

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of independent school approval, to serve students in grades K-8, to Hilltop Montessori School, Brattleboro, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of independent school approval, to serve students in grades K-8, to Hilltop Montessori School, Brattleboro, VT. 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 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:

Hilltop Montessori continues to thrive as it provides an alternative option for students and families in southeastern, Vermont. Founded in 1972, the school remains very strong financially and has a student population of 128 from toddler to 8th grade. This is very near maximum capacity. The school abides by its mission: "For students to attain responsible independence". The Head of School Tamara Mount shared that there is some discussion about revising the current mission statement to include the aspect of community, which is very much ingrained in the culture of the school. The school's educational objectives and pedagogy is predicated upon the need to allow each child to come to learning in accordance with his or her own pace, style, and rhythm. Student progress is measured over the span of three year developmental stages so as to allow for the developmental ebb and flow of growth to take its course. The school remains affiliated with the North American Montessori Teacher Association and the American Montessori Society.

The Board of Trustees governs the institution. The Board supports and oversees the mission of the school specifically while determining and overseeing policy, fiscal stability, fundraising efforts, strategic planning and the hiring, supervision and evaluation of the Head of School. The Board also approves personnel policies, salary scales and benefits programs while appointing certain committees, serving as a liaison with parents and general oversight of the school's property and investments. The Head of School oversees the academic program,

staffing, supervising, and evaluating the 22 teachers and assistants. There is an administrative team of six who support the Head of School in the areas of curriculum, enrollment, finances, attendance, facilities and more.

Steven Lorenz visited the school on February 15, 2017, and was greeted by Tamara Mount the Head of School and was introduced to most of the administrative staff. Tamara then toured him around the facilities. Steven then observed an elementary classroom during which he was engaged by both students and teachers. Steven also had the opportunity to observe a middle school math lesson and visit with the teacher and some students afterward. He also had the opportunity to meet with and interview Finn Campman, a long time Middle School teacher, and Dan Filler, the Director of the Elementary Program.

Description of Facilities

The school sits on a high hill with 43 acres of land that students use for a variety of activities. The three main buildings are 20,000 square feet of new and renovated classroom and administrative facilities. There are two light filled primary classrooms that directly open out onto the gardens, play space and fields. There is one classroom for lower elementary and one for upper elementary united by shared studio space for art making, woodworking and creative project undertakings of all types. The two middle school classrooms are a blend of old and new. The new addition contains 2,000 square feet of classroom, project and multimedia space as well as the program's art studio.

Minimum Course of Study and Required Assets

16 V.S.A. #906. A minimum course of study and learning experiences are adapted to a pupil's age and ability in the field of basic communications skills etc. was evident at Hilltop. A detailed description of the curricula was submitted in the Hilltop 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. Teachers have been trained and credentialed to deliver the curriculum that was developed by Maria Montessori. The curriculum integrates art, music, dramatics, and technology into the typical academic subjects that are delivered both indoors and outdoors. There is also a focus on the social and emotional skills so critical to the whole child's development. Reading the detailed description of the curriculum in the application and observing classrooms leaves me with no doubt that this curriculum aligns with the Vermont Framework and Standards and Common Core State Standards.

Staffing: Adequacy; Qualifications; Professional Development

The number of administrative staff at Hilltop is six (6) and the number of fulltime and part time faculty and assistants at Hilltop is twenty two (22). The job descriptions (roles and responsibilities and resumes) were available, complete and up to date. Steven's observations and interviews indicated a high level of passion for and understanding of the curriculum as well as expectations for continued professional development and personal improvement. Staff and faculty Steven talked with knew the mission, the core values and educational objectives of the school. Professional Development was expected and opportunities are presented and

encouraged. There is a budget designated for professional development for each program. Every staff person participates in several training sessions, conferences, school visits and more yearly. Each year staff have an evaluation when they and their supervisor identify professional development goals at the beginning and the end of the school year. Hilltop staff and faculty are invited to the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union in-service and trainings and to Montessori Conferences yearly.

Financial Capacity

Included in the application was the 2016 CPA Financial Summary and at the time of the visit the 2015 CPA Financial Audit was on file as well as the 2016 - 990 Form and Balance Sheet/Statement. According to the 2016 Balance Sheet the school is on extremely solid ground in terms of its Financial Stability and Capacity.

Student Attendance and Assessment Records. Fire Drill and Safety Records. These records were available and in order.

Operating Schedule; Number of Instructional Hours.

The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year of 1,103+ hours and school days of 175+ per year.

Policies: Admission, Health and Safety, Discipline, Harassment/Bullying. Review of the school's parent/student handbook, staff/faculty handbook and emergency and safety procedures reveals that the school has developed policies for health and safety, admission, discipline and more. The school has a policy on prevention of harassment and all other policies required and desired to operate a school efficiently, effectively and safely.

School Improvement Plans.

There are plans to continue maintaining and improving the existing facility.

Summary and Recommendation

Hilltop Montessori School provides a unique and wonderful opportunity for students and families to experience a very high quality educational experience. Set in southeastern Vermont, an area rich with a variety of diverse educational choices, Hilltop Montessori School is attended by not just students/families who are seeking a Montessori style education but by students/families who are seeking an education that fosters: inquiry and exploration and a multi-disciplinary curriculum that requires initiative, problem solving skills, and the personal integrity to work to one's fullest capacity. This is a collaborative learning community that encourages students, staff and faculty to develop, share and acknowledge individual strengths and skills.

Hilltop Montessori School meets the most important of AOE standards and requirements for an Approved Vermont Independent School. I, Steven Lorenz, recommends that the SBE grants renewal of general education independent school approval to Hilltop Montessori School located at 99 Stafford Farm Hill Road in Brattleboro, Vermont 05301 for a period of five years.

Hilltop Montessori continues to thrive as it provides an alternative option for students and families in southeastern, Vermont. Founded in 1972, the school remains very strong financially and has a student population of 128 from Toddler to 8th grade. This is very near maximum capacity. The school abides by its mission: “For students to attain responsible independence”. The Head of School Tamara Mount shared that there is some discussion about revising the current mission statement to include the aspect of community, which is very much ingrained in the culture of the school. The school’s educational objectives and pedagogy is predicated upon the need to allow each child to come to learning in accordance with his or her own pace, style, and rhythm. Student progress is measured over the span of three year developmental stages so as to allow for the developmental ebb and flow of growth to take its course. The school remains affiliated with the North American Montessori Teacher Association and the American Montessori Society.

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This reviewer arrived at the Hilltop Montessori School at 9: 15 am. I was greeted by Tamara Mount the Head of School and was introduced to most of the administrative staff. Tamara then toured me around the facilities. I then observed an elementary classroom during which I was engaged by both students and teachers. I also had the opportunity to observe a middle school math lesson and visit with the teacher and some students afterward. I also had the opportunity to meet with and interview Finn Campman, a long time Middle School teacher, and Dan Filler, the Director of the Elementary Program.

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FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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