

AT A GLANCE

Application to Establish New Charter Schools

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A charter school **sponsor** is a not-for-profit entity that files an application for a proposed charter school. A sponsor can become the governing body of the approved school if it is a 501(c)(3) entity not promoting a religious agenda.

For a new charter school to open in Tennessee, the sponsor of the proposed charter school must go through an application process. The rules for this process are defined by the State Board of Education in accordance with Tennessee Code,^A while the application form is created by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). The application form requests information about a proposed charter school relative to three criteria: academic plan design and capacity, operational plan and capacity, and financial plan and capacity.

The sponsor submits a completed application to their authorizer for evaluation.

The charter school authorizer is the entity designated by law as responsible for oversight of a charter school, including approving or denying applications and ensuring the school's financial health. Most charter schools in Tennessee are authorized by a local board of education. The authorizer scores the sponsor's application using a scoring rubric created by TDOE. Should an application be denied during the initial authorizer review, sponsors may amend their application to correct the deficiencies. Should the amended application be denied, the sponsor may appeal this decision to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission (PCSC).

Charter school applicants fall into one of four categories. Category 1 only includes new-start applicants (i.e., sponsors that are not already operating at least one charter school outside or in Tennessee). The other three categories capture other types of sponsors, such as those already operating at least one charter school in the state that are now seeking to open an additional school, new-start applicants proposing to open multiple schools simultaneously, and sponsors that wish to transfer their charter school from under the authority of the Achievement School District (ASD) to that of a local board of education (see box). Sponsors in Categories 2, 3, and 4 must submit additional information, such as the financial history and performance record of the existing charter schools under their management.

Process for a charter school sponsor applying for local board authorization:

1. The sponsor of the proposed charter school sends a letter of intent to TDOE and the authorizing local board of education. This letter must be sent at least 60 days prior to the application due date of February 1 of the year prior to the intended school opening year. For example, letters of intent were due on December 3, 2023, for sponsors seeking to open a school in the 2024-25 school year.
2. The sponsor must submit a completed charter school application to the authorizing local board of education and TDOE by the application due date. Authorizers are permitted to charge an application fee not exceeding \$2,500. Within 90 days of receiving the application, the authorizer rules on the application using the rubric provided by the commissioner. Only applications that receive a summary score of "Meets or Exceeds the Standard" on all sections of the application are approved. If an application is approved by the authorizer, this is the last step of the application process.
3. Within 90 days of receiving the application, the authorizer rules on the application using the rubric provided by TDOE. If an application is approved by the local board of education, this is the last step of the application process.
4. If an application is denied by the local board of education, the local board of education must state in writing the reasons for denial. The sponsor then has 30 days from receipt of the grounds for denial to submit an amended application to the board addressing the reasons for denial. If the amended application is approved by the authorizer, this is the last step of the application process.
5. If the amended application is denied by the local board, the sponsor can file an appeal with the PCSC. The appeal must be filed within 10 calendar days of the local board of education's denial of the amended application. For details on the appeals process, see "[Appeals of local school board denials of charter school applications.](#)"

Category 1: New-start applicants with no charter schools authorized and/or operating.

Category 2: Existing Tennessee sponsor of a charter school proposing a new charter school with different focus or grade structure; out-of-state sponsor with at least one charter school currently operating outside of Tennessee; new-start applicant proposing to open multiple charter schools simultaneously.

Category 3: Existing Tennessee sponsor proposing to replicate its existing charter school by creating a new charter school with no change in structure or focus.

Category 4: Applicant is the governing body of a school currently operating in the Achievement School District (ASD) in Tennessee requesting return to local school district. Per state law, select ASD schools can opt to send their applications directly to the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission rather than local board of education.

Renewals: Active operating Tennessee charter schools seeking to renew their expiring charter agreement. The governing body may apply using a separate charter renewal application.

^A TCA § 49-13-106 through § 49-13-108.

