

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of general independent school approval to serve students in grades K-8 to the Upper Valley Waldorf School in Quechee, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general independent school approval to serve students in grades K-8 to the Upper Valley Waldorf School in Quechee, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2022.

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

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

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Upper Valley Waldorf School is a Preschool through eighth-grade school with 154 students. There are 110 students in grades 1-8 and 44 students in the early childhood program. The school was founded in 1991 and recently celebrated its 25th birthday. The school program is based on the educational beliefs and tenets of Rudolf Steiner. The Waldorf curriculum offers a classically inspired education that integrates the arts and music with rigorous academics. The Upper Valley Waldorf School prepares students to engage with a changing world, in a socially inclusive environment, using curriculum rich in the sciences, humanities and arts, and is based on the Rudolf Steiner's insights into Child Development. The Upper Valley Waldorf School is currently seeking accreditation through the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, accreditation through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and is also conducting a major Capital Campaign.

The school has a unique and effective three-fold governance structure, comprised of a Governance Council, Pedagogical Leadership Core Group, and a Board of Trustees. The faculty, as a whole and through its committees is responsible for the pedagogy, the delivery of the education and the welfare of the children in its care. Within the faculty there are two main bodies that govern the school-The Pedagogical Leadership Core Group (PLCG) and the Governance Council. The PLCG works to support the faculty and staff in pedagogy that deepens the understanding of child development and educational principles. The Governance Council is empowered by the Board of Trustees, and the Faculty and Staff to research and create

policy, and to provide day-to-day management and decision-making on behalf of the school. The Board of Trustees is responsible for the financial and legal aspects of the school. Within this governance structure the school utilizes the Administrative Director for support.

Affiliations: The school is currently a developing member of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America and is a full member of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN). The early childhood program is licensed by the Agency of Human Services' Licensing Division.

Daily Program: The Early Childhood Program provides consistent daily and weekly rhythms, emphasis on human interaction, nutritious whole-food snacks, festivals and celebrations, experiential and sensory activities, practical life skills, outdoor play and nature exploration. In the first through eighth grade program two hours of each day are reserved for the main lesson, which consists of three or four week blocks of in-depth primary academic study infused with art, music, movement, and storytelling. These blocks allow students to work deeply in the subject matter. Midday and afternoons include lessons that require more focused physical activity or that engage the feelings - such as physical education, art, practical arts, music, and foreign-language study. An extra main lesson may also be part of the end of the day, to reemphasize the morning work.

School Site Visit

This reviewer arrived at the Upper Valley Waldorf School First – Eighth Grade Building just before 8:15 AM. I was greeted by the Administrative Director, Christine Scherding. She accompanied me to the Friday Assembly. I was then taken on a tour of the Frist through eighth grade building by the Director of Admissions, Lori Parent, as she was touring prospective parents. For the remainder of the morning I was able to observe a craft and story event, and then interview two subject teachers (French and Movement), observe the recess program and part of a Movement class. I then had the opportunity to interview two teachers (Grade 3 and Grade 7) before lunchtime. During lunch I did a records and policy review with the Office Manager, Jeannie Surrell. I was then toured by the Administrative Director to see the Early Childhood Center and the Administrative Building. The afternoon finished with interviews with the Administrative Director, the Early Childhood Director, the Plant Manager, the Human Resources Manager and the Director of Admissions.

Description of Facilities

Upper Valley Waldorf School is set on a hilltop overlooking the village of Quechee, VT on 3.2 acres. The school occupies the former Quechee Grammar School and houses grades 1-8, some administrative offices and Hand Craft/Arts Room. The Roberts House is a classroom building for the Early Childhood Program: Kindergarten, Nursery, and Parent Toddler program (Morning Garden). There is currently a mobile classroom for the fifth grade and a farmhouse type building housing the woodworking shop, administrative offices a therapeutic and tutorial room and community meeting space. There is also playing field, two playgrounds, a wooded area, and vegetable garden.

Minimum Course of Study and Required Assets 16 V.S.A. #906.

A minimum course of study is adapted to a pupil's age and ability in the fields required by statute, and was evident at Upper Valley Waldorf School. A detailed description of the curricula was submitted in the UVWS 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 may come with IEP's or 504 plans. Academic support services are provided by a dedicated "Educational Support Teacher". The school works closely with the public school district to develop and support ISP's for students in need. In general the curriculum is purposely designed to be broad and comprehensive and structured to respond to and enhance the developmental phases in childhood in an individualized manner.

Staffing: Adequacy; Qualifications; Professional Development

The number of staff and faculty at Upper Valley Waldorf School number 26 and are comprised of administrative and teaching staff, subject teachers, classroom teachers teaching assistants, before school and after school program directors etc. The job descriptions (roles and responsibilities and resumes) were available, complete and up to date. All teaching staff and many administrative staff have college and university degrees and are trained/certified Waldorf teachers. In addition many hold Vermont professional teacher licensures. My observations and interviews indicated a high level of skill knowledge and practice of the school's philosophy and core values, understanding of the curriculum, a collaborative spirit, and respect for individual learning styles of each of the students at the school. All stakeholders I talked with knew the mission, the core values and educational objectives of the school.

The Professional Development program and in-service opportunities are some of the best I have seen offered in any Vermont independent school. The UVWS's Governance Council has delegated the oversight of professional development and the evaluation of teachers to the Professional Development Group (PDG). The PDG identifies appropriate professional development consultants/evaluators to pair up with the teachers. The PDG helps plan professional development and in-service training opportunities and receives requests for, and approves the use of, continuing education funds and professional development days provided as a benefit to salaried teachers. New teachers receive a full two-day observation/ evaluation by an outside consultant.

Teaching staff, supervision and evaluation is also overseen by the Governance Council and the Professional Development Group. This system of teaching staff evaluations is one that should be, in my opinion, emulated by schools throughout Vermont. There is an evaluation schedule outline in the Employee Handbook. The system requires that teachers and administrative staff be evaluated by an internal peer evaluation using a 2-3 year cycle and teachers by an outside evaluator as well on the same schedule. The PDG prioritizes support for teachers new to the school and new to teaching. New teachers are observed/evaluated for a full two days by an outside consultant.

Financial Stability and Capacity

The Upper Valley Waldorf School submitted with their application and had on site, an independent auditors report as of and for the years ended June 30, 2016 and 2015. The school, traditionally has an auditors report done annually.

Student Attendance and Assessment Records.

Fire Drill and Safety Records. These records were reviewed and found to be in very good order.

Operating Schedule; Number of Instructional Hours.

The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year of 1,050.50 instructional hours and schools days of 175 per year.

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

Review of the school's handbook and emergency and safety procedures reveal that the school has developed policies for health and safety, admission, discipline and more. The school has a policy on prevention of harassment, mandatory reporting of child abuse (as well as training) and all other policies required and desired to operate a school efficiently, effectively and safely.

School Improvement Plans

The school is, at the time of this visit, on the verge of ending a 2.5 million dollar capital campaign for a variety of campus/facility improvements including:

- *4-classroom middle school building (removal of 2 classroom modulars)
- *Main entrance canopy
- *Upgrades to the heating system and improvements for fire/safety purposes
- *Improved access to driveway from Bluff Road
- *Building efficiencies to minimize energy costs
- *program flex and breakout spaces

Summary and Recommendation

I would like to thank and commend the staff and teachers of the Upper Valley Waldorf School and in particular the Administrative Director, Christine Scherding for a particularly detailed and content laden application, a very well scheduled site visit and for their work on behalf of families and children attending their school. The Upper Valley Waldorf School is a mission driven school that provides an education for its students that meets and adheres to the tenets of Rudolf Steiner in a way that offers a high quality learning experience. The Upper Valley Waldorf School meets the AOE rules and requirements for an approved Vermont independent school. I recommend a five-year renewal.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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