

**AGENCY OF EDUCATION  
Barre, Vermont**

**TEAM:** School Finance

**ITEM:** Will the State Board of Education grant initial general and special education independent school approval, to serve a maximum of 10 male and female students in grades 7-12 within the disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Other Health Impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury, to Stone Path Academy, Moretown, VT?

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

**Will the State Board of Education grant initial general and special education independent? School approval, to serve a maximum of 10 male and female students in grades 7-12 within the Disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Other Health Impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury, to Stone Path Academy, Moretown, VT. This approval is for two years, through June 30, 2018.**

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

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

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Stone Path Program is an independent, LLC day facility providing educational, therapeutic, and reintegration services for up to 10 male and female students in grades 7-12, which is seeking initial independent school approval in general and special education. The program was founded in 2012 at the residence of the current Executive Director and has since moved to its current leased facility in Moretown, VT. Accepted students will be in need of specialized services in a self-contained classroom environment due to academic and emotional difficulties that interfere with their ability to function in a traditional school environment. Stone Path Academy will serve previously traumatized students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, learning impairments, learning differences, and other health impairments. The core purpose of is to embrace and inspire the strengths of the students and communities in which they live. Stone Path is a proprietary entity owned by Alan Faircloth of East Calais, VT.

Peter B. Gilmore visited the school on behalf of the Agency on June 6, 2016.

## GENERAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The description in the application and on the admissions brochures is accurate. The Core Purpose, Core Values, and Philosophy of the school are clearly presented on the website and serve as guides for life at the school. These tenets are reviewed regularly during the school year and discussed openly by all faculty and staff.
2. The course of study outlined is highly individualized to student needs and is adequate to meet the educational purposes of the school. The school will provide a minimum course of study that is age and ability appropriate, and it is presented in a highly individualized way. The school will make available the support services necessary to meet the requirements of a minimum course of study and its educational purposes including (a) library services through the internet, (b) administrative services and facilities including on-site administrators, computer databases for tracking information, emergency and safety plans, set schedules, etc., (c) counseling services including on-site counselors, therapists etc. and (d) a system of record keeping both electronic and paper that are stored in safe, inaccessible files in the cloud and/or on site. All the students will be on an IEP, and the sending LEAs will work with Stone Path staff to devise and implement IEPs yearly or as needed. Students may occasionally be reintegrated into public school programs after their time at Stone Path; however, most will be integrated into workforce programs or on-the-job learning environments. Stone Path uses a holistic team approach to educate students and according to the staff interviewed, it is highly effective.
3. All facilities of Stone Path Academy are located on the Moretown campus. The self-contained leased space has the minimum classrooms and facilities necessary to carry out the school mission and programs. The building also has a kitchen, a central gathering area, and office/meeting areas. There is just enough classroom space within the facility for the students to experience common and self-contained environments, and the teachers and administrators have sufficient but shared office/working space as well. The building meets relevant health and safety standards as represented by updated certificates of inspection. There are emergency, safety, and evacuation plans for the building. The campus is a somewhat worn facility that is kept up with occasional maintenance as necessary. Faculty and students share responsibilities to keep the facility clean during the day.
4. The school employs professional staff in sufficient number, who are qualified by training and experience in the areas in which they are assigned. All the general education staff has at least a bachelor's degree and some hold Masters degrees in related areas. Upon interview, the administrative staff at Stone Path proved to be experienced, dedicated, professionals, the teaching staff are usually lesser experienced with some in their first teaching positions. They each have certificates applicable to the needs of the students and some experience teaching the age groups they encounter. The general faculty is often young and inexperienced staff when they arrive, but are immersed in working with the students immediately. Staff appropriately oversees the students during the entire school day never allowing students to venture off on their own. The professional development offered for staff at Stone Path is appropriate to the techniques used with the students such as TCI (Therapeutic Crisis Intervention) and NAPPI (Non-Aggressive Psychological and Physical Intervention). Teachers are invited to attend training sessions in these areas and are encouraged to take advanced study in the techniques as well. SSRT (Strategic Self-Regulation Therapy) stands as the cornerstone approach to dealing with the needs of the

students. Based on recent scholarship and clinical study, SSRT is a highly individualized intervention that seeks to address student needs in an adaptive and interactive way. All staff are encouraged to use the techniques whenever dealing with students to provide a broad and constant approach to remediation. Beyond psychological interventions, the academics at the program are of secondary concern; however the school has taken steps to significantly improve that situation. Having hired a new Academic Director with a wealth of knowledge and experience in academic programs, the school will benefit greatly from a fresh look at this part of the curriculum in the near future. The changes on the horizon will help the school succeed in its mission and improve its standing in the academic community. Ultimately this portends good for the experiences of all students, and will help them be better prepared for life ahead.

5. The back office administrative systems at Stone Path are appropriate for the running of the organization. On and off-site databases serve as secure storage for admissions and contact information, daily attendance along with all biographic information on students and families, academic records, immunization records, performance tracking, etc. The bookkeeper maintains an accounting system of accounts payable, accounts receivable, budget tracking, and payroll. There is a yearly budgeting process that involves the main administrators with input from the staff. Review of a recent budget that was made available illustrated the expense side of the ledger, but conversations with the Executive Director, the Educational Director and individual faculty assured that through adherence to a strict budget, the school will be financially intact.

Stone Path is an organization that is committed to serving this very needy population of students in an individualized yet holistic way. Those currently being served in the program, via a contractual LEA agreement, have previously experienced trauma, oppression, abuse, and often arrive with a scattered formal education. Many have previously been through myriad social programs, foster homes, and specialized boarding schools or out of district placements, before finding Stone Path. There were stories of students graduating and moving on to adult programs and some reintegrating with their public schools. The staff spoke of loving their professions and many spoke of feeling a strong sense of purpose in their jobs as well as strong support from the organization. The environment in which they teach is at times intense, but again, they all spoke of feeling happy to work there. It is easy to see how this quality approach to education reflects the hard work of these dedicated professionals, and how it flows to the children and families in their care.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION FINDINGS

Stone Path is seeking initial general and special education approval from the State Board of Education. As such, they have hired a consultant to help them develop systems and common core aligned curriculum, which will then become the responsibility of an Education Coordinator to be hired once they receive State Board approval. Their focus is on a therapeutic environment which will support student's access to academic instruction. That being said, they do have policies and procedures in place to meet the minimum requirements for special education approval in the following categories:

- Intellectual disability
- Emotional disability
- Other health impairment
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Traumatic brain injury

There are 10 program participants, ranging in age from 11-21, currently being served at Stone Path. Each participant receives individualized instruction and counseling according to the student's IEP. There are two (2) licensed special educators who provide services to students as well as being available for all staff when necessary. In addition they have a clinical coordinator, and a consultant who provides counseling to all students. Each student is fully supported with adult supervision either by a behavior interventionist, job coach, teacher or paraprofessional. They are a hands-on program focused on making sure each student is available for learning. They have safe spaces for each of the students where instruction can take place if the classroom or common areas are not conducive to learning. These spaces are shared by all the students and include a sensory room, a teepee room (yes there's a teepee in the room!), a multipurpose room with computers for regulation, and a special safe space with a full size dollhouse and decorations made by one of the female students.

Stone Path communicates regularly with the student's Local Educational Agency (LEA) throughout the time a student is enrolled. Staff members actively participate in meetings including therapeutic, IEP and Evaluation Planning Team meetings. From 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, staff work to promote collaboration among all parties involved in a student's educational support system.

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. A comment made by one of the teachers is that "home can be more problematic than school for students" and a student reiterated that when he said "until home stuff is dealt with, I can't learn". In the special education site review of the school, conducted on March 24, 2016 by VTAOE Education Program Coordinator Tonya Rutkowski, it was noted that staff and students alike work together for daily learning opportunities.

**COST IMPLICATIONS:** none

**STAFF AVAILABLE:**

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