Tennessee State Board of Education **Agenda**
August 31, 2006 **Report Item: II.A.**

Executive Summary:
State Board of Education Charter School Visits

The Background:

In March and April, 2006, SBE staff visited 11 of the 12 currently operating public charter schools in Tennessee. Ms. Sharon Thompson, State Board of Education member from Memphis, accompanied the staff on visits to six of the nine public charter schools visited in Memphis. Ms. Carolyn Pearre, State Board member from Nashville, accompanied staff to the two operating public charter schools in Nashville. The outgoing TEA President, Judy Beasley-Whitehill, also accompanied SBE staff to KIPP Academy Nashville. SBE staff interviewed the LEA staff in Memphis and Nashville responsible for coordinating the work of the public charter schools within their districts.

The purpose of the visits and the report is to bring to life the people involved with Tennessee's 12 public charter schools. This report summarizes comments from public charter school faculty and staff, board members, parents and students. It also includes comments from LEA staff working with charter schools.

The report includes school stakeholders' observations of the current charter schools' strengths and challenges, as well as their recommendations for State Board rules and changes to Tennessee's Public Charter School Act that would facilitate their continued success.

The Recommendation:

For information purposes only; no action required.

The following is an Executive Summary of State Board of Education charter school visits.

The Full Report will be provided at the Meeting.

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1. **School Climate Indicators of Success.** SBE staff visited schools at various stages of implementation. SBE staff agrees that the following observed characteristics of Tennessee's public charter schools merit distinction for the nurturing environment they create:

   (a) **A visionary board of directors.** The organizational practices of visionary board members included forward looking and well-planned benchmarks for implementation. These benchmarks included securing educational facilities *well in advance* of school opening, selecting very well qualified school leaders and providing them with the support and flexibility to prioritize organizational strategies in the best interest of students. Members of such boards were able to articulate an on the ground strategy for sustained community outreach to the local district, parents, non-profit organizations, and private business.

   (b) **High expectations, personalized structure, and an extended school day.** Schools with the most positive climate were structured in ways that supported the development and reinforcement of high expectations among all stakeholders for longer periods of "educational" time. In these schools, students were able to articulate a vision of their future beyond high school and, in many cases, beyond college. Parents were able to provide specific examples of how they supported the mission of the school. Teachers provided descriptions of how a smaller school size and an extended day allowed them to know their students in more meaningful ways. These schools also established clear parameters for academic expectations in a manner that was relevant to

students. These schools contained entrenched organizational practices that rewarded positive behavior and academic outcomes.

2. **School Climate Indicators for Improvement.** SBE staff visited schools still working towards establishing a school environment that would merit distinction. In each case, these schools were challenged by *both* of the following implementation challenges:

   (a) substantial uncertainty related to securing a school site in the first year of operations;

   (b) school leadership turnover within the first years of school operations;

Each of these schools is currently comprised of dedicated teachers, students, parents, and staff. However, the presence of both implementation challenges within such schools emphasize the need to incorporate charter school application parameters that place the *burden of proof* on the applicant to clearly articulate safeguards that will *minimize* the risk of such challenges within the first years of operations. A specific example might include local board policies that encourage and allow the flexibility to approve applications at least a year in advance of school opening.

3. **Policy Recommendations for the State Board of Education.**

   (a) *Educate Tennesseans About Tennessee Public Charter Schools.* One of the most effective things the State Board of Education can do to improve the educational opportunities for all Tennessee schoolchildren is to educate people about public charter schools. Charter school stakeholders consistently find that decision-makers and the general public do not understand what the Charter School Act created. Many people, including state and local officials perceive charter schools as something other than public schools. A perception of "us and them" pervades many discussions about "charter schools and public schools" despite the fact that the law allows for the creation of "public charter schools."

   (b) *Expand Eligibility.* Tennessee's public charter schools have limited enrollment. Only those students who are failing to make adequate progress or those students enrolled in or zoned for schools which, as a whole, are failing to make adequate progress, may attend public charter schools. Because the state standardized tests are only administered beginning in third grade, public charter schools serving students in preK-3 can only serve students from s*chools*

failing to make adequate progress. Thus, Tennessee's public charter school law actually limits eligibility as follows:

i. Grades preK-3: students enrolled in or zoned to attend schools failing to make adequate yearly progress.
ii. Grades 4-12: students enrolled in or zoned to attend schools failing to make adequate yearly progress or students failing to test proficient on the TCAP or Gateway examinations.

(c) *Establish Additional Authorizing Authority.* States with only one authorizer are generally given low scores by public charter school researchers. The fact that applicants may appeal to the State Board of Education is helpful, but still leaves room for tension between applicants and authorizers.

(d) *Improve Recruiting to Increase Choices for All Students.* Because of the limited eligibility, timely access to information is critical for public charter schools' success. Public charter schools struggle to get information in time to provide parents with real opportunities to consider the possibility of enrolling their children in public charter schools. The timing of information release also makes it difficult for charter schools to budget accurately.

(e) *Adjust Approval Timeline to Benefit Authorizers and Applicants.* The Tennessee Public Charter School Act requires sponsors to apply to the chartering authority "On or before October 1 of the year preceding the year in which the proposed public charter school plans to begin operation."[1] However, the law also notes that "[i]f approval is a prerequisite for the sponsor to raise working capital, a chartering authority may grant conditional approval for a charter application."[2] Full approval may then be granted following demonstration that the "charter school will have liquid assets sufficiently available to operate the school on an ongoing and sound financial basis."[3]

Given the challenge of securing adequate facilities, expanding conditional approval or adjusting the application timeline would reduce the strain on chartering authorities and give charter schools more opportunity to start operations fully prepared for all of the business and academic challenges of operating the school. Florida's charter school law, for example, requires applications to be filed "on or before August 1 of each calendar year for charter

1 Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-107 (2006).
2 Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-115 (2006).
3 *Id.*

schools to be opened at the beginning of the school district's next school year, or to be opened at a time agreed to by the applicant and the district school board."[4]

4 Fla. Stat. Ann. § 1002.33(6)(b) (2006).