

**AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont**

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant initial general education independent school approval to serve students in grades K-6 to Red Fox Community School in Manchester Center, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grant initial general education independent school approval to serve students in grades K-6 to Red Fox Community School in Manchester Center, Vermont for a term ending on June 30, 2020.

That the school immediately report to the Agency of Education any change in enrollment, programs, policies, facilities, financial capacity, staffing, or administration during the approval period.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 706c and § 164

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. An independent school may operate and provide elementary or secondary education if it is approved by the State Board of Education.
2. The State Board of Education shall approve an independent school if it substantially complies with Board's rules for independent schools, promulgated as Series 2200 (Independent School Program Approval). Only private schools that are approved by the SBE may receive public tuition dollars.
3. Red Fox Community School is seeking initial general education approval.
4. The Secretary appointed a reviewer to visit the school and make a recommendation as required by SBE Rule 2222.
5. Red Fox Community School is currently operating as a recognized independent school.

6. Steve Lorenz performed the general education review. He described the school facility as leased space in a fairly new and modern facility with a very generous sized classroom, a small entryway, and an administrator's office. Outdoor play space is also generous.
 7. The reviewer found that the minimum course of study as required by 16 V.S.A. § 906 is provided and is well adapted to the age and abilities of the students. It is child-centered with mathematics and literacy at its core. Each child has an individual learning plan.
 8. Red Fox Community School had an enrollment of 12 students on the day of the site visit.
 9. The independent contractor reviewed a notarized summary of the school's financial status for 2017/18, signed by the chair, treasurer and secretary of the board of directors; a current and projected cash flow sheet for the 2017/18 school year; and a three (3) year financial plan/forecast. The contractor noted, "the school appears to be in good financial health for a first year school. The current budget as it is presented projects to finish the school year with a balanced budget. As most new independent schools, the budget depends on tuition revenues. RFCS is running a lean yet efficient school organization. And as with most new, newer and smaller independent schools, there is some reliance on fundraising to bridge the cost gap of educating each child."
- *Please note: the contractor's report references a three (3) year Financial Plan/Forecast. Per past practice, the AOE has withheld financial documents from the SBE information.
10. Red Fox Community School has a policy on the prevention and reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying which is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

COST IMPLICATIONS: None.

VT AOE STAFF AVAILABLE:

Cassandra Ryan, Fiscal and Regulatory Compliance Coordinator, (802) 479-8545

GENERAL EDUCATION REPORT

Background Information

Red Fox Community School (otherwise for the purposes of this report, RFCS) is in its first year of operation and is seeking to be an Approved Vermont independent School for the 2018/19 school year as a kindergarten through sixth grade. The RFCS philosophy is to educate students through a progressive approach to be independent thinkers, creative problem solvers, and engaged, respectful community members. In its first year, the enrollment of RFCS is 12 students. In their second and third years, the RFCS is anticipating 18-24 students with an eye to equal numbers of male and female students. The school is currently drawing students from Manchester, Bondville, Sandgate, Sunderland, Danby and East Dorset.

The mission and description of the school is stated clearly on their website and is the same as in the application. The mission and philosophy of the school was capably articulated by all staff and faculty.

The school governance model as described in the application is accurate. The RFCS is incorporated as a Vermont non-profit with a Board of Directors, a Board of Faculty, two advisors and a developing Parent Teacher Association.

Daily Program:

The daily program includes all the subjects and special classes one would expect in a school setting including but not limited to: basic communication skills including reading and writing; mathematics; physical education and health education; English, American and other literature; Science; art education; and citizenship, history, and government. Weekly field trips on Fridays reflect what is being taught in science and social studies and are school wide and theme based. Four times a year there are school sponsored Saturday activities for parents and students.

The daily routine allows students to work individually, in small groups and as an entire class. Student learning is facilitated by a lead teacher, an assistant teacher and the school administrator/director of academics.

School Site Visit (schedule included)

This reviewer arrived at RFCS just before 8:15 a.m. I was greeted by the Director of Academics and Administration, and met the lead teacher and assistant teacher. I was given a tour of the school facility and I was then able to interact with students and parents during the arrival/drop off time. The Administrator, Samantha Krasny and I then met to review policies, handbooks, paperwork and to review the AOE checklist. I found all to be not only in order but very detailed and comprehensive. I have attached to this report the RFCS Community Handbook and the RFCS Emergency Plan.

The schedule allowed me to attend all school meeting and observe work time in the classroom with some initial teacher instruction and directions. My time also included meeting individually with the lead teacher, assistant teacher and for an extended time with two members of the board of directors. The visit, which ended at 12:15 pm, allowed me ample time to see the

philosophy of the school in action and to get a sense of the commitment to learning by the students and faculty.

Description of Facilities

The RFCS is located in a leased space in a fairly new and modern facility. The space includes a very generous sized classroom (comfortable with ample room for 12 students), a small entryway, an administrator's office and a bathroom. The interior of the building allows for handicap accessibility, while the entrance way can be made accessible with a slight modification when the need arises. Outdoor play space is generous. The facility is more than adequate to meet the needs of the students and meets state and federal health and safety regulations. Plans for expansion for the 2018/19 school year are noted below.

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

The minimum course of study, as prescribed in 16. V.S.A § 906, is provided and documented in the RFCS application and is well adapted to the age and abilities of the students.

RFCS has aligned its curriculum and course of study to the Common Core. The curriculum is designed to meet the individual needs of each student. It is child centered with mathematics and literacy at its core. Each child has an individual learning plan.

The school's pedagogy, while reinforcing basic skill sets, goes beyond the teaching of the basics and core subjects. As noted in their application and witnessed by this reviewer, the school's tenets and methods of instruction promote the freedom to develop naturally while fostering individual interests and curriculum that is connected to real world applications. The teachers serve as guides and look to educate the whole child (socially/emotionally, physically and academically). The school does this by using a number of instructional methods, which is coupled with a strong collaboration/partnership between school and home.

Staffing: Adequacy; Qualifications; Professional Development

The number of staff and faculty at RFCS is currently three people. The team consists of a lead teacher, the assistant teacher and the Director of Academics/Head Administrator/teacher. Two of the staff are the co-founders of the school. As the school expands next year, they expect to add faculty and staff as needed. Staffing is more than adequate at this time.

The teacher, administrator and teaching assistant have, in all cases, college degrees with two of the three with advanced degrees. Their resumes were available and complete. All have had prior teacher experience. My observations and interviews indicated a high level of skill and knowledge, a collaborative spirit, and respect for individual learning styles of each of the students at the school.

Professional development needs are met via faculty meetings, monthly off campus networking/inquiry group meetings with members of other schools, and in-service a week before and after the school year.

Financial Stability and Capacity

RFCS in its application included a notarized summary of their financial status for 2017/18, signed by the chair, treasurer and secretary of the board of directors. A current and projected cash flow sheet for the 2017/18 school year was included as well. The school appears to be in good financial health for a first year school. The current budget as it is presented projects to finish the school year with a balanced budget. As most new independent schools, the budget depends on tuition revenues. RFCS is running a lean yet efficient school organization. And as with most new, newer and smaller independent schools, there is some reliance on fundraising to bridge the cost gap of educating each child. To this end, the school is conducting a modest Annual Fund Campaign to raise the \$20,000 needed to finish the school year with a balanced budget and they are already at 50% of their goal.

I met with the current Chair of the Board of Directors, Maxine Linehan and Board Member Courtney Callo (long time staff member at The Long Trail School) to discuss the immediate and long term financial future of RFCS. They assured me to the best of their ability that RFCS has a promising future based on the niche they have created in the educational market in their region. To that end upon my request, they have supplied a three (3) year Financial Plan/Forecast that is included in this document.

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 969 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. I was so impressed with the depth and breadth of these for a first year school that I have attached them to this report.

School Improvement Plans:

In anticipation of growth from 12 students this school year to 18 to 24 students for the next two school years, the school will be expanding in its current building and adding: the current spin studio (which will be their community and multipurpose room), the main entrance and lobby (which will be their new entry and mudroom), the current office and the "couch room" will also be part of the school. In addition, there is another space upstairs, which will be used as the second classroom. The complete space also includes two restrooms.

Summary and Recommendation

RFCS provided an incredibly in depth and detailed application. The site visit was informative and gave me a complete picture of the current school and future plans. Meeting with the lead teacher, assistant teacher, the lead administrator and two board members was helpful in getting a sense of their commitment to excellence, the strengths and the challenges of the school, the financial stability of the school now and as it moves forward, and the schools alignment with Vermont AOE guidelines for Independent Schools. RFCS is intent on growing a lean and sustainable organization that will offer a unique educational option in their community/region.

My time in the classroom gave me a sense of the happiness, joy and engagement of the student body. There was a real evidence of a community of purpose and adherence to the mission throughout the school.

RFCS meets the most important of AOE standards and requirements for an Approved Vermont Independent School. I recommend that the SBE grant initial GenEd Independent School Approval for grades K-6 to RFCS located in Manchester Center, Vermont for a period of two years ending on a date to be determined by the SBE.

Respectfully submitted,

Steven Lorenz