



American Classical Academy Montgomery - Commission Appeal Statement

Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-105 and 49-13-108, we, the board members of American Classical Education (ACE), ask the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission (Commission) to follow the decision-making principles in its own [Policy 2.000](#) and overturn the July 19th decision by the Board of the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System (CMCSS) to deny the application of American Classical Academy Montgomery (ACAM).

According to the law and the Commission's policy, ACAM should be authorized if its application meets the standards for authorization and if authorization is in the best interests of "the students, the LEA, *or* the community." We are confident that approval of ACAM is in the best interests of not just one of these parties, but all three, as demonstrated consistently by our application.

ACAM's amended application meets the standards for authorization.

ACAM's mission is to "train the minds and improve the hearts of students through a content-rich classical education in the liberal arts and sciences, with instruction in the principles of moral character and civic virtue." We envision our teachers helping students develop "the intellectual and personal habits and skills upon which responsible, independent, and flourishing lives are built, in the firm belief that such lives are the basis of a free and just society." ACAM's application includes plans and demonstrates the capacity needed to meet the standards required in each area for approval: academic, operational, and financial.

The Board's stated reasons for denial are unfounded.

The CMCSS review committee found that the academic and financial sections of ACAM's application met the standard for approval. So, we address the concerns raised by the CMCSS board of education in the denial: contingency planning for a facility, the Safety and Security Plan, a Health plan, and the basis for waiver requests.

ACAM's application meets all the requirements for facility planning: facility *plans* aligned to the program, budget, and enrollment; demonstrated expertise in facilities acquisition and management; and a *plan* for identifying a facility. We share the Board's concern that students might have to move schools if none of ACAM's facility options work out. Knowing that risk, we have worked diligently, since before submitting the application, with local real estate and development experts, and local property owners, to determine the best facility option. We have submitted an LOI for an existing property in downtown Clarksville and expect renovation to be complete by June 2023. Thanks to an initial grant to ACE detailed in our application, ACAM has more than sufficient funds to pay for needed renovation. As a contingency, ACE expects to have use of an existing school facility immediately adjacent to this property that has more

than enough room to accommodate the anticipated first year enrollment. And, as a last resort, ACAM is prepared to exercise its statutory option to defer opening one year (T.C.A. § 49-13-110(b)).

Interestingly, while making this one of the reasons for denial of ACAM's application, the CMCSS review committee recommended another applicant for approval, even though that applicant had made significantly less progress in identifying a facility or planning for contingencies than ACAM has. That applicant stated they would "begin" the process to secure a facility *after* authorization. In comparison, ACAM has worked diligently since before filing its application, to address the facility issues. Denying ACAM because of the remote risk of needing to defer opening only further delays the authorization needed by ACAM to secure a lease or purchase a facility and prepare it for opening.

The other stated reasons for denial are unsupported by the application and do not merit rating the application short of meeting the standard. Regarding safety and security, the application clearly describes the school's plan for safety and security, names the principal as the primary safety officer, and outlines the process and timeline for creating a school crisis plan. The review committee said, "there was no indication in the amended application when [development of the plan] would occur." In fact, the application states that the principal will create a plan and run an emergency management test based on the plan by December 31 of each year (pp. 163-164).

For health, the stated objection was that there was not "much more insight around [ACAM's] plans to ensure a healthy learning environment for students." In fact, the application explains, "the education model incorporates physical activity, ensuring a healthy environment, and provides health education, and access to counseling and student health services" (p. 163). Additional details about all of those elements are provided throughout the application.

The final concern regarding waivers is unfounded and contradicts the review committee's rating of the ACAM's academic plan and capacity. The review committee felt there was "insufficient evidence of waivers' necessity and their relationship with improved student outcomes. . . [and] the applicant did not demonstrate sufficient evidence of the success of their classical model as a lever to improve student achievement . . . [rendering] their reasoning in the waiver section non-compelling."

In fact, the review committee found ACAM's academic plan and capacity met the standard. Suggesting otherwise as a basis for rejecting waivers is contradictory. ACAM requested waivers from a limited set of laws, typical of most charter schools in Tennessee (e.g., not using standard career ladder payments and choosing curricular materials), and explained how operating the school without being hindered by those laws and rules will allow the school to deliver the proposed educational model (which the review committee approved).

Authorizing ACAM, particularly in a district straining to meet the needs of a growing number of school age children, is in the best interests of these pupils, the district, and the community.

To demonstrate the likely success of students who choose to attend ACAM, the application included achievement data from classical public schools and teachers implementing ACAM's planned curricula and teaching strategies with fidelity. That data shows students scoring proficient in ELA and math at rates between 55 and 80 percent. According to data available at the time of ACAM's application (2018-19), 41 percent of CMCSS students were proficient in ELA and 43 percent in math. Pre-pandemic, CMCSS was rated Level 5 on TVAAS for ELA and math, showing its students grew at the highest level of schools across Tennessee. Because the success of ACAM's students will be included in the district's results, the

success of ACAM's students will contribute to a virtuous cycle of increasing student performance in all district schools.

We envision our teachers helping students develop “the intellectual and personal habits and skills upon which responsible, independent, and flourishing lives are built, in the firm belief that such lives are the basis of a free and just society.” Authorizing ACAM will further diversify and enhance the cadre of educators in the community. Veteran, mid-career, and new teachers are attracted to the classical model. They will bring unique insights and gain exciting experience in a new type of public school. They will learn from and with peers across the district--through shared professional development or through informal community interactions.

ACAM will help the district meet the needs of its growing population of school age children. The county has grown by more than 27% over the most recent ten-year period (averaging 677 new students every year) and CMCSS forecasts growth of 43% in the next 20 years. CMCSS describes its elementary schools “as a whole at 95% of its overall capacity. Far above the district target of 85%” and “capacity at the Middle school level ... at a critical level across the district. Middle schools remain at 104%, above the 85% target, with little room to absorb additional growth”.¹ Because many of its schools are overcrowded, the district is serving students in more than 100 portable classrooms. ACAM will help CMCSS address these challenges by adding capacity for approximately 700 students. ACAM's classical education model will also attract students to the district and keep students who might otherwise choose private school or homeschooling.

Many families expressed interest in ACAM's school model. Half the respondents to CMCSS' own survey support the addition of a public charter school focused on classical education methods. The response in community meetings facilitated by ACAM and in letters of support included in the application mirror the kind of support experienced by other classical public schools around the country.

Broadening the range of educational options for parents will make Clarksville-Montgomery County a more attractive place for tax-paying families to live. The school will, through the renovation of an existing but underused facility, strengthen the educational infrastructure of the community and turn an existing empty building into a shining asset for the community.

Conclusion

We believe that the denial of our application was contrary to the best interests of the pupils, the school district, and the community. Therefore, we ask that you overturn that decision and authorize American Classical Academy Montgomery to begin serving the students of Clarksville-Montgomery County in the fall of 2023.

Sincerely,

SIGNED by ALL BOARD MEMBERS

Dolores Gresham Dennis Pearson Michelle Garcia Rick Kucera

¹ <https://www.cmcoss.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/10yearplan.pdf>