

**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 5-22 in grades K-12 within the disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Speech or Language Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Developmental Delay, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Multiple Disabilities, and Traumatic Brain Injury, to The New School of Montpelier in Montpelier and West Glover, Vermont?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students ages 5-22 in grades K-12 within the disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Speech or Language Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Developmental Delay, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Multiple Disabilities, and Traumatic Brain Injury, to The New School of Montpelier in Montpelier and West Glover, 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 Education whenever any changes occur in enrollment, program, 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 New School of Montpelier, Inc. (NSM) is an independent day facility providing educational, therapeutic, and reintegration services for male and female students in ages 5-22 in grades K-12. The school was founded in 2005 and is located adjacent to the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier. A second site in West Glover is opening in August of 2016, to serve a maximum of eight students ages 5-22 in grades K-22.

Accepted students are in need of intensive specialized services in a self-contained classroom and living environment due to physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral challenges that cannot be appropriately addressed in their public schools. The Core Purpose of the school is to provide a safe, therapeutic, effective educational program coupled with clinical support for all students. The New School is owned by a cooperative of faculty and board members that serves as effective leadership for the institution. The unique nature of this governance system cannot be understated as it is the only one like it in the state of Vermont, and among very few known schools in the country.

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

GENERAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The descriptions of the school in the application, on the admissions brochures, and on the website are accurate. The Core Purpose, Core Values, and Philosophy of the school are clearly presented on the website and serve as the guides for all aspects of 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 is highly individualized to student needs and is adequate to meet the educational purposes of the school. The school provides a minimum course of study that is age and ability appropriate, and it is presented in a highly individualized way. The school makes available the support services necessary to meet the requirements of a minimum course of study and its educational purposes including (a) library services through books on site, proprietary communications software, and guided access to 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 students are on IEPs and the sending school LEAs work with The New School staff to devise and implement IEPs yearly or as needed. Students are not often reintegrated into public school programs after their time at the New School, and many finish out their basic education there after developing life, work, and communication skills. At each of the three levels, (Radio Flyers, Bridge, Transition) the school uses a holistic team approach to educating students and according to the staff interviewed, it is highly effective. This course of study and support resources will be available to the students in West Glover as well.
3. Although located on one campus in Montpelier, the school uses multiple buildings and functions administratively from the main house on West Street. This building is owned by the founder of the school (now retired) and is leased to the institution. The other two leased self-contained school buildings have the classrooms and facilities necessary to carry out their respective mission and programs. There is enough space within these areas for the students to enjoy common and classroom environments, and each of the teachers and administrators has sufficient office/working space as well. The buildings meet relevant health and safety standards as represented by updated certificates of inspection. One of the facilities has a built in kitchen area for teaching life skills. There is emergency, safety, and evacuation plans for each building. Overall the campus is an effective facility is kept up with regular maintenance as necessary.

The New School site in West Glover is located in a renovated barn. It is 2500 square feet on two floors with a second egress. The building houses a large classroom, three small tutorial spaces, a full kitchen with open meeting/classroom space, two bathrooms with one with a shower, and office space. The first floor is fully accessible. Students will not be served at this facility until the fire alarm system is inspected and the Division of Fire Safety has conducted another inspection and issued a Certificate of Occupancy (CO). The AOE Special Education Consultant who visited this facility on Monday, July 25, 2016, described it as "...recently renovated, bright, clean and the amount of space is appropriate for the number of potential students. The space has the resources to provide academic, behavioral, and community education as well as the opportunity for kinesthetic movement and exercise. The design, layout and organization of the space is flexible and

conducive for teaching a wide range of students and for creating a variety of working environments.”

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 NSM proved to be experienced, dedicated, professionals. They each have certifications applicable to the needs of the students and experience teaching the age groups they encounter. Staff appropriately oversees the students during the entire school day never allowing students to venture off on their own. Teachers and professional staff work in highly effective teams at NSM, and bring a wealth of experience, education, and dedication to their work. The meetings witnessed showed that the care and education of the students was at the very core of their efforts. The professional development at NSM is appropriate to the techniques used with the students. The staff at NSM West Glover will include a Program Director, who is licensed in special education and special education administration, a teacher/special education, and a behavior specialist.
5. The back office administrative systems at NSM are secure and appropriate for the running of the organization at both sites. 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 Business Manager 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. Review of a recent budget and other financials was not made available, but conversations with the former owner, Business Manager, current administrators, and individual faculty assured that all is financially intact at the school.
6. NSM’s program in Montpelier is a year-round educational school. The program in West Glover will be a school-year program, with extended year services available if needed or desired.
7. The governance of this institution is an element in the life of the school that is not to be overlooked. Employee ownership through limited memberships is the basis of an elaborate system for governing that is highly unusual yet apparently quite effective. Memberships are purchased by faculty and maintained during their employment. The members comprise the Board that is responsible for financial oversight, strategic planning, and the hiring/nurturing of the Director. “The Board runs the business, and the Director runs the school” is a favorite phrase. This system seems to work well, provide incentives for the teachers/staff, and allows the employees direct input into the running of the school.

The New School of Montpelier is an organization that is committed to serving this very needy population of students in an individualized yet holistic way. There were many stories of successful students reintegrating with their public schools or “graduating” and moving on to adult programs. The staff spoke of loving their professions and many spoke of feeling a strong sense of purpose in their jobs as well as wonderfully 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. 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 how it flows to the children and families in their care.

This school, with its effective programs and especially its unique system of governance is a model of creativity for all education in the state of Vermont. It demonstrates the value of independent schools to be beacons of change in education, and shows that new and successful ideas can happen when educators are given the freedom to devise and implement them.

SPECIAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS:

The New School is seeking re-approval as an independent day school in the areas of Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Developmental Delay, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Other Health Impairment, Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability and Multiple Disabilities. The New School's main campus is located in Montpelier, Vermont and is utilizing three separate building spaces for their "pods." The three pods are Radio Flyers (elementary and middle school students with severe behaviors, trauma backgrounds, and different learning styles), Bridge Pod (children of all ages with autism and complex communication) and Transition Pod (secondary and transition age students typically with cognitive delays). The focus of the pods changes periodically depending on the needs of the population of students. The New School currently serves 21 students. Due to the intensive nature of the population served, each student is supported by an individualized education program behavior plan, transition plan, academic as well as life skills and community development curriculum and staffing support as needed.

The New School was visited by Vermont Agency of Education staff on 5/25/16. Agency employees interviewed The New School's staff, toured facilities, observed staff/student interactions and reviewed student files and IEPs. Observations and file reviews were conducted for students diagnosed with: Other Health Impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and Emotional Disturbance, Multiple Disabilities and Speech or Language Impairment. The staff was engaging, knowledgeable, cooperative and professional. The facilities were clean, the amount of space was appropriate for the number of students enrolled and organized as needed for the individual needs of the students. The New School staff reported a positive and collaborative working relationship with Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to support the student's educational programs, although did note that paperwork, especially corrections and updates are not always provided in a timely or accurate manner.

The New School is also requesting approval for another school site in West Glover, VT. This site was visited by a Special Education Consultant from the Agency of Education on Monday, July 25. At this visit, the Consultant was also able to meet with the Program Director for this site as well as one of the Co-Directors of The New School. Comments from the Special Education Consultant on the facility in West Glover are included above under GENERAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS: # 3.

Staff professional development and training take the form of new hire training in general teaching and behavioral principals, as well as ongoing support and observations from supervisory staff. All staff receives crisis prevention and emergency response guidelines through Handle With Care®. Staff reported feeling supported with on the job training with specific students and behavior plans as well as on-going feedback during observations and meeting times.

The following rules were reviewed for compliance:

2228.1 – MET– The New School demonstrated the policies, procedures and staff training to support students in the disability categories of Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Developmental Delay, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Other Health Impairment, Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability and Multiple Disabilities.

2228.3 – MET – Observed written policies and/or procedures in the areas of: (1) admissions, (2) least restrictive environment, (3) discipline, (4) graduation, (5) faculty qualifications, and (6) faculty-student ratios.

2228.3.1 – MET – Evidence of maintenance of (1) educational records, and coordination with LEA and parents through data and file review, (2) participation in evaluation and IEP procedures through IEP review, (3) implementation of IEPs through progress reporting and behavioral data.

2228.3.2 – MET – Special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists were licensed by appropriate local state agencies. All current staff has completed the requirements outlined in Rule 4500 as related to training for staff involved in restraint and seclusion protocols.

2228.4 – MET – Policies, procedures and written agreement outline tuition and establish division of legal responsibilities with regards to students on IEPs.

Based on the rules for Special Education Approval for Independent Schools, The New School has met the minimum requirements for independent school approval.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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