

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students in grades 8-12, within the disability categories of Emotional Disabilities, Specific Learning Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, and Other Health Impairment, to The Arlington School, St. Johnsbury, VT?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students in grades 8-12, within the disability categories of Emotional Disabilities, Specific Learning Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, and Other Health Impairment, to The Arlington School, St. Johnsbury, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2021.

Approval is subject to the condition that the school immediately report to the Agency of Education whenever changes occur in enrollment, programs, policies, facilities, financial capacity, staffing, or administration, during the approval period.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: Title 16 V.S.A. §166(b)
State Board Rule 2228 et seq

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Arlington School is one of five schools managed by the Northeastern Family Institute, Inc (NFI). Until June, 2015 the Arlington School was known as the Caledonian School, but it was renamed after the original 1875 primary school building in which it is housed. The outcome has been much greater community recognition, precisely because of the familiar name. The Arlington School is an independent day school that provides educational, vocational, and community-based services to boys and girls in grades 9-12, with the disability categories of Emotional Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disability, and Other Health Impairment. Students are encouraged to increase their growing independence with opportunities for responsible decision making. The school is applying for re-approval for grades 9-12, and for initial approval for grade 8. Brian Morgan visited the school on behalf of the Agency on May 26, 2016.

GENERAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS:

1. The Arlington School was last granted renewal of general and special education independent school approval on August 9, 2011 through June 30, 2016.
2. Description of facilities.

The Arlington school occupies the 1875 building that housed the original Arlington Primary School until St. Johnsbury schools were consolidated. The school consists of two floors and basement, surrounded on three sides by paved parking spaces and recreation space, and on the fourth side by a grass playground/recreation space. The main floor includes two roomy classrooms, a kitchen, staff offices, a handicapped accessible bathroom and the "Great Room" used for community meetings, lunch room, and recreation. The main floor is spacious and airy, thanks to high ceilings and tall windows. Upstairs consists of two more spacious classrooms and a library. The basement, which once included individual carrels for special education students in the Independent Study Program, now houses exercise equipment, art supplies, a full kitchen, the boiler room, a small tutoring room, the Transitions Counselor's office and an office for the special educator. The main floor is handicapped accessible. The entire building is equipped with burglar and fire alarm systems as well as a sprinkler system, and each floor has two egresses.

3. Minimum course of study as prescribed in 16 V.S.A. §906.

A minimum course of study as prescribed is provided and adapted to the age and capacities of the students. Curriculum, based on Common Core and VT Standards, is covered by differentiated instruction that allows for students of different ages and abilities in the same class. This reviewer visited several classes and witnessed engaged, articulate students in each class. Vocational opportunities are available via the St. Johnsbury Technical Center, the Department of Employment and Training, the JOBS program, and through the school's Transition Counselor. On the day of this visit 18 students were enrolled. Of the 18 students, seven are on IEP's, four on 504s, and seven in general education.

4. Staffing: adequacy; qualifications; professional development.

The staff is qualified by degree, training and/or experience for their positions. The staff currently includes four full-time teachers for Science, Math, English, and Social Studies/History. All staff members are supported by a full-time Program Director, a licensed Special Educator, and a part-time NFI Regional Director. Case management is provided by Northeast Kingdom Human Services. The staff also provides instruction in fine arts, health, and vocational programming. There is a program of professional development in place. NFI makes available to each full-time employee \$2500 each year for continuing education. NFI VT also provides ongoing training in trauma, student developmental needs, and other related social and emotional trainings. Teachers' and the Program Director's ongoing professional development needs are included in their annual evaluations.

5. Financial capacity.

The school submitted evidence of financial capacity to carry out its program for the period of approval in the form of an independent auditor's report on the financial statements of NFI VT, Inc. for FY 15.

6. Student attendance and assessment records. Fire drill and safety records.

These records were reviewed and found to be in good order.

7. Operating schedule. Number of Instructional hours.

The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year that is not less than that required of a public school serving the same grades.

8. Policies: admission, discipline, harassment/bullying.

Review of the school's *Parent/Student Handbook* reveals that the school has developed policies for admission and discipline. The school has a policy on prevention/reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

9. School improvement plans.

Enrollment at Arlington has been declining over the last three years. This is in part due to Lyndon Institute (LI) building their special education department to better serve their students with special needs. This has resulted in fewer LI students coming to Arlington. Now that a neighboring NFI school in St. Johnsbury, the Cornerstone School, is licensed for K-12, the plan for next year is to relocate all Cornerstone's HS students to Arlington School. There is also demand for grade 8 students to enroll at Arlington, hence the request to modify Arlington School's approval to 8-12. Next year the school will have two experienced content teachers (currently employed at the school) as a Math/Science teacher, and a Humanities teacher. They will be assisted by two classroom counselors. Only two classrooms will be used – grades 8-10 and grades 11 & 12. Both experienced content teachers are thoroughly familiar with differentiated instruction and the school is fully equipped and prepared to add grade 8. A Clinical Coordinator will also be hired to provide support for all staff in helping students regulate behavior, if needed, and to see students in a therapeutic manner, if needed.

10. Summary and recommendation:

The general education available at Arlington School is of very high quality, delivered by very experienced and dedicated staff. Given the demand for the addition of grade 8 students, I recommend that Arlington School be re-approved for the next five years with the addition of approval for grade 8.

SPECIAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS:

Special education policies, procedures and staff licensures were reviewed. All policies and procedures are aligned with special education regulatory requirements. This includes policies in regard to discipline, suspension and expulsion, and the school's least restrictive environment practices which fully align with federal and state regulations. Unless otherwise stated within the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), Arlington School's graduation requirements, by policy, are identical for all students. All special education staff hold appropriate and current licensure for the positions they are assigned.

Arlington School staff coordinates and communicates with the student's Local Education Agency (LEA) through the referral process, the development and revision of the student's programming and services, as well as the reevaluation of students for special education eligibility through their participation at the student's IEP and Evaluation Planning Team meetings. In addition, the Arlington School staff invites Local Education Agency representatives to attend the school's planned activities for parents and students that enable the LEA to remain in contact with students and families during the time they are placed in a program outside of the local school district operations. Its direct connection to local mental health services is vital to the needs and success, through its direct support of the students as well as the families of the students. The entire school incorporates a positive behavior management system which identifies and rewards positive student behaviors as witnessed during the site visit.

The Arlington School is currently approved for the disability categories of:

1. Intellectual Disability
2. Other Health Impairment
3. Specific Learning Disability
4. Emotional Disturbance

The school seeks to continue serving students with these disabilities in grades 9 through 12 and seeks to add to its current programming the ability to work with students in 8th grade, who may more appropriately fit the academic rigor at Arlington School instead of remaining at their sister program at the Cornerstone School or in other local public schools. Arlington School has community partnerships which enable the older students to participate in job shadowing, internship and apprentice opportunities.

In the special education site review of the school, conducted on May 12, 2016 by VTAOE Program Coordinator Ernest Wheeler, it was noted that staff has received numerous professional development opportunities to address both the academic and functional performance needs of their students. A review of sample files indicated that a significant need existed in the development of appropriate postsecondary transition plans; the Vermont Agency of Education's PowerPoint training and checklists were provided to the Arlington School for assistance on this matter.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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