

# **Initial Review**

## **The Pond Brook Project-**

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

**Site Review Conducted**

**June 1, 2023**

Submitted by Independent School Review Team:

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## **Site Review Scope of Work and Purpose**

The Pond Brook Project (Pond Brook) submitted an initial application requesting State Board of Education approval to operate as a general education independent school for students aged twelve through fifteen, in grades 7-9. The Agency's Independent School team conducted a site review on Thursday June 1, 2023 at Pond Brook's facilities in the village of Bristol, Vermont.

## **School Philosophy & Educational Objectives**

*State Board of Education Rule 2225.2, 2225.5*

Pond Brook was currently offering a two-semester academic enrichment program option for LEAs under the auspices of its umbrella agency, The Willowell Foundation. Willowell is a non-profit organization founded in 2001 and located in Monkton, Vermont. The Foundation's mission is predicated on the principles of global citizenship, sustainability, and ecological responsibility. Willowell's website includes a detailed description of the Foundation's guiding principles.

Pond Brook staff present during the site review were the Director of Pond Brook, who teaches science and mathematics, the Program's Assistant Director, who teaches social studies, and the Administrative Program Director.

## **School Philosophy**

Pond Brook's application describes the academic philosophy as... "embedded in the natural and human communities of Vermont, the Pond Brook Project inspires adolescent learners to cultivate their relationship to self, society, and the natural world.

During each semester at Pond Brook, 12- to 15-year-old students will embark on different interdisciplinary explorations of science, society, mathematics, culture, art, literacy, technology, and health through the lens of the Vermont landscape. Students spend much of their time in hands-on engagement with the natural world as well as in a variety of creative projects, problem-solving challenges, community service and team building activities."

## **Program Objectives**

Pond Brook's website and initial approval application academic objectives align with Willowell Foundation's organizational mission. Specifically... "each semester at Pond Brook, students are exposed to each of the primary content areas as designated by the Vermont Agency of Education: Literacy, Mathematics, Science, Global Citizenship, Physical Education, Artistic Expression, Financial Literacy and Transferable Skills. Students demonstrate proficiency in these areas through a variety of means that include, but are not limited to: class participation, written reflection, problem solving, creative expression, independent projects, team projects, service learning engagement, tests, and demonstration of skills. Each student will produce a body of work each semester to include in a portfolio of their learning."

Pond Brook will follow the local public-school calendar.

## **School Enrollment**

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

Pond Brook students will be enrolled by parents/families through an application process. Pond Brook's admissions policies and application comply with non-discrimination enrollment requirements ... "Admission to the program is non-exclusive. In our first year of operation, 14 students ages 12-15 will be admitted in grades 7-9, with a balance sought between students of different ages. If the program is full, students are selected by lottery. Students are admitted regardless of their ability to pay tuition."

Pond Brook is requesting a maximum capacity of 20 students. At the time of the site review, Pond Brook's enrichment program was serving 14 students.

### **Governance**

#### State Board of Education Rule 2225.4

Pond Brook's Governance Board is comprised of nine Willowell Foundation Directors. Pond Brook's director is hired by this Board. Board members provide fiscal, academic, administrative, and organizational oversight of the programming.

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

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

Pond Brook's academic model has been developed to align with the Willowell Foundation's mission and academic objectives. Curricula will facilitate student immersion in outdoor and community-based learning opportunities. Additionally, Pond Brook's academic program will include differentiation not only by age, grade, and ability level, but will respond to each student's particular learning style.

Academic classes will focus on hands-on learning, writing, experimentation, problem solving, creative expression, drawing, movement, spoken word and visual learning throughout the school day. Pond Brook' student portfolio process is structured around each student's interests and learning styles to ensure multiple pathways for students to demonstrate proficiency in each content area.

Pond Brook student's achievement will be evaluated by utilizing a narrative evaluation process, teacher's classroom assessments and content from student portfolio and assessment of class assignments. Pond Brook will also utilize proficiency-based learning scales to align student academic progress at Pond Brook with grade level assessments at local public schools.

The Independent School Team found Pond Brook's academic program meets State Board of Education's requirements under Minimum Course of Study.

### **Professional Staff**

#### State Board of Education Rule 2225.8

The Agency's Independent School Team has reviewed Pond Brook's staff credentials and have found instructional staff are qualified in their content area assignments. Staff currently engage in regular professional content area and pedagogical professional development.

There will be two and a half full-time teachers to teach the core subject areas and one support staff member. Adjunct instructors to teach art, physical education and health.

### **Staffing Safeguards:**

The staff, volunteers, and support staff will complete a fingerprint-supported criminal records check. The staff, volunteers and support staff will be checked through the adult/child abuse registries as well.

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

Pond Brook has adopted the Agency of Education's hazing, harassment, and bullying policy. It will be published on the future school's website and in both staff and parent/family handbooks.

### **Mandatory Reporting Procedures:**

Pond Brook's administration has a plan in place that will require staff to complete on-line mandatory reporting training and policy information will be included in the school's staff and parent/family handbooks.

### **Facilities**

#### State Board of Education Rule 2225.6

Pond Brook is a traveling school which makes use of existing infrastructure, public lands and natural landscape in the communities in Addison County. Each day, students meet at a central location and travel by bus (or, if in town, by foot) to one of numerous regular locations to spend the day either in a nature setting, in a community space (library, town hall, classroom, recreational facility, or community organization space), or out in the community, doing some sort of community service or activity. The schedule for locations is primarily set at the beginning of each semester, with some flexibility to work around weather and other factors. In addition to using libraries, teen centers and schools, students have access to more traditional classroom materials (such as computers, books, writing desks, science lab, etc.) in our mobile classroom (a converted school bus) which serves as classroom meeting space as well as workshop and art room and travels to many of our locations.

Pond Brook does have a central facility in Bristol. Pond Brook's facility is on the first floor of a shared space with the Bristol fitness center in the historical site of the former Bristol High School. Staff and students utilize this facility at the start of each day for community meetings, organizing daily academic schedules, and during occasions when weather conditions is not optimal for outdoor academic programming. This facility was inspected by the Division of Fire Safety, and a Certificate of Occupancy was issued.

Maintenance, annual fire and heating system inspections are the responsibility of the Bristol's facility owners. Inspections are conducted annually.

### **Emergency Services:**

Pond Brook has a safety plan in place for responding to medical emergencies during outdoor academic classes. Pond Brook staff are all trained in wilderness first aid, which includes CPR. 911 emergency services will be utilized, if needed.

Pond Brook has a plan in place for conducting monthly fire, active shooter and shelter in place drills.

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

Pond Brook does not employ a nurse. Staff are trained in administering medications, if needed, but only with a signed parent/family permission slip. This includes over-the-counter meds as well. Student immunization records will be collected and filed in each student's official file in the administrative office.

### **Financial Capacity**

Pond Brook provided a balance sheet and The Willowwell's Foundation 990s. This information provided evidence that the school will have adequate financial resources to operate during the period of approval.

### **Independent School Team Recommendation**

The Agency's Independent School Team recommends initial approval of the Pond Brook Project, for the term of two years, to the Secretary of Education. The school's proposed academic program, staffing qualifications, facilities, and financial standing all meet State Board of Education Rules to operate as a general education independent school serving students aged twelve through fifteen.