



UNCHARTERED TERRITORY

They oversee SC charter schools. Why are Charter Institute's leaders planning schools in TN?

By [Zak Koeske](#)

Updated January 07, 2025 10:33 AM

COLUMBIA, S.C.

This is the first installment in Uncharted Territory, an ongoing series by The State Media Co. about South Carolina's changing charter school landscape.

For the past year, the leaders of South Carolina's largest charter school district have been quietly working with unidentified business partners on a mysterious project to open three charter schools in Tennessee.

The proposed charter school network, known as Teach Right Traditional Schools, recently paused its plans to open next year in the Volunteer State, but not before filing paperwork that offers a glimpse into the organization's vision and reveals its deep ties to the [Charter Institute at Erskine](#), a South Carolina taxpayer-funded affiliate of Erskine College that oversees more than two dozen of the state's charter schools.

The out-of-state enterprise, disclosed to the Charter Institute's board but not to the public, raises questions about why the publicly funded organization's leaders want

to open schools in another state and whether taxpayer dollars or employee time were expended on the effort.

Charter schools are taxpayer-funded and free to attend. But unlike traditional public schools, they are exempt from certain regulations to encourage innovation, and operate under a contract, or charter, with an authorizing agency, such as the Charter Institute at Erskine. Authorizers rely on taxpayer dollars to fund their operations and are responsible for vetting new charter applications, overseeing schools they approve to open and shutting down schools that fail to live up to their commitments.

In a recent interview, Charter Institute CEO and Superintendent Cameron Runyan acknowledged his work with Teach Right Traditional Schools, but denied the misuse of public money or time. He said he and his Charter Institute colleagues worked on the project outside of business hours and were not compensated.

A recent trip to Tennessee that he and several colleagues expensed with Charter Institute credit cards was for “official business,” Runyan said, not in the interest of advancing the nascent charter school network.

“As a private citizen, I can do whatever I want to do with regard to that, and so can other people,” he said. “And there’s nobody that can tell me I can’t.”

Charter Institute board member Stu Rodman, a former Beaufort County council chairman, expressed support for his superintendent’s out-of-state endeavor and said he kept the board apprised of its progress throughout the past year.

“I don’t know of any objections about anything they’re doing,” he said.

According to Runyan, he and other top Charter Institute officials became involved with the project more than a year ago at the request of several out-of-state individuals whose names he declined to share.

The parties discussed their plans on multiple occasions over the past year, both in-person and over Zoom, culminating in December with the submission of documents declaring their intention to open three K-8 schools in Tennessee.

The group’s preliminary proposal laid out an ambitious plan to generate interest in the new schools through outreach at local preschools, summer camps, community programs and via direct mail, email campaigns, in-person and virtual meetings and social media marketing.

Teach Right Traditional Schools launched a website and Facebook pages for each school around the same time and began promoting their Fall 2025 opening.

“Our New Year’s Resolution?” Teach Right’s Chattanooga school posted on Facebook Jan. 1. “Bring a tuition-free public charter school to the Chattanooga area that reinforces your family values, teaches understanding for American history and institutions, and produces excellence in academics and extracurriculars.”

Identical messages were posted to [Teach Right's Nashville](#) and [Knoxville](#) pages, which each linked back to the [Teach Right Traditional Schools website](#) where parents could fill out an interest form.

Despite its social media promotion, however, Teach Right failed to submit a charter school application by Tennessee's Feb. 1 deadline, effectively pushing back any school opening by a year.

Runyan confirmed last week that he and fellow Charter Institute officials had stepped away from the venture, but didn't rule out resuming their work with Teach Right in the future.

"From our standpoint and our ability to volunteer and support something in another state, we've just got a lot on our plate right here in South Carolina right now," he said. "We're very focused on this state, continuing to work in this state."

Teach Right's ties to the Charter Institute

Since helping [found the Charter Institute in 2017](#), Runyan, a former Columbia city councilman, has grown it into the state's largest charter school authorizer.

Today, it sponsors 27 schools that together enroll more than 25,000 students, and could more than double in size over the next few years as the approved schools in its pipeline open.

Runyan said it was the Charter Institute's impressive track record that prompted outside interests to contact him for assistance when they wanted to open schools in Tennessee.

"People see what we've done in South Carolina and they want that in their state," he said. "I think it's a great honor, to be honest with you."

But the [documents Teach Right Traditional Schools filed in Tennessee](#) tell a different story.

The group's paperwork presents Teach Right Traditional Schools as the brainchild of the Charter Institute's leaders and does not mention the unidentified backers Runyan said initiated the project.

Teach Right's 12-member governing body is composed almost entirely of high-level Charter Institute employees and associates, and the group's paperwork identifies [Teach Right USA](#), a teacher training nonprofit the Charter Institute recently formed and financed, as the schools' sponsor. (A sponsor, in this case, refers to the management organization that oversees the school.)

Kusuma Buddhiraju, a Charter Institute employee who serves as Teach Right USA's chief of data and strategy, is listed as Teach Right Traditional Schools' primary contact and gave the Charter Institute's Columbia office, which doubles as Teach

Right USA's office, as her mailing address. Buddhiraju, who did not return requests for comment, is one of three Teach Right USA executives on the Teach Right Traditional Schools board.



loi-teach-right-traditional-school-nashville-2024.pdf

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Runyan said the apparent connections between Teach Right Traditional Schools, Teach Right USA and the Charter Institute are not what they seem.

The paperwork Teach Right Traditional Schools submitted identifying Teach Right USA as its sponsor was the result of a typo, he said. The actual sponsor, Runyan said, was Teach Right Traditional Schools.

He said that despite sharing directors and similar names, Teach Right Traditional Schools and Teach Right USA are unrelated organizations with different missions and completely separate finances.

“The names sort of imply some kind of linkage, and so I can understand how people maybe were a little confused about that,” he said. “But at the end of the day, there’s just no there there. There’s been no connection between these organizations other than the fact that there’s some folks who have agreed to volunteer.”

When asked why unrelated organizations would have such similar names, Runyan said the unidentified private individuals behind the charter network were responsible.

“They needed a name and they liked the name,” he said.

The names sort of imply some kind of linkage, and so I can understand how people maybe were a little confused about that... But at the end of the day, there's just no there there. There's been no connection between these organizations other than the fact that there's some folks who have agreed to volunteer.

Cameron Runyan

Neither South Carolina nor Tennessee has any record of Teach Right Traditional Schools filing articles of incorporation. Teach Right USA, on the other hand, was incorporated in South Carolina early last year and received federal tax-exempt status in August, IRS records show. Runyan and the Charter Institute are Teach Right USA's incorporators.

University of South Carolina law professor Derek Black, an expert in education law, said he was in no position to dispute Runyan's assertions, but that the discrepancies in Teach Right Traditional Schools' paperwork warranted further examination.

"I cannot say that anything wrong has been done here, but there is, it seems to me, a clear blurring of the lines," Black said. "It's consistent with the type of blurring of lines that has created problems elsewhere in the charter school industry."

Charter school management can be a lucrative business, and conflicts of interest abound.

I cannot say that anything wrong has been done here, but there is, it seems to me, a clear blurring of the lines. It's consistent with the type of blurring of lines that has created problems elsewhere in the charter school industry.

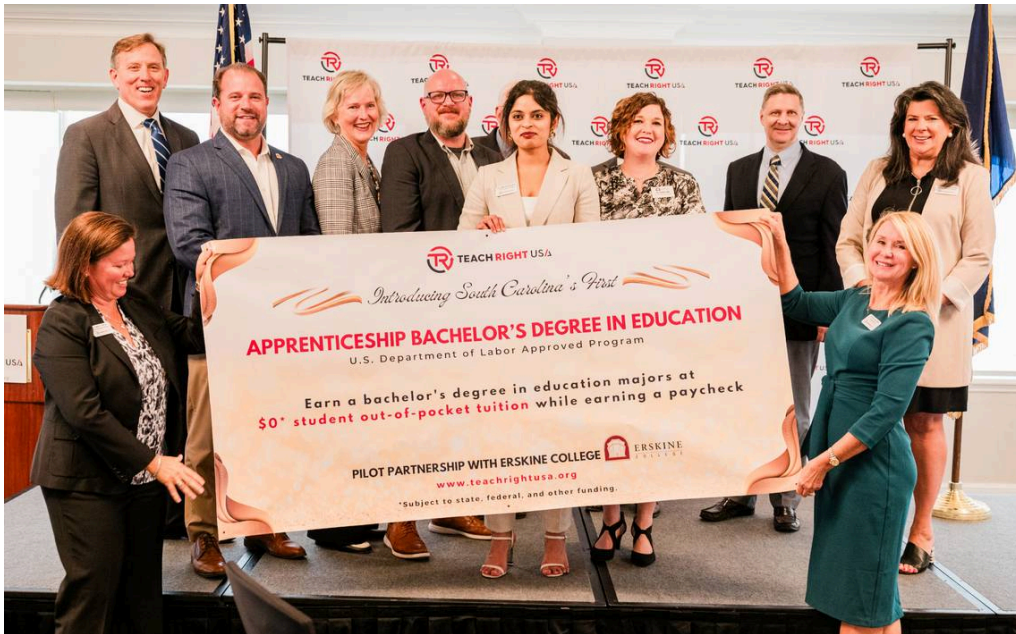
Derek Black, University of South Carolina law professor

Management companies earn millions of dollars each year by opening charter schools, leasing them property and contracting with them to provide a host of financial, operational and administrative services.

“The opportunities to cash in are limited only by the charter school entrepreneur’s imagination,” the Network for Public Education, a public education advocacy group, wrote in its 2021 report, [Chartered for Profit](#).

Runyan, whose role as CEO of a charter school authorizer puts him in a position to monitor and mitigate such conflicts of interest, dismissed the notion that his involvement with Teach Right Traditional Schools was financially motivated and said he was driven only by the desire to transform students’ lives.

“That’s why I do what I do,” he said. “I want to be where I can have the biggest impact on that.”



Teach Right USA board members, staff and associates celebrate during the organization's Sept. 25, 2023 launch party at the Capital City Club in Columbia. Pictured from left to right are Tammy White, Todd Atwater, Cameron Runyan, Karen Wicks, David Crook, Kusuma Buddhiraju, Sarah Little, Steve Adamson, Deirdre McCullough and Tracey Williams. White, Runyan, Buddhiraju and McCullough are members of the Teach Right Traditional Schools board. *The Charter Institute at Erskine*

Traditional schools flourish in SC

Over the past six years, Runyan has not only grown the Charter Institute into the state’s largest charter school authorizer, but one with a distinct niche. The Institute specializes in opening traditional charter schools, sometimes called classical or back-to-basics schools, that emphasize morality, character development and the exceptionalism of Western values — a model that has proven particularly popular with conservative families.

Teach Right Traditional Schools was conceived as an incubator of that type of school.

According to a two-page abstract the organization submitted in Tennessee, its educational program is founded on three pillars: reinforcing “A.M.E.R.I.C.A.N. virtues;” teaching respect and understanding for Western history and institutions,

and stressing excellence in academics and extracurriculars — a mission virtually identical to the one Runyan has articulated for the Charter Institute.

Since 2017, when the South Carolina Public Charter School District denied his group’s application to open a classical school in Hampton County, Runyan has worked through the Charter Institute to bring like-minded charter operators to the Palmetto State.

In fact, the trip that five Charter Institute officials, including three members of Teach Right Traditional Schools’ governing body, took to Tennessee last year was for recruiting purposes, he said.

“This is just part of our model and how we bring good schools to South Carolina,” Runyan explained. “We went up there and we met with some folks that we were trying to recruit to come to South Carolina.”

Charter Institute credit card statements show that Runyan, chief operating officer Vamshi Rudrapati, deputy superintendent of institute initiatives Christy Junkins, deputy superintendent of fiscal and student services Missy Brakefield and chief of communications Ashley Epperson flew to Nashville in September and spent a night at a downtown hotel.

Runyan, Rudrapati and Junkins are all members of Teach Right Traditional Schools’ governing body.

Their one-day excursion, which Runyan said was unsuccessful, cost the Charter Institute more than \$4,000, records show.

“You win some, you lose some,” he said. “That’s a well worn and very familiar path for how we operate.”

This story was originally published February 15, 2024 at 5:30 AM.

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Zak Koeske is a projects reporter for The State. He previously covered state government and politics for the paper. Before joining The State in 2020, Zak covered education, government and policing issues in the Chicago area. He’s also written for publications in his native Pittsburgh and the New York/New Jersey area.

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South Carolina House Education Chair Shannon Erickson leads a committee hearing Wednesday, Sept. 20, 2023. Erickson, R-Beaufort, has introduced several measures aimed at cracking down on charter school authorizers and clarifying ambiguities in the state's decades-old charter schools law. Photography by Joshua Boucher

UNCHARTERED TERRITORY

SC lawmakers are cracking down on charter school sponsors over improper spending concerns

By **Zak Koeske**

Updated January 07, 2025 10:32 AM | 

COLUMBIA, S.C.

This is the second installment in Uncharted Territory, an ongoing series by The State Media Co. about South Carolina's changing charter school landscape.

House lawmakers, concerned that South Carolina's largest charter school district may be violating the spirit if not the letter of the law, are moving quickly to shore up ambiguities in the state's decades-old charter schools law.

The move comes amid reporting by The State Media Co. that revealed leaders at the Charter Institute at Erskine, a publicly-funded school district that oversees more than two dozen charter schools across South Carolina, were quietly working to launch three charter schools in Tennessee.

Charter Institute CEO and Superintendent Cameron Runyan said the group ultimately suspended its plan out of a desire to refocus their attention on South Carolina. But the out-of-state venture has raised questions about the potential misuse of public dollars and employee time.

In a letter South Carolina House Education Chair Shannon Erickson wrote to Runyan last month, she expressed concern that he was "skating on very thin ice and at best using gray areas of law to do it."

“I believe in school choice,” Erickson, R-Beaufort, said in an interview with The State newspaper last week, “but I also believe in fiscal responsibility and duty to the funds being spent in an appropriate way.”

Runyan has denied any wrongdoing.

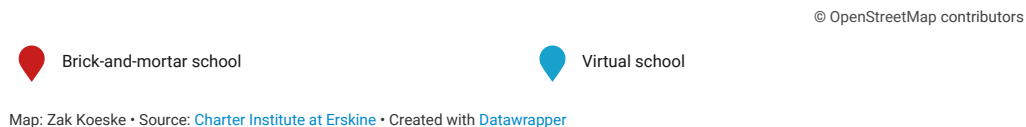
Charter schools are privately-run public schools that are exempt from certain regulations to encourage innovation in the way students are educated. They operate under a contract, or charter, with an authorizer, such as the Charter Institute at Erskine, that oversees them.

The powerful House budget committee last week passed a one-year measure called a proviso to prohibit charter school authorizers from spending state dollars on anything other than the fulfillment of their statutory duties. The measure specifically prohibits authorizers from establishing or managing schools in other states.

Another proviso, inspired by [Erskine College’s accreditation problems](#), permits charter schools sponsored by a college or university to switch authorizers in the event their sponsor is sanctioned by its accrediting body. Erskine, a private evangelical Christian college in Due West that [established the Charter Institute](#), is [on warning status with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission](#) due to finance and governance issues.

Assuming the full House adopts the provisos as part of its spending plan, the one-year measures will still need to clear the Senate, which introduced its own charter school reform legislation last year.

Charter Institute at Erskine schools



The crackdown on charter school authorizers is aimed not only at forestalling any expansionary ambitions, but also at clarifying inconsistencies and omissions in South Carolina’s [Charter Schools Act](#), which doesn’t contemplate many of the complex relationships and potential conflicts of interest that have emerged in the years since its passage.

“These are areas the law is silent,” said Erickson, who authored the provisos. “It never entered our minds that we would need to have these particular safeguards in place.”

The House Education chairwoman said that while she’d prefer to pass permanent charter school reform legislation, as the Senate has discussed, she proposed the provisos in the interest of expediency.

The [Senate’s charter school reform bill](#) has yet to get a vote in the upper chamber.

“That bill hasn’t made it to us yet in the House,” Erickson said. “So as just a precaution and kind of a clarifying scenario, I felt it was important for us as a state body to say: South Carolina funds are supposed to be spent on South Carolina schools.”

Questions remain about Teach Right Traditional Schools

Runyan, a former Columbia city councilman who helped found the Charter Institute in 2017, has insisted that public dollars were not spent on the plan to open schools in Tennessee.

In a recent interview with The State newspaper, Runyan asserted that he and his Charter Institute colleagues, with the support of the authorizer's board, helped with the effort at the request of out-of-state interests whose identities he declined to reveal.

While charter school management can be a lucrative business, Runyan said he wasn't compensated for his work on the project.

"If anything, it's been a financial drain," he said, explaining that he'd sunk his own money into the venture.

The group behind the proposed network of Tennessee schools, known as Teach Right Traditional Schools, [submitted paperwork in December declaring its intention to open schools in the Nashville, Knoxville and Chattanooga areas](#). Teach Right also launched a [website](#) and [Facebook pages](#) for each of its schools around the same time and began promoting a Fall 2025 opening date.

Documents the group filed in Tennessee lay bare the vital role that Charter Institute employees played in the project.



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The authorizer's leaders not only founded the charter network, they ran it. Teach Right Traditional Schools' governing body was composed of high-level Charter Institute employees and associates, and its primary contact, the Charter Institute's director of data and research, listed the Institute's Columbia office as her mailing address.

Teach Right USA, a teacher training nonprofit the Charter Institute formed last year, was slated to manage each of the Tennessee schools, documents show.

When confronted about the connections, Runyan denied that the Charter Institute and Teach Right USA had anything to do with the Tennessee schools project.

"At the end of the day, there's just no there there," he told The State earlier this month. "There's been no connection between these organizations other than the fact that there's some folks who have agreed to volunteer."

Erickson, the House Education chairwoman, said she first heard about the Teach Right schools project from a constituent who read about it on a Knoxville news website.

A mutual connection relayed her misgivings about the project to Runyan, who emailed Erickson in late January in an effort to allay her concerns.

"I want to assure you that no South Carolina taxpayer funds are involved in any efforts that may be occurring beyond the borders of the state," Runyan wrote Erickson in a Jan. 23 email obtained by The State. "To emphasize our commitment, the Institute Board of Directors recently adopted a resolution reaffirming their ongoing commitment to spend all state funds in accordance with state and federal laws."

Erickson responded four days later to express her continued unease with the Charter Institute's behavior.

"Sadly," she wrote, "the information you provide is suspect and a resolution from your board after the fact feels contrived."

Erickson went on to caution Runyan that the Charter Institute's funding could be affected if it didn't manage the state's money with the utmost fidelity and welcomed hearing his plan to implement financial systems that "operate in a clean, transparent and accountable way."

Teach Right USA under question

Meanwhile, the Charter Institute's support of Teach Right USA, the teacher training organization identified in documents as Teach Right Traditional Schools' parent organization, may itself violate the Charter Schools Act, according to lawyers consulted by The State.

An audit of the Charter Institute's finances shows it paid more than \$140,000 of the fledgling nonprofit's expenses last year before entering into a formal loan agreement with the organization for an additional \$500,000.

As of last June, the Charter Institute had advanced Teach Right USA \$343,855, according to the audit. It's unclear exactly how Teach Right USA spent the money or whether it has continued to draw from its line of credit over the last eight months.

Neither the Charter Institute nor Teach Right USA responded to questions about the organization's finances.

Charter school authorizers are required by law to use the public dollars they receive exclusively to fulfill their statutory obligations, which are restricted to reviewing charter school applications, negotiating charter school contracts and providing oversight and accountability to the schools they sponsor.

The use of taxpayer dollars to seed a private nonprofit, whether its purpose is to train teachers or open schools in another state, is inconsistent with the language of the statute, said University of South Carolina law professor Derek Black.

"When you receive money from the state to do Job 1, you don't get to take it and do Job 2 and say, 'Yeah, it's still good for the state,'" Black said. "It is, at very best, an extremely creative use of state funds."



Executive director of Teach Right USA Tracey Williams, Chief of planning and innovation Dr. Tammy White and Chief of data and strategy Kusum Buddhiraju speak after a meeting of the State Board of Education's education professions subcommittee on Tuesday, February 13, 2024. Joshua Boucher jboucher@thestate.com

Runyan, who takes a more expansive view of the law, said he saw nothing wrong with loaning taxpayer dollars to Teach Right USA, which offers a host of services to prospective teachers, schools and school boards.

“We put resources into things like this all the time,” he said in an interview earlier this month. “We’re going to continue to put resources into things like this because that’s our job, that’s what the state of South Carolina has charged us with.”

Financing an organization like Teach Right USA, Runyan said, actually fulfills the Charter Institute’s requirement under the law to open and support quality schools across the state.

“You’ve gotta have teachers, you’ve gotta train administrators,” he said. “And that all is under the umbrella of what we are required to do under state law. We are completely comfortable with that. Our lawyers are completely comfortable with it.”

Erickson, however, has her doubts.

She said she’s broadly supportive of Teach Right USA’s mission and open to discussing legal ways to fund such a group, but that Runyan and the Charter Institute should have consulted state lawmakers if they felt hamstrung by the law and needed more financial flexibility.

“You need to come to the table and say, ‘This law says this. We need it to be able to do some of this,’” she said. “Then let the General Assembly decide if that needs to be a tweaked policy. That’s how those things work.”

This story was originally published February 29, 2024 at 5:30 AM.

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Zak Koeske is a projects reporter for The State. He previously covered state government and politics for the paper. Before joining The State in 2020, Zak covered education, government and policing issues in the Chicago area. He’s also written for publications in his native Pittsburgh and the New York/New Jersey area.

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Charter Institute at Erskine officials pose with members of the Charter Lab School planning committee on Wednesday, April 17, 2024, after the school was conditionally approved to open. Zak Koeske/The State

UNCHARTERED TERRITORY

SC Charter Institute has close ties to school it will oversee, raising ethical questions

By [Zak Koeske](#)

Updated April 23, 2024 10:28 AM |

COLUMBIA, S.C.

This story is part of Uncharted Territory, an ongoing series by The State Media Co. about South Carolina's changing charter school landscape.

South Carolina's largest charter school district last week approved a new school at the Mission Lake Wilderness Camp in Lexington County that was proposed by a group composed almost entirely of people with close ties to the district.

The relationship between the parties raises serious ethical concerns, according to legal experts, and appears to run contrary to industry standards that recommend charter school districts provide independent oversight of the schools they authorize to ensure public dollars are spent appropriately.

The ethically fraught situation is the latest example of the charter school district, known as the Charter Institute at Erskine, pushing the boundaries of [South Carolina's decades-old charter schools law](#). Written in 1996 and amended years later

so that Erskine College and other universities could authorize and regulate charter schools, the law does not address many of the complex issues that have emerged as a result.

In recent months, state lawmakers have taken a piecemeal approach to patch some of the law's most glaring loopholes, but aren't planning to pass comprehensive charter school reform legislation this year.

That means, at least for the time being, the law will remain silent on whether groups charged with authorizing charter schools, commonly referred to as authorizers, can oversee schools in which they have an interest.

Authorizers receive taxpayer dollars to vet new charter school applications, regulate schools they approve and hold accountable schools that fail to live up to their commitments. If they're too close to the schools they regulate, the system cannot function effectively, said University of South Carolina law professor Derek Black.

"The whole reason for having an authorizer is having independent judgment over the charter school to hold the charter school accountable," said Black, an expert in education law. "If they are the same functional entity, then that theory of governance entirely breaks down."

The issue came to light last week when a group of Erskine associates received the Charter Institute's approval to open a charter school within the 2,200-acre Mission Lake Wilderness Camp in Gaston. The relationships between the school's planning committee and the Charter Institute board and staff were not acknowledged during an application hearing Wednesday and the school's application was treated like any other.

The Charter Lab School, which plans to partner with Erskine College and Teach Right USA, the Charter Institute's teacher training nonprofit, would open in August 2025 and eventually serve grades K-8, according to its application.

The school's planning committee includes Erskine College's interim provost, three people associated with Teach Right USA and several others with personal or professional ties to Charter Institute leaders.

The planning committee did not mention its plans to partner with Erskine College and Teach Right USA during its presentation to the Charter Institute board, and the board, on which Erskine president Steve Adamson and Teach Right USA chairman Stu Rodman sit, did not disclose their potential conflicts before voting to conditionally approve the school.



The Charter Institute at Erskine board on Wednesday, April 17, 2024, conditionally approved a charter school application submitted by the Charter Lab School. *Zak Koeske/The State*

When asked afterward about Erskine College's partnership with the Charter Lab School, Adamson, who chairs the Charter Institute board, referred questions to Charter Institute staff.

"I will let the Charter Institute focus in on that," Adamson said. "Because those are things that are still in a preliminary stage."

Rodman, who chairs three nonprofit boards with ties to the Charter Lab School, said in an interview before the vote that he was not familiar with the school and did not believe his relationships with its planning committee members posed a conflict of interest.

In addition to chairing Teach Right USA, Rodman chairs the executive committee of Christ Central Ministries, the nonprofit that owns the land where the Charter Lab School will be located, and the Palmetto Family Council, a faith-based group that employs a CLS planning committee member.

"I don't have a financial interest in (the new school), so I would not be restricted from voting," he told *The State*.

Was Charter Institute involved in developing the new school?

The Charter Institute's approval of the Charter Lab School comes several months after it revised CEO and Superintendent Cameron Runyan's contract to expand the scope of his responsibilities to include the development of so-called laboratory schools.

Runyan, who declined to be interviewed for this article, introduced the lab school concept during a Charter Institute board meeting last year, explaining that he, Rodman and Adamson had been “extensively” involved with the project.

“The Charter Institute at Erskine has had a vision for the past couple years of starting laboratory schools — schools that have a job creation development type of component to them — and the Charter Institute being a formal part of those,” he told the board last June. “Something that is very, very unique, tied to economic development, tied to job creation, et cetera.”

Runyan said at the time there was an “emerging opportunity” to launch a “classical-type” lab school in downtown Columbia that would be called the Gateway School because of its central location in the state’s capital city.

“We already have initial renderings on buildings and a potential site location that we’re in discussion over as well,” he said.



Zak Koeske/The State

While the Charter Lab School’s name and location differ from Runyan’s original proposal, in many respects the school resembles the project he pitched to the board last summer.

The Charter Lab School, like the aforementioned Gateway School, proposes to use a classical-style curriculum that emphasizes moral character and virtue and is focused on job training.

Charter Lab School planning committee chair Raegan McCullough said during her presentation Wednesday that the school would “create labs across our campuses to prepare students for the workforce.”

“We’re going to be installing the workforce initiatives in our students at a very young age,” said McCullough, the daughter of a Teach Right USA director whose teacher wellness company is a Charter Institute vendor.

“Our students will have classroom roles, classroom jobs. They’ll have to interview for them. They’ll use their friends as references,” she explained.

Ties to Tennessee schools project

The Charter Lab School also shares striking similarities to another controversial school project with which Charter Institute leaders were closely involved.

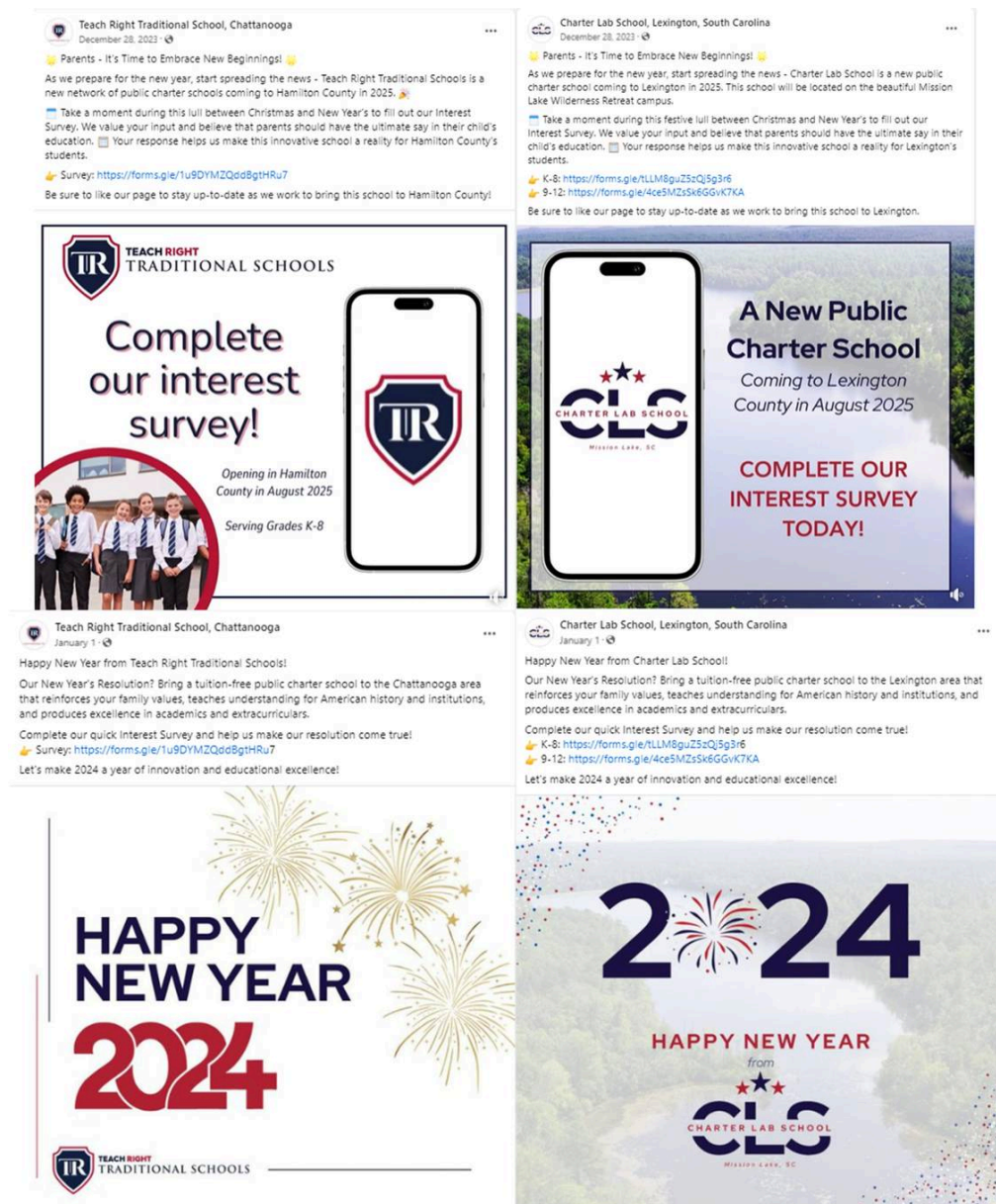
CLS’ mission statement, core commitments and curriculum are virtually identical to Teach Right Traditional Schools, a trio of Tennessee charter schools Institute leaders quietly worked on for much of the past year.

Runyan pulled the plug on the Tennessee schools project in January, around the time state lawmakers began raising concerns about the potential misuse of South Carolina tax dollars, citing a desire to redouble efforts in his home state.

He has denied any wrongdoing.

The Teach Right Traditional Schools website has since been taken down, but archived screenshots preserved by The State show it mirrors the Charter Lab School’s current page, down to the WordPress theme and the questions asked on each school’s interest form.

Even the Facebook pages for Teach Right Traditional Schools and the Charter Lab School posted near-identical messages on the same days, indicating they may have shared an administrator.



The Charter Lab School and Teach Right Traditional Schools have an identical mission statement and core commitments and regularly posted near-identical messages on Facebook. *Joshua Boucher/The State*

Like the Charter Lab School’s planning committee, several of Teach Right Traditional Schools’ planning committee members had ties to Teach Right USA, the teacher training nonprofit the Charter Institute formed last year and loaned \$500,000.

It’s unclear exactly how Teach Right USA spent the money. The organization’s leaders have not responded to multiple requests for comment and the Charter Institute has denied public record requests seeking information about the group, which it argues is a “private corporation not subject to (the Freedom of Information Act).”

CLS planning committee conflicts

Concern over the Charter Lab School is not confined solely to questions about its independence from the Charter Institute and connections to Institute leaders.

Several of its planning committee members also have potential conflicts of interest with vendors. (Charter school planning committees typically transform into charter school boards once a school has been approved.)

The most glaring example involves the Rev. Jimmy Jones, a prominent local pastor who runs Christ Central Ministries, a religious organization with dozens of mission stations and social service locations across the state that owns the land where the Charter Lab School has been proposed.



The Charter Lab School is proposing to open within the Mission Lake Wilderness Camp in Gaston, a private wilderness area owned by Christ Central Ministries. *Zak Koeske/The State*

Jones, who has longstanding ties to both [Runyan](#) and Rodman, declined to divulge any details about the school's arrangement with his church organization.

"Your questions are premature," he said in response to a reporter's inquiries about the Charter Lab School's facilities. "That's not something to be answered at the moment."

According to its application, the Charter Lab School plans to "enter a contract or lease agreement with a church or other religious organization." Separately, the school estimated it would pay more than \$14 million for rent, or roughly \$2.8 million annually on average, over its first five years in operation, according to its proposed budget.

When a Charter Institute board member asked Jones directly about the school's facilities plan at Wednesday's meeting, he responded in a way that did not answer the question.

Rather than ask for clarification, Charter Institute board members moved on to other questions and the issue was not revisited.

A short time later, the Charter Institute’s director of authorization recommended the board approve the school conditionally and the board voted unanimously to do so.

The school’s conditional approval appears to stem from challenges its planning committee has had finding parents interested in enrolling their children.

The Charter Lab School is aiming to open with 1,134 students in grades K-6, increasing to 1,458 students at full capacity as a K-8 school, but hasn’t generated enough interest yet to support those projected enrollment numbers.

According to its application, submitted at the beginning of February, the committee had managed to find just 28 school-age students interested in attending the school.

McCullough acknowledged at Wednesday’s meeting that interest in the school was not where it needed to be, but said the planning committee had a “robust” plan to ensure it met its enrollment projections.

The group will be holding its first “face-to-face interest meeting” for prospective parents on Tuesday at the Cayce-West Columbia public library.

This story was originally published April 22, 2024 at 6:00 AM.



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