

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

**TEAM:** School Finance

**ITEM:** Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of independent school approval to Okemo Mountain School, Ludlow, VT, to serve students in grades 5-12?

**SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

**That the State Board of Education grants renewal of independent school approval to Okemo Mountain School, Ludlow, VT, to serve students in grades 5-12. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2022.**

**Approval is subject to the condition that the school immediately report 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:** Title 16 V.S.A. § 166(b)

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

1. Okemo Mountain School (OMS) in Ludlow, VT is a winter sports academy which seeks to challenge and support motivated student athletes. OMS serves students in grades 5-12 and offers two program options. The first option is a traditional school-year program, which maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year which is not less than that required of a public school serving the same grades. There were no students enrolled in the traditional school year program in 2016-2017. Okemo Mountain School's second option is a five-month winter term program. The school is currently serving 45 students in the five-month winter term program. The school serves both Vermont and out of state students. OMS is dedicated to delivering a rigorous academic program while providing an intense on and off snow training schedule. All this is balanced with a caring and supportive community culture. Okemo Mountain School facilitates the curricula of each winter-term student as sent from their sending schools. Any student who does not receive a curriculum from his/her sending school follows the OMS curriculum. The school is headed by a dynamic, dedicated administrative team; a skilled, talented staff; and a strong, supportive Board of Directors. The school recently celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

## **2. School Site Visit**

This reviewer arrived at OMS just before 10:30 am and left the site at about 3:45 pm. The visit consisted of meeting the Head of School to review the application and to review policies and financial information as well as a general discussion about the school; a tour of the facility; three classroom observations; three interviews with teachers and a brief meeting with one of the Academic Deans. Upon return of the students from their on- snow training which occurs from 7:30 am to 11:40 am, students had lunch and then went to their academic classes which consisted of 8 periods of 37 minutes each starting at 12:20pm and ending at 5:37 pm. Students were happy, focused, eager and attentive. They were polite and courteous to their peers, the staff and to me a visitor. With after school assignments and homework these young people put in a 10-12 hour day.

## **3. Description of Facilities**

The main OMS building is located at 53 Main Street in Ludlow, Vermont. The building, which is in very good condition and meets all state safety and facility regulations, is housed in a converted Inn of 7,000 square feet. The building contains all administrative offices, academic classrooms, common spaces, lockers, a science lab, computer room, kitchen, bathrooms, ADA accessible classrooms, and a small library. Okemo Mountain School temporarily leases an athletic/fitness training facility for dry land trainings and collaborates with Okemo Mountain for on-snow training and races. The school has recently been granted approval for a state of the art and tastefully designed athletic/fitness training facility to be built on their campus.

## **4. Minimum Course of Study and Required Assets**

A minimum course of study of learning experiences adapted to a pupils age and ability in the field of basic communications skills etc. was evident and is approached in a very unique way at OMS. The school facilitates the curricula of each student as sent from their sending school. The goal for OMS students to continue to work at the same level as their sending school peers and transition seamlessly back into their sending school classes at the end of the winter term. Any student who does not receive a curriculum from his/her sending school follows the OMS curriculum, which is aligned to Vermont State Standards. As evidenced by the curriculum OMS submitted in their 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 IEP's or 504 plans. The fact that all instruction is delivered with a teacher/student ratio of one to one or one to two/three students makes adapting curriculum a standard aspect of the program delivery model.

**5. Staffing: Adequacy; Qualifications; Professional Development**

The administrative, teaching and coaching staff number 28 full and part time. The resumes that were submitted with the application and available during the visit indicated that all administrators, teaching staff and many coaches held bachelor degrees and advanced degrees combined with many valuable life experiences. My observations and interviews indicated a high level of expertise, passion and collegiality. All stakeholders I talked with knew the mission, the core values and educational objectives of the school. All resumes were included in the application and on site. All job descriptions were available and are located in the Staff Handbook. Professional/Personal Development opportunities were encouraged. Many are available to staff via orientation meetings, in-service trainings, staff meetings and an agreement with the supervisory union that OMS teachers can attend school district professional development opportunities. I was impressed by how many staff took it upon themselves to seek their own personal and professional growth opportunities and that the school required all staff to be trained, using the AOE resources, as mandated reporters.

**6. Financial Capacity**

Included in the application was the 2014 - 990 Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax. Upon the reviewers request the school also presented the 990 Return for 2015, which is included in this report. In the past the 990 has been accepted as evidence of financial capacity and my recommendation upon study of this 990 return is to accept it as acceptable to determine capacity once more. The return in fact, shows a school that is very strong in terms of its current finances and has a history of the same.

**7. Student Attendance and Assessment Records. Fire Drill and Safety Records.**

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

**8. Operating Schedule; Number of Instructional Hours.** 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, while being in attendance for 96 days of the school year ( 5 month term )

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

Review of the school's parent/student handbook reveals that the school has developed policies for health and safety, admission, discipline and more. The school has a policy on prevention of harassment that is as stringent as the Department's model policy and based on the same.

**10. School Improvement Plans.** The school has plans for a training and fitness facility (as mentioned previously) that will allow students to train on campus rather than traveling into the village.

## **Summary and Recommendation**

Okemo Mountain School represents a unique model of education that has been successful for 25 years. It is a student-centered school that represents best practices in academic, physical, and social education in a ski academy setting. It meets the AOE standards and requirements for an Approved Vermont Independent School.

The school was visited on January 25, 2017 by Steve Lorenz, a GenEd contracted consultant. Mr. Lorenz is recommending that the SBE grants renewal of GenEd independent school approval to Okemo Mountain School located in Ludlow, Vermont for a period of five years.

**COST IMPLICATIONS:** none

### **STAFF AVAILABLE:**

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