

Nashville, Tennessee charter school teachers victimized as school's finances investigated

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New Vision Academy, a Nashville charter school, is under investigation by the city's school district for financial irregularities and noncompliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The charter operation has come under scrutiny after several teachers acted as whistleblowers against practices they found troubling at the school. At least four of five teachers who spoke to the *Tennessean* newspaper have been pressured to resign by the charter school owners as a result.

The paper reported that on May 21 four teachers were "escorted out of the school" and three were told not to return. The fourth was permitted to complete the final three days of the school year before "resigning."

The investigation, initiated in March, was prompted by a detailed report from an anonymous whistleblower submitted online to Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) board member Amy Frogge, who then forwarded the report to the district.

The report itself was compiled by teachers. One of the accusations is that New Vision is failing to provide English language-learning students and students with learning disabilities adequate instructional time. However, according to the MNPS charter schools executive officer Dennis Queen, investigators from the Exceptional Education and English Language Learner offices found New Vision to be in compliance in those areas.

In a letter to the *Tennessean*, five New Vision teachers dispute the district's claim, stating, "Students who have (individualized education plans) that entitle them to service hours on a daily or weekly basis for math and/or reading classes very rarely received services from a certified education teacher this school year. English language learners have rarely received support from an ELL teacher in our classrooms."

Noncompliance with individualized education plans is a violation of federal law.

Furthermore, the teachers said they were not interviewed by the district during its ELL and learning disability investigation and a district spokeswoman has not revealed how these investigations are conducted.

Beyond the alleged neglect of English language learners, New Vision Academy's facility reportedly has no elevator for wheelchair accessibility to its multiple floors in violation of the ADA.

The report also alleges that students had to pay for textbooks and basic classroom supplies despite the school allocating \$36,106 for supplies and \$6,831 for textbooks. Students poached from the public schools are used as little more than ATMs for wealthy charter operators.

The top two executives of New Vision, Tim and LaKesha Malone, who are married, have a combined salary of \$562,000. Out of a total operating budget of \$2.3 million in the most recent school year, the Malones' salaries comprise a full quarter. They oversee a mere 200 students, with 71 percent coming from working-class and low-income families. Their combined annual haul amounts to \$2,810 per student.

For those involved in the charter schools, education is a lucrative business. The executive director of KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Nashville, Randy Dowell, makes \$159,130 per year, and oversees five charter schools representing 1,770 students. MNPS Director Shawn Joseph, who oversees the entire metro school district, makes \$285,000.

New Vision is located in Davidson County District 16, in the neighborhood of Glencliff, an area that is demographically characterized by working-class and low-income households. The median income is \$35,350, which, when considering the rising costs of

living and housing that Nashville continues to exhibit, amounts to an existence of just barely making ends meet. It has become increasingly typical for charter schools to situate in these areas in order to siphon off students from public schools that are underfunded due to low tax revenues.

In addition to its school, New Vision operates a “social network nonprofit,” according to the *Tennessean*, coordinating with the juvenile justice system, “which ensures youth abide by the terms of their juvenile probation.” This activity as virtual parole officer is combined with educational work in New Vision’s tax filing, “therefore its finances can be muddled between the two nonprofits,” the newspaper noted.

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Tennessee state law designates public charter schools as part of the state public education system, and as such they receive public funding. Yet, because they are a charter school, New Vision has total autonomy on how it chooses to spend the money.

“This year, one hundred percent of new available revenue for the entire school district will go towards the MNPS charter sector, which (last I checked) serves only around fifteen percent of MNPS students,” wrote Frogge in a Facebook post dated May 22. “Charters aren’t receiving the funding because they are growing (their enrollment is dropping like all of our schools), but because of state law which dictates that we pay charters, no matter how much funding is available.”

MNPS is struggling with a budget deficit, and as a result must make severe cuts. Traditional public schools, which serve a much larger number of students, will be the ones impacted, while charter schools will remain unscathed.

Indeed, charter schools have contributed to the decline in funding allocated to public schools in Nashville over the past several years. A 2014 report by the MNPS estimated more than \$300 million in funding went to charter operations over five years. Charter operations in the city, including New Vision, have received millions more from the state budget over the years, including \$3 million split 10 ways last year.

The school district is preparing deep cuts to programs and staffing levels, including axing the jobs of 87 “Reading Recovery” teachers who focus on struggling

elementary school students. The district administration has given assurances that these specialists will be placed elsewhere in “priority schools,” although no plan has been announced for their placement.

The distress felt by public schools at the expense of charter operations will be exacerbated in the new fiscal year with worsening conditions in schools that serve the working class and poor, including children who require the most intensive educational interventions—those with special needs, learning disabilities, English learners, and children from unstable and impoverished homes.



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