

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-8, to the Neighborhood Schoolhouse, Brattleboro, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general independent school approval, to serve students in grades K-8, to the Neighborhood Schoolhouse, Brattleboro, 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)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. The Neighborhood Schoolhouse (NSH) is an independent day school. The school was founded in 1980 by a group of educators and parents committed to nurturing children's intellectual, emotional, and physical growth. The school serves students in grades K-8. The school was granted initial independent school approval through the State Board of Education in January of 1993 and has been continuously approved since that time.
2. NSH currently has 32 students in grades K-8 with room for four more students, with another 45 students in a robust infant and toddler and preschool program. NSH believes that education should address the development of the child across all domains: social, emotional, physical, cognitive and aesthetic. The school believes that children learn at an individual pace that is best supported by opportunities to learn and play with a diverse group of students in a multi-age setting that prioritizes small class size, teachers who loop with their students when appropriate and family engagement.
3. A Board of Directors governs NSH. The day-to-day operations are overseen by the school principal with feedback from the faculty, students and families of the school.
4. The minimum course of study, as prescribed in 16 V.S.A. § 906, is provided and adapted to the age and abilities of the students. NSH's methods of instruction are designed in order to achieve its educational objectives. The school uses curriculum aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Students participate in multi-age classes where

they work individually and in small groups in the areas of mathematics and language arts and in larger groups for science, social studies, the arts and physical education and health. This is to provide a balance between whole group, small group, and individual instructional formats. Children work at their academic level while instruction and curriculum provides same age and multi-age social opportunities.

5. School Site Visit

Steve Lorenz visited the school on behalf of the Secretary of Education on May 30, 2017. The principal greeted Mr. Lorenz; and he had an opportunity to speak to students and parents upon arrival. After a tour of the school, Mr. Lorenz observed the lower elementary and the upper elementary programs, then interviewed teachers. The principal and Mr. Lorenz spent time reviewing policies and other documents. There was ample time to talk informally with other faculty and staff.

6. Description of Facilities

The Neighborhood Schoolhouse rents the first, second and third floors of a three-story, wood-framed building. Internal changes continue to be made to meet the needs of the students. The inside space consists of six classroom spaces and a community space, known as Neighbor's Hall. Each classroom has a variety of workspaces, a bathroom and kitchen area. The school grounds provide the students with access to a community garden, two playgrounds and woodland. The school uses a variety of community facilities to supplement their programs. A property agent manages the building and a maintenance person performs work for the landlord. The facility is adequate to meet the needs of the students and meets state and federal health and safety regulations. A copy of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO) issued by the Division of Fire Safety was available for review.

7. Minimum Course of Study 16 V.S.A. § 906.

A minimum course of study of learning experiences, adapted to a pupil's age and ability in the field of basic communications skills, etc. was evident at NSH. Based on the submitted application and from the onsite visit it is clear the curriculum is age and ability appropriate. The staff adapts the curriculum when appropriate to meet the needs of each student's learning profile including students who have IEPs or 504 plans. Furthermore, students work independently and in small groups by academic level rather than by age, which allows for the meeting of individual needs. Some staff have had trainings and are using a supplemental reading program to meet the needs of students who may be reading below grade level.

8. Staffing: Adequacy; Qualifications; Professional Development

The school has the resources necessary, including qualified staff, to support its program. The staff includes a full-time principal, three full-time teachers, an office manager, and part-time specialists. A program of professional development is in place for the professional staff. Professional development is encouraged and expected for teaching faculty. Each staff member is required to complete a minimum of 15 hours of annual professional development. Opportunities are identified based on goals for program-

wide growth and individual teacher performance. As of this spring, teachers will be evaluated based in part on an assessment measure called CLASS, the outcome of which will assist in determining priorities for professional development. In-service days number eleven (11) over the course of the school year. In-service training this year included program orientation, curriculum implementation, classroom assessment scoring, child abuse awareness and reporting, and RAVE, a remedial reading instruction program. The school has the resources necessary, including qualified staff, to support its program.

9. Financial Stability and Capacity

NSH placed in the application and had on site a letter from the Treasurer of the Board of Directors with a Balance Sheet and Profit and Loss Statements, which provided evidence of the financial capacity of the school to support the school program.

10. Student Attendance and Assessment Records. Fire Drill and Safety Records.

These records were reviewed and found to be in very good order.

11. Operating Schedule; Number of Instructional Hours.

The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year of 1,037 hours and schools days of 175 per year.

12. Policies: Admission, Health and Safety, Discipline, Harassment/Bullying.

Review of the school's handbooks 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 and reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy, mandatory reporting of child abuse (as well as training), and all other policies required and desired to operate a school efficiently, effectively and safely.

13. School Improvement Plans:

No plans for physical plant improvements were shared with the reviewer or were indicated in the report except for some minor interior changes.

Summary and Recommendation

The Neighborhood Schoolhouse provided a complete and detailed renewal application. The site visit was set up in such a way that the reviewer was able to sample and observe classes and programming. NSH has a long history of providing a valued alternative educational setting for students in Brattleboro and beyond. It was clear to me that, as the school's website professes, that NSH truly provides an education that addresses the development of the child across all domains with children learning at their own individual pace.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: None

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