

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Montpelier, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of kindergarten approval to Saxon Hill School, Inc., Jericho, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of kindergarten approval to Saxon Hill School, Inc., Jericho, VT for a term through June 30, 2022; and

This approval is conditional on the requirement that the school reports to the Agency of Education within five business days whenever any changes occur in enrollment, programs, policies, facilities, financial capacity, staffing or administration during the approval period.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: Title 16 V.S.A., Section 166 (b) (1)
SBE Rules 2270

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. The State Board of Education shall approve an independent school which offers kindergarten but no other graded education if it finds that the school substantially complies with the Board's rules for approved independent kindergartens, promulgated as Series 2200 (Independent School Program Approval).
2. Saxon Hill School, Inc. (Saxon Hill) is seeking renewal of approval as an independent kindergarten.
3. Upon receiving Saxon Hill's application, the Secretary appointed a review committee to visit the school and make a recommendation as required by SBE Rule 2222.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

J. Deborah Ormsbee, Independent School Review Coordinator

Independent School Review Report

REPORT

November 21,
2019- Review

Saxon Hill School, Inc.

Jericho, VT

Submitted by

Independent School Review Team Members:

Education Representatives:

J. Deborah Ormsbee & Pat Pallas-Gray



The AOE's independent school review team met with Saxon Hill kindergarten staff on Thursday, November 21, 2019. Interviews were conducted in the school's main office located at the entrance of the school building. Personnel present for interviews were the director, school administrator, Vermont licensed educator, Kindergarten teachers and volunteer parent support personnel.

Saxon Hill kindergarten is currently seeking renewal for their kindergarten program. Educational objectives are aligned with State Board of Education Rules 2200 Series. Program objectives are as follows:

- Aligned with and compliant under Act 166 program requirements
- Currently serving 46 enrolled students (student approved capacity of 49)
- Educational programming is for a half day (3.5 hours), four days a week
- Meets kindergarten minimum course of study requirements under SBE Rule Series 2200
- Staff implement comprehensive grade level literacy and math based instructional services
- Students have access to specialized services, as needed, such as but not limited to: speech language specialist, occupational therapy, trauma informed mental health services and intensive family-based services and supports
- Saxon Hill's mission is fully integrated in student curriculum

At the time of program review, Agency staff were able to confirm program objectives are aligned with State kindergarten program requirements and meet State Board requirements for "minimum course of study" and include: differentiated instruction, project-based learning, Common Core curriculum, and utilization of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. Trauma informed and social emotional practices that provide additional support to close student achievement gaps and are imbedded in all areas of academic learning, behavioral plans and accessed as needed. All Saxon Hill School personnel members are trained, annually, on current best practices for core instruction, trauma informed and behavioral interventions.

Saxon Hill kindergarten's application was complete and included all required documentation at the time of submission.

Saxon Hill was founded as a parent-run, cooperative kindergarten. The original model of Saxon Hill has remained intact, effectively, since its founding in 1964. The School Board and school administrators monitor educational programming annually to ensure impactful and regular program improvement. The Board, school personnel and parents work collaboratively to ensure implementation of educational best practices, develop and implement curriculum for creating a foundation of effective technological citizenship in 2019, collaborate to align curriculum with state education quality standards, ensure families and students have access to any required specialized programming such as, but not limited to: speech and language services, occupational therapy or special education services.

Additionally, Saxon Hill's school board is comprised of volunteer community members from a variety of demographic groups such as; business professionals, certified public accountants, retired educators, parents, and a variety of other supportive community members. The Board meets regularly and provides governance oversight of all aspects of the school's programming. In addition, parent coop members collaborate to maintain school facilities, perform janitorial services, organize and lead extra-curricular and intersession programs as needed, and engage in highly effective fund-raising activities.

Furthermore, Saxon Hill's director and school administrator have worked tirelessly to develop a mutually beneficial, supportive and respectful relationship with the neighboring LEA and often share outdoor space, facilities and collaborate on community-based activities.

As stated, Saxon Hill's program is a parent run cooperative model that leverages "Parents-At-Large" to perform many school responsibilities both in and out of the classroom.

At the time of the Agency's site review visit to Saxon Hill, no kindergarten-aged students were enrolled in the program. However, staffing and programming is in place, to serve students immediately upon enrollment and for those students, with educational plans in-place, to support students during the transition from the pre-school to enrollment in Saxon Hill's kindergarten program.

Student Records & Confidentiality
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<i>Vermont Rule 2273.1</i>

AOE representatives verified that Saxon Hill's student records and electronic filing system continues to meet State and Federal confidentiality requirement standards. Student education records and other related paper documentation is kept in a secure, locked storage facilities in the school's main office. Parent volunteers are required to sign a confidentiality disclosure

statement, receive appropriate training prior to being placed on parent assignment rosters and allowed full access to student files.

Additionally, student files may only be accessed through formalized requests to either Saxon Hill's director or administrator. A formalized summary sheet is utilized to keep a record for signing out and returning student files and other required official records.

Professional Staff	<i>Vermont Rules 2272.4 & 2272.5</i>
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Saxon Hill is currently accredited through The National Association for the Education of Young Children. As such, school administrators take advantage of national professional development opportunities for themselves, the teaching staff, educational support staff and interested cooperative member parents

The kindergarten must undergo extensive and rigorous program development, curriculum and assessment implementation and staff training in order to maintain their status as a NAEYC school. Additionally, Saxon Hill is recognized in Vermont as a Five Star kindergarten program. The Department for Children and Families, Child Development Division's Five Star Certificate is posted in a public location in the school's main office.

Saxon Hill kindergarten staff are experienced teachers who integrate the school's mission, values and quality education indicators in lesson plans and enrichment activities. The school's curriculum complies with The Department of Children and Families' requirements for developing, implementing and assessments that reflect age-appropriate educational experiences for young children.

The head teacher holds a Vermont level two teaching license in secondary English language arts and is currently pursuing an endorsement in early education, K-6. Non-licensed teachers all have either college degrees, enough professional development credits or a combination of both in order to meet State and Saxon Hill level of required professional proficiency.

Supplemental to core instruction staff, Saxon Hill's kindergarten has access to includes on-site professionally licensed speech language pathologist and an occupational therapist, who are employed by the school district. All students are provided access to these specialists to evaluate regular educational development and to provide individualized progress monitoring, as needed.

In addition to maintaining relevant licensure, Saxon Hill staff members (including support personnel) are expected to participate in and satisfactorily complete additional required professional development to address the following educational requirements of the cooperative:

- IEP, evaluations and assessments
- Content area professional development

- Special education instruction
- Classroom management
- Student Self-Regulation and Trauma Informed Instruction practices
- Other areas identified by the Board and Parent Coop Members as meaningful and required for students enrolled in the program

All Saxon Hill School personnel members are trained, annually, on current best practices for core instruction, trauma informed and behavioral interventions. Staff are regularly invited by the LEA to attend professional development opportunities, of which, Saxon Hill staff participate in and complete annually to maintain required level of program proficiency.

Kindergarten Methods of Instructions & Evaluations	<i>Vermont Rule 2272.1</i>
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Saxon Hill administrators, teachers, support staff and parent volunteers have worked to develop evidence-based, best practice instruction methods for all students, in concert with implementing any LEA required curricula as part of an IEP for identified students. Special Education push-in services are provided by the LEA, as well as, any additionally required contracted services to assist with student’s educational program needs. Saxon Hill’s Program Director and LEA Special Education Director collaborate to ensure transition plans are effectively developed in accordance with IEP goals.

Parents, Saxon Hill Staff and identified LEA staff, if required, collaborate to develop age-appropriate transition plans for enrolled students not requiring an IEP or a 504 Plan.

Agency of Education representatives received a review of program materials that included:

- An extensive school library, pre- K through kindergarten, as well as, advanced placement readers
- Kindergarten STEM project-based curriculum
- Integrated Arts Program
- Life Skills
- Physical Education activities
- Community skills practice
- Evidenced based literacy and math curriculums

Instructional staff are trained to ensure successful adaptations to curriculum are completed with fidelity and meet student developmental needs. The curriculum includes student specific goals to ensure a successful transition to the kindergarten program is educationally and developmentally appropriate and meets the individual needs of each student.

Student evaluations, assessment strategies and progress monitoring are reviewed weekly to ensure students are meeting developmental benchmarks. School staff and parents collaborate to develop each student’s individual learning plan.

Saxon Hill's program utilizes technology in the classroom when developmentally appropriate; however, the LEA provides students some access to supportive technology, as required, in order to adapt and enrich classroom learning project-based learning assignments and authentic assessments, as needed.

The school's parent and teacher partnership requirements are strengthened by several unique and effective programs. For example, teachers make home visits throughout the late summer months in order to build trusting relationships between families and school personnel for supporting and fostering academic growth and success for each child. Children are encouraged to share important personal information with visiting teachers such as favorite: colors, toys, foods, spaces or activities.

Codes of Professional Conduct and School Environment:

All staff receive professional development that ensures proper management of student educational spaces and staff offices. Saxon Hill's handbook includes a specific conduct policy that outlines expectations for staff, family members and students.

Program administrators, teaching staff and parent volunteers have put forth great effort in creating a welcoming, soothing student and family centered educational environment. All school classrooms and common spaces post school values and mission statements for students and community members. Saxon Hill School is primarily a general education school and to-date, student's behaviors have not required the use of environmental management techniques requiring either suspension or expulsion or implementation of Therapeutic Crisis Intervention techniques. However, school personnel are trained in and are familiar with procedures for using adapting techniques.

All staff members are trained annually and have a thorough understanding of the program's strength-based approach toward discipline of children who come from a variety of backgrounds. All training is completed and includes consideration of students with IEPs or 504 Plans, and personal learning plan objectives.

Facilities, Health & Safety	<i>Vermont Rule 2272.2, 2272.4 & 2273.1</i>
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School Facilities & Safety Materials:

Saxon Hill kindergarten is located on Brown's Trace Road in a building adjacent to Browns River Middle School, which is within the Mount Mansfield Unified Union School District. The school shares a portion of its building space with Jericho Town Offices. However, the school has a separate main entrance and the facilities are not accessible to town personnel without going through the school's main office. The school's main entrance is locked, has a video and an audio security screening system in place and the doors are opened by qualified school personnel.

The Saxon Hill school is currently under partial renovation to add a much needed third classroom, make improvements to the school library and has already added a new administrative main office for both the program director and administrator.

Despite current renovations already underway, a Certificate of Occupancy (CO) has been granted and filed with the Agency of Education. A thorough safety review was conducted by State, and local officials in order to verify the school's ability to provide students, staff and parent-members with a safe learning environment. The building meets all State requirements pertaining to use as an educational facility. The building also meets Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and is accessible via graded wheel chair pathways, all classrooms are on the first floor and door-casings provide both access and egress for all handicap assisted technology or wheelchairs.

Monthly fire and school safety drills are conducted in collaboration with local officials, Police and Fire Departments, as needed. In consideration of student's ages and developmental needs, parent notifications are sent to assist with preparing students for participation in each monthly emergency drill held throughout the school year. School administrators check smoke detectors monthly and has contracted with the landlord for the heating and cooling systems to be cleaned regularly, as well as, testing the electrical system and fire extinguishers.

Safety information including location maps, fire extinguishers and emergency contact numbers are prominently posted in multiple, highly visible areas. Emergency directions and other pertinent information include easily understood emergency pictograms and corresponding emergency contact numbers in each of the common areas of the school, classroom area, gymnasium/cafeteria, hallways and main office. Once construction of the library is completed, a set of emergency posters and other required safety equipment will be installed.

First Aid and other life-saving equipment is visible and meets health and safety requirements, including date of last inspection. All staff members are required to attend First Aid and emergency response specialized training during August in-service each year.

Nursing Services and Medications:

Saxon Hill School does not currently employ a nurse or provide visiting nursing services for students. Students are required to take medications prior to attending school each day. As a half-day program, Saxon Hill staff are not required to dispense, secure or train staff on student medications. However, all school personnel are trained annually on emergency First Aid, and classroom teachers have Epi-pens with them in a secured med case to respond appropriately to student allergic reactions. Annual training on use and disposal of pens is required of staff, and training records are kept on file in the main office. All information on Epi-pen use is included in the school handbook and provided to all parents prior to the start of the school year.

The precautions section of the handbook includes procedures that school personnel follow when required to address blood borne pathogens, infectious body fluids and toxic substances. In addition to medical precautions and procedures, that staff are trained on food safety as proscribed by the USDA, cleaning of classroom materials (including toys and educational manipulatives) water table use during instruction or student free time, and student access to pre-approved classroom pets.

Immunization Policies & Records:

Saxon Hill School student immunization records are contained in a secure, confidential locked filing system and included in student files in the main office.

Staffing Safeguards:

Background checks are conducted prior to start date for all newly hired employees. Fingerprint supported criminal record checks and VT adult/child abuse registries are checked annually, and both reports are contained in a confidential filing system available for review upon request.

Health, Wellness & Hazing Policies:

The Saxon Hill School community developed strong anti-bullying, anti-hazing and anti-harassment policies and corresponding procedures that are updated and reviewed with staff annually during August in-service. Parent coop members, in collaboration with professional teaching staff, developed and implemented additional policies to safeguard the well-being of the school community. For example, the handbook includes a section on “Exclusion of persons whose presence is prohibited by Vermont Licensing Regulations.”

Saxon Hill School Financial Capacity

Agency Independent School Team review of school application and files comply with State Board Rules and Title 166 requirements for fiscal capacity and tuition payments. Saxon Hill School’s handbook includes tuition payment options for families, as well as, outcomes for non-payment.

At the time of program review, Agency staff confirmed Saxon Hill School has the financial capacity to ensure educational programming through the end of the school year. Additionally, Independent School Team members confirmed the school is in compliance with accounting best practices and has sufficient data to support and meet current fiscal program responsibilities. All Saxon Hill School’s accounting practices meet requirements for fiscal capacity under State Board of Education Rules Series 2200 ... [the] “program has financial capacity to carry out its educational purpose for the period of approval.”¹

Independent School Team, Agency of Education Recommendations

Saxon Hill’s kindergarten program has met all State Board of Education rules and legal educational requirements under Title 16. It is the recommendation of the Agency of Education’s Independent School Team that Saxon Hill be granted the maximum program renewal of two years.

¹ Guidelines for Vermont Approved and Recognized Independent Schools, Rule Series 2200, Vermont State Board of Education