
December 8, 2023

Tennessee Public Charter School Commission
Attn: Tess Stovall, Executive Director
Beth Figueroa, Director of Authorizing
500 James Robertson Parkway 5th Floor
Davy Crockett Tower Nashville, TN 37243
CharterSchool.Appeals@tn.gov

Re: Appeal of Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Denial of Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary School's Appeal Charter Renewal Application

Dear Ms. Stovall and Ms. Figueroa,

Pursuant to Tennessee Code Section 49-13-121(f), Rocketship Education ("RSED") submits this letter to initiate its appeal before the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("TPCSC") of the November 28, 2023, decision made by the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools ("MNPS") Board ("MNPS Board") to deny the charter renewal application of Rocketship Nashville Northeast Elementary School ("RNNE").¹

1. Approval of RNNE's Renewal Is in the Best Interest of Students, Families, and the Community.

Currently serving over 500 K-5 students ("Rocketeers") in a vibrant and established school with nearly a decade of service to the local community, RNNE stands as one of the top-performing elementary schools in the struggling Maplewood cluster.² The . At enrollment, many of our students enter academically behind their similar-age peers. RNNE provides among the strongest of choices for Maplewood cluster families seeking educational excellence and accelerated growth.³

a. Rocketship's Model Offers Maplewood Cluster Students and Families an Opportunity to Accelerate Academic Growth and Participate Meaningfully in their School Community.

We believe that every child deserves an elementary education that puts them on the path to college and career readiness. Our model is centered on accelerating academic growth through personalized learning, and in fostering close partnerships with families and the communities we serve.⁴ We believe that the best way for students to reach their full potential, preparing them for college and career success, is by achieving more than a year's worth of academic growth each school year. RNNE students are demonstrating strong growth providing clear evidence that the RSED model is working in their service.⁵

¹ The required supporting documentation can be found at the following cloud-based box folder:

<https://rsed.box.com/s/ema3qjx9b7bxeyaralue3v3i12nq8eby>

² At the November 28 Hearing, the MNPS Board made a comparison of RNNE to all MNPS schools at large on academic performance. However, the more appropriate and meaningful point of comparison is to RNNE's Cluster (Maplewood) not to the District at large which includes more affluent schools.

³ The school has experienced a 12% growth in enrollment since opening in 2014, and serves 100% of students who have applied for attendance.

⁴ Engaged parents are a core pillar of Rocketship's model and critical to our Rocketeers and their long-term success. Beyond supporting their own students, the community is improved by parent voice in our daily work and as external advocates on Parent Organizing Committees.

⁵ **RNNE Meets Academic Metrics:** RNNE students consistently surpass typical growth rates on NWEA MAP, and since established in 2014, RNNE students have achieved an overall TVAAS rating of Level 4 or 5 every year with available TNReady growth data. Even the MNPS Fall 2023 Charter Renewal Application Review Team Findings RNNE noted: "Based on the performance frameworks, the school scored a rating of 5 in Academic Growth in 2017-2018, 2018-2019 and 4 in Academic Growth in 2021-2022."

Before the pandemic, RNNE students achieved an average growth of 1.7 years in reading and 1.8 years in math on NWEA MAP. TNReady proficiency scores for RNNE students from economically disadvantaged households consistently outperformed similar peers in the Maplewood cluster and across MNPS. In fact, in the Fall of 2019, RNNE earned the designation of "Reward School" from the Tennessee Department of Education. As with most schools, the pandemic had a significant impact on teaching and learning, and we are still actively working with our school community to reestablish gains. Despite the unanticipated pandemic challenges, RNNE Rocketeers have made significant post-pandemic progress.

When measured by TNReady, RNNE stands as the highest-performing elementary school in the Maplewood cluster *in both reading and math*. Additionally, RNNE consistently achieves scores above the 60th percentile among MNPS schools for students from economically disadvantaged households. RNNE has surpassed MNPS performance levels among economically disadvantaged students in three of the five years of TNReady data available, and in the other two years, the school's performance was within three percentage points of the MNPS average.

In its inaugural year, RNNE achieved the second-highest academic growth score among all 73 elementary schools in Nashville. Since 2017 RNNE has consistently demonstrated growth, attaining the highest score, Level 5, on the TVAAS every year.

b. RNNE Offers Students and Families Modern School Facilities, Effective School Operations Systems, and Responsible Financial Stewardship.

RNNE operates a safe and joyful learning environment within a newly built 36,637 square foot facility. This facility includes community spaces, a learning lab, playgrounds, both indoor and outdoor basketball courts, and advanced safety measures.

In addition, RNNE demonstrates strong systems for school operations⁶ and financial health. RNNE has successfully stabilized enrollment and established solid financial practices since its opening.⁷ Maintaining a positive cash balance, RNNE has reported positive income for the past three years.⁸

2. RNNE's Renewal Should be Approved Under State Law Standards and TDOE Renewal Criteria⁹

The Tennessee Renewal Application Rubric states "A charter school *should be renewed if it did not commit a*

⁶ **RNNE Meets Operations Metrics:** Since SY2021-2022 RNNE has achieved "Meets Standards" on all Operations Metrics on the MNPS Annual Performance Framework. MNPS's January 2023 Performance Report: Based on 8 years of your school's Annual Performance Framework, MNPS Charter Schools Office has not had any major concerns around the operations of your charter school." The Fall 2023 Charter Renewal Application Review Team Findings for RNNE, and the 11/28/23 MNPS School Board discussion singled out 2021-2022 Teacher Retention as the singular operational metric of concern. Despite this, MNPS staff recommended approval of RNNE's renewal, and yet, the MNPS Board without citation to evidence, context, or discourse on materiality, used this as a basis for denial. On appeal, RNNE seeks the opportunity to provide additional information on this point, and to discuss the materiality of this metric in assessing RNNE's operational health.

⁷ **RNNE Meets Financial Metrics:** MNPS's January 2023 Performance Report: Based on 8 years of your school's Annual Performance Framework, MNPS Charter Schools Office has not had any major concerns around the financial health of your charter school." RNNE achieved "Meets Standards" on all but one financial metric "Enrollment Variance." The 11/28/23 MNPS School Board discussion singled out school enrollment as a metric of concern. As this had not been raised as a concern during the renewal review process, RNNE requests the opportunity to provide additional information and context in this regard.

⁸ See, generally, RNNE's annual reports, performance reports, financial statements, fund balance, and financial audits.

⁹ Pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-121(d) "The authorizer shall consider the renewal application, the annual progress reports, and the renewal performance report... when deciding whether to approve or deny the charter school's renewal application."

material violation of its charter agreement, met or made sufficient progress toward the performance expectations in its charter agreement, and generally met the accepted standards of fiscal management.” Under this rubric, RNNE should have been renewed.

During the November 28th hearing, the MNPS Charter Office recommended approval of RNNE’s charter renewal. Despite the staff’s recommendation, the Board voted for denial citing erroneous, misstatements of fact, while reaching incorrect conclusions about RNNE’s school facilities, teacher retention, academic success, student attendance, enrollment, and finances.¹⁰ In its November 29, 2023 letter, MNPS confirmed its denial of RNNE’s renewal application citing only three (3) of these bases for the denial.¹¹

Not one of the MNPS Board’s cited bases for denial articulated a “material violation of [RNNE’s] charter agreement.” Moreover, the Board did not demonstrate that RNNE failed to meet or make “sufficient progress toward the performance expectations of the charter,” nor did it show RNNE’s failure to meet accepted standards of fiscal management.

In addition, the concerns raised by the MNPS Board were not raised during the review process. Accordingly, RNNE did not have the opportunity to meet the concerns with evidence in support of RNNE’s position. Therefore, in the context of this appeal, RNNE seeks the opportunity to provide evidence to make its case because it maintains that when RNNE’s full record is assessed, it is clear that RNNE meets the standards for renewal and that the MNPS Board’s denial was both unsubstantiated and inappropriate.

3. RNNE Students and Families, and Future Students Deserve the Option of the Highest Performing School in their School Cluster.

The closure of one of the highest-performing elementary schools in the Maplewood cluster would be devastating for students, families, and staff members in the RNNE community, and have the added consequence of eliminating a crucial high-quality choice for parents in this cluster.

RSED looks forward to presenting evidence to address the unanticipated (and immaterial) objections raised by the MNPS Board on November 28th. We look forward to sharing family and community stories that afford TPCSC a clear view into the RNNE community, and all it offers students and families. Should your team have additional questions regarding this appeal please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Sincerely,

William Hill
Executive Director, Rocketship Education Tennessee

¹⁰ MNPS Board November 28, 2023, Board Meeting Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOBYAhBLZ44>

¹¹ The Board’s three (3) bases for denial as articulated in its November 29, 2023 letter included: 1) “Evidence that the data did not show significant progress toward the goals outlined in the charter agreement [from original application]”; 2) “April 8, 2022, Memo of Non-compliance from MNPS Office of Strategic Investment regarding concerns with timely submissions of Rocketship’s ESSER 2 and Title II funds;” 3) “Lack of evidence that the future planning will provide the proper foundations of operations moving forward”.