local board's decision to deny the charter renewal application was contrary to the best interests of the students, LEA, or community. If the local board of education's decision is overturned, then the Commission shall approve the renewal application, and authorize the school. The Commission shall enter into a new, ten (10)-year charter agreement with the governing board of the school. If the Commission votes to uphold the local board's decision to deny the renewal application, the school will close at the end of their current ten (10)-year term.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. On April 1, 2013, MNPS Board of Education awarded a charter to RNNE to open a charter school serving grades kindergarten to fourth grade.
2. RNNE was opened in SY14-15 and was authorized by MNPS.

¹ Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs. 1185-01-01-.02(1).

3. On April 3, 2023, the governing board of RNNE submitted an application to renew its charter agreement to MNPS.
4. On November 28, 2023, the Office of Charter Schools presented a recommendation to the MNPS Board of Education to approve the renewal application of RNNE. The MNPS Board of Education voted to not renew the charter agreement for RNNE.
5. On November 29, 2023, MNPS notified RNNE of the MNPS Board of Education’s decision to not renew the charter agreement for a new, ten (10) year term.
6. On December 8, 2023, the governing board of RNNE appealed the denial of its renewal application in writing to the Commission, including submission of all required documents per Commission Policy 2.200.
7. The Commission’s review committee independently analyzed and scored the RNNE renewal application including the submitted required documents using the Tennessee Department of Education’s Renewal Application and Model Scoring Rubric.
8. The Commission’s review committee conducted a capacity interview with key members of the RNNE leadership team on January 8, 2024 via Microsoft Teams.
9. After the capacity interview, the Commission’s review committee determined a final consensus rating of the RNNE amended application, which served as the basis for the Review Committee Recommendation Report, attached hereto as **Exhibit A**.
10. On January 11, 2024, the Commission staff held a public hearing in Nashville, Tennessee. At the public hearing, the Executive Director, sitting as the Commission’s designee, heard presentations from MNPS and RNNE, and took public comment regarding the RNNE renewal application.
11. The Commission staff conducted a full review of the record, which includes the application submitted by the RNNE, documentation submitted by MNPS, and the findings of the public hearing and public comment. The Commission’s General Counsel conducted a full review and legal analysis of the record.
12. The Executive Director considered the Review Committee’s Recommendation Report, the documentation submitted by the LEA and the school, the discussion at the public hearing, and the public comments received by Commission staff in drafting this report.

FINDINGS OF FACT

District Denial of Application

RNNE submitted its renewal application on April 3, 2023 to MNPS, and the Office of Charter Schools assembled a team to review the renewal application submitted by the school. The review committee’s rating was as follows:

Section	Rating
Academic Success	Partially Meets Standard
Operational Stability	Partially Meets Standard
Financial Health	Partially Meets Standard
Future Plans/Projections	Partially Meets Standard

After the MNPS review committee completed its review and scoring of the renewal application, the review team determined that the charter school’s academic outcomes, operational condition, financial condition, and goals for the next charter term merit renewal with additional supports. This recommendation for approval was presented

to the MNPS Board of Education on November 28, 2023. At the November 28, 2023 board meeting, the MNPS Board of Education voted to deny the renewal application of RNNE.

Commission Review Committee’s Evaluation of the Application

Following the denial of the RNNE renewal 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 RNNE renewal application. This review committee consisted of the following individuals:

Name	Title
Trent Carlson	Commission Staff
Erin Conley	External Reviewer
Beth Figueroa	Commission Staff

The review committee conducted a review and scoring of the RNNE renewal application and conducted a capacity interview. The review committee’s consensus rating of the RNNE application was as follows:

Sections	Ratings
Academic Success	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Operational Stability	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Financial Health	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Future Planning	Meets or Exceeds Standard

The review committee found that the Academic Success section of the application meets or exceeds standard. The review committee noted that the school has shown consistent success in student academic growth, as it has a history of TVAAS Composite scores of Level 4 and 5. In terms of proficiency rates, the review committee found that RNNE has made significant progress in recovering proficiency scores following a post-pandemic dip. The review committee also determined that throughout its charter term, the school has proven to be a strong school option in the Maplewood Cluster.

The review committee found that the Operational Stability section of the application meets or exceeds standard. The review committee noted the school has operated at an enrollment count appropriate to the building capacity and effectively addressed student attrition when enrollment counts dipped. The review committee also determined, through the application and capacity interview, that the governing board, regional staff, and school leadership demonstrated the capacity and expertise necessary to support the school’s continued operational stability. The review committee stated the school has demonstrated progress and commitment to core operational functions including teacher retention, parent and student satisfaction, facilities, and school safety.

The review committee found that the Financial Health section of the application meets or exceeds standard. The review committee stated the school has consistently met generally accepted standards of fiscal management, received clean financial audits, and the application provides a detailed description of the school’s fiscal health. Through both the application and the capacity interview with school and regional leadership, the review committee determined the financial condition of the school merits renewal of the charter, as they demonstrated clear alignment between expenditures and the school’s mission, academic growth, and staff development.

Lastly, the review committee found that the Future Planning section meets or exceeds standard. Upon initial review of the application, the review committee indicated there was limited information regarding goals for student achievement, organizational changes, and projected financial goals. Therefore, the review committee spent significant time during the capacity interview asking questions to address these initial concerns. The review committee found

that school and regional leadership provided clear responses to the review committee's questions and provided evidence of strategic future planning, including a recent five-year strategic plan.

For additional information regarding the review committee's evaluation of the RNNE renewal application, please see **Exhibit A** for the complete Review Committee Recommendation Report, which is fully incorporated herein by reference.

Public Hearing

Pursuant to Commission Policy 2.200, a public hearing chaired by the Executive Director was held on January 11, 2024. In the opening statement from MNPS, representatives from MNPS indicated that RNNE's renewal application was denied based on evidence that the data did not show significant progress toward the goals outlined in the charter agreement (from the original application), a memo of non-compliance from MNPS regarding concerns with timely submission of ESSER 2 and Title II funds in April 2022, and lack of evidence that the future planning will provide the proper foundations of operations moving forward. MNPS's presentation at the public hearing focused on the process the district took for evaluating the renewal application using the published evaluation criteria, a capacity interview with the renewal application focused on the original application and stated goals, the use of a review committee and consensus building amongst the committee, and preparation of a renewal recommendation reflective of the review team's consensus. In the presentation to the MNPS Board of Education, MNPS staff provided evidence of the review committee's ratings for academic success, operational stability, financial health, and future planning. The district concluded its presentation at the public hearing by requesting that the Commission uphold its decision to deny the renewal of RNNE. If the Commission denies the appeal of RNNE, the district confirmed that MNPS has the building capacity to accept students currently attending RNNE and stated they will work with families to ensure a smooth transition.

In the opening statement from RNNE, the Executive Director spoke to Rocketship's approach, which is built on the pillars of personalized learning, talent development, and parent power. The Executive Director stated that personalized learning is implemented through a rotational model and is guided by content experts in humanities, STEM, enrichment, and learning labs. The operator shared that since opening in 2015, the school was recognized as a Reward school in 2019, was a top performing school in its cluster in both reading and math in SY21-22, and received a Level 5 Literacy and Numeracy Composite growth score on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) in 2023. In addition to these milestones, the operator presented historical TVAAS scores demonstrating consistent and accelerated growth from SY17-18 through SY22-23. The Executive Director then shifted the presentation to focus on the performance of the school in comparison to other schools in the Maplewood cluster, as well as to the district as a whole. This data was used to make the argument for why the school is consistently a high-performing school in the area and how results for RNNE have been similar or higher to MNPS for economically disadvantaged students. Lastly, RNNE discussed the goals of the school's new five-year strategic plan, which are focused on academic excellence, providing pathways to broader opportunities, parent participation, team culture and quality, and growing the school's impact and enrollment. The operator stated that the strategic plan will be reviewed regularly and implemented at all levels of the organization, including regional leaders, instructional leadership teams, and teachers.

The parties then answered questions from the Executive Director. During questioning by the Commission, MNPS addressed whether the district ever communicated concerns to the school that would indicate non-renewal such that the school had the opportunity to address these concerns. The district responded by walking through the renewal process that was taken, including the various touchpoints in which feedback was provided to the school; however, the district confirmed that most feedback was provided as a part of site visits and not through the renewal process. Additionally, MNPS affirmed that the charter office never had significant concerns regarding the school based on the annual performance framework. Representatives of MNPS stated that the MNPS board

considered both the evidence of how the school performed within the cluster, as well as how it performed against the district as a whole. The Commission then questioned MNPS regarding the non-compliance memo that was cited as a reason for denial. MNPS confirmed that the issue was originally brought up in April 2022, but it did not result in a notice of concern to the operator as it was resolved by RNNE. Furthermore, when questioned about how the board determined that material violations existed, such that it would warrant non-renewal, the MNPS representatives responded by indicating that the MNPS board found that RNNE had not made sufficient progress against the original goals established in the charter school's application. Lastly, representatives from MNPS confirmed that the district uses the TDOE application for renewal, and all operators going through renewal are instructed to answer the questions included within the application.

The Commission then questioned the operator, beginning with a question regarding what type of communication the school had with the district that would suggest the school may be non-renewed. The Executive Director for Rocketship Tennessee stated that RNNE did not receive any notification related to any item that would disqualify them for renewal, and no concerns were ever communicated to the school. The operator stated the school only became aware of the concerns when the district's presentation was posted publicly before the MNPS board meeting. Additionally, the Chief Financial Officer shared that while the network was aware of the April 2022 memo related to federal funds, RNNE worked in partnership with the district to resolve all issues. The operator noted that the school was not aware of any further issues. When questioned about the lack of detail surrounding future planning and goals for achievement, RNNE stated that they were not aware of these concerns as they were not raised during the capacity interview. Additionally, the operator stated that the capacity interview questions did not allow them to speak to all areas of the application including their academic outcomes. Ultimately, RNNE believes that the amount included in the application was appropriate based on their understanding of the authorizer's request. The Commission's questions then transitioned to chronic absenteeism rates. RNNE stated that the school is intervening earlier with families, and the school has seen these rates decline in the current year, with chronic absenteeism rates around 31% and attendance rates at approximately 91%. When questioned about the formation of a Tennessee nonprofit that will soon be responsible for the governance of Rocketship Tennessee, RNNE confirmed that services and support the operator receives from the national network related to academic, operations, and finance will not be disrupted by the governance change.

The public hearing concluded with closing statements by both parties and the receipt of eleven (11) in-person comments, with one (1) speaking in support of MNPS and ten (10) speaking in support of RNNE. The Commission also accepted written comments, and the Commission received 297 written comments, with zero (0) writing in support of MNPS and 297 writing in support of RNNE.

ANALYSIS

Under T.C.A. § 49-13-121 and Commission Policy 2.200, the Commission is charged with determining if the decision of the local board of education to deny the renewal of the charter agreement was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, and the community. In making my recommendation to the Commission, I have considered the Review Committee's Recommendation Report, the documentation submitted by the LEA and the school, the discussion 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, grounded in the Commission's standard of review, cite specific examples in the renewal record, and reference information gained at the capacity interview in support of its findings.



Authorizing and opening a public charter school in Tennessee is a responsibility shared by all parties who have chosen to engage in the work. A public charter school authorized by a local board of education is expected to demonstrate evidence of sufficient progress towards the academic standards outlined in the performance framework, be organizationally sound, and fiscally viable at renewal. The authorizer is expected to provide timely feedback on issues and concerns, provide opportunities to correct those issues, and hold schools accountable for their academic outcomes. Through the renewal process, in accordance with the state's quality authorizing standards, the authorizer is expected to provide information to the school regarding its prospects for renewal and allow meaningful opportunities to correct the record and present additional evidence regarding its performance. A recommendation and a decision to non-renew a school should not be a surprise to any parties involved.

In this case, MNPS provided RNNE a cumulative performance report that documented the operator's performance over the charter term; however, the report noted no specific concerns related to the academics and explicitly stated that the district had no major concerns around the operations or financial health of the charter school. The district utilized a review committee to review the renewal application; however, the operator was never given an opportunity to address the concerns and questions raised during the review committee process. Ultimately, the review committee's recommendation, without any additional information from the operator to address their questions, was to renew Rocketship Nashville Northeast with additional support from the district. However, as local boards of education are not bound by the recommendation of a review committee, the MNPS board of education denied the renewal application.

In this appeal, MNPS misstated the Commission's charge in a renewal appeal. It is not, as the district stated, to determine if the renewal application meets and/or exceeds the metrics in the Tennessee Department of Education's scoring rubric and that approval is in the best interest of the students, the local education agency (LEA), or community. Instead, T.C.A. § 49-13-121(f)(2) states "[i]f the commission finds that the local board of education's decision to deny renewal of a charter agreement is contrary to the best interest of the students, LEA, or community, then the commission shall approve the renewal application..." Moreover, Commission rule details the process the staff and Commission utilize to arrive at a recommendation for approval or denial of the renewal application. Based on the following, my recommendation is to renew the charter agreement for Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary.

Academically, according to the MNPS cumulative report on the school, RNNE has met or exceeded the performance of the Maplewood cluster within MNPS in achievement and growth annually. MNPS indicated during the public hearing that the charge of all public charter schools is to meet or exceed the district's schools, not just the schools geographically around the charter school. While the overall comparison to the district is important, it is not the only consideration in my review of the school's prospects for renewal. As both the MNPS review committee and the Commission's review committee cited, RNNE has been one of the highest academic performing schools in the Maplewood Cluster. RNNE's academic results over the term of the charter evidence a high-quality option for the families in the Maplewood cluster. While there were periods of decline, mostly because of the pandemic, the operator continued to make academic improvement post pandemic, and at no time during the term of the charter did the district cite academic concerns with the operator. Based on SY22-23 results, the school achieved a Level 4 Composite TVAAS and was the top performing elementary school in ELA in the cluster. Moreover, it is the only elementary public charter school option in the Maplewood Cluster.

The public support for Rocketship was apparent throughout the appellate process. The operator had one of the strongest showings of public support at the public hearing related to this appeal. Parents and community members gave impassioned pleas for the renewal of this charter and continuation of Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary to continue serving the students in the Maplewood Cluster. While parent support is only part of a

successful charter school, I recognize that a charter school that enrolls over 500 students is one that parents and the community desire to attend.

I also find that RNNE has provided sufficient evidence of operational achievement that warrants a renewal of its charter. RNNE has strong teacher retention, and the professional development offered demonstrates a continued commitment to growth and support for the staff. It will be imperative that RNNE continues to assess and address chronic absenteeism throughout a new charter agreement. While the attendance rate of 91%, as stated by the operator this year, is commendable, the charter school will be expected to continue in this trend throughout a new charter term. Additionally, the governing board has proven its ability to successfully operate a school consistent with the terms of the agreement they entered into ten (10) years ago. The commitment of the national body to establish a regional advisory board and a regional nonprofit to inform decisions is a strong indicator of the operator's future planning for the continued success and oversight of the school. I am confident that the quality of oversight for RNNE by a newly formed Tennessee nonprofit will not diminish if a new charter agreement is granted.

I agree with the Commission's review committee that RNNE met the financial standard for renewal. The application showed no audit concerns of material deficiencies, and the school met generally accepted fiscal management standards. Moreover, MNPS's cumulative performance report stated that the school had met all metrics on its financial performance framework. Within the presentation to the MNPS board, it was cited as a concern that RNNE had less than ninety (90) days cash on hand. However, the operator did not receive any indicators throughout the charter agreement that would have previewed a non-renewal. The one incident noted by MNPS from April 2022 surrounding finances was resolved without the need for a notice of concern. Overall, the Commission found no evidence of financial concerns, either within the short term or the long term, after the review of the previous financial audits, the district's cumulative report, and the school's renewal application.

In future planning, I agree with MNPS that the details within the written application were limited. However, an authorizer's renewal decision is not limited to the written application. T.C.A. § 49-13-121 states that a renewal decision shall be based on the renewal application, the charter school's annual progress reports, and the cumulative performance report. Additionally, both the MNPS Office of Charter Schools and the Commission's review committee conducted a capacity interview to gather more information related to the renewal application. It was through this capacity interview with the Commission's review committee that the operator shared specific information about the network's five-year strategic plan, budget alignment to the plan, and how the network is shifting to a locally-based governance model. After a full review of the entire record, I conclude that the school does have a sufficient plan for a future charter term that merits renewal.

The district's review process, while it contained clear steps, failed to surface for the MNPS board material issues for consideration in its decision-making process. For example, while the district held a capacity interview with the operator, it only focused its questions on the original application and not on the school's plans for the future. The issues and questions raised by the MNPS review committee were not addressed in this capacity interview. Therefore, the operator had no opportunity to correct the record or provide additional information regarding these concerns. This proved to be a missed opportunity as the local board cited several of the concerns raised by the review committee as reasons for denial that could have been easily addressed if the operator had an opportunity to address them in the process. While the Commission does not have jurisdiction to compel a local district to adopt a particular model for capacity interviews and/or review processes, I would encourage MNPS and any local district to compile a complete record, that includes clear opportunity for operator response, for a board's review and deliberation.

Ultimately, the decision before the Commission is whether it believes the record of the past ten (10) years of academic, operations, and financial performance of RNNE merits renewal. While MNPS decided that it does not want



the school within its district for a new ten (10)-year term, I believe that the school provides a quality option for students within the Maplewood cluster, and it has strong organization and financial foundations now and for the future. The Commission's charge in a renewal appeal is to determine if the local district's denial is "contrary to the best interests of the students, LEA, or community." In my review of the academic achievement and growth, operational and financial capacities, and future planning of Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary School, I believe that the operator has shown sufficient progress to warrant a new ten (10)-year charter term.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons, and for the reasons stated in the Review Committee Report attached hereto as **Exhibit A**, I do believe the decision to deny the renewal application of Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary School was contrary to the best interests of the students, the LEA, or community. Therefore, I recommend that the Commission overturn MNPS's denial of the renewal application for Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary School.

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

1/26/24
Date



EXHIBIT A

Charter Renewal Appeal Review Committee Report

January 26, 2024

School Name: Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary

Charter Management Organization: Rocketship Public Schools

Name of Authorizer: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Location of School: Metro Nashville Public Schools, Maplewood Cluster

Evaluation Team:

- Trent Carlson
- Erin Conley
- Beth Figueroa

This recommendation report is based on a template from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.



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Introduction

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated (T.C.A.) § 49-13-121(f), the governing board of a public charter school may appeal a decision by the local board of education to deny a renewal application to the Commission no later than ten (10) calendar days after the date of the local board of education's decision to deny the renewal application. In accordance with T.C.A. § 49-13-121, the Commission shall conduct a de novo on the record review of the local board of education's renewal decision.¹ If the Commission finds that the local board of education's decision was contrary to the best interests of the students, LEA, or community and approves the renewal application, the Commission shall overturn the decision of the local board of education. If the Commission overturns the decision of the local board of education, the Commission shall become the authorizer.

The Commission's charter school renewal appeal process is outlined Commission Policy 2.200 – Charter School Renewal Appeals² and aligned to the criteria set forth in T.C.A. § 49-13-121. The Commission assembled a charter renewal review committee comprised of highly qualified internal and external evaluators with relevant and diverse expertise to evaluate the renewal record and interview the operator. The Commission provided training to all review committee members to ensure consistent standards and fair treatment of all.

The Commission's appeal process is aligned to the high standards set forth in Commission Policy 3.300 – Core Authorizing Principles.³ These principles ensure that the well-being and interests of students are the fundamental values informing all Commission's actions and decisions. The 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 the renewal of a charter school. Annually, the Commission evaluates its work to ensure alignment with national and state standards for quality authorizing and implements improvement when necessary.

Overview of the Evaluation Process

The Commission's charter renewal review committee developed this recommendation report based on three key stages of review:

1. Evaluation of the Record: The review committee independently reviewed the charter school's renewal application, the charter school's annual reports, the local board of education's performance reports for the charter school, the local board of education's annual reports, and any grievances submitted by the charter school regarding the site visit report's findings, and correspondence from the local school board to the governing body regarding the status of the school during the term of the charter. 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 four sections of the application: Academic Success, Operational Stability, Financial Health, and Future Planning.
2. Capacity Interview: Based on the independent and collective review of the record, the review committee conducted a 90-minute virtual interview with the operator, members of the governing board, and the school leaders to address the weaknesses and questions identified in the record, and to assess if the school's academic outcomes, operational condition, financial condition, and goals for the next charter term merit renewal.

¹ Commission Rule 1185-01-01-.03(3).

² [2.200 Charter School Renewal Appeals \(Final\).pdf \(tn.gov\)](#)

³ [3.000 Core Authorizing Principles \(Final\).pdf \(tn.gov\)](#)

3. Consensus Judgment: At the conclusion of the record review and the capacity interview, the committee submitted a final evaluation 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 school: A brief description of the charter school including its plans for future goals and achievement in a new charter term.
2. Summary of the recommendation: A brief summary of the overall recommendation for the renewal record.
3. Analysis of each section of the renewal evaluation rubric: An analysis of the four sections of the evaluation rubric.
 - a. **Academic Success**: school mission and academic program design; progress toward academic goals; academic achievement and growth results; performance on the local board’s annual performance evaluation; use of data to inform academic practice; progress toward closing achievement gaps for all students; demonstrating successful outcomes for diverse learners; and any notices of concern or other interventions from the local board of education.
 - b. **Operational Stability**: progress toward operational goals; performance on the local board’s annual performance evaluation; capacity and student attrition; parent and student satisfaction and community support; capacity of governing board and school leadership; facility; addressing social, emotional and health needs of students; teacher retention, professional development and personnel stability; and any notices of concern or other interventions from the local board of education.
 - c. **Financial Health**: school fiscal health; financial audits; performance on the local board’s annual performance evaluation; alignment between expenditures and mission; fiscal challenges; and any notices of concern or other interventions from the local board of education.
 - d. **Future Planning**: future goals and plans for achievement; growth plans; alignment to current standings; and any address of deficits.

The Charter Commission’s charter renewal application review committee utilized the Tennessee Department of Education’s Charter Renewal Application and Model Scoring Rubric, which is used by the Charter 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 “[b]ases the renewal process and renewal decisions on thorough analyses of a comprehensive body of objective evidence defined by the performance framework in the charter agreement” and “[g]rants renewal only to schools that have achieved the standards and targets stated in the charter agreement, are organizationally and fiscally viable, and have been faithful to the terms of the contract and applicable law.”

The evaluators used the following criteria and guidance from the scoring rubric to rate applications:

Rating	Characteristics
Meets or Exceeds Standard	The record includes specific and accurate evidence that the school generally demonstrated success in meeting and upholding the terms of the charter agreement.
Partially Meets Standard	The record meets the criteria in some aspects but lacks sufficient evidence that the charter school is meeting the terms of the charter agreement in one or more areas.

Does Not Meet Standard	The record provides evidence that the charter school committed a violation of its charter agreement, failed to meet or make sufficient academic progress, and/or failed to meet generally accepted standards of fiscal management
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Summary of the Application

School Name: Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary

Charter Management Organization: Rocketship Public Schools

Charter Authorizer: Metro Nashville Public Schools

Year Charter Opened: 2014

Year Charter Expires: 2024

Mission: Rocketship Public Schools Tennessee provides liberating and holistic college and career-ready education intended to produce societal change agents. We intentionally provide rigorous instructional programming, interventions, and afterschool opportunities to address the specific academic and social needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged students of color.

Number of Schools in Tennessee Currently in Operation by the Board of Trustees: 3

Current Enrollment (SY 23-24):

Current Grade Levels and Student Enrollment		
Year	Grade Levels	Total Student Enrollment
Year 9	K-5	502
Year 8	K-4	471
Year 7	K-4	503
Year 6	K-4	479
Year 5	K-4	432

Proposed Enrollment:

Proposed Grade Levels and Student Enrollment for Next 10-Yr Term		
Year Following Renewal	Grade Levels	Total Student Enrollment
Year 1	K-5	525
Year 2	K-5	525
Year 3	K-5	525
Year 4	K-5	525
Year 5	K-5	525
Year 6	K-5	525
Year 7	K-5	525
Year 8	K-5	525
Year 9	K-5	525
Year 10	K-5	525

Brief Description of the Application:

Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary (RNNE) is a charter school in Davidson County, Tennessee and serves students in grades K-5 in the Maplewood Cluster neighborhood of Nashville. The school intends to continue operating in this neighborhood. The school’s educational model is personalized instruction with a holistic college and career-ready education.



Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary is governed by Rocketship Education dba Rocketship Public Schools. While Rocketship Public Schools remains the school's governing board and is responsible for the oversight of RNNE, the board established a Tennessee advisory board comprised of local residents with diverse experience that inform decisions that are made by the national board of directors. RNNE intends to stay in their current facility for its next ten-year charter term as its facility is an integral part of their community. RNNE is operating in a strong financial position with a net position of \$4.2 million as of the FY21-22 audit.

Summary of the Evaluation

The review committee recommends approval of the renewal application for Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary because the school has demonstrated a history of academic achievement relative to the Maplewood cluster, maintained operational stability through effective governance and leadership, managed its finances in a manner that maintains a positive financial position, and presented a strategic plan that supports the continued success for the school.

The review committee found that the Academic Success section of the application meets or exceeds standard. The school has shown consistent success in student academic growth, as it has a history of TVAAS Composite scores of 4 and 5. In terms of proficiency rates, the review committee found that RNNE has made significant progress in recovering proficiency scores following a post-pandemic dip. Additionally, the review committee determined that, throughout its charter term, the school has proven to be a strong school option in the Maplewood Cluster.

The review committee found that the Operational Stability section of the application meets or exceeds standard. The school has operated at an enrollment count appropriate to the building's capacity, and it has effectively addressed student attrition when enrollment counts dipped. The review committee also deemed, through the application and capacity interview, that the governing board, regional staff, and school leadership demonstrated the capacity and expertise necessary to support the school's continued operational stability. The school also has a track record of commitment to core operational functions including teacher retention, parent and student satisfaction, facilities, and school safety.

The review committee found that the Financial Health section of the application meets or exceeds standard. The school has consistently met generally accepted standards of fiscal management, received clean financial audits, and the application provides a detailed description of the school's fiscal health. Through both the application and the capacity interview with school and regional leadership, the review committee determined the financial condition of the school merits renewal of the charter, as they demonstrated clear alignment between expenditures and the school's mission, academic growth, and staff development.

Lastly, the review committee found that the Future Planning section meets or exceeds standard. Upon initial review of the application, the review committee indicated there was limited information regarding goals for student achievement, organizational changes, and projected financial goals. Therefore, significant time was spent during the capacity interview addressing these initial concerns. School and regional leadership provided clear responses to the review committee's questions and provided evidence of strategic future planning, including a recent five-year strategic plan.

Summary of Section Ratings

In accordance with the Tennessee Department of Education's Charter School Renewal Application and Model Scoring Rubric ("Scoring Rubric"), in order to overturn a local district's decision not to renew a charter agreement, the Commission must find "that the local board of education's decision was contrary to the best interests of the students, LEA, or community," pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-121. The scoring rubric set forth specific criteria that defines the expectations to "Meet or Exceed Standard" regarding the school's academic success, operational stability, financial health, and future planning. The review committee's consensus ratings for each criterion within the renewal record are as follows:

Sections	Rating
Academic Success	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Operational Stability	Meets or Exceeds Standard



Financial Health	Meets or Exceeds Standard
Future Planning	Meets or Exceeds Standard

Analysis of Academic Success

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The review committee found that based on the renewal application and the applicant's responses in the capacity interview, the school meets or exceeds standard for academic success. The school has shown consistent success in student academic growth, has made progress in recovering proficiency scores following a post-pandemic dip, and is a strong school option in its cluster.

The review committee found RNNE's history of student academic growth to be a strength of the application. From SY17-18 to SY21-22, the school scored a TVAAS Composite 5, indicating the school successfully grew its students at a rate faster than expected. In SY22-23, the most recent year of academic data, the school scored a TVAAS Composite 4, which indicates the school still grew its students at an above average rate. Additionally, the school has averaged 1.0 years of growth or more on NWEA MAP Reading and Math in every year of operation, and, in the SY21-22, the school averaged 1.2 years of growth in both subjects. During the capacity interview, school and regional leadership outlined the structures and processes for collecting, analyzing, and responding to student academic data, including specific systems for serving students with disabilities and English learners. The region also recently added a position supporting its schools' RTI² services.

While early in RNNE's charter term the school showed promising student proficiency scores on state assessments, the school saw a large dip because of the pandemic and virtual learning. The review committee found that the school has made progress toward pre-pandemic proficiency rates on TNReady in recent years, which was considered a strength of the application. For example, the school improved proficiency rates in SY21-22 by eight percentage points in ELA and 12 percentage points in Math. Additionally, during the capacity interview, the school leader explained that in SY23-24, the school has shifted to daily small group instruction to better target and address achievement gaps among its students. School leadership also outlined how it uses student data to inform its teacher training and professional development, providing evidence of a robust, data-informed practice.

The review committee found that the application provided evidence supporting the fact that RNNE has been a strong option among its surrounding schools in Nashville's Maplewood cluster. Throughout its charter term, the school has been one of the top performing schools among the cluster's elementary schools in both Reading and Math, and the review committee determined that the school remains a strong option for families when compared with zoned schools. For example, while RNNE earned a D letter grade for SY22-23 (released after the submission of the application), the performance of other schools in the cluster ranges from C (2), D (2), and F (1). School and regional leadership also spoke to family and community partnerships during the capacity interview and how the school has become a staple in its community. This is further evidenced by strong school enrollment that averages around 500 students.

Analysis of the Operational Stability

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

The review committee found that over its tenure of operations, RNNE meets or exceeds standard for operational stability. The school has operated at an enrollment count appropriate to the building capacity and effectively addressed student attrition when enrollment counts dipped. The review committee found evidence of RNNE's leadership capacity through the application and capacity interview. The school has demonstrated progress and commitment to core operational functions including teacher retention, parent and student satisfaction, facilities, and safety.

Maintaining consistent enrollment over the course of a charter term is critical, as it ensures schools can maintain services to students at appropriate levels and maintain fiscal sustainability. RNNE has on average been at 90% enrolled based on its building capacity. While there were two years where enrollment capacity dropped below 85%, the enrollment chart provided within the application shows that the school quickly rebounded in any year that dipped below this level. The review committee asked the school specific questions related to the impacts of the recent denial by the district and how the school intends to maintain enrollment, given the impacts the district's denial is likely to have on enrollment. The school stated that RNNE has an active recruiting team, works to add bus routes for new neighborhoods to increase access, has built partnerships with day cares, and that they are engaging in geographic targeting of neighborhoods for the purpose of marketing and canvassing.

Another area key to operational stability is the effectiveness and capacity of a school's governing board and leadership to govern a school. RNNE is currently governed by Rocketship Public Schools. While Rocketship Public Schools remains the school's governing board and is responsible for the oversight of RNNE at this time, the board established a Tennessee advisory board comprised of local residents with diverse experience to inform decisions that are made by the national board of directors. Within the application, RNNE outlined the long-term plan for Rocketship Tennessee to form a separate Tennessee nonprofit, which will result in the Tennessee board assuming all governance roles. During the capacity interview, the review committee sought to understand how the change in governance structure would impact the services that Rocketship Public Schools currently provide to the region's schools, such as financial assistance, academic supports, and professional development. The governing board chair, representatives from Rocketship Public Schools, and executive leadership for Rocketship Nashville were able to clearly articulate how this adjustment to governance is in line with the strategic plan and that services from the national charter operator will not be impacted or reduced because of this shift in governance.

Within the application and during the capacity interview, the review committee considered other operational functions including teacher retention, parent and student satisfaction, facilities, and safety. Teacher retention rates have improved over the last three years, and historically, the school's teacher retention rates align with the Commission's School Performance Framework. The application also outlines the efforts to increase engagement opportunities with students, parents, and community members. These include parent meetings, ensuring parent participation in the annual School Improvement Planning process, engaging local business partners, and the implementation of a Parent Organizing Committee. RNNE also adequately addressed facilities and safety within the application and capacity interview. RNNE will remain in the same facility should the school be renewed, and the school's leadership will continue conducting facility walk throughs to determine major projects and ensure safety elements are being properly addressed. Additionally, RNNE conducts weekly safety walk throughs with security guards in different times of the day to test safety related to arrival, recess, and building access.

Analysis of the Financial Health

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

For a school to be renewed, a school must demonstrate that it has consistently met generally accepted standards of fiscal management, received clean financial audits, and completed an application providing a detailed description of the school's fiscal health. Schools should also be in a financial condition that merits renewal of the charter and demonstrate clear alignment between expenditures and the school's mission, academic growth, and staff development. In this case, the fiscal health of Rocketship Nashville, including Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary, meets or exceeds standard based on these criteria, as evidenced by the renewal application, clarification provided in the capacity interview, and review of financial audits.

RNNE has historically had audits free of material weaknesses or deficiencies in internal control, and the audits found the school compliant with federal programs. The school has also met generally accepted standards of fiscal management, and the school leadership shared in the application and capacity interview how they are committed to operating in a financially sound and transparent manner. Specifically, in the capacity interview the Chief Financial Officer spoke to how the school has a dedicated financial analyst who partners with the school and regional team, allowing for financial information to be aggregated and synthesized in a manner that assists the school leader in making informed decisions. The application also speaks to the strong financial outcomes for the last three fiscal years. The renewal application states that new schools often need five to seven years before they can be fully financially self-sustaining and as such require support from Rocketship Public Schools. However, during the capacity interview, the school confirmed that RNNE is in a financially sound position, allowing them to repay temporary loans over the next three years. Furthermore, recent audits reflect that the school is meeting standards according to the Commission's School Performance Framework.

Within the renewal application, RNNE stated the expenditures are made in a manner that align with the achievement of its mission, ensuring student achievement, and professionally developing staff. While this prompt was briefly addressed in the application, the review committee sought further information regarding the alignment between expenditures and academic outcomes within the capacity interview. Within the capacity interview, the Executive Director clearly described the strategic planning process which begins with school leadership engaging with teachers, staff, parents, and students to determine school needs and goals. The network has formally adopted a strategic plan reflective of the input that was received, with the budget being last part of this process to ensure that funds are used to directly support the strategic plan and the priorities outlined within the document. The Chief Financial Officer also shared that expenditures are regularly monitored so that they can set aside midyear funds should midyear decisions be needed based on programmatic adjustments.

Analysis of Future Planning

Rating: Meets or Exceeds Standard

Strengths Identified by the Committee

Upon initial review of the renewal application, the review committee found limited detail related to future plans and goals for achievement specifically related to academic benchmarks, organizational changes, and projected financial goals. As a result, the review committee spent significant time during the capacity interview seeking clarity related to these items. During the capacity interview, the board chair, executive director, and executive leadership provided the necessary clarity for RNNE to meet or exceed standards for future planning. Specifically, the Executive Director provided information related to the five-year strategic plan, which addresses educational goals and benchmarks. Additionally, clarity was garnered related to the long-term vision of the governing board given the restructuring that is currently underway to transfer to a Tennessee nonprofit. Financial stability was also discussed, and the school leadership provided clarity regarding long-term sustainability based on realistic financial goals.

The five-year strategic plan that was recently adopted incorporates academic and socio-emotional elements to meet the learning needs of RNNE students. Specifically, RNNE will provide science instruction daily, where it was previously only a part of instruction 3 times per week. Additionally, students will have daily small group instruction to provide students and instructional staff the opportunity to address learning gaps. Small groups will also be pivotal in ensuring that all students grow academically, and not just those that were previously seen as requiring greater levels of intervention. Reading and math interventionists are also on staff to support students and the school is implementing fourth grade tutoring after school.

As the organization prepares to shift governance from the national board to a local governing board, the application outlines structures to support RNNE as the organizational and structural shifts occur. Within the application, RNNE states that the Tennessee network anticipates hiring a new chief of staff to the executive director and director of schools. Despite the proposed governance restructuring, the Tennessee board is already involved in the network's day to day governance functions, and during the capacity interview, the board chair was able to speak to the extensive levels of support that will remain from the national level despite this change. In regard to the financial outlook of the network under the restructured governance, RNNE stated in the application the school's financial position has been improving steadily over the past four years. This improvement is evidenced in annual audits and running financial statements through financial sustainability metrics, which indicate that both the Rocketship Tennessee network and the school are in a financially strong position.



Evaluation Team

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Erin Conley serves as an expert reviewer for a number of charter school authorizers across the country. Over the last 14 years in the field of education, she has served in roles focused on survey development, data analytics and visualization, research, board development, compliance, school operations, and policy analysis. Erin has expertise in charter authorization and laws that impact charters and networks. Erin began her career teaching in the Chicago Public School district. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English and Secondary Education from Michigan State University and a Master's in Public Policy from Vanderbilt University with a focus on K-12 education policy.

Beth Figueroa is the Director of Authorizing for the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission. She is a Certified Public Accountant and has spent the last 15 years specializing in school finance and charter school oversight. Before working at the Commission, Beth worked as an administrator and charter school authorizer in California. She has also had the opportunity to serve as the Chief Business Officer of a charter school, an Executive Director of Fiscal Services for a school district with an annual budget of over \$500 Million, and an auditor of charter schools and non-profit organizations. She earned her Master of Business Administration degree from California Baptist University, where she also received her B.S. in Business Administration and serves as an adjunct professor teaching Government and Non-Profit Accounting.