

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of approval as a distance learning independent school, for grades K-12, to the **Oak Meadow School** of Brattleboro, Vermont?

ACTING SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of approval as a distance learning independent school, for grades K-12, to the Oak Meadow School of Brattleboro, Vermont. This approval is for 5 years through June 30, 2023.

That the school reports to the Agency of Education within five days whenever any changes occur in programs, policies, facilities, financial capacity, staffing, or administration during the approval period.

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

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. The school's educational philosophy is to provide a flexible and progressive education for independent learners. This concise statement was distilled from the previous mission statement that read: "Oak Meadow offers an independent education that empowers students to live skillful, innovative, compassionate lives by engaging the intellect, cultivating creativity, and fostering curiosity. Our flexible, self-directed model empowers students to find their most inspired path to learning and to build connections between living, learning, and their community, which accurately reflects our core values." The new mission statement was adopted in 2014 while preparing the NEASC Self-Study. The mission statement will be reviewed each time the multi-year plan is reviewed, i.e. at least every five years.
2. The State Board of Education last granted distance learning independent school approval to Oak Meadow School in 2013.
3. Oak Meadow School was visited on behalf of the Acting Secretary of Education by Brian Morgan on May 8, 2018.

4. The school offices occupy a custom-designed suite on the second floor of the Brooks House, centrally located to act as a community and educational hub, with space for administrative offices, group meetings, tutoring and study spaces, and private meeting areas. Oak Meadow's publications and shipping operations are still based in the old Mill building on South Main St.

Students around the world (60 countries) study at home or within their communities, e.g. in libraries. Educational counselors, program directors, and teachers advise families on how best to structure their physical spaces.

Oak Meadow provides comprehensive instructional materials to families. It creates, publishes, and provides original K-12 curricula that guide each learner through detailed lessons designed for independent learners. In K-8, courses cover a full 10-month school year. In high school, Oak Meadow offers a variety of full-year or semester courses. Materials include detailed lesson plans, required reading, and additional resources to supplement the curriculum, such as craft kits and science lab kits.

Oak Meadow supports its students through an online infrastructure including an email system and custom, school managed access to the Google educational platform. Students and teachers connect to discuss student work via instant messaging (Google Hangouts), video chats and Skype/Zoom, and telephone, as well as synchronous and asynchronous communication within shared Google docs.

Oak Meadow also has a custom-developed student data management system called Dash, used by faculty and staff, and an information portal for parents and students called the Oak Meadow Gateway. The Dash system allows Oak Meadow to create a unique student data profile upon a student's admission to the school, which, in turn, becomes the repository for all student personal data, including grades, teacher comments, course schedules, course history and transcripts, and student standing. Parents and students may also view class schedules, grades, and teacher comments through the Oak Meadow Gateway.

The Brooks House facility meets all state and federal health and safety regulations and is handicapped accessible.

5. 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.

The very comprehensive list of course offerings is included in the school's thorough application materials. Lessons can be personalized when necessary.

In order for Oak Meadow to provide accommodations for students with learning challenges, it has developed a thorough Learning Plan process. School program directors work with the director of admissions and parents to determine if a student with learning needs can be accommodated by the distance learning model. After a review of psychological/educational testing and any existing IEP's, program directors will work with parents to develop an Oak Meadow Learning Plan that helps students meet learning goals without reducing the quality or scope of the course content.

6. The school has the resources including financial capacity and qualified staff to meet its objectives. A review of the balance sheet and budget submitted with the application for re-approval indicates that the school is financially sound. Moreover, a financial review is in process by an accounting firm, and a notarized letter verifying financial capacity will accompany the hard copy of this report. Oak Meadow became the first non-brick and mortar school to be accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) in 2015, and financial capacity is a central element of such accreditation.
7. Work progress is monitored carefully by teachers, so that a student does not risk falling behind. Health and safety issues and parental concerns in the context of a distance learning school. All occupants of the Brooks House participate in quarterly fire drills.
8. The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year that is not less than that required of a public school serving the same grades.

Oak Meadow's application materials include a detailed breakdown of the number of instructional hours for each grade level. For example, Kindergarten spends 540 hours over the 10-month school year; grades 1-4 spend 720 hours; grades 5-8 spend 900 hours. In high school, a full-year course consists of 180 hours, and a semester course 90 hours.

9. The school has a policy on prevention of harassment of students that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy. This policy is clearly stated in the Student Handbook.

State Board Rules for Distance Learning Schools:

- 2234.1 Oak Meadow's business and administrative offices are located in Brattleboro, VT, and are sufficient to meet the needs of the school.
- 2234.2 Oak Meadow follows Vermont requirements for incorporation pursuant to Titles II, IIA, and IIB of Vermont Statutes Annotated. Oak Meadow included a copy of Vermont Secretary of State's Certificate of Merger that Oak Meadow, Inc. became a domestic corporation on January 23, 2007.
- 2234.3 Oak Meadow offers an educational program that is developed and assessed by staff who are other than the parents of the students and who are employed either by the school or under contract with the school. Oak Meadow's educational program has been developed and is continually improved by its faculty and staff, and its curriculum is used widely across the United States by school districts as well as home schooling organizations. The program is assessed regularly by personnel contracted by the Vermont Agency of Education and by representatives of the NEASC Independent School Commission.
- 2234.4 Oak Meadow School has policies and procedures to:
 - (1) Enroll students who reasonably can be expected to benefit from the instruction offered by the program, and

- (2) Measure student progress to ensure that students continue to benefit from such instruction.

These policies and procedures are discussed above. Those students who complete the Oak Meadow program and who earn a diploma have proven to be quite sought after by competitive colleges because of their independent minds and their motivation.

2234.5 Oak Meadow School has policies and procedures to answer student and parent inquiries about programs and services promptly and satisfactorily and to answer specific student academic inquiries in a timely and beneficial way. The Oak Meadow Gateway is an excellent means to access information. In addition, the Oak Meadow application materials contain detailed procedures for resolving parental and student concerns. The school is well staffed to deal with such circumstances.

2234.6 Oak Meadow has policies and procedures for informing students and parents of academic progress on a regular basis. Such policies and procedures are in place. Moreover, frequent student/teacher communication ensures that a student progresses.

2234.7 Tuition:

2234.7.1 Tuition policies including tuition collection practices, are written, clear, and provided to parents in advance of enrollment.

Such policies are clearly stated in writing.

2234.7.2 Oak Meadow School has clear policies on refunds of tuition payments, when students choose not to, or are unable to complete the program of instruction.

Such policies are clearly stated in writing.

2234.7.3 In the event that Oak Meadow School closes, the school has policies for:

- (1) Tuition adjustment or refund, and
- (2) Preservation and release of student records.

Such policies are clearly stated in writing.

Respectfully submitted,
Brian Morgan.
May 9, 2018

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

Cassandra Ryan, Fiscal & Regulatory Compliance Coordinator
479-8545