

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve a maximum of 40 students in grades K-12, in the disability categories of Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Learning Impairment, Developmental Delay, and Emotional Disabilities to Cornerstone School, St. Johnsbury, VT?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve a maximum of 40 students in grades K-12, in the disability categories of Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Learning Impairment, Developmental Delay, and Emotional Disabilities to Cornerstone School, St. Johnsbury, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2021.

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)
State Board Rule: 2228 et.seq.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. Cornerstone School is currently an independent, non-profit day facility providing educational, therapeutic, and reintegration services for up to 40 male and female students in grades 2-12. The school has formally applied to add grades K-1 and Developmental Delay to their programming in 2016. In the 2016-2017 school year, students in grades 9-12 will be relocated to a nearby NFI facility, The Arlington School, so that there will be space available for the introduction of grades K-1. Accepted students are in need of specialized services in a self-contained classroom due to academic and emotional difficulties which interfere with their ability to function in the traditional school environment. The mission of the school is to build a safe trusting, and responsible community in which students are encouraged to

take risks, rise to challenges, fulfill expectations and support each other. Cornerstone School is operated by Northeastern Family Institute of Vermont (NFI), Inc. in conjunction with Northeast Kingdom Human Services.

2. Cornerstone School was last granted approval by the State Board of Education on September 21, 2010 through June 30, 2015.
3. Cornerstone School was visited on behalf of the Secretary of Education by Peter B. Gilmore on January 29, 2016.

GENERAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The description of the school in the application, and on the admissions brochures is accurate. The mission of the school is clearly presented and serves as the guide for all aspects of life at the school.
2. The course of study is adequate to meet the educational purposes of the school and does provide a minimum course of study that is age and ability appropriate. The school makes available the support services necessary to meet the requirements of a minimum course of study and its educational purposes including (a) library services through books on site and access to the internet, (b) administrative services and facilities including on site administrators, computer databases for tracking information, emergency and safety plans, set schedules, etc., (c) counseling services including an elaborate array of on-site counselors, public school system liaisons, therapists etc. and (d) a trustworthy system of record keeping both electronic and paper that are stored in safe, inaccessible files in the cloud or on site.
3. The school has the classrooms and facilities necessary to carry out its mission and program. Housed in the former Portland Street School, the main building is aging but appropriate for the size of the student body and the program. There are enough classrooms for each of the four grade levels, and with the movement of high school-aged students to The Arlington School, there will be space available for the introduction of grades K-1. Each of the teachers and administrators has sufficient office space, and support services such as individual and group therapy, and IEP team meetings, are offered within appropriate meeting spaces beyond classrooms as well. The building meets relevant health and safety standards as represented by updated Certificates of Occupancy (CO). The recent improvements of new, triple-sealed windows and new flooring are welcome additions that add to the quality of the facility. More of these improvements are necessary and planned for the future. The school uses a fleet of three vans to provide bus service for their students to and from school, and for field trips as needed. The one area specifically outlined as a need is for more technology facilities for the classrooms and trainings in its use for the teachers.
4. The school employs a professional staff in sufficient number who are qualified by training and experience in the areas in which they are assigned. All staff has at least a bachelor's degree in their field of instruction and many hold Masters degrees in related areas. In such a small school environment staff is expected to participate in varied ways

and perform duties in addition to their classroom or administrative expectations. These involve covering field trips, monitoring lunch times, attending school events, etc. The current staff performs these and all duties with a wonderful sense of “esprit de corps” not found in many such institutions. The professional development at Cornerstone is healthy and constant. Teachers are invited to attend sessions with fellow NFI teachers, experts are brought in to present new techniques, and staff is encouraged to obtain higher degrees through a new tuition assistance program. There is little question that the school is dedicated to self-improvement in this area.

5. The back office administrative systems at Cornerstone are secure, comprehensive, and appropriate for the running of the organization. On and off-site databases serve as secure storage for admissions and contact information, daily attendance along with all biographic information on students and families, academic records, immunization records, performance tracking, etc. The school is part of a larger non-profit organization that maintains an extensive accounting system of accounts payable, accounts receivable, budget tracking, audits, and payroll. Review of the recent budget and audit, and a lengthy phone conversation with the Business Manager, assured that all is financially intact at the school and within the larger organization.
6. Cornerstone School has a policy on the prevention/reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency’s model policy.

The Cornerstone School presented as a warm, healthy, and successful organization that is committed to both the students and families in the school community as well as self-improvement in the many areas of school life. The students appeared happy, dedicated, and appropriately challenged. The staff spoke of loving their jobs and the environment in which they work, appreciating the mission of the institution, and respecting the administrators that make it happen every day. It is easy to see how this positive atmosphere reflects the hard work of these dedicated professionals, and how it flows to the children in their care.

SPECIAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

Special education policies, procedures and staff licensures were reviewed. All policies and procedures are aligned with special education regulatory requirements. This includes policies in regard to discipline, suspension and expulsion, and the school’s least restrictive environment practices which fully align with federal and state regulations. Unless otherwise stated within the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), Cornerstone’s graduation requirements, by policy, are identical for all students. All special education staff hold appropriate and current licensure for the positions they are assigned.

Cornerstone School staff coordinates and communicates with the student’s Local Educational Agency (LEA) through the referral process, the development and revision of the student’s programming and services, as well as the reevaluation of students for special education eligibility through their participation at the student’s IEP and Evaluation Planning Team meetings. In addition, the Cornerstone staff invites Local Education Agency representatives to attend the school’s planned activities for parents and students that enable the LEA to remain in

contact with students and families during the time they are placed in a program outside of the local school district operations. In transitioning students back to their sending LEAs or other general education programs, great care is taken to ensure the path is a purposeful and positive experience for the student, the families, and the receiving LEA staff.

The Cornerstone School is currently approved for the disability categories of: Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, and Emotional Disturbance. The school seeks to continue serving students with these disabilities and add the category Developmentally Delay, as they expand their current grades of 2 through 12 to also include grades K-1.

In the special education site review of the school, conducted on February 9, 2016 by VTAOE Program Coordinators Alicia Hanrahan and Ernest Wheeler, it was noted that staff has received numerous professional development opportunities to address both the academic and functional performance needs of these students. The entire school incorporates a positive behavior management system which identifies and rewards positive student behaviors witnessed throughout the school day. The Cornerstone central philosophy of "Regulate Before You Educate" is a strong and vitally important component to their success as a school and in their meeting the individual needs of each of their students.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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