

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 K-6 to the Bridge School, Middlebury, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general independent school approval to serve students in grades K-6 to the Bridge School, Middlebury, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2022.

Approval is subject to the condition that the school immediately reports to the Agency of Education whenever changes occur in enrollment, programs, policies, facilities, financial capacity, staffing or administration during the approval period.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 166 (b)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Bridge School is an elementary day school that was founded to serve grades K-6 in September of 1980. The school currently has 40 students. The Bridge School seeks to create a caring and engaged community of learners. The school continues to this day to honor four core values: Personal Excellence, Respect for Children, Engaged and Passionate Learners and Caring Community. Bridge School strives to create an environment that responds to the various ways that children learn. The unique learning style of every child is the driving force of the school's individualized curriculum. The Bridge School's educational program encourages personal connections with learning. The school provides their students with many different kinds of opportunities to learn including but not limited to: making choices about topics, thinking critically, investigating scientifically, exploring artistically, and relating socially. Bridge School views children's learning as a lifelong process, and the teachers at the school strive to model this process as a way of life.

The school is governed by a Board of Directors, who abide by the established school bylaws. Four of the school's primary employees are called Mentors. The Mentors collaboratively run Bridge School by using a consensus model for planning and problem solving. The Mentors divide the students into younger and older groups according to a combination of age, ability, and interest. The Mentors manage all aspects of school operations, develop curriculum, and supervise teachers. All Mentors are voting members of the governing Board of Directors and

participate in creating a productive and supportive partnership between the school and the Board.

There currently are ten Board members. The powers and responsibilities of the Board of Directors are clearly spelled out in the Bylaws of the Bridge School and are in the schools application for renewal. The powers and responsibilities of the Board of Directors include but are not limited to the school's financial and legal affairs, long term planning, hiring and supervising the mentors, establishing and reviewing policies, reviewing the schools programs and operations to assure they are in line with the schools mission and various fundraising.

Daily Program: The daily schedule of the school includes early arrival activities; morning meeting, student choice enrichment activities; blocks of time for Language Arts, Math, Social Studies and Science Explorations, Silent Reading, Arts, and a return to their Home Centers (homerooms). And of course there is time for snack, recess and lunch. Students were well aware of the schedule and the routines and seemed secure and happy as they moved from class to class, room to room and activity to activity.

School Site Visit

This reviewer arrived at Bridge School and was greeted immediately by, Joslyn Cassady, the Mentor-Administrator. After a few minutes of getting settled she explained to me the arrival process for students and parents. I was invited to attend the All School Morning Meeting and was introduced to the student body and the teachers and then participated in one of the activities. After morning meeting Joslyn Cassady reviewed the rest of the days schedule and toured me around the school. The remainder of the day consisted of meeting with each of the four Mentors, observing classes, having lunch with the staff and having time to talk with one of the original four co-founders. The day concluded with a review of policies, manuals, and general administrative review with the Mentor Administrator. The schedule allowed me to get a sense of the rhythms of the school day and to experience how the school did in fact "CHALLENGE CHILDREN TO USE THEIR MINDS SUCCESSFULLY IN A SUPPORTIVE, COLLABORATIVE, AND RESPECTFUL COMMUNITY"

Description of Facilities

Bridge School is housed in a large, restored barn. The first floor of the barn is divided into six large classrooms and a smaller instruction room. Bridge School also has a two-story gym/theater/meeting space/lunch room with a high and a low climbing wall and a shop/greenhouse/art space with a kiln, computer lab, cataloged library shelves, and a general open spaced entry. The outdoor grounds consist of 3.5 acres, including three playing fields, playground equipment, and a skating rink. The facility meets all state and federal health and safety requirements, is handicapped accessible, and is adequate to meet the needs of the students. The school also avails itself of the variety of educational and recreational opportunities/facilities in the region.

Minimum Course of Study and Required Asset 16 V.S.A. #906.

A minimum course of study of learning experiences is adapted to a pupils' age and ability in the fields required by statute, and was evident at Bridge School. A very detailed and in-depth

description of the curricula was submitted in the application and from the onsite visit it is clear the curriculum is age and ability appropriate. The curriculum is developed by Bridge School teachers and is based on Common Core State Standards. The staff adapts the curriculum when appropriate to meet the needs of each student's learning profile including students who have IEP's or 504 plans. In general, Bridge School utilizes a project-based, hands on thematic curriculum through a constructivist learning model. The learning experience is highly individualized. Teachers work collaboratively to determine each student's learning style following Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and thus each student's learning is tailored towards their individual learning style.

Staffing: Adequacy; Qualifications; Professional Development

The number of staff and faculty at Bridge School number 6 and are: 1 Full Time Mentor Administrator, 3 Full Time Mentor Teachers, 1 – teacher for various subjects including literacy and one part-time assistant and afterschool program director. The job descriptions (roles and responsibilities and resumes) were available, complete and up to date. All staff have a BA, BS, MED, or Doctorate. My observations and interviews indicated a high level of skill, knowledge and practice of the school's philosophy and core values, understanding of the curriculum, a collaborative spirit, and respect for individual learning styles of each of the students at the school. All stakeholders I talked with knew the mission, the core values and educational objectives of the school.

Bridge School teachers are encouraged to seek and engage in professional development opportunities that enrich their teaching and support the mission of creating a caring and engaged community of learners. Off campus opportunities are identified by the mentor administrator. Staff requests for payment of professional development fees are reviewed and approved by the team of mentors. Bridge School staff members meet after school once a week and periodically during lunchtime. The school has four paid inservice days per year.

Staff supervision and evaluation does not happen in a formal way on a regular basis, however this is being discussed. With a four member Mentor Team no one is assigned to do formal observations and evaluations. The team is aware of the need for this and desires more formal and informal feedback in terms of how the students of Bridge School are being served and how these services are being delivered. The team is in the process of discussing peer evaluation and review systems that include goal setting, demonstration teaching and continual input and feedback during the course of the school year.

Financial Stability and Capacity

Bridge School placed in the application and had on site a notarized letter dated January 10, 2017 from the Chair of the Board of Directors a letter indicating that the school is in a solid financial position and has been for years. The school, in fact, has several accounts and a credit line. It certainly appears after 37 years of providing educational opportunities to area students that they remain strong in the area of financial stability. As they are a tuition driven school they are also in the envious position of having a wait list for students seeking to enroll in the school.

Student Attendance and Assessment Records. Fire Drill and Safety Records. These records were reviewed and found to be in very good order.

Operating Schedule; Number of Instructional Hours. The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year of 962.5 + hours and schools days of 175 per year.

Policies: Admission, Health and Safety, Discipline, Harassment/Bullying. Review of the school's handbook and emergency and safety procedures reveal that the school has developed policies for health and safety, admission, discipline and more. The school has a policy on prevention of harassment, mandatory reporting of child abuse (as well as training) and all other policies required and desired to operate a school efficiently, effectively and safely.

School Improvement Plans:

No plans for physical plant improvements were shared with the reviewer or were indicated in the application.

Summary and Recommendation

The Bridge School provided a complete and detailed renewal application. The site visit was set up in such a way that the reviewer was able to sample, observe and discover all that makes Bridge School a valued alternative educational setting for students in Middlebury and beyond. It was clear to me that, as the school's web site professes, that Bridge School does indeed "value respect for the individual within an environment of kindness, collaboration and joint exploration by offering mixed age classes, daily academic choices for students and the arts".

Bridge School meets the State Board rules and requirements for an approved Vermont independent school. I recommend that the SBE grant renewal of general education independent school approval to Bridge School located in Middlebury, Vermont for a period of five years.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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