

Site Review

Renewal– Southshire Community School

Independent School Review Report General Education

Site Review Conducted - May 10, 2022

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Site Review Scope of Work and Purpose

The Southshire Community School submitted its renewal application in a timely manner meeting State Board of Education renewal requirements under 2227.

General Education

State Board of Education Rule 2226.2

Members of the Agency's Independent School team met with Southshire staff on, May 10, 2022. Interviews were conducted at the school located in North Bennington, VT. School staff present for interviews were the head of school, two general education content area instructors and an elementary education instructor.

School Philosophy

Southshire Community School was founded in 1987 by community members interested in creating a school focused on community involvement and implementing a student-centered curriculum. Parents are integral to the operation of the school's facility, academic growth, and sustainability of the program's mission. The school describes its philosophy as providing "Emergent curriculum [which] allows for a child's interests and needs" to direct access to educational materials. "As themes emerge, teachers develop curriculum that reinforces the child's interests while expanding the scope of inquiry. Children gain information and develop skills in a manner that has personal meaning and is relevant and useful to them. They remain active participants in the learning process, and view learning as natural and enjoyable. They see that others value their interests and ideas. They build self-esteem while developing themselves as students."

Program Objectives

At Southshire Community School "Teachers observe students during periods of self-directed [engagement], such as activity time and recess, to help identify areas of demonstrated interest and patterns of inquiry. [Teachers] meet regularly to discuss observations, plan curricula, and write narratives to describe students in context and elucidate the qualities of individual learners. Together, observation and narrative guide the creation of curriculum based on demonstrated interests and an expectation of academic excellence."

School Enrollment

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

The Agency's independent school team confirmed that Southshire Community School's enrollment is currently 27 students, kindergarten through the eighth grade. Students at the school are enrolled by parents/guardians through a committee review process.

An enrollment committee is comprised of the head of Southshire Community School, members of the governance board and the school's instructional staff. Final enrollment decisions are made by the head of school.

Parents/families are required to fulfill several requirements deemed essential to the enrollment process. The school's website posts admissions criteria as:

- “Parents complete the application for admissions and meet with a teacher to discuss their child.
- The child visits the classroom and independently participates in at least one day of school.

Supplemental prerequisites for admission include:

- The child's needs and abilities are compatible with the composition of the group the child will be joining, and consistent with the school's capacity to serve its students.
- Parents are willing to be active members of the school community.
- Parents are comfortable with the philosophy and teaching practices of the school.”

Information provided by parents as well as the child's classroom visit inform how the Southshire Community School's admissions committee makes its enrollment determinations. The admissions committee strives to maintain a balance in the composition of student groups to ensure meeting the needs of each student.

Southshire Community School is committed to diversity and ensuring the school is affordable to all interested families. Southshire Community School has a written anti-discrimination policy declaring that the school “does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, gender, religion, or national or ethnic origin in the administration of its educational, admissions, or employment policies or practices.” This policy is the core principle that guides the enrollment committee's work.

Governance

State Board of Education Rule 2226.4

Southshire Community School's Governance Board is comprised entirely of parents and serve a term of 3 years. New board members are elected by all parents whose child is enrolled in the school. Governance Board members take a regular and active role in the daily running of the school, fund raising, oversight of business management, and development of academic programming. Parents often provide academic enrichment opportunities as well as spear head fund raising events. The head of Southshire Community School reports directly to the Governance Board.

Minimum Course of Study & Required Assessments

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

Southshire Community School's academic program is based upon common core standards. Students are also provided with opportunities to attend classes in fine arts, performing arts, cultural studies, music, outdoor education, environmental studies, and student designed high interest learning activities. The school follows a traditional calendar and is open for 178 days.

Instruction is delivered using several modalities, in-person small group activities, a traditional classroom setting, individualized project-based learning, one-on-one direct instruction, outdoor education, and community-based education programming that utilizes community partners to enrich academic program goals in all subject areas.

Core classes are scheduled for 45 - 60 minutes daily by qualified instructors or qualified volunteers from the broader community who have a professional specialty that supports the school's curriculum.

The Agency's independent school team observed classes in English, middle school algebra, and a first and second grade elementary class. During classroom observations, the AOE independent school team identified evidence that instruction methods support the school's stated philosophy and academic objectives. Additionally, each class observation demonstrated methods for addressing appropriate multi-grade, differentiated instruction, as needed, to ensure skill and cognitive development of each child. Methods of instruction and authentic assessment were reflective of measurable student progress and aligned with Minimum Course of Study requirements to address age and ability needs of each student.

Professional Staff

State Board of Education Rule 2226.8.1

All Southshire Community School's instructional staff are qualified to teach in their area of specialty. One of the s instructional staff members has a master's degrees and two are currently licensed in VT. Formal regular classroom observations are conducted by the head of school and inform professional development planning collaboratively between the instructor and head of school.

Teachers take an active role in developing the school's curriculum and incorporate grade level transitions. Cross and integrated disciplinary curriculum development ensures that student learning is consistent and developmentally appropriate. Authentic assessment integrates individualized learning student achievement with more traditional elements of the academic program.

Staffing Safeguards & Mandatory Reporting

State Board of Education Rules 2227.12

Interviews with the Southshire Community School's instructors and the head of school revealed that staff have completed fingerprinting and child/adult abuse registry background checks, and verification forms for each staff member are included in official staff files. Parent volunteers have also undergone fingerprint and abuse registry background checks.

Southshire Community School has a published mandatory reporting policy that includes a list of procedures with accompanying expectations in the current staff handbook, which complies with 16 V.S.A. § 251-260. The head of school conducts annual training in mandatory reporting during August in-service professional development.

Health and Safety, Nursing, and Immunization

State Board of Education Rules 2226.7

Southshire Community School has formal plans in place for fire drills and shelter in place protocols for ensuring student safety during times of crisis. The head of school, instructors and Board members are currently engaged in developing active shooter policies for conducting monthly drills to meet the psychological needs of elementary students.

All staff and parent volunteers receive annual training in First Aid and CPR. Medical equipment and first aid kits are easily accessed throughout the building, including fire extinguishers. Emergency exit posters and maps are prominently displayed and include easy to read and understand graphic instructions.

Southshire Community School does not employ a school nurse and does not administer any student medications. Student files include parent/family medical emergency release forms and current student immunization records.

Hazing, Harassment & Bullying Policies

At the time of review, agency personnel confirmed that Southshire Community School has adopted the Agency of Education's policies and protocols for hazing, harassment, and bullying. Any incidents are addressed through required confidential meetings with involved students and their families. Robust restorative justice practices and outcomes provide a bridge between the Agency's policy and the school's principles on community engagement.

Facilities

State Board of Education Rule 2226.6(3)

Southshire Community School is housed in a renovated, handicapped-accessible farmhouse on 2.5 acres. The farmhouse was the former Cutler and Coleman Farms respectively and was the first building in North Bennington.

The school's main floor has a total of seven rooms that are used for classrooms, weekly community circle meetings, a kitchen, a woodshop, library, art/game room, and a cubby area. An old barn formerly used for storage, was renovated, and turned into a fine arts studio, Science Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) classroom and an additional community space. Funds for the renovation were raised by parent volunteers and the governance board's fund-raising committee. A certificate of occupancy for the renovated building is on file at the Agency of Education. Open green space surrounding the main schoolhouse and renovated barn is utilized as an inviting play/recreation space and as an outdoor classroom.

Financial Capacity:

State Board of Education Rule 2226.9

Southshire Community School submitted to the AOE a copy of its annual audit report and profit and loss statement, indicating the school has met rule 2226.11 requirements and has the financial capacity to conduct its educational purposes for the period of approval.

Renewal Approval Recommendation:

The Agency's Independent School team recommends renewal of independent school approval for Southshire Community School to the Secretary of Education. The head of school, governance board and staff have worked diligently to meet all State Board of Education requirements. The school's academic program, restorative practices and unique model for student centered learning have garnered a high level of support throughout the broader community and fosters regular engagement of family members to enrich student learning and ensure academic success.