

TO: EQS Subcommittee
FROM: Dr. Sharon Howell
Head, St. Johnsbury Academy
DATE: December 8, 2022
RE: Comments on Act 1 Advisory Group Recommendations

St. Johnsbury Academy (SJA) is a NEASC accredited independent school serving 920 students in grades 9-12. The original mission of the school at the time of its founding in 1842, was to serve the youth of St. Johnsbury. We still do that, and 279 of our students are from the town of St. Johnsbury—but over the years we have expanded to serve students from over fifty other towns in the Northeast Kingdom region, which is among the most rural in the state. We have also had an international boarding school for over a hundred years, and we currently have 180 students who come from around fifteen states and over twenty-five countries. Other SJA highlights include:

- 120 teaching faculty, 70% with at least a master's degree
- Student:faculty ratio of 8:1
- Average class size of twelve
- Four full-time mental health counselors
- College and career guidance staff
- 220 academic classes, including 30 Advanced Placement classes
- Career and Technical Education
- The full spectrum of special education services; have implemented multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)
- Dual enrollment and flexible pathways
- Restorative justice program
- Strong interscholastic and club athletic program with fifty-two teams and twenty-three sports
- Faculty sponsored clubs, currently twenty-one, available after school and on weekends for any students who wish to participate
- Reading and writing lab to focus on literacy and expand our capacity to test for neuro-divergence; partnering with local districts to make SJA resources in this space available

The Act 1 Advisory Group recommendations are aligned with those of SJA. The NEASC standards also stress the importance of these shared goals to support diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) in our schools and SJA has had a very robust focus on these issues. For example, the last NEASC 10-year comprehensive accreditation report we received before I arrived in 2020 had as a major recommendation that we think about how we support diversity across the board, and we have taken that very seriously. It was an important spur for

the school, and we were just able to report in our 5-year review that we have made gains and continue to make gains in this area, adding equity, inclusion, and belonging to the mix.

The best way to describe what we are doing currently is a comprehensive review or audit of our institutional commitment—we have engaged a consultant to help us look at everything we do, including governance, hiring, discipline, public relations, curriculum, student programs, and responsive classrooms. We are working on a new strategic plan and Equity and Access is one of our pillars. We have a faculty, staff, parent, and student focus group working to develop recommendations for our strategic plan, and one of those will be the recommendation to our Board that we develop a strategic plan specifically for DEIB, to approach it from every perspective. A group of our educators attended the AISNE Diversity conference. These efforts are critical to SJA's ability to continue to be a great school, and to respond to the needs of our students who face discrimination in the larger world, and who hope and expect that we will create a safe environment for them.

One impetus for improvement in this area was a consciousness on the part of NEASC five years ago that we needed to make progress. The system of accountability the NEASC process creates is an excellent one to which we are committed. The NEASC standards and process are more directly tailored to an independent school governance model. If there are elements of the Act 1 Advisory Group recommendations that are not considered to be addressed within the NEASC standards, SJA would welcome the opportunity to discuss how best to incorporate those elements into a Vermont-specific addendum to the NEASC standards. The State Board of Education already recognizes NEASC as a measure of quality and accountability for purposes of approval. It makes sense to continue to rely on the accreditation mechanism to address the Act 1 goals for accredited independent schools.

We do not support broad application of EQS to independent schools. The EQS go far beyond the Act 1 goals and do not recognize our differences, for example, faculty requirements. In addition, imposing EQS on accredited independent schools would add unnecessary complexity and duplication of effort, and therefore divert resources from our ongoing process of evaluation, self-improvement, and delivery of high-quality educational services to all students.