

2017/2018**Needs Assessment for Academics****Mission:**

The mission of Vermont School for Girls is to provide a caring and safe environment where all students have the opportunity to acquire the academic and social/emotional skills needed to realize and maximize their potential and earn credits towards their high school diplomas. As an academic program within a residential treatment facility the goal is for our students to achieve maximum growth in a relatively short period of time and to transition into a less restrictive environment. Our academic program is committed to aligning our curriculum with the Vermont State standards, i.e., Common Core Standards, New Generation Science Standards and the C-3 Framework for Social Studies Standards.

Background:

In late fall, 2012, the Vermont School for Girls, then known as the Bennington School, was at risk of closure, and the State of Vermont DCF approached the Becket Family of Services (BFOS), an allied group of nonprofits that includes Mount Prospect Academy (MPA) and Becket Academy (BA), nonprofit agencies based in NH and Maine, respectively, about the possibility of operating the school. The respective Boards of BA and MPA maintain an alliance to share purchasing (insurance, software, etc.) and share resources, most notably back office finance and accounting services, business consultation, marketing, etc. Because MPA was primarily responsible for serving Vermont students at its locations in NH, its management team, led by Jeff Caron, President & CEO, took a lead in the Bennington School project, with support from BA personnel in the business office.

In less than 60 days, BFOS developed and implemented a state-approved plan to operate the Bennington School, in order to continue the availability of this resource for its students. On January 1, 2013, ownership of the Bennington School was transferred to a newly formed Vermont nonprofit corporation (Vermont Permanency Initiative, Inc.) seeded with working capital and other needed startup funds from BA in the form of a low interest (3%) loan, with the understanding that MPA would oversee the governance and management of VPI going forward. An initial interim rate was agreed upon with the Division of Rate Setting based on the limited cost data available relative to the operation of the former Bennington School.

Because of the limited time frame and general inability to conduct full due diligence, the basic operational model and facilities of the former Bennington School were necessarily “inherited” with the exception of its administrative team. Long-time employees Ralph Bennett and Lee

Gallagher were asked to assume the Program Director (responsible for day to day operations) and Clinical Director roles, under the CEO's oversight.

The VPI team was challenged, as one would expect, during this initial period by priorities such as transitioning and supporting a concerned group of employees who had been living for several months with the fear of losing jobs and changing administration, as well as significant deferred maintenance issues associated with the neglect of prior administration. Initial efforts to borrow monies to support program improvement were stymied by the lack of financial data, the reputation issues associated with the name "Bennington School" and the unexpected promulgation of new rate setting regulations that, in essence, limited the ability of management and finance teams to project needed debt service coverage ratios to support bank lending. This has led to significant additional investment in the program by the BFOS. A maturing VPI is currently close to developing its first direct banking relationship independent of the resources of its affiliate companies. This loan will enable the Vermont School for Girls to further renovate those portions of the main campus which still are in need.

Initial Needs Assessment and Responses:

Notwithstanding these challenges, the Vermont School for Girls has been able to steadily move forward to improve academics. Relative to the school itself, the management team was able to assess initially that the following were priority needs:

1. Full – time, on – site day to day leadership in the school (versus an inherited model where a SPED Administrator provided one day a week oversight);
2. Basic facility improvements (roof, doors, HVAC, etc.);
3. Hiring and development of highly qualified staff; and
4. Engagement of school as part of a broader 24 hour therapeutic community.

This initial needs assessment effort was led by Jeff Caron with the support of Lee Gallagher, Clinical Director, Ralph Bennett, and others, most notably Susan Kimmerly (former contracted school director who remained with us to provide ongoing Title I services). In the 2013/14 fiscal year, our efforts to address these fundamental issues began in earnest. More specifically,

1. Kathy Houran was hired to serve as a full-time, on-site SPED Director;
2. Lenny DaRosa was promoted to serve as our Academic Director;
3. Staff throughout the agency began to be trained in ARC and related competencies designed to create a consistent and common framework to work with our students;
4. Facility improvements were made to the campus to establish a YOGA/Mindfulness Center and a Music classroom;
5. Focused hiring resulted in substantial progress towards developing highly qualified teachers across competency areas;

6. Expanded relationship with a local arts center to enhance our art program.

By the end of the 2014/2015 school year, most of these initiatives showed progress, and our academic team was able to begin focusing more on teacher and curriculum development. Our new SPED Director began to work with our local school district to access Title II funding, and curriculum / teacher development efforts took place in 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 in school-wide embedded reading competency and writing competency.

Further curriculum focus began in the 2016/2017 period with a review of the Next Generation Science Standards and the mapping of those standards with our existing curriculum. This resulted in the purchase, in June of 2017, of a new science curriculum for the 2017/18 school year. Additionally, a review of the C-3 Framework for Social Studies Standards has been underway since September 2017 with an anticipated rollout of a new Social Studies curriculum in 2018/2019. Teacher development continues as well through teacher training being conducted by Rick Reardon, Director of Education at Castleton State College, in the areas of Universal Design & Differentiated Instruction.

Agency of Education Feedback:

We have viewed the Vermont AOE as a collaborative partner in our efforts and welcomed the reports and feedback so that this feedback can inform our future strategic planning. We have had ongoing dialogue with AOE representatives in our efforts to enhance our staff qualifications. We are pleased to have an opportunity to present ourselves and our work to the Board firsthand and to respond to your questions.

The Vermont School for Girls has come a long way in a short time. It is not surprising that Peter Gilmore, the author of the AOE report, highlighted our curriculum as needing improvement, since this is something we identified and have focused on during our own internal processes. Although we are not clear what Mr. Gilmore means by our need to focus on “modern” instruction, we have already identified our plans in the area of Universal Design and Differentiated Instruction and accordingly are making efforts to challenge our teachers towards what we believe are more “modern” approaches to instruction. Our efforts to embed reading and writing across our curriculum and our focus on experiential learning are other examples of the “modernization” of our curriculum. We do not present our program as a finished product and anticipate years of ongoing and continuous quality improvement.

In response to Mr. Gilmore’s recommendation, we also have developed a new strategic planning team. Current membership of the team includes:

Dr. Richard Reardon, Director of Education, Castleton State University (Teacher Training & Curriculum Consultant)

Jeff Caron, M.Ed., CAGS, President/CEO

Ralph Bennett, Executive Director

Kathy Houran, SPED Director

Lenny DaRosa, Academic Program Director

Don Collingsworth, Licensed Teacher

Jay Wolter, CAO (Finance)

At our last meeting, we determined that we will be looking more closely at the use of technology in our school, which presents unique challenges. One of our members is reaching out to a contact at the Massachusetts College for Liberal Arts with expertise in this area. The Committee has also asked Dr. Reardon to further assist the staff of the Vermont School for Girls in examining the current curriculum being utilized to provide instruction leading to the successful completion of Vermont's Graduation Proficiencies and Performance Indicators.

Specific goals and objectives have also been framed. We agreed that instructional practices will continue to promote personalization for each student and enable students to successfully engage in the curriculum and meet graduation requirements. Classroom instruction will include a range of research-based instructional practices that most effectively improve student learning, as identified by national and Vermont guidance and locally collected and analyzed student data. Through the development of the professional development modules, we are looking to ensure that the written and delivered curriculum at the school is aligned with the standards approved by the VT State Board of Education. We are dedicated to having supports in place that allow students to engage in rigorous, relevant and comprehensive learning opportunities that allow them to demonstrate proficiency in literacy, mathematical content and practices, scientific inquiry and content knowledge, global citizenship, physical and health education, as well as meeting the expectations of the transferable skills of communication, collaboration, creativity, innovation, inquiry, problem-solving and the use of technology.

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