

Renewal & Amendment Request

New England School for Girls, Vermont School for Girls

Independent School Review Report General Education & Special Education

General Education Site Review Conducted – November 15, 2022
Special Education Site Review Conducted - December 12, 2022

Submitted by Independent School Review Teams:

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Site Review Scope of Work and Purpose

This report will address 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.

Going forth in this report, these two schools will be referred to as the New England School for Girls.

The application for the schools were submitted to the Agency of Education in a timely manner including support documents, and the schools have met all State Board of Education requirements under Rule 2227.

General Education

Members of the Agency's Independent School Team met with the New England School for Girls (NESFG) staff to conduct the general education review on Tuesday November 15, 2022. Special education team members conducted their site review on December 12, 2022.

Interviews were held at the school's primary location in Bennington as well as the facility on Vail Road. The Vail Road facility houses the critical care, in-take assessment program and is located three miles from the school's main campus. Staff members present for interviews were the Academic and Student Services Director, three licensed special educators, English, math and history teachers, the teacher at the critical care in-take assessment facility, the operational support/compliance officer, clinical/treatment providers, and one-to-one support staff. The Executive Vice President of Vermont Permanency Initiative was also present to answer questions and provide clarification as needed.

School Philosophy & Educational Objectives

State Board of Education Rule 2225.2, 2225.5

School Philosophy

The school's philosophy is to provide a therapeutic community that enables youth to heal from past trauma, find pleasure and joy in their present lives and build resources for their futures. The core values of connection, compassion, kindness, and respect provide the foundation for the provision of comprehensive services to children and adolescents who have experienced complex developmental trauma. The school provides academic, residential, social, behavioral, and therapeutic services to girls and individuals who are transgender, gender expansive, gender fluid and non-binary.

Program Objectives

The New England School for Girls provides children and youth with an environment in which they can realize and fulfill their educational and social potential. The New England School for Girls educates students at the middle school through the high school level, offering high school diplomas to students that fulfill graduation requirements. The curriculum reflects the various courses of study offered at New England School for Girls. Transitional skills and social-emotional learning for all students are embedded throughout the curriculum.

School Enrollment

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

The New England School for Girls serves students ages 11-21. The school is licensed by the Department for Children and Families (DCF) to serve a maximum of 49 female-identifying children and youth from out of state and 13 female-identifying children and youth from Vermont.

State Board of Education Rule 2225.4

The Vermont Permanency Institute's (VPI) Board of Directors is led by a President and an Executive Director/Vice President. This Board oversees ten administrative team directors for the school. The school's board consists of six representatives, two of whom are the President and the Executive Director/Vice President from the Vermont Permanency Institutes' (VPI) Board of Directors.

Both the VPI and the school's board members conduct financial, treatment and academic oversight of the school. The Academic and Student Services Director attends all Governance Board meetings and provides updates on academic, treatment and facilities, as needed.

Minimum Course of Study & Required Assessments

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

The Academic and Student Services Director, was hired three years ago and has spent significant time updating the school's curriculum offerings. Changes to the academic program initiated by the Academic and Student Services Director, was completed with input and assistance from content area instructors, treatment staff and behavioral intervention staff members. Proficiency-based curriculum, electives and life skill program areas are supported by treatment best-practice interventions. Documentation provided during the site review are reflective of the school's efforts to improve curriculum development, lesson planning and assessments.

Agency of Education review team members observed science, math, and social studies classes. Instructional and support staff employ a variety of methods for delivery of educational services that includes access to a traditional classroom environment, and individualized or one-on-one direct instruction.

There is a formalized plan for providing access to state assessments for students. State assessment testing is accommodated to ensure compliance with each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan.

The curriculum for all classes meets State Board of Education requirements for Minimum Course of Study (MCOS) which is accommodated as needed by age, grade, and ability.

Professional Staff

State Board of Education Rule 2225.8

The school's instructional staff meets the qualifications for instructors in his/her academic area(s). Special education staff all hold a valid Vermont Educator's License endorsed in special education. The school employs three licensed special educators that are responsible for providing direct instruction to students as well as providing-supervision for general education instructors for developing appropriate learning accommodations.

NESFG's staff engage in annual professional development for therapeutic crisis intervention training, evidence-based behavioral interventions, special education, and content area development. General education teachers are provided with support to access specific professional development pertinent to his/her content area(s).

The Academic and Student Services Director requires all staff to attend professional development opportunities during in-service days. Training is based upon an examination of student behavioral, learning and achievement data from the previous school year. Data driven in-service workshops are scheduled throughout the school year.

Staff engage in weekly meetings with mandatory attendance by classroom teachers, special education teachers, clinicians, and other relevant personnel. Student progress is reviewed as well as academic assessments, behavioral and treatment programming.

Members of the staff interviewed were able to articulate effective processes for adapting curriculum to meet individualized student IEP goals and social/emotional/behavioral objectives. Effective methods for providing direct instruction in traditional class setting, small groups or as part of intensive one-on-one programming aligns with student IEPs, 504 Plans and treatment goals.

Staffing Safeguards:

Background checks are conducted prior to start date for all newly hired employees. Fingerprint supported criminal record checks and Vermont adult/child registries have been completed for all administrative staff, instructors, support staff and clinical staff.

The school has adopted the Agency of Education's hazing, harassment and bullying policies which are included in the staff, student, and family handbooks. Procedures for these policies are reviewed with all students and staff annually in August.

Content area instructors are trained annually on a variety of treatment, academic and social/emotional/behavioral interventions.

Mandatory Reporting Procedures:

The school has implemented and published mandatory reporting procedures and expectations in the staff handbook. Staff participate in required annual refreshers and policy requirements for mandatory reporting during August in-service staff development.

Facilities

State Board of Education Rule 2225.6

The main campus for the schools is on Fairview Street in Bennington, which includes the educational building and the cafeteria. The school's administration building is located across the street and houses most of the administrative offices. The facility on Vail Road houses the critical care in-take assessment program. There are several dormitories located on Mattison and College roads, and a counseling center on Mattison Road as well. There is a variety of outdoor spaces available for physical education classes as well as outdoor enrichment activities that includes trauma informed behavioral and social emotional learning interventions. The school's buildings are in good repair. Much attention has been given to the facilities to create a calm, welcoming and supportive environment for students and staff. The facilities meet all state and federal health and safety regulations and are handicapped accessible. Copies of the Certificates of Occupancy (CO) for the facilities used for residential or educational purposes are on file at the school.

Health & Safety

The schools practice fire and emergency safety evacuation protocols at all sites. Designated staff members are trained or participate in annual refreshers for CPR and First Aid, and in-turn provide remaining staff members with instruction for conducting medical emergency responses.

Nursing Services, Medications, and Immunization Records:

The schools have two licensed nurses: a Registered Nurse and a Licensed Practical Nurse. The RN oversees the LPN and another nursing assistant. The RN provides trainings as needed to other staff members. Medications are kept in a locked cabinet. There are immunization records in each student's file.

Hazing, Harassment & Bullying Policies

The school has adopted the Agency of Education's hazing, harassment, and bullying policy, and is published in the school's handbooks. Staff are updated on requirements of the policy during annual in-service training in August.

Financial Capacity

The school submitted information about their financial capacity for the period of approval. The school participates in the rate setting program for Private Non-Medical Institutions (PNMI) through the Agency of Human Services.

Special Education

Based on the rules for special education approval for independent schools, the special education team finds that the New England School for Girls has met criteria for the renewal of their approved status.

The New England School for Girls was visited by representatives from the Special Education Team on December 13, 2022.

During the visit, Agency staff interviewed school staff, toured both of the educational facilities, and observed staff/student interactions in and outside of classroom settings. Student file reviews were conducted following the site visit.

The following State Board of Education rules were reviewed for compliance:

2228.1 (1): Essential Special Education Standards

New England School for Girls demonstrated that it has the staff, programs, and facilities to skillfully meet state and federal special education standards. The depth of their programming and expertise of their staff members is remarkable.

2228.1 (2): Limitation of Special Education Approval

New England School for Girls has sought renewal to serve students in the disability categories of Hearing Loss, Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, and Speech or Language Impairment.

2228.2 (1): Placement Prohibition

No students at New England School for Girls had categories of disability that fell outside those for which the school is seeking approval.

2228.3 – Maintenance and Implementation of Written Policies and Procedures

New England School for Girls conclusively proved to effectively maintain and implement written policies and/or procedures in the areas of: (1) admissions, (2) least restrictive environment, (3) discipline, (4) graduation, (5) faculty qualifications, and (6) faculty-student ratios. In the years since the school was last approved, the school's leadership team has critically analyzed their past policies and procedures and have fully modified their special education programming, to include a handbook, transitional documents, 504 procedures, transcripts, graduation materials, report cards, etc. The school's curriculum has also been re-written. Resulting in a well-oiled set of daily/weekly/monthly practices for seeing that these policies and procedures are implemented with fidelity and with sensitivity to the student population served.

2228.3.1 – Coordination with Sending Responsible Agencies, Parents, Public Agencies, and other Service Providers

New England School for Girls showed evidence of (1) maintenance of educational records and disclosure to the students' parents and sending agencies, (2) participation in evaluation procedures and development of IEPs, (3) implementation of IEPs, and (4) providing prior notice to the sending LEA regarding the need for a change in a child's program or placement. The director demands not only regular progress monitoring of the students' academic skills, but substantial growth in those skills.

Again, the new leadership team, along with their well-organized Academic and Student Services Director have reason to feel proud of the improvements they've made and the relationships they've cultivated between the residential and educational staff members, with sending schools, families, and the many outside agencies with whom they effectively collaborate. Interviews with teachers only reinforced these concepts; the special educators in particular expressed their appreciation, respect, and trust for the structure and operation of the school.

2228.3.2 - Licensure Requirements

There are a total of four special educators at New England School for Girls who hold valid Vermont special education licenses. Two are full-time special educators, the Academic Director is also a special educator, and carries a small caseload, and the fourth special educator delivers Title One literacy interventions for students. The school also employs a Vermont licensed Speech-Language Pathologist and a Vermont licensed Occupational Therapist. A school-based clinician, several para-educators, two program managers, and seasoned general education classroom teachers round out the team.

A climate of caring and trusting relationships between and among staff and students was very apparent during the visit to New England School for Girls. Teachers appear happy and articulate their appreciation for working there. Students were observed to be encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings freely, and did so by seeking comfort, conversation, validation, and support from the staff members.

Approval Recommendation

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.