

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of general independent school approval to serve students in grades 6-12 to Pacem School of Montpelier, Vermont?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general independent school approval to serve students in grades 6-12 to Pacem School of Montpelier, 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)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Pacem School is an independent day school providing educational services for up to 30 male and female students in grades 6-12. The school was founded in 2006 and has grown over the past 10 years. Pacem School offers a nine month program that services full time, and part time (homeschooled) students. The school is an independent school that provides a quality academic program for students who desire a small, nurturing environment. Each student is treated as a unique individual, fostering academic involvement, commitment to goals, independence, responsibility, respect, and confidence. The ambition of Pacem School is to provide the support and direction necessary for each young person to achieve his/her personal potential, goals and dreams. Peter B. Gilmore visited the school on behalf of the Agency on June 1, 2016.

GENERAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The description of the school in the application, and on the admissions brochure, is accurate. The mission and philosophy are clearly presented on the website and serve as guides for all aspects of life at the school. These tenets are reviewed regularly by the various "Circles" of governance (General, Parent, Faculty, Student, and Board of Directors). The Board Circle is specifically responsible for overseeing the mission of the school.

2. Students come to Pacem from a variety of towns in the central Vermont area and participate as either full or part time students. Full time students attend up to five days per week, and homeschool (part-time) students fill in their schedules by attending a few days per week. Regardless, the schedule for students is structured and regular, and the students are enrolled in classes appropriate to their learning needs. Although schedules can be different according to student needs, all students must complete minimum requirements in their classes in order to receive credit. The course of study for students is highly individualized as Pacem uses small classes with specific teacher guidance focusing on individual rates of learning. The exceptional flexibility of the administration and staff allow this approach to work. The school makes available the support services necessary to meet the 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) records both electronic and paper that are stored in files on site or in password protected locations in the cloud. This educational approach is highly effective at providing students with confidence and a feeling of success in their studies; qualities many students have simply never felt before attending Pacem.
3. The campus is basically self-contained and located nearby lots of resources used by the school. The current classrooms are all located in one building on the campus of the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier. There is just enough classroom space for the students and faculty to enjoy the daily work, and administrators have office/working space as well. The building meets relevant health and safety standards as represented by updated certificates of inspection. There is emergency, safety, and evacuation plans for the building, and an appropriate harassment/hazing/bullying policy established. The overall feeling is a warm, homey atmosphere in a fairly tight space.
4. The school employs a 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 in their field of instruction and some hold Masters degrees in related areas. Upon interview, the long term staff at Pacem proved to be experienced, dedicated, professionals. They each have backgrounds applicable to the needs of the students with which they work and experience teaching the various age groups they encounter. Staff oversees the students during the entire school day despite changing attendance as part time students come and go. The professional development at the school is appropriate to the teaching and training techniques used with the students. Most professional development takes place during the summer or on staff personal time, but there are sessions sponsored directly by the school as well. Both teachers and staff expressed their love of working at the school feeling that it provides a safe, academic, supportive, and happy place to work.
5. The back office administrative systems at Pacem are secure and 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 school employs a bookkeeper who 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. Reviews of some recent financials were made available and these assure one that the school is financially stable.

The Pacem School is an organization that is committed to serving this population of students in an individualized and efficacious way. There were many stories of successful students feeling well prepared for college or other educational environments after Pacem. The staff spoke of loving their professions, feeling a strong sense of purpose in their jobs as well as good support from the organization. The environment in which they teach is unique in that there are students coming and going at the school following individualized schedules, but again, they all spoke of feeling happy to work there. The staff is held to high standards and they know what is expected of them. It is easy to see how this quality approach to education reflects the hard work of these dedicated professionals, and why students and families support it so vigorously.

The healthy life at Pacem is augmented by the unique approach to governance and management. The various “Circles” allow all in the community to have input into decisions at appropriate levels. From students, to parents, to Board members, everyone can participate in helping the school be the best it can be. The curriculum is unique and directed at high standards. Students learn to work cooperatively and individually as required. The “sociocratic methods” in use allow for everyone to share the best in ideas and have the school benefit from them. For such a small school, it was impressive, and one can see that students thrive under its guidance. The school is well designed, well managed, and most importantly well lead; all of which combines to make it successful in its mission.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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