

# **Site Review**

## **Initial Approval – Expeditionary School at Black River (ESBR)**

### **Independent School Review Report General Education**

**Site Review Conducted - June 22, 2023**

Submitted by Independent School Review Team:  
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## Site Review Scope of Work and Purpose

The Expeditionary School at Black River (ESBR) requested consideration for initial independent school through the State Board of Education to become a general education independent school. The application was received on April 18, 2023. Subsequent supporting documentation requested by the Independent School Team was received in a timely manner.

The school indicated in the initial application that ESBR was designed to serve children with a particular disability or disabilities in general. When asked if ESBR was going to complete and submit a special education application, the Independent School Team was told no.

ESBR is currently operating as a recognized independent school.

## General Education

State Board of Education Rule 2225.2, 2225.5

Members of the Agency's Independent School Team and two AOE Directors met with available ESBR staff on Thursday, June 22, 2023. Interviews were conducted in person, by phone, and by Zoom at the school's facility, located on Main Street in Ludlow, VT. This building previously served as Black River High School, which closed at the end of the 2020 school year. ESBR staff present for interviews were the head of school; the part-time school counselor, and part-time teachers in the following subject areas: social studies, Spanish, French, global citizenship, mathematics, and science. Some of the staff are paid, some are working pro bono, and some are teaching in exchange to compensate for tuition.

An ESBR board member or the head of school sat in on each of the interviews. At the lunch break, a parent came to the school and said that she specifically moved to Ludlow with her three children with learning challenges so that they can be enrolled at ESBR. During the interview with the two science teachers, they indicated that their granddaughter, who has learning challenges, would benefit from going to ESBR.

At the exit interview many of the board members were also present. The head of school is leaving at the end of June 2023, and a Governance Board appointed interim head of school was also present during the exit interview.

Members of the AOE visiting team provided information and clarification pertaining to statutory and State Board Rules while at the visit.

## School Philosophy

ESBR's initial approval application states that:

"From its inception, creating a cost-effective financial model for educating youth that is more community focused and locally controlled has been a priority of ESBR's leadership team. ESBR's leadership team believes schools must be designed so that a student's community can be

their classroom. By creating cost-efficient schools, ESBR's vision is to revitalize local economies and create opportunities for community engagement."

## **Program Mission**

"ESBR's mission is to educate students to be intellectually curious, resourceful, and confident in themselves for a life of personal fulfillment and civic engagement. ESBR's culture of learning is built from these educational pillars: a global perspective, civic responsibility, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. Learning opportunities are intentionally aligned with these pillars.

ESBR leverages the outdoors as a setting to help individuals explore their passions and reflect on their personal characteristics to become conscientious global citizens and respectful human beings. In so doing, the schools' educational objectives are also designed to offer students experiences where they can develop the dispositions outlined in VT-AOE's Portrait of a Graduate, dispositions that have been a key feature of ESBR's educational objectives since opening day. Over the course of a student's experience at ESBR, learner agency, critical thinking & problem solving, wellbeing, global citizenship communication and academic proficiency are the descriptors used to describe student's progress toward these dispositions."

ESBR's philosophy and program mission are included in the school's handbooks and provided to parents at the time of student enrollment.

## **School Enrollment**

16 V.S.A. §166(b)(4), State Board of Education Rule 2225.3

ESBR's application addresses school enrollment with the following: "Due to the constraints that accompany relying entirely on philanthropic fundraising methods, currently, only 15 students can attend ESBR. We have been approached by families in VT's school choice communities who are interested in choosing ESBR, yet not until their tuition dollars are accessible to families wanting to enroll in ESBR, the school's growth is capped.

Once approved for the 2023-2024 school year only ESBR wants to recruit additional students to bring its total enrollment up to 40 students for the 2023-2024 school year. ESBR's physical space at 43 Main Street, Ludlow, VT can accommodate up to 300 people, including adults and students. ESBR intends to leverage a system of flexible pathways, a combination of anytime, anywhere learning opportunities with a year-round academic programming, for the purpose of ensuring a cohort model can rotate in and out of the brick-and-mortar structure. This operational design feature will allow ESBR to grow its enrollment over time."

At the time of the onsite visit, the AOE review team confirmed that there were 15 students enrolled for the 2022-2023 school year, one of which graduated in June of 2023.

ESBR provided an outline of the current enrollment by grade and specifics regarding the continuation of the student's special education service plans provided by the Two Rivers Supervisory Union. Parents/guardians of three out the five students elected to participate in these special education services.

Admission to ESBR is made by an admissions committee. The first step is the parent's or guardian's meeting with the head of school and two board members. The second step is an interview with only the head of school. ESBR indicates it has an open admissions policy, but in the process of reviewing youth wishing to enroll, may ask for more information including a writing sample and documentation of any previous behavior issues.

The student handbook guides the process by which student conduct is monitored and addressed. The student handbook is available on the ESBR website and ESBR staff review the student handbook with parents during the admissions process.

The visiting team reviewed the daily attendance records from the 2022-2023 school year. During interviews with teaching staff, the review team learned that students who are unable to attend school (either on a day-to-day basis or more long term) are able to participate in class remotely. The review team clarified that those days do not count towards compulsory attendance for those students.

### **Governance**

State Board of Education Rule 2225.4

ESBR is a 501(c)(3) with a volunteer Board of Trustees (BoT). There are currently seven (7) members on the BoT, but they hope to expand this number in the future. Per established bylaws, trustees serve on a three-year rotating term. The Chair and Vice Chair ensure adherence to the policy manual. An elected Treasurer monitors all aspects of finance, and an elected Secretary is responsible for maintaining minutes of all meetings. The manual includes protocols for board operations, including conflict of interest, meeting and agenda preparation and agenda distribution, notice of non-discrimination, as well as BoT and head of school communication processes. The head of school reports to the BoT. The head of school provides a monthly update at BoT meetings, and is responsible for managing faculty and student body.

Board members take a regular and active role in the daily running of the school, fund raising, oversight of business management, development of school programming including annual evaluation of head of the school. The head of school reports directly to the Board.

### **Minimum Course of Study & Required Assessments**

16 V.S.A. §166(b), State Board of Education Rule 2225.5

ESBR's initial approval application states that the academic program is based upon proficiency-based curriculum, personalized student learning plans and provides opportunities for student engagement in project-based learning activities. Students must also complete financial literacy courses and attend classes in fine arts, performing arts, cultural studies, music, outdoor education, and environmental studies.

Instruction is provided using several modalities--virtual 1:1, in-person small group activities, a traditional classroom setting, in-person individualized project-based learning, one-on-one direct instruction, outdoor education, and community-based education programming that utilizes

community partners to enrich academic program goals. Plans to provide virtual 1:1 instruction are for a limited number of students on a needs-based individually determined basis.

Core classes are scheduled for 30 - 60 minutes three times a week by either part-time instructors or pro-bono staff from the broader community. Students access Google Sheets to post completed work, receive assignments from instructional staff and directions for activities scheduled for the following day.

ESBR has developed a manual called the Program of Studies which provides a brief description of the content of each course that is available during the school year.

ESBR stated it uses EL Education's curriculum for communication skills including reading and writing. EL Education's rubrics were adapted from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and their proficiency column is taken directly from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Students are assigned articles from Newsela on a weekly basis. Students must complete reading quizzes as well as short written answers to articulate their understanding of the content of the article. Topics covered pertain to current events and with a focus on environmental science, specifically the impact climate change is having on the natural environment as well as each of our daily's lives. Each year, students need to produce culminating writing assignments that demonstrate their ability to write descriptive, expository, persuasive, narrative and creative writing.

ESBR's stated its instructional resources for math align with Common Core Math Standards. Specifically, ESBR's materials are published by the Art of Problem Solving. Every student is completing the foundational math knowledge that is part of Art of Problem Solving's Beast Academy. All students are required to complete and demonstrate proficiency in Financial Literacy. The Financial Literacy course is taught by industry professionals from the local branch of M&T Bank. Components of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation's (FDIC) Financial Literacy curriculum will be taught each year a student is enrolled in ESBR.

ESBR stated its social studies curriculum is aligned with the College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies. Newsela is a resource used to provide students with access to nonfiction journalism on a daily basis. Current events are then used to teach the history that has led up to and/or contributed to the issue at hand. All students are required to complete The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Civics (History and Government) Questions for the Naturalization Test. The USCIS's test sets the standard for what a new Americans must know about history and government in the United States. Therefore, the process of preparing to take a simulated version of the test becomes evidence of Global Citizenship as well. Passing this test is not the focus, rather students are required to also write about the test's methodology and the degree to which it develops an understanding of what it means to be a global citizen and a respectful human.

ESBR stated it utilizes the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) for science. Science curriculum maps are aligned with the learning targets NGSS has outlined for Physical Sciences, Life Sciences, Earth and Space Sciences, and Engineering Design. To ensure access to the highest

quality research and science equipment, ESBR has a formal partnership with the New Hampshire Academy of Science.

ESBR stated it adheres to the National Core Art Standards.

The Curriculum Framework published by SHAPE America (Society of Health and Physical Educators) is the curriculum ESBR reports using for these content areas.

Some of the staff stated they prepared their own curriculum in coordination with the head of school. The staff also stated that they only make “recommendations” regarding a student’s grade for a class to the head of school. The final grade determination is made by the head of school.

ESBR provided information about the school’s graduation requirements.

ESBR has been conducting literacy and math assessments to develop a baseline of knowledge of the students. We recommend this practice be continued.

ESBR plans to explore providing flexible pathways to students. At the time of the application and review ESBR is still developing its plan for flexible pathways. Agency staff is available to discuss flexible pathways with ESBR and provide technical assistance.

Per 16 V.S.A. 166 (g), upon approval, ESBR will need to assess all students for whom the district of residency pays tuition to measure attainment of standards for performance, using the state assessment or assessments required under subdivision 164(9).

### **Professional Staff**

#### State Board of Education Rule 2225.8

Most of ESBR’s instructional staff are paid part-time employees, work pro bono, or instruct to defer tuition. There is one full time staff member, the head of school, who provides instruction in English and in social studies, in addition to head of school duties. Others at the school include a communications instructor, a Spanish teacher, a French/global citizenship teacher, a math teacher, a performing arts teacher, three science teachers, a reading teacher, an art teacher and two life skill instructors.

Since the head of school is leaving, ESBR will need to hire a qualified English teacher for the upcoming school year. A part-time social studies teacher may be needed as well if the part-time school counselor/social studies instructor is unable to provide all the social studies classes needed.

High interest activities are provided by part time paid and pro-bono community members in languages, performing arts, fine arts and arts and crafts.

During interviews with instructional staff and the head of school, the visiting team learned ESBR staff do not have a professional development plan, and staff do not currently engage in

individualized, content area professional development. State Board Rule 2225.8 .2 outlines the requirements for professional development and the need to develop clear expectations for all staff.

ESBR does not currently formally evaluate staff members; it is more of a “coaching” model. The interim head of school plans to work with the Board and school staff to outline a template for conducting future staff evaluations and addressing professional development.

ESBR does not engage in regularly scheduled whole staff meetings; however, ESBR staff reported that the head of school does reserve office hours and engages in discussions with staff. During the onsite visit, the outgoing head of school, the incoming interim head of school and board members all agreed that developing a plan for professional development and holding regularly scheduled whole staff meetings is a high priority that they intend to address.

### **Staffing Safeguards:**

All of ESBR’s instructors both pro bono and volunteers, with the exception of one, have completed the fingerprinting and child/adult abuse registry process. This staff member is not a US citizen.

### **Mandatory Reporting Procedures:**

ESBR’s staff has gone through the mandatory reporting training.

### **Health & Safety**

ESBR has regularly scheduled fire drills, active shooter and shelter in place polices for ensuring student and staff safety during times of crisis.

### **Nursing Services, Medications, and Immunization Records:**

The school does not employ a school nurse, and in case of an emergency the local health center is used. It is located very near the school. Only one of the ESBR’s staff is trained in CPR and first aid.

ESBR stores over-the-counter meds in a locked box in the head of school’s office. No meds are administered without having a parent’s signed permission sheet.

Student immunization records are on file at the school.

### **Hazing, Harassment & Bullying Policies**

ESBR has adopted the Agency’s model hazing, harassment, and bullying policy.



## **Facilities**

### State Board of Education Rule 2225.6

ESBR currently utilizes the second and third floors of the former Black River High School building which provides 10 rooms for the school to use. The classrooms and all school spaces are clean and neat. There is sufficient space to conduct academic programming for each grade, seven through twelve.

The facility is owned by the Town of Ludlow, which leases the space to ESBR. The current lease expires at the end of June 2023. The Town of Ludlow indicated to ESBR's Board that they are willing to enter into another option to lease to renew every two years. ESBR's board members shared the board is waiting on the SBE action on this application before they will sign a new lease. The facility's heating system is inspected annually, and there is a hard-wired fire suppression system that is inspected twice yearly. The Division of Fire Safety issued a Certificate of Occupancy (CO) for use of the facility for educational purposes.

### **Financial Capacity:**

ESBR is philanthropically funded per its status as a recognized school, but only fifteen students can attend tuition free. If approved by the State Board of Education, the school's Board and head of school expects to double student enrollment based on revenues they expect to receive through public funding.

ESBR provided a financial capacity letter with notarized signatures from the Board to the Agency on April 10, 2023. Accompanying this letter was a balance sheet as of March 31, 2023, showing the school had cash on hand to complete this academic year, and a historical summary of ESBR's finances. The latter document indicated that the operating balance as of March 31, 2023 was \$140,446.

There is a significant receivable which is from the Town of Ludlow, who voted to grant ESBR a donation of \$75,000 to bridge expenses until the school receives approval. With approved independent school status, ESBR will qualify for monies from public tuition to follow students in accordance with 16 V.S.A. Section 824. These funds will provide the funds for enrollment expansion, increase in staffing, and incremental investment in instructional excellence.



## **Initial Approval Recommendation:**

ESBR board members and staff have cooperated with AOE review staff and provided all additional information requested in a timely manner. ESBR has indicated that they are a work in progress and that the approved independent school status and associated tuition funds is a critical piece towards the school's ability to improve and develop. The board and staff have expressed an understanding of the deficiencies noted during the site visit on June 22, 2023 and have shared its commitment toward addressing these deficiencies. Agency staff are available to provide the board and staff with ongoing technical assistance to ensure full compliance with State Board of Education Rules.

The Agency of Education's Independent School Team recommends a one-year approval to the Secretary of Education with the following conditions:

1. Content area staff must be hired prior to the first day of school and approved by the Agency of Education as meeting SBE Rule 2226.8.1. Qualifications for all school year 2023- 2024 staff must be submitted to the Agency of Education Independent School Team allowing for a minimum of five days to review (prior to the start of school).
2. ESBR must develop and maintain on file a plan for staff professional development and evaluation prior to the first day of school.
3. ESBR must develop and maintain on file a plan for serving all students pursuant to SBE Rule 2229 prior to the first day of school.
4. ESBR must have a plan in place for delivery of required state assessments by January 1, 2024.
5. ESBR's direct instruction must be delivered by qualified staff to student(s) who are physically in attendance at the school.
6. ESBR must continue its assessment of all incoming students for literacy and math.
7. ESBR must develop or purchase a written curriculum to meet the Minimum Course of Study for age, grade and ability level.
8. Prior to implementing a flexible pathway learning opportunity, ESBR must seek technical assistance from the Agency.