

# **Site Review**

## **Renewal – Hiland Hall School**

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

**Site Review Conducted**

**October 20, 2022**

Submitted by Independent School Review Team:

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## Site Review Scope of Work and Purpose

Hiland Hall School is a general education school in Bennington, Vermont approved for students ages 5-13, kindergarten through the eighth grade, and follows a traditional school year calendar. The Independent School team conducted a renewal site review on Thursday, October 20, 2022. The head of school submitted a timely renewal application and the required supporting documentation in compliance with State Board of Education renewal requirements.

## School Philosophy & Educational Objectives

State Board of Education Rule 2225.2, 2225.5

Hiland Hall School ascribes to the educational progressive philosophy of educator John Dewey. Dewey defined progressive education as an instructional model in which educators believe that individuality, progress, and change are fundamental to one's education. Dewey believed that people learn best from what they consider most relevant to their lives, progressivists, like John Dewey, center their curricula on the needs, experiences, interests, and abilities of students.

## School Philosophy

Hiland Hall School attends to the individuality of each student's interests. The school is deliberately organized to promote and support progressive education. Hiland Hall School's renewal application states that "The purpose of the Hiland Hall School is to join with families in the liberation and development of the full capacities of the students entrusted to it: intellectually, socially, aesthetically, physically, and morally."

## Program Objectives

Hiland Hall's stated objectives are a blend of progressive educational philosophy and compliance with Vermont statute and State Board of Education Rule requirements for students ages 5-13 in grades K – 8. Educational objectives are developed and implemented based upon Dewey's progressive academic frame work. Hiland Hall School's renewal application defines the school's objectives as "our purpose [is] to develop the full capacities of our students because we believe that both the individual and society are best served when individuals reach full potential. It is a school's task to serve both the individual and the society. Thus, to concentrate on only one aspect of human potential (for instance, intellectual development or even more narrowly academic development) is to be of disservice to both individual and society."

## School Enrollment

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

There are currently thirty-two students enrolled at Hiland Hall School for the 2022 – 2023 school year. Students are enrolled by parents with the specific aim of enrolling their child in a school that follows Dewey's progressive philosophy and academic practices. Hiland Hall School students are grouped by age and ability level in both the elementary and middle school program. The school is divided into three school settings- North (upper elementary grades) and South- (lower elementary grades), and the middle school program. Students are grouped in classes based upon age, grade level, mastery of skills and level of readiness to learn.

Student enrollment at Hiland Hall School is accomplished through a rolling admission process and final enrollment decisions are made by the head of school, the two instructors and the school's founder. Under the school's current enrollment process, a parent/guardian contacts the school, and a plan is made for the student and parent to visit the school. Parents/guardians and prospective students meet with Hiland Hall School staff at the conclusion of the school visit, to discuss potential enrollment.

## **Governance**

### State Board of Education Rule 2225.4

Hiland Hall School is a 501(3)(c) school. The school's Governance Board is comprised of nine volunteer members elected annually by school community members. The Governance Board's structure includes positions for a chair, vice-chair, secretary, and a treasurer. Board members serve two-year terms.

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

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

The curriculum at Hiland Hall School is developed using the progressive principles and framework of education philosopher, John Dewey. The instruction model is referred to as an emergent curriculum, and the head of school at Hiland Hall describes in the school's renewal application that:

"...emergent curriculum is... in response to students' interests and experience. Of course, that curiosity is balanced with community concerns, societal standards, as well as teacher and family priorities. We keep an eye on Common Core Standards and Vermont Framework Standards, but do not base our choices entirely upon them.

We make time for students to work independently for many reasons, most importantly so that this skill is developed and also so that teachers are better able to meet each student where they are academically. We have cherished traditions that have built up at the school that express a few of the many ways of pursuing progressive education: such as starting the year with a teacher-chosen theme and then allowing all students to choose an independent study topic for individual and group attention in the second half of the year. Along the way, students are asked to create with their hands, write & draw, and reflect on the experiences they have at school in order to make meaning for themselves." (Source: Hiland Hall School, Renewal application, 2021, page 4)

Independent School Team members conducted interviews with both academic instructors and the head of school. Interviews confirmed that units of study, lesson plans and assessments are aligned with Hiland Hall School's stated philosophy and objectives and meets Minimum Course of Study requirements under Rule, 2226.5.

Hiland Hall School's curriculum integrates Common Core Standards in each unit of study and lesson plan. Students access educational opportunities in a variety of ways including whole class direct instruction, student led activities, individualized student work periods and collaborative, small group classes. Parents and interested community members volunteer to provide a wide range of learning opportunities such as a recent outdoor education unit centered

around cutting down a dead tree on school grounds. Community volunteers provided a team of draft horses and joined students and teachers to process the wood, mill the wood with a portable sawmill into lumber and used the finished product to build bookshelves and coat racks for the school. Hiland Hall School also offers classes in languages, fine arts, crafts or artisan and utilitarian hands-on learning opportunities. Essential academic classes are focused on environmental sustainability, community-based learning, and independent living skill classes.

## **Professional Staff**

### State Board of Education Rule 2225.8

The Agency's Independent School Team members have reviewed Hiland Hall School staff credentials and can confirm that all staff are qualified in their areas of responsibility.

Hiland Hall School added an academic para-educator support position for school year 2022-2023. The new para-educator works collaboratively with both instructors to develop student learning objectives, support student assessments and provides one-to-one literary and math support instruction to assist with closing student achievement gaps.

The para-educator leads student enrichment activities under the supervision of instructional staff and acts as an embedded substitute instructor when the need arises.

All Hiland Hall School staff meet weekly to review student needs, revise curriculum, and review student progress. Formal staff professional development training opportunities are provided during in-service days. Instructional staff have ample opportunity to participate self-directed professional development in either content area learning opportunities or in methods of instruction and child development course work.

Hiland Hall School instructors collaborate regularly in delivering curriculum and share instructional responsibilities for all enrolled students, K- 8. Both instructors provide assessment information in each student's progress reports to parents/guardians throughout the school year.

Jessica Howard, the founder of the school, works part-time, three days a week with the younger students in the areas of reading and mathematics. She also conducts seminars with the middle school students. The founder taught at the Prospect School and Archives in North Bennington when it operated an elementary and middle level school for children in grades K-8.

## **Staffing Safeguards:**

Background checks are conducted prior to start date for all newly hired employees. Fingerprint-supported criminal records check, and Vermont adult/child registries are checked. Background check reports are included in staff professional files and are available for review upon request.

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

Hiland Hall School has adopted the required policy, as posted on AOE website for hazing, harassment, and bullying. Parent/family and staff handbooks include information and requirements of the hazing, harassment, and bullying policy as well as the school's expectations.

## **Mandatory Reporting Procedures:**

Hiland Hall School staff review mandatory reporting policies and procedures during in-service, prior to the start of school each August. Mandatory reporting information is also included in the school's handbooks and reviewed with parents/family members as part of the admissions process.

## **Facilities**

### State Board of Education Rule 2225.6

Hiland Hall School is a single-story building set back from the main road. There is ample green space for children to explore and engage with peers during outdoor free time. The building is in good repair, well organized and clean.

Learning environments utilize open classroom settings that accommodate a variety of learning activities. Student work is prominently displayed.

The middle school academic area includes a work bench for creating a variety of hands-on projects ranging from the fine arts to wood working. Materials and tools required for these classes are stored safely in cabinets and hung on wall spaces that are well organized and clearly labeled. Examples of finished hands-on projects are displayed to celebrate student learning, and skill progress.

A new HVAC air exchange system was installed last year and was inspected prior to the start of this school year. The school has built a three-sided outdoor classroom on a concrete pad behind the main school building.

Hiland Hall School has a Certificate of Occupancy (CO) for the main school building and the outdoor classroom issued by the Division of Fire Safety (DFS)

## **Emergency Services:**

In an emergency, Hiland Hall School contacts 911 Emergency Services. Staff members complete first aid and CPR training/certification refreshers annually.

Hiland Hall School's administrator works with local police and local first responders to conduct and practice monthly fire drills, active shooter and remain in place protocols. A log listing the date, and purpose for each drill is kept on file in the main office with student daily attendance records.

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

Hiland Hall School does not have a school nurse on staff. Student specific medications are not administered by the school's staff and are the responsibility of family members. However, parents complete and provide the head of school annually with a medication authorization permission for staff to administer basic pain relief medication such as Tylenol or Advil and cough drops. The Independent School Team has confirmed that student immunization records are up to date and included in each student's files, which are located in the administrative offices.

## **Financial Capacity**

Hiland Hall School provided a profit/loss statement and a balance sheet confirming the school has sufficient financial resources to operate throughout the period of approval. Copies of financial documentation is on file with the Agency of Education.

## **Independent School Team Recommendation**

The Agency of Education's Independent School Team confirms that Hiland Hall School meets all statutory requirements and State Board of Education Rules and recommends to the Secretary of Education a five-year renewal of the school.