

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, within the disability categories of Developmental Delay, Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning) to Turning Points School in Morgan, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students ages 5-22, within the disability categories of Developmental Delay, Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning) to Turning Points School in Morgan, 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 any changes occur in enrollment, programs, policies, facilities, financial capacity, staffing, or administration during the approval period.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 166 (b)
State Board Rule 2228 et. seq.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Turning Points School (TPS) is an independent, LLC day facility providing educational, therapeutic, and reintegration services for up to 35 male and female students ages 5-22. Originally founded in Derby, VT in 1998, the school recently relocated to a larger facility in Morgan. They now occupy a former elementary school leased from the town. 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 school serves previously traumatized students with developmental delays, emotional disabilities, specific learning disabilities, and other health impairments. The school is requesting initial approval for autism spectrum disorder (high functioning).

The core purpose of the school is to provide a safe, therapeutic, effective educational program coupled with clinical support for all students. The Turning Points School is operated by Northeastern Family Institute (NFI) Vermont and owned by the North American Family Institute (NAFI) which is a larger organization dedicated to the same mission. Peter B. Gilmore visited the school on behalf of the Secretary of Education on May 10, 2017.

GENERAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The description of the school in publications and the application is generally accurate and reflects the essence of the school. The website, however, where most families would seek and obtain information on the school is scant and a poor reflection of what is offered by the school, the types of children they serve, and what is happening each day. As part of the larger NFI Vermont website, there is little indication of the life of the school and caring professionals employed at TPS reflected in the description. The core purpose, core values, and philosophy of the school are not clearly presented on the website, however do serve as the guides for aspects of life at the school in practice. These tenets are reviewed regularly during the school year and discussed openly by 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 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 system of record keeping both electronic and paper that are stored on site. All students are on IEPs and the sending school LEAs work with Turning Points School staff to devise and implement IEPs yearly. Students are reintegrated into public school programs after their time at the Turning Points School, and some finish out their basic education there after developing life, work, and communication skills. The school uses a team approach between teachers and counselors to educate students and according to the staff interviewed, it is effective. According to some staff however, reintegration is hampered by a lack of understanding on the parts of local school administrators to the needs of former TPS students; a situation that should be addressed by the school and the receiving institutions.
3. Located on one campus, the school uses one central building to serve multiple age groups. This building is owned by the Town of Morgan and is leased to the institution. There is enough space within these areas for the common and classroom environments, and teachers and administrators have sufficient office/working space as well. The building meets relevant health and safety standards as represented by updated certificates of inspection. There is a small kitchen area for serving daily lunches that are prepared at the local public school. There are emergency, safety, and evacuation plans for the building. There were multiple rooms off the hallways used for students to take

time-out and according to staff they are used regularly. Overall the main building is a well-worn facility that serves the functions of the school adequately. The hallways of the building were marked with holes, patches, and areas in need of simple paintwork - it was surprising to see these examples of deferred maintenance, and something the school should address more regularly. Some staff mentioned the remote location of the school as a challenge; however others saw it as an opportunity to expose children to nature around them.

4. The school employs 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 have 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 TPS 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 oversee the students during the entire school day never allowing students to venture off on their own. Teachers and professional staff work together, and bring a wealth of experience, education, and dedication to their work. Professional development at TPS is appropriate to the techniques used with the students. There is very low turnover of employees however there were concerns expressed about inadequate compensation. Staff working at the school for many years who are deeply experienced are still making only subsistence wages. It was obvious however, that the care and education of the students was at the very core of their efforts, and did not suffer because of lower pay scales. It is recommended that the school research pay scales in the profession, seek ways to ameliorate the situation, and respond appropriately.
5. The back office administrative systems at TPS are appropriate for the running of the organization, although they could use upgrading. Modernizing communications with parents and school systems would be a great help for example. Onsite databases serve as 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 NFI organization employs a Finance 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. As with other NFI institutions visited by this evaluator, all is financially intact at the school.
6. When asked about the curriculum, all staff agreed to the use of experiential projects, field trips, manipulatives, computers, life skills, arts, graphic organizers, videos and movies, as well as hands-on learning all of which are expressed in the application. There were indications of these parts of the curriculum available and faculty seems to make the best of the various resources at their disposal. New resources in the forms of improved textbooks, computers and tablets, lab facilities, and furniture would be a great help. The school could also use its new location to better these approaches by creating more in-depth programs off-campus, and employ more experiential curricula involving the farms, businesses, and unique opportunities of the surrounding countryside. Strategic planning with a specific focus on modernizing the resources and curriculum

followed by an influx of funds to actualize these new approaches and hire experienced staff would greatly help the school in its mission.

The Turning Points School is an organization that is committed to serving this very needy population of students in an individualized way. There were stories shared 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. The environment in which they teach and serve students is at times intense, but again, many spoke of feeling happy to work there. The staff members are held to good standards and they know what is expected of them by a local administration that obviously cares for them. It is easy to see that the success of the school reflects the hard work of these dedicated professionals, and how that success flows to the children and families in their care.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Turning Points is seeking re-approval as an independent day school in the areas of specific learning disability, developmental delay, autism spectrum disorders (high functioning), other health impairment, and emotional disturbance. Turning Points is located in Morgan, Vermont. Turning Points was established in 1998, at the request of local educators, to provide alternative education and mental health services to local students with emotional and behavioral challenges. Turning Points currently serves 30 students aged 5 to 19.

At Turning Points, students participate in language arts, science, social studies, math classes, physical education and therapeutic activities daily. The educational curriculum is process oriented and directed toward individual developmental and emotional needs. A licensed special educator works with the student and his/her family to develop educational and behavioral goals that meet the objectives defined in the students Individual Education Plan (IEP). Clinical case management and individual clinical services are provided in collaboration with Northeast Kingdom Mental Health, the local community mental health center. Family participation is an important part of the Turning Points experience.

Turning Points was visited by Vermont Agency of Education staff at their new location on May 18, 2016. A Vermont Education Agency employee interviewed Turning Points staff, toured facilities, observed staff/student interactions and reviewed student files and IEPs. Observations and file reviews were conducted for students diagnosed with emotional disturbance, specific learning disability, and other health impairment. The staff was 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. Turning Points staff reported a positive and collaborative working relationship with Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to support the students’ educational programs.

The following rules were reviewed for compliance:

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 – Clear 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 hold valid, VT educator licenses endorsed in special education. All current staff has completed the requirements outlined in Rule 4500 as related to training for staff involved in restraint and seclusion protocols and all staff has training in CPI.

Based on the rules for special education approval for independent schools, Turning Points has met the requirements for independent school approval.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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