

**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 ages 12-21 in grades 7-12, within the disability areas of Intellectual Disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Delay, Traumatic Brain Injury, Multiple Disabilities, Emotional Disturbance, Specific Learning Disabilities, and Other Health Impairment, to Maplehill School, Plainfield, Vermont?

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

**That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students ages 12-21 in grades 7-12, within the disability areas of Intellectual Disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Delay, Traumatic Brain Injury, Multiple Disabilities, Emotional Disturbance, Specific Learning Disabilities, and Other Health Impairment, to Maplehill School, Plainfield, Vermont. 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 mission of Maplehill School is to provide real-world educational experiences where students and adults gain practical skills and personal successes. Through the acquisition of academic, vocational, and social skills, students are prepared for further education, training, employment, and independent living.

The school achieves its mission by providing small group and individualized learning opportunities, engaging students in a variety of educational activities including service learning, project-based learning, vocational endeavors, dual enrollment, internships, recreational activities, farming and gardening, employing staff who interact effectively with students stewarding the school's 230 acres, growing food that feeds the school and local communities, teaching and nurturing restorative practices, self-reflection, clear and empathic communication, and personal resilience.

Students enrolled at Maplehill have struggled in traditional school settings or other social circumstances primarily because of Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) and other disabilities, e.g. learning disabilities, oppositional/defiant disorder, anxiety disorder, etc. Maplehill School enrolls and serves both male and female students between the ages of 12 and 22 in grades 7-12 in one of its two programs.

The Group Process Program can serve a maximum of 22 students. It provides an educational therapeutic day program for students who need to reconstruct behavioral patterns along appropriate societal norms so that they can complete requirements for a high school diploma or demonstrate their capacity to return to a less restrictive learning environment. Many, if not most Group Process Program students participate in the summer session.

The Individual Care Program can serve a maximum of 14 students and has grown considerably in the past five years. It provides an educational therapeutic day program, which addresses a broad spectrum of educational needs presented by students with severe disabilities. These disabilities include emotional/behavioral, cognitive, developmental, learning challenges, including traumatic brain injury. All students in this program require 1:1 support. The Individual Care Program is a year-round program.

Maplehill School is a private school that operates under the umbrella of Elmhill, Inc, a 501(c)3 non-profit educational organization.

Brian Morgan visited the school on behalf of the Agency on May 25, 2016.

## GENERAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. Maplehill School was last granted renewal of general and special education independent school approval on August 21, 2011 through June 30, 2016. A subsequent amendment on April 21, 2015, enabled to Maplehill School to increase the maximum number of students to be served in the Individual Care Program from 10 to 14.
2. Description of the facilities

Maplehill's Group Process Program, currently enrolling 9 students (6 boys, 3 girls), is located in a renovated farmhouse that sits on 90 acres. The first floor includes two classrooms, a library, kitchen/dining room, and a mudroom with student cubbies. The second floor includes two classrooms, a multi-use room that currently houses some exercise equipment, and administrative offices. The first floor is handicapped accessible.

The Individual Care Program, currently enrolling 10 students (5 boys, 5 girls), is housed on an old Vermont "hill farm" about a mile away cross country. It consists of 142 acres of open field and forest, including maple grove that the students tap. There are two renovated buildings on the farm: the farmhouse itself, which provides four spacious individual workrooms, a full kitchen, and an office. Upstairs is used for storage. The second building is a former dormitory and is still referred to as the 'dorm'. No longer residential, the 'dorm' provides six individual workrooms, a small engine repair shop, a woodshop, a multimedia room, a music room, a large recreation room, a kitchen/dining room and a Dean's office.

The farm provides for extensive gardens, a fruit orchard, and an animal barn, currently just for chickens, but will allow for a few cows this summer, and a thriving greenhouse.

Both campuses offer splendid acreage for outdoor education, physical education, and various outdoor educational projects. The facilities at both locations are quite adequate to meet the needs of the programs. Copies of the Certificates of Occupancy are on file at the Agency.

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 abilities of the students. In the Group Process Program academics include core subjects: math, science, English, and social studies. Specific instruction in content areas is given as it relates to each student's capacity and need. Whenever possible instruction is project-based and hands-on for the most effective outcome.

The Individual Care Program at the Farm provides traditional school subject matter through a functional academics mode, and are goal-oriented

In addition to its two instructional programs, Maplehill has a small, personalized atmosphere that provides a therapeutic milieu of emotional support. Students with whom I spoke, one of whom was about to graduate after six years at the school, all praised the quality of their learning and the dedication of their teachers.

4. Staffing: adequacy; qualifications, professional development

The large list of staff provided with the application indicates that the Maplehill School staff is qualified by degree, training, and/or experience for their positions. A plan for professional development is in place for the staff.

5. Financial capacity and audit

Maplehill School submitted evidence of financial capacity to carry out its program for the period of approval. Evidence consists of a notarized letter dated 2/17/16 attesting to the school's good financial standing based on its current profit and loss report, the balance sheet as of 1/31/16, and the most recent Federal Form 990 for FY15.

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

These records were reviewed and found to be in impeccable 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/hazing/bullying.

In examining the School's *Student/Parent Handbook*, it was clear that the school has well-developed policies in all areas, including admission and discipline. The School has a policy on prevention and reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

## 9. School improvement plans.

While the Maplehill School is modestly celebrating its 50 year of operation, it is still looking ahead and beginning a strategic plan that will focus on school improvement. Its Individual Care Program has grown considerably and the school is proud of its programs built on relationships. In the future the school would wish for greater consistency in enrollment. The school has benefited from a USDA Development Loan which will enable it to undertake more infrastructure improvement. Part of this improvement will include high-tensile wire to enable the farm to house cattle!

The school is an Americorps host site and currently has an Americorps volunteer temporarily on staff. The school also benefits from its proximity to Goddard College, and three Goddard students are doing their practice teaching at Maplehill. The school hopes to strengthen this relationship in the future.

## 10. Summary and recommendation.

Maplehill School is a strong, vibrant learning community with dedicated staff and very grateful students. I recommend that Maplehill School be granted reapproval for the next five-year period.

## 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), Maplehill'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. Most of the related services required by students are provided through LEA contracts with individual, licensed professionals who either provide direct service to the student or provide consultation to Maplehill staff.

All current students are enrolled at either the Small Group Program site or the Individual Care Program site (located at separate campuses) and attend the school through a Local Educational Agency (LEA) referral and LEA tuition support. Programming ranges from providing students with the essential elements necessary for daily living needs to academic support for a student currently dually enrolled in Community College of Vermont courses. In addition, Maplehill School has a long and successful collaboration with local businesses to provide pre-vocational and work study/internship opportunities for its older students. The school also has long-standing relationships with area experts that provide the staff with professional development opportunities and serve as consultants to the programs.

Maplehill School staff coordinates and communicates with the student's LEA throughout the referral process, is an active participant in the LEA's development and revision of the student's Individualized Education Program, as well as the reevaluation of students for special education eligibility through their contact with an assigned LEA case manager. The transition of students to the Maplehill School is completed with great care to ensure the path is a purposeful and positive experience for the student, the families, and the sending LEA staff.

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

- |                                 |                            |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Intellectual disability      | 2. Other Health Impairment |
| 3. Specific Learning Disability | 4. Emotional Disturbance   |
| 5. Autism Spectrum Disorder     | 6. Developmental Delay     |
| 7. Traumatic Brain Injury       | 8. Multiple Disabilities   |

The school seeks to continue serving students with these disabilities. In the special education site review of the school, conducted on April 28, 2016 by VTAOE Program Coordinators Tracy Harris and Ernest Wheeler, it was noted that besides the internal trainings, staff has also been invited to access some trainings provided by the local education agency. Some related services for which the school does not maintain professional staff, such as speech language pathologist or occupational therapists, the Maplehill School the sending local education agency provides the related service through a contract with their staff or with other local professionals.

The school provides a caring and appropriate educational environment for students otherwise challenged by a public school placement and we endorse its continued recognition as an independent school serving a special education population.

**COST IMPLICATIONS:** none

**STAFF AVAILABLE:**

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