STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NINTH FLOOR, ANDREW JOHNSON TOWER
710 JAMES ROBERTSON PARKWAY
NASHVILLE, TN 37243-0375

BILL HASLAM
GOVERNOR

CANDICE MCQUEEN
COMMISSIONER

April 25, 2016

Via Electronic Mail
Dr. Chris M. Henson, Director of Schools
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools
2601 Bransford Ave.
Nashville, TN 37204
chris.henson@mnps.org

Dear Dr. Henson:

I am in receipt of your March 24th letter requesting a waiver for Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) of T.C.A. §49-6-101(F) (1) (B) which establishes the requirement for income eligibility for preschool students participating in Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K Program. Current law states that for children to be eligible for the Voluntary Pre-K program, they must be from families with incomes that meet the eligibility requirements for free and reduced price lunch as determined by 42 U.S.C. § 1771.

Pursuant to the commissioner's waiver authority under T.C.A. §49-1-201(d), your request for a waiver of T.C.A. §49-6-101(F) (1) (B) is granted for MNPS for the 2016-2017 school year. This waiver is granted only under the condition that MNPS set income eligibility requirements for all Pre-K classrooms that are consistent with the eligibility measure for Tennessee's federal Preschool Expansion Grant.

Please feel free to contact Assistant Commissioner Joey Hassell at 615-741-0661 or Joey.Hassell@tn.gov if you have questions about the requirements for this waiver.

Sincerely,

Dr. Candice McQueen

Cc: Joey Hassell, Assistant Commissioner
       Lisa Wiltshire, Executive Director, Office of Early Learning
       Connie Casha, Director, Early Childhood Education Programs

METROPOLITAN
Nashville
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

2601 Bransford Ave. ▪ Nashville, TN 37204
615/259-8421 ▪ Fax: 615/214-8850

Chris M. Henson
Interim Director of Schools

March 24, 2016

Dr. Candice McQueen, Commissioner
Tennessee Department of Education
9th Floor, Andrew Johnson Tower
710 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, TN 37243-0375

Dear Commissioner McQueen,

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) is requesting a waiver of T.C.A. §49-6-101 (f) (1) (B), which establishes the requirement for income eligibility for preschool students participating in the State's Voluntary PreK program.

> *Children who are four (4) years of age on or before August 15 and from families with incomes that meet the eligibility requirements for free and reduced lunch as determined pursuant to 42 U.S.C. §1771.*

The current measure for free and reduced priced lunch is 185 percent of the poverty line. MNPS is making an application to replace this measure with 200 percent of the poverty line (the eligibility measure for Tennessee's federal Preschool Expansion Grant) for our PreK classes funded under the Tennessee Voluntary PreK program.

MNPS is asking you to use your waiver authority under T.C.A. §49-1-201 (d) (1), which states:

> *Upon application by the LEA for one (1) or more of its schools, the commissioner of education may waive any state board rule or statute that inhibits or hinders the LEA's ability to meet its goals or comply with its mission.*

MNPS contends that having two conflicting income requirements for our PreK program hinders our ability to meet our goal of developing a system of district PreK classrooms, which efficiently and effectively serve disadvantaged 4 year-old children so that they are prepared and ready for kindergarten.

To apply two different eligibility requirements for PreK classrooms, one group funded by state funds under Tennessee Voluntary PreK and the other group funded by federal funds under Tennessee's Preschool Expansion Grant, inhibits our ability to effectively manage our early childhood program and produce the results we all want, i.e., children who are ready to succeed in kindergarten, for the following reasons:

1. The process of selecting eligible 4 year-olds becomes very cumbersome, which has resulted in the addition of a full-time position to oversee the placement of students in classrooms according to these different income qualifications;
2. Communication with parents about the different income qualification requirements for each PreK site confuses them and serves as a barrier to enrolling their children in the program;
3. Having to transport PreK children across the district to "eligible" sites because the family's income is between 185 and 200 percent of the poverty level discourages participation of families in the program due to the heavy transportation burden; and,
4. Coordinating the PreK experience for a child with their zoned kindergarten for a smooth transition is easier when the PreK child is attending his/her zoned school.

Currently, we have families who want to enroll their children in PreK classes (funded by Tennessee Voluntary PreK program) near their homes and in the same schools to which their families are zoned. Instead, these families, with incomes only slightly above the 185% poverty criteria, are only offered options to our new "expansion" classrooms, which are open to children in families up to 200% poverty. Many of these families do not have transportation to take advantage of these expansion classroom options.

We want to ensure all of our disadvantaged 4 year-olds are offered quality PreK classes that are accessible to them. MNPS is asking you to waive the requirement in T.C.A. §49-6-101(f)(1)(B) for Tennessee Voluntary PreK income criteria so that MNPS may use the 200% poverty criteria for all of its PreK classrooms. The 200% criteria is identified by the U.S. Department of Education as a family that is economically disadvantaged and eligible for their PreK grant-funded classes. By doing this, MNPS would have one consistent criteria for eligibility based on income for its state and federally-funded classrooms.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Julie McCargar, Executive Director of Federal Programs and Grants, at (615) 259-8402 or Julie.mccargar@mnps.org.

Sincerely,

Chris M. Henson

cc: Christy Ballard
        Joey Hassell
        Lisa Wiltshire
        Connie Casha