

Community Schoolhouse - Renewal & Amendment Request

Independent School Review Report General Education & Special Education - January 10, 2023

Submitted by Independent School Review Teams:

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Site Review Scope of Work and Purpose

This report will address independent school renewal and an amendment request for Community Schoolhouse to request the addition of a high school program. The required applications were submitted to the Agency of Education in a timely manner including corresponding supporting documents. The school has met all State Board of Education requirements under Rule 2227.

General Education

Community Schoolhouse is seeking renewal as a therapeutic school and at this time, is also requesting an amendment to their approval status, to add a high school program for students in grades nine through twelve. Community Schoolhouse's administration is seeking to enroll sixteen high school aged students during the 2023-2024 school year.

Community Schoolhouse currently operates a therapeutic day school for a maximum of 30 students in grades K-8. Enrollment of an additional 16 high school students will bring total enrollment student census to 46 for the upcoming school year. Community Schoolhouse also operates a short-term residential stabilization and assessment program, which is licensed by the Department for Children and Families (DCF), to serve a maximum of six students ages 5-12.

This renewal and amendment request specifically addresses the renewal of Community Schoolhouse's therapeutic day school, the therapeutic classroom utilized for the residential students, and addition of a high school program. The school will continue to operate on a school-year calendar.

The Agency's review team met with Community Schoolhouse staff to conduct a review on Tuesday, January 10, 2023. Interviews were held at the school's location in Brattleboro, Vermont. Staff members present for interviews were the principal, the special education coordinator, licensed special educators, classroom instructors, the program manager and instructors for the classrooms which serve the residential children placed by DCF/DMH.

School Philosophy & Educational Objectives

State Board of Education Rule 2226.2, 2226.5

School Philosophy

Community Schoolhouse's program philosophy is dedicated to creating a safe, structured environment to educate and support students who have experienced significant childhood adverse experiences. The renewal application states that, "...it is our belief that children deserve to feel understood and accepted in a secure and structured environment and to this end, it is our duty to make sure that our school provides the external controls needed to achieve this. Our program also strives to help children increase their self-esteem and sense of control in order to reach their academic potential." (Source: Community Schoolhouse General Education Renewal Application, 1-10-23)

Program Objectives

Community Schoolhouse's learning objectives are posted on the school's website and published in staff and parent handbooks. Program objectives include, "...structured, predictable, yet challenging and engaging [school-wide] environment designed to recognize and meet the needs of individuals and support the whole child. We strive to maintain high academic and behavioral expectations."

Central to Community Schoolhouse's learning opportunities is to ensure students return to their sending schools using "a variety of teaching methods, learning opportunities, behavioral programs and by creating connections with others and relationships."

School Enrollment

16 V.S.A. §166(b)(4), State Board of Education Rule 2226.3

Community Schoolhouse's K-8 day school is approved to serve a maximum of 30 students from kindergarten through the eighth grade. At the time of the site review there were eight Vermont students and thirteen New Hampshire students enrolled in the day program. There were four Vermont residential students being served in the classroom for the residential children.

Students in the day school are publicly placed by an LEA through an application process. The principal, and other appropriate staff members review submitted applications and final enrollment decisions are made collaboratively by the principal and the education director.

Enrolled students have either an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan, and LEAs provide Community Schoolhouse with this information as part of the application process. The high school program, once approved, will follow the same enrollment process.

The school's website and handbooks have been updated to include non-discrimination policies that align with State Board of Education requirements.

Governance

State Board of Education Rule 2226.4

Community Schoolhouse is operated under a 501 (c) (3) known as Community House; and Community Schoolhouse is overseen by a Board of Directors. The Executive Director provides financial management and overall program management and development. The program director provides administrative leadership and therapeutic services oversight. The Principal of the day school provides the supervision and management of the day school. Currently there are seven members on the Board of Directors.

Minimum Course of Study & Required Assessments

16 V.S.A. §166(b), State Board of Education Rule 2226.5

Community Schoolhouse employs a variety of instructional methods to ensure students access their educational goals and IEP/504 Plan requirements such as: direct instruction, project-based learning, one-to-on individualized support and traditional classroom methods. When appropriate peer tutoring is utilized during small group instruction and student-centered activities.

Curriculum is appropriately developed, implemented, and assessed by age, grade, and ability level in grades K-8, and in the residential program for students aged five through twelve. Instructors incorporate visual, auditory and utilize technology to ensure students comprehend assignment instructions and learning objectives during class activities. The Agency's review team members found that Community Schoolhouse's curriculum meets State Board of Education requirements for Minimum Course of Study under Rule 2226.5 by age, grade, and student ability level.

Community Schoolhouse has developed a program of studies for its high school program. It utilizes text and online resources based upon the Common Core State Standards to deliver a program of studies which aligns with the standard graduation requirements. Members of the review team reviewed Community Schoolhouse's high school curriculum and found that it meets Minimum Course of Study requirements by age, grade, and ability level, including graduation requirements.

Community Schoolhouse students participate in required state assessments.

Professional Staff

State Board of Education Rule 2227.5, 2227.5.2

Community Schoolhouse's instructors meet professional staffing qualifications under State Board of Education Rules 2227.5 and 2227.5.2. Community Schoolhouse's staff engage in annual professional development during in-service days in August and throughout the school year.

Additionally, staff development is supported by tuition funding to access specific professional development in their area of responsibility. Staff members work with the principal to engage in regular evaluation and annual professional goal setting. The principal requires all staff to attend professional development opportunities during in-service days. Training is based upon an examination of student behavioral, learning and achievement data from the previous school year and includes annual refresher for mandatory reporting, CPR/First Aid, and review of policies.

Staff engage in daily progress review meetings with classroom teachers, special education teachers, clinicians, and other relevant personnel. Student progress is reviewed on behavioral data and academic assessments to inform treatment programming.

Currently three classroom teachers are licensed in special education, with a total of six special educators on staff. The day school has a licensed clinical social worker and a reading specialist. An outdoor education instructor leads classes and provides time for individual projects.

Each staff member of Community Schoolhouse interviewed was able to articulate effective processes for adapting curriculum to meet individualized student IEP goals and social/emotional/behavioral objectives. Effective methods for providing direct instruction in

traditional class setting, small groups or as part of intensive one-on-one programming aligns with student IEPs, 504 Plans and treatment goals.

Community Schoolhouse's administration will advertise and hire qualified high school staff upon being approved to serve secondary education students (see addendum section of this report). The principal has contacted the Independent School Team to receive guidance on hiring potential new staff, in particular, the staff qualification review conducted by the AOE. All new high school staff members will receive mandatory training prior to the start date, as well as undergo required fingerprinting, and child/adult registry background checks.

Staffing Safeguards:

Background checks are conducted prior to the start date for all newly hired employees. Fingerprint-supported criminal record checks and Vermont adult/child registries have been completed for all administrative staff, instructors, support staff and clinical staff. Background check documentation is available for review upon request.

Community Schoolhouse has adopted the Agency of Education's hazing, harassment and bullying policies and they are included in the staff and family handbooks. Procedures for these policies are reviewed with all students and staff annually in August.

Mandatory Reporting Procedures:

Community Schoolhouse has implemented and published mandatory reporting procedures and expectations are outlined in staff and family handbooks. Staff participate in the required annual refreshers and policy requirements for mandatory reporting during August in-service staff development.

Facilities

State Board of Education Rule 2226.6(2),(3)

Community Schoolhouse is located in a residential neighborhood at 135 High Street and 10 & 24 Oak Street in Brattleboro, VT. 135 High Street is where the residential classroom is located. The day school is located at 24 Oak Street and the back wing of 10 Oak Street. It is divided into four classrooms allowing an opportunity to group students by grade/age and developmental level. Additionally, the renovated historic carriage house on the property provides multi-purpose space for break out lessons, meetings, therapeutic recreation groups, and larger school gatherings. All buildings are handicapped accessible to the first floor. There also is a large fenced-in playground, a picnic area, and a paved outdoor space for basketball and four-square court.

The heating, ventilation and fire systems are inspected annually prior to the start of the school year. Evacuation signage is prominently displayed at all egress points throughout the building.

A Certificate of Occupancy (CO) is on file for all the facilities used for the day program and for the residential classroom.

The high school will be located at 80 Linden Street. It was a professional office building, and it has undergone renovations to meet occupational standards for school buildings. Community Schoolhouse worked with an architect to design the layout of the school, which includes four large classrooms, five smaller breakout rooms, and a library/reading area. The principal's office will be located in the back carriage house. All permits, Certificates of Occupancy, and licenses are going to be forwarded to the AOE's Independent School Team.

Health & Safety

Community Schoolhouse staff facilitate student fire and emergency safety evacuation protocol drills monthly. A log that records the date of each drill and student attendance during drills is kept in the main office. These protocols will be duplicated at the building serving the high school students.

Designated staff members are trained or participate in annual refresher for CPR and First Aid. New staff members meet with school staff certified to provide CPR/First Aid instruction to receive training in emergency responses.

Nursing Services, Medications, and Immunization Records:

Community Schoolhouse does not employ a licensed nurse. The principal utilizes local emergency services, if needed. A designated staff member administers over the counter and any required student prescriptions. Administration of medications is logged and all medications, including over-the-counter meds, are secured in a locked file cabinet. Parent/guardian medical permission forms are filed in each student's file as well as up-to-date student immunization records.

Hazing, Harassment & Bullying Policies

Community Schoolhouse has adopted the Agency of Education's hazing, harassment, and bullying policy, which is published in each of the school's handbooks. Staff are updated on the policy during annual in-service training in August.

Financial Capacity

Community Schoolhouse provided a copy of its audited financials, which evidence that Community Schoolhouse has the financial capacity to operate for the period of approval, including the addition of the high school program.

Special Education

Based on the Rules for Special Education Approval for Independent Schools, the special education team finds that the Community Schoolhouse has met criteria for the renewal of their approved status.

The Community Schoolhouse was visited by representatives from the VT AOE on January 10, 2023. During the visit, Agency staff interviewed school staff, toured the residential and day

treatment school buildings, observed staff/student interactions in and outside of classroom settings and conducted student file reviews.

The following State Board of Education rules were reviewed for compliance:

2229.2 Staffing

Community Schoolhouse demonstrated that it has the staffing to meet state and federal special education standards. In spite of the pandemic, which has brought staffing challenges to many schools throughout the state, Community Schoolhouse has been able to maintain a very low staff to student ratio, which allows for ample differentiation and individualized attention. In addition to the teaching and support staff, the school is equipped with clinical and behavioral staff as well.

2229.3 Assurances

Community Schoolhouse has demonstrated an understanding of the provision of a free and appropriate public education in accordance with federal and state law, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and characteristics and educational needs associated with the categories of disabilities under federal and State law.

Community Schoolhouse maintains and implements policies and procedural safeguards and parental rights, including discipline procedures.

Community Schoolhouse implements the IEPs of enrolled students, provides the required services, and appropriately documents the services and the student's progress.

The day treatment program at Community Schoolhouse has two Vermont licensed special educators, including the director, and one licensed elementary teacher whose special education endorsement is anticipated. Together, they serve up to 32 students.

The residential classroom is led by a classroom teacher who is licensed in Vermont for both elementary education and special education. This teacher oversees a maximum of 6 students at any given time (given the residential placements, students are admitted and discharged in a fluid manner). The practices in place for ensuring effective collaboration between the residential classroom and the residential program were impressive and the results of that collaboration were not missed by AOE staff who witnessed these efforts.

Related services such as speech language, physical therapy and occupational therapy are arranged through the students' LEAs.

Community Schoolhouse evidenced communication with the responsible LEAs in the development of IEPs, need for IEP changes, student progress, maintenance of the student's enrollment, an identification of suspected disabilities. While reviewing student files, the AOE team members found some elements were missing but the principal was able to phone the LEAs

and get those documents faxed over within minutes. Community Schoolhouse staff have fostered a collaborative relationship with the LEAs they serve, as evidenced by the efficiency with which these contacts occurred.

Community Schoolhouse is committee to participate in dispute resolution as provided under federal and state law.

Approval Recommendation

The Agency's Independent School and Special Education Teams recommend to the Secretary of Education a five-year renewal of Community Schoolhouse to operate as an approved therapeutic school, including approval of the amendment request to add a high school program. Community Schoolhouse has met all requirements to operate as an approved therapeutic independent school under State Board of Education Rules serving students in kindergarten through twelfth grade in the day program, and for ages five-twelve, in the classroom for residential students.

August 14, 2023 Addendum

Since the original drafting of this report, Community Schoolhouse's administration has successfully completed the hiring process for the proposed high school program. All content area instructors are qualified to teach in their areas of assignment. Staff credentials, resumes and transcripts have been reviewed and approved by responsible AOE staff members.

The high school facility is completing renovations to meet the requirements for educational occupancy. A copy of the Certificate of Occupancy will be sent to the Agency upon issuance. Students are not allowed in the facility until the CO is issued.