

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont

TEAM: Legal Division

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

RECOMMENDED ACTION: That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general education independent school approval to serve students in grades K-6 to The Downtown School of Manchester Center, VT. This approval is for three years through June 30, 2018.

This approval is also subject to the condition that the school immediately report to the Agency of Education whenever any changes occur in policies, programs, facilities, financial capacity, staffing, or administration during the approval period.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: Title 16 V.S.A. §166 (b)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. The Downtown School's mission "...promotes exceptional academy achievement, intellectual flexibility, deep learning, creativity, and whole-child growth through authentic, experience-based curriculum that creates a landscape for learning out of the world around us." The Downtown School serves students in grades K-2. The school plans to add a grade a year to eventually be able to serve students in grades K-8.
2. The Downtown School is located in Manchester Center. The lowest level of the building is a walk-out English-style basement and is the main entrance to the building. This level serves as an entry/mudroom/cubby area and also a space for movement activities and large-scale projects. The first floor consists of a large room that is the Kindergarten classroom, another room for grades 1/2, and the library. The second floor has a music and movement room, an art room, and administrative offices. The majority of indoor time will be spent on the main floor. The entire campus is approximately four acres and features two barns, a blacksmith shop, a pond, large fields, vegetable gardens, and multiple varieties of trees. At the rear of the property, there is a short trail to the Manchester Recreation Center. A copy of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO) for the facility is on file at the Agency of Education.

3. The minimum course of study, as prescribed in 16 V.S.A. §906, is provided and adapted to the learning style, age and abilities of the students. The curriculum is interdisciplinary and inquiry based; the learning is skills-based. The teachers have clear goals and standards regarding the skills their students will achieve each academic year, with the year planned with benchmarks and checks along the way with reflection leading to adjustments, changes, and differentiated learning to create successful outcomes.
4. The Downtown School is staffed by a full-time Founder/Head of School, a full-time kindergarten teacher, and a full-time 1st/2nd grade teacher. Both teachers have a Master's degree and at least 12 years of teaching experience. The staff is qualified by degree, training and experience for their assignments.
5. On behalf of the Secretary of Education, The Downtown School was visited by Alicia Hanrahan and Pat Pallas Gray on Thursday, September 11, 2014. There were 12 students enrolled on the day of the visit. Chris Case visited the school on May 28, 2015.
6. The Downtown School 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.
7. The Agency of Education conducted a review of financial capacity. The applicant is in its second year as an approved independent school. The initial approval for Downtown School expired on June 30, 2015. Downtown is in "startup" mode right now, and is running a deficit. This deficit was forecasted, and is close to the deficit that was projected by the school, at the beginning of the prior fiscal year. The school received a loan from a Director to cover expenses in the 2014-2015 school year, and has access to up to another \$300,000 from this same director. Downtown School does not expect a need for this amount of loaned monies to support FY 2016 operations, but it is available, if needed. These loaned monies are being loaned to the school interest-free and without loan payments until such time as the school is in a financial position to begin paying back this loan, per a written agreement. Downtown is engaging development efforts and other long term planning to secure its financial position. As those efforts evolve, a 3 year approval term, for this approval cycle, is recommended by AOE to the State Board.
8. The Downtown School has a policy on the prevention/reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

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