

State Board of Education Independent School Approval Review Committee

Draft Meeting Minutes

Meeting Place: Virtual Teams Meeting/Video/Teleconference
Call in #: 1-802-828-7667
Conference ID: 794 189 100#

Date: May 3, 2023

Present

State Board of Education (SBE) Subcommittee Members: Tom Lovett, Jenna O'Farrell, Lyle Jepson

Agency of Education (AOE): Maureen Gaidys, Deborah Ormsbee, Josh Souliere

Others: Pat Pullenin – Expeditionary School at Black River, Jennifer Gilly - Bridge School, Marel Meringolo - Okemo Mountain School, Will Gardner – Kurn Hattin, Lara Saffo and Jess McGowan – New England School for Girls, Anne Sayze - Greenwood School

Call to Order/Roll Call/Amendments to the Agenda

Tom Lovett called the meeting to order at 1:04 p.m. There were no amendments to the agenda.

Approve Draft Minutes from the March 9, 2023 Meeting

Tom Lovett made a motion to approve the minutes from the March 9, 2023 meeting. Lyle Jepson seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Public to be Heard

There was no public to be heard.

Update on Backlog

AOE staff member Josh Souliere reported out. He will send revised spreadsheets out on the back log to Tom Lovett. Lyle Jepson asked for a copy of the spreadsheet outlining the back log. An internal decision has been made to put a pause on site reviews until July 1, 2023, due to the new rules going into effect. There will be three tutorials visited prior to that time. They should be ready for the committee to review them by August. AOE staff will be 100% caught up on *General Education* reviews. Sixty-one (61) site reviews will have been completed over two years. Fourteen (14) schools will need site visits after July 1st. Eight or nine reports need to be completed. There are nine applications that include New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) letters follow-ups.

All “catch up” will be scheduled in the fall. It is expected that there will be several schools to review in June.

In response to a question from Tom Lovett, Agency staff indicated that additional information is needed from the Expeditionary School at Black River (ESBR). A site visit cannot be scheduled until the application has been clarified. Staff will keep the committee updated on the status of ESBR's application.

Public to Be Heard

Pat Pullenin from ESBR spoke regarding the option to put them on the agenda for consideration as soon as possible. They will get back to AOE staff with answers to the questions posed. A second application has been submitted. They feel that they have done everything necessary. Mr. Pullenin believes it has taken a long time to get through the process. He thanked people for their support.

(Jenna O'Farrell joined the meeting.)

Independent School Approvals

Renewal of General Education Approval

- **Bridge School, Middlebury; grades K-6**

Bridge School is an approved general education school in Middlebury, Vermont that serves students in kindergarten through the sixth grade. Bridge School follows a traditional school year calendar. The head of school submitted a timely renewal application and all required supporting documentation in compliance with State Board of Education Rule 2227. The Independent School Team conducted a renewal site review on Thursday, November 10, 2022. Twenty-eight students were in attendance at the time of the visit. There are currently 25 students enrolled.

The Agency's Independent School Team recommends a five-year renewal of the Bridge School's independent school approval to the Secretary of Education. The school's academic program, facilities, and financial standing all meet State Board of Education requirements to operate as a general education independent school for students in kindergarten through the sixth grade.

Jennifer Gilly was in attendance on behalf of the Bridge School. The school has been in existence since 1980. A preschool has been added. They currently have a wait list. The family makes the decision if there is a good fit. There are four full-time and one part-time instructor. There is one part-time administrator that does not teach. They do have students who have special education plans. Accommodations are possible based upon the size of the school. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) help service the plans. They provide in-house and virtual services. The budget is approximately \$675,000 for the year. Day school tuition is \$12,700.

A motion was made by Tom Lovett and seconded by Lyle Jepson to recommend to the full State Board of Education, based upon the visiting team's recommendation to the Secretary of Education, a five-year independent school approval renewal for general education instruction for Bridge School ending June 30, 2028. The motion passed unanimously.

Tom thanked Jenn Gilly for her work.

- **Okemo Mountain School, Ludlow; grades 5-12**

Okemo Mountain School (OMS) is a snow sport academy for students in grades five through twelve located in Ludlow Vermont. Students attend OMS because of their interest in alpine ski racing, freestyle/freeride skiing, or snowboarding competition. OMS's administration submitted the school's renewal application and supporting documentation in a timely manner. The application is complete and meets all requirements under Rule 2227. The site visit took place on December 3, 2022.

The Agency's Independent School Team recommends a five-year renewal of Okemo Mountain School to the Secretary of Education. The school's academic programs, facilities and financial standing all meet State Board of Education requirements to operate as an approved independent school for students in grades five through twelve.

Marel Meringolo was in attendance on behalf of Okemo Mountain School. A range of educational curriculum, assignments and assessment are provided by LEAs. The goal is to seamlessly return students to their sending schools in the spring. This requires individualized levels of involvement on the part of Okemo Mountain School staff.

Application and acceptance include a comprehensive onboarding process. Students are expected to have a minimum level of snow sport ability in order to be accepted. Many students are enrolled after being involved in a pre-enrollment weekend snow sports program.

Advanced Placement (AP) courses are offered. There is a comprehensive curriculum. They do not contract with an online service to provide services. They have 20 teachers on staff, including four full-time teachers and an administrator that teaches. They can facilitate all offerings with the staffing level they have available. The full-year student body is small. They are seeing more students that have 504 plans. Less frequently, students are on an Individualized Education Program (IEP). They partner as needed with the LEA.

The school has been in existence for 32 years. Enrollment trends have shown an increase in winter term students. Enrollment was 63 in 2020-2021. Families were looking for in-person instruction. They have historically hovered in the mid-fifty range for winter term students. Full-year enrollment for next year is expected to be six (6).

There is a visiting athletic trainer, under the Rutland Regional Medical Center umbrella. There is also a training coach as well.

Most students have a family member with them and stay in a family home or winter seasonal rental. There are also host families. All full-year students are from the local area.

A motion was made by Tom Lovett and seconded by Jenna O'Farrell to recommend to the full State Board of Education, based upon the visiting team's recommendation to the Secretary of Education, a five-year independent school approval renewal for general education instruction for Okemo Mountain School ending June 30, 2028. The motion passed unanimously.

Renewal of General Education Approval - Residential School

- **Kurn Hattin, Westminster; grades K-8**

Kurn Hattin School, founded in 1894 for families experiencing a period of need or instability, is “a year-round, charitable, residential and day program school serving children, ages 5-15, from throughout the Northeast.” Kurn Hattin School is located in Westminster Vermont and follows a year-round school calendar. The Agency of Education’s Independent School Team conducted a general education site review on Thursday, October 18, 2022. It is important to note that the Agency of Education’s report is only applicable to Kurn Hattin School’s academic program. The report only reflects a review of the educational program, not the boarding program.

On April 8, 2023, the Agency of Education received confirmation of Kurn Hattin’s initial accreditation through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. As a school with a boarding program, Kurn Hattin is required to be accredited by a State Board of Education recognized accreditor or licensed as a resident childcare facility by DCF. Due to being granted NEASC accreditation, the Independent School Team recommends a five-year renewal of Kurn Hattin School to the Secretary of Education. The school’s academic program, staff, facilities, and financial standing all meet State Board of Education rule requirements under 2227.

Will Gardner spoke on behalf of the school. They work hard to involve parents. Ultimately parents decide if a student will attend Kurn Hattin. Financial burdens do not inhibit enrollment. They have outreach staff who work through the admissions process. It is an individualized procedure. Vermont students are not publicly funded.

There are many students who have IEPs and 504 Plans. They have a 504 coordinator on staff. They have Title I funding for reading and writing instruction. Outlined services in an IEP are fulfilled. Some class sizes are 3-4 students, with an average of six (6) students per class. Social/emotional issues are the primary concern that has held students back from maximizing their academic abilities. Many students are behind because they have not been in a school setting receiving an education. They meet each student “where they are at.” Kurn Hattin’s goal is to create a positive child/adult relationship. They have a token system for “catching students being good.” They celebrate successes as a community. Data is used extensively to monitor progress.

They have a large group of incorporators and a board of trustees. Mr. Gardner will provide an update on the number and provide it to Agency staff.

NEASC has provided an initial accreditation but will be returning to the school in January of 2024 for a focused visit to review recommendations that have been made. Mr. Lovett suggested postponing the decision on renewal until after the focused visit by NEASC.

A motion was made by Tom Lovett and seconded by Lyle Jepson to recommend to the full State Board of Education, a delay in acting upon the Kurn Hattin application for independent school approval renewal until the results of the NEASC focused visit are provided. The goal would be to hear from Kurn Hattin in March 2024 at the meeting of the committee. The motion passed unanimously.

Renewal of General & Special Education Approval AND combining two separate schools into one

- **New England School for Girls, Bennington; ages 11-21**

The Agency staff report addressed the renewal request for the New England School for Girls and the Vermont School for Girls and an amendment to combine the two schools to reflect how they have been operating recently. The New England School for Girls and the Vermont School for Girls are both year-round residential treatment programs licensed through the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and operated under the auspices of the Vermont Permanency Initiative (VPI). The governance board members and the school's administrators have requested an amendment to combine both approved independent schools into one to be known as the New England School for Girls. The schools share the same facilities, staff, minimum course of study, and administration. Consolidation of the schools will not impact either DCF's oversight of the residential program or change the student capacity. If approved, moving forward the two schools would be referred to as the New England School for Girls. The application for the schools was submitted to the Agency of Education in a timely manner including support documents, and the schools met all State Board of Education requirements under Rule 2227.

The site visit took place on December 12, 2022. The Agency's Independent School and Special Education Teams recommend to the Secretary of Education a five-year renewal of independent school approval and combining of the two schools to be known as the New England School for Girls.

Lara Saffo and Jess McGowan represented the school(s). The combined school will have 10 teachers, two part-time instructors and 14 paraeducators. Discussion took place regarding the school board governance model. They are licensed for 45 students. Fourteen are from Vermont.

A motion was made by Tom Lovett and seconded by Jenna O'Farrell to recommend to the full State Board of Education, based upon the visiting team's special education and visiting team recommendation to the Secretary of Education, a five-year independent school approval renewal, ending June 30, 2028, for general and special education instruction for New England School for Girls and Vermont School for Girls combining them into one school, hereafter referred to as the New England School for Girls. The motion passed unanimously.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Accreditation & Special Education

- **Greenwood School, Putney; grades 6-12**

The Greenwood School is a residential special education school for boys in grades six through twelve, located in Putney, Vermont. The Greenwood School is accredited through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). Pursuant to SBE Rule 2224, approval may be granted without committee evaluation and the approval process in the case of any school accredited by a state or regional agency recognized by the SBE. NEASC is one of the accrediting bodies recognized by the SBE per rule 7320. A copy of the school's most current notification(s) from NEASC regarding its accreditation status provides such information as is necessary to assure the State Board that the school is meeting the approval standards.

The Independent School Team conducted an onsite review of Greenwood School's special education program on November 29, 2022. The Independent School Team received Greenwood School's renewal applications and supporting documentation in a timely manner meeting all State Board of Education requirements under Rule 2227.

The Independent School Team and Special Education Team recommends a five-year renewal of the Greenwood School to the Secretary of Education. The school has met all State Board of Education and statutory requirements to operate an approved special education independent school accredited with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). The Greenwood School meets the criteria for renewal of approval under Rule 2227 and the accreditation requirements for residential independent schools.

Anne Sayze was in attendance representing Greenwood School. Student enrollment and staffing was discussed. A special NEASC progress report is due in September 2024, including a visit. NEASC will visit in the fall of 2023 to follow up on that review and recommendations that have been made.

A motion was made by Tom Lovett and seconded by Lyle Jepson to recommend to the full State Board of Education, a delay in action on this application for independent school approval renewal in general and special education until the results of the special progress report and NEASC focused visit are provided to the committee. The Greenwood School will be added to the December 2023 committee agenda for further review and potential approval. The motion passed unanimously.

Public to be Heard

There was no additional public to be heard.

Adjourn

Lyle Jepson moved to adjourn the meeting. Jenna O'Farrell seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 2:44 p.m.

Minutes prepared by Lyle Jepson

