



July 26, 2023

Tennessee Public Charter School Commission
500 James Robertson Parkway
5th Floor, Davy Crockett Tower
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Tennessee Public Charter School Commission,

Empower Memphis Career and College Prep, "Empower Memphis," was denied approval by Memphis Shelby County Schools, "MSCS," on July 18, 2023, despite meeting or exceeding expectations on the Tennessee Charter Scoring Rubric. We humbly request that the Tennessee Public Charter Commission appeals this decision. We believe that the denial of Empower Memphis's application was contrary to the best interests of the students, the community, and the MSCS district.

Empower Memphis is a proposed single-site charter school serving students and families in grades K-8 in the Orange Mound and South Memphis communities within Memphis, TN. Our school model provides career and technical education experiences to elementary school students, a model that is traditionally available in secondary schools. Several studies show the benefits of career exploration at the elementary level. Helwig et al. (2004) found that career connections formed in elementary school provide building blocks for later career decision-making¹. Maree (2018) saw that career preparation programs that begin in elementary school guide students through completing developmental tasks that motivate them to set and realize specific goals². With this in mind, we developed a mission that states, "In partnership with families and community, Empower Memphis is a K-8 charter school with an unwavering obligation to accelerate academic achievement, foster individuality, and cultivate career mindsets of all students as early as Kindergarten. Through differentiated instruction, interest-based studies, leadership development, financial planning, and career simulations and internships, students develop future-ready skills for success in the global market." Providing career and technical education at the elementary level empowers children to make informed decisions about their future. It inspires families to pursue higher aspirations, thus creating a brighter economic future for generations to come.

MSCS's decision to deny Empower Memphis was against the best interests of students. The MSCS Fall 2022 Educational Priorities Document/Rubric³, a five point scale rubric that evaluates schools on the utilization of school spaces, school performance, and facility condition, was used to justify the need for Empower Memphis. According to the document, the Central City West region is the lowest-performing region of the district and has the lowest seat quality. Sixty-seven percent of schools are performing at a three or below, creating a need for 2,622 quality elementary school seats. In Orange Mound, two of the six schools are on the priority list. In South Memphis, six out of fourteen schools are on the priority list. Of the six schools identified on the priority list, five are elementary schools, K-5 or K-8, our targeted grade band. Further analysis of student achievement trends in Section 1.2 of our application demonstrates a need for change. Orange Mound and South Memphis also have limited options for unique school programs compared to other communities within the Central City West region. Schools with STEM,

¹ Helwig, A. A. (2004). A ten-year longitudinal study of the career development of students: Summary findings. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 82(1), 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2004.tb00285.x>

² Maree, J. G. (2018). Promoting career development and life design in the early years of a person's life. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(4), 425–436.

³ MSCS Fall 2022 Educational Priorities Document/Rubric



College Prep, International Studies, and Creative Arts programs are concentrated in Downtown/Midtown and North Memphis/Uptown communities. No programs are available in Orange Mound; the only school with a unique model is in South Memphis. That school, however, is on the state Priority list having achievement scores from 2019, 2021, and 2022 of <5, <5, 10.6 in ELA, and 12.8, <5, and <5 in Math, respectively. To help improve students' academic options and performance, we intend to locate within the Central City West region of the MSCS district and recruit primarily from the Orange Mound and South Memphis communities. If approved, Empower Memphis will serve as the premier career and technical-focused charter elementary school within the Central City West region of the MSCS district.

MSCS's decision to deny Empower Memphis was against the community's best interests.

Empower Memphis intends to build stronger connections between the school and community, creating a collaborative network for students' and families' educational and career journeys. Empower Memphis plans to provide career exploration early so students can broaden their horizons to various professions and determine clear paths toward a successful future. This exposure is significant in poverty-stricken communities such as Orange Mound and South Memphis, where children have limited exposure to different career paths and opportunities and face overwhelming challenges. Empower Memphis has canvassed neighborhoods within Orange Mound and South Memphis to garner community support, supporting events such as the Orange Mound Winter Ball and conducting tabling events. We have obtained the approval of over 100 families and community members who believe in the school's mission and vision.

A key component of our school model is the focus on career exploration and awareness, as described in Section 1.3 of our application. Developing partnerships with local organizations and businesses that reflect the career clusters of study is imperative. Empower Memphis has already obtained several letters of support from local community organizations and companies that recognize the need for Empower Memphis and are willing to aid in the development of the school. These organizations include the Greater Memphis Chamber of Commerce, Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, YMCA of Memphis and the Mid South, Sweetgrass Counseling, Girls Inc of Memphis, City Year of Memphis, Memphis Education Fund, UT-TSU Extension Shelby County, ANF Architects, and a recent judge of the Shelby County General Sessions Court Criminal Division 15. In addition, state and national organizations such as Tennesseans for Student Success, Build.Excel.Sustain (BES), Level Field, and Accelerated Education have all expressed their support for Empower Memphis. We continue to forge relationships with the community through tabling events at Porter Leath facilities, canvassing neighborhoods, and co-hosting back-to-school events.

MSCS's decision to deny Empower Memphis was against the best interests of MSCS. Empower Memphis is directly aligned with Memphis Shelby County Public School's "Reimagining 901" strategic plan, making it in the district's best interest to gain approval. The Reimagining 901 strategic plan outlines the priorities and initiatives of the district to "strengthen early literacy and continuing literacy," "recruit, retain, immerse, entrench," and provide "relative, rigorous and equitable academics ."As identified in Section 1.1(d) of our application, Empower Memphis is aligned with these initiatives in the following ways: **Strengthen Early Literacy and Continuing Literacy Studies show that students who develop strong early literacy skills are more likely to perform well academically throughout their education journey.** Empower Memphis has selected Core Knowledge (CKLA) for grades K-5 and EL for grades 6-8, to strengthen early literacy and continued literacy as the core curriculum. The curricula are state-approved by Tennessee's State Department of Education and meet expectations on EdReports Annual Curriculum Review. The resources support the principles of the Science of Reading, where learning how to read requires



explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction. I-Ready will be used to help all students and as an intervention for struggling readers. Students in grades K-2 will receive 210 minutes dedicated to literacy instruction that includes explicit instruction on foundational literacy skills. Finally, leveled readers and libraries will be available in every grade level and classroom to promote a love for reading. **Recruit, Retain, Immerse, Entrench:** *Empower Memphis will recruit and retain the best staff within the city and the nation. **Recruit:** Empower Memphis intends to collaborate with organizations such as Teach 901, Memphis Teacher Residency, Teach For America, and local universities to recruit certified teachers for vacant positions. **Retain:** Our retention strategies, such as leadership opportunities, career reflections, and wellness offerings, are best practices for promoting retention within organizations. Additional details can be found in Section 2.4 of our application. **Immerse:** We intend to provide professional learning opportunities for staff through coaching and professional development sessions offered by the school, the Tennessee Department of Education, and aligned vendors. Adapted from Diane Sweeney's Student-Centered Coaching, the use of Teach Like A Champion, and measured through the TEAM rubric, these opportunities will yield exceptional teachers, thus improving student achievement. **Entrench:** Staff will collaborate with community organizations on activities such as career fairs, internships, and Tour of the City field trips. We will provide career development sessions such as resume writing or interview sessions for families during our Family Night events. As staff become entrenched within the community, they will develop a sense of belonging and job satisfaction. **World Ready Graduates-Relevant, Rigorous, and Equitable Academics** *We believe that as a result of Empower Memphis' ability to provide relevant, rigorous, and equitable academics, students will matriculate with the critical thinking skills, communication skills, and collaborative skills necessary to thrive in the global workforce. **Relevant:** Students will learn content and skills that apply to real-world challenges, thus preparing them for the evolving needs of the workforce. Activities include the development of yearly career portfolios that capture the learning of their career cluster of study, potential jobs, and educational requirements. Students will also participate in a Tour of the City field trip that explores the post-secondary career and educational opportunities available in Memphis and aligned to their career cluster of study. Internships will be available to fifth and eighth-grade students based on their interests. **Rigorous:** We will promote high standards of excellence and challenge students to build critical thinking and problem-solving skills. All students will receive instruction utilizing TN approved curriculum that allows for access to complex texts and tasks that supports the acceleration of academic achievement in all subject areas. **Equitable:** We recognize that all students have unique learning needs, and we will provide an inclusive learning environment for all students. As the premier, career exploration-focused elementary school in the Orange Mound and South Memphis communities; Empower Memphis will serve as a high-quality school option for families. All students will participate in a Career Exploration Course that profoundly analyzes the grade level assigned career cluster.**

The approval of Empower Memphis is in the best interest of the students, community, and MSCS. We met or exceeded expectations in all categories of the charter application rubric based on MSCS Office of the Charter School review process, we obtained support from families, community members, local organizations and businesses, and we are proposing an innovative model that could potentially transform the cycle of generational poverty for the students and families within the Orange Mound and South Memphis communities. If approved, we believe that Empower Memphis will be the catalyst to bridging the socio-economic gap, offering a more promising and self-sustaining future for the communities of Memphis, TN. We appreciate your consideration.

With gratitude,

Empower Memphis Career and College Prep Founding Team