

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 25 female students ages 13-19 within the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Hearing Loss Hearing Loss, and Speech or Language Impairment, to the New England School for Girls (NESG) in Bennington, VT?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants initial general and special education independent school approval, to serve a maximum of 25 female students ages 13-19 within the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Hearing Loss Hearing Loss, and Speech or Language Impairment, to the New England School for Girls (NESG) in Bennington, VT.

This approval is for two years, through June 30, 2018.

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 Rules 2228 et. seq.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. The New England School for Girls (NESG) is a soon-to-be-opened independent, non-profit boarding facility providing educational, therapeutic, and reintegration services for up to 25 female students ages 13-19 years of age. The students admitted at NESG will be from out of state. Accepted students are in need of specialized services in a self-contained classroom and living environment due to academic and emotional difficulties that interfere with their ability to function in a traditional school environment. The mission of the school is to build a safe, trusting, and responsible community in which students are encouraged to heal from past trauma, find pleasure and joy in their lives, and build inner resources for this future. NESG is owned and operated by Becket Family of Services, Inc. of Plymouth, NH. Peter B. Gilmore visited the school on behalf of the Secretary of Education on January 28, 2016.

GENERAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The description of the school in the Application, and on the admissions brochures is accurate. The mission of the school is clearly presented and serves as the guide for all aspects of life at the school.
2. The course of study is highly individualized to student needs and is adequate to meet the educational purposes of the school. It does provide a minimum course of study that is age and ability appropriate. 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 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 trustworthy system of record keeping both electronic and paper that are stored in safe, inaccessible files in the cloud and/or on site.
- 3.
4. NESG will function as a separate entity with separate facilities but will also serve as an extension of the Vermont School for Girls program. The two schools will share many administrative facilities including a central administration building, administrative support staff, administration software and record keeping, food services, and transportation services. The NESG Subacute Program on Vail Road will serve eight girls, the NESG house on College Road will serve nine girls, and the NESG house at Manning on Route 7 will serve eight girls. The girls at the Subacute Program on Vail Road will have a standalone self-contained approved education program. The girls at both the house on College Road and at Manning on Route 7 will be educated at the NESG classroom on College Road. In these two self-contained school houses sited off campus from the main administration building, the NESG has the classrooms and facilities necessary to carry out its mission and program. The renovations are complete on one of the living/study houses, and a copy of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO) is on file at the Agency. The renovation of the second building is near completion, and the facility will not house or be used as for educational purposes until the CO is granted for this building. There is enough classroom space within the self-contained houses for the students living there, and each of the teachers and administrators has sufficient office/working space as well. Each house has new dorm room spaces for the students, a central kitchen, central living areas, classroom space, and office/meeting areas. There are emergency, safety, and evacuation plans for each facility.
- 5.

6. The school will employ professional staff in sufficient number who are qualified by training and experience in the areas in which they are assigned. There are two subject area teachers both have Master's degrees. One of the teachers is licensed in special education, also. Upon interview, the two educators proved to be experienced, dedicated, professionals. They each have licensure and experience teaching the age groups they will encounter. In fact, they were quite impressive, and certainly were prepared for the work ahead. There is a Doctorate level music teacher and an art teacher from the Vermont Art Exchange that will also provide instruction. The program will also employ a number of paraprofessionals.
- 7.
8. Staff oversees the students 24/7 including evening bed checks every 15 minutes by a team of employees. The professional development at NESG is appropriate to the techniques used with the students such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy (EMDR) and Attachment, self-Regulation, Competency (ARC). The staff is invited to attend training sessions in these areas and is encouraged to take advanced study in the techniques as well.
- 9.
10. The back office administrative systems at NESG are secure, comprehensive, 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 is part of a larger non-profit organization that maintains an extensive accounting system of accounts payable, accounts receivable, budget tracking, audits, and payroll. Review of the recent budget and audit, and a conversation with the onsite finance liaison, assured that all is financially intact at the school and within the larger organization.

The New England School for Girls is a planned organization that is committed to the success of this very needy population of students. There were no students to review at the time of this visit, but given the plans for all aspects of their needs, one can project they will be successful. The staff who will be transitioning from the Vermont School for Girls campus spoke of loving their professions and looked forward to the new opening of NESG. The environment in which they will work is expected to be the same high quality as their current one, as it will be administered by the same basic organization. It is easy to see how this quality approach to education reflects the hard work of these dedicated professionals, and how it will flow to the children in their care.

SPECIAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The NESG's population will be from out-of-state, and as such, NESG must follow the special education rules and regulations from those states.
2. On behalf of the Secretary of Education, a visit was made to NESG by Alicia Hanrahan, Education Programs Manager on December 17, 2015.
3. NESG has developed policies for admissions, discipline, Least Restrictive Environment and graduation. The policies were reviewed and found to be appropriate.
4. The New England School for Girls will be providing a therapeutic and educational environment for girls whose sending schools are not in Vermont.
5. The out-of-state LEAs, in collaboration with NESG, and based on individual agreements, NESG may or may not conduct evaluations, write evaluations and develop IEPs. This provides options for LEAs to complete the paperwork themselves based on their own rules and regulations
6. IEP development will include input from the LEA, the staff at NESG and the IEP Team. The implementation of the IEP will be the responsibility of the New England School for Girls.
7. NESG will be responsible for the provision of special education supports and services as written in students' individualized education programs (IEP).
8. The special education supports and services will be implemented using both a pull-out and a push-in model, dependent upon the needs of each student. Some students' services will be in 1:1 or in small group settings.
9. NESG has adopted a policy on the prevention/reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

VTAOE STAFF AVAILABLE:

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