

**State Board of Education
June 20-21, 2016
Item c13**

**AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont**

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve a maximum of 50 students ages 11-21 in grades 7-12, within the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance, Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Intellectual Disability (mild), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning) to Centerpoint School, Winooski, VT?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve a maximum of 50 students ages 11-21 in grades 7-12, within the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance, Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Intellectual Disability (mild), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning) to Centerpoint School, Winooski, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2021.

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: Title 16 V.S.A. §166(b)
State Board Rule 2228 et seq

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Centerpoint School is a comprehensive adolescent day treatment program that works in collaboration with Northeastern Family Institute-VT, The Baird Center for Children & Families/HowardCenter for Human Services, and Matrix Health Systems. Through this collaboration, Centerpoint School offers an integrated therapeutic approach to the academic, social, and emotional development of each adolescent and families with whom they work. Brian Morgan visited the school on behalf of the Agency on May 5, 2016.

GENERAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. Centerpoint School was last granted renewal of general and special education independent school approval by the State Board of Education on January 17, 2012, through June 30, 2015.
2. Description of facilities.

The Centerpoint School now occupies two campuses. Eight years ago the school occupied three locations. 94 West Canal St, Winooski is a former mill building that has been extensively renovated to house the school. Two years ago the school moved to a “house” model. Each of the five “houses”, all named after a tree, comprises a House Leader, a social worker, 4-8 teachers, and 8 students. This model enables the administration to place incoming students according to their needs, and it enables the student

to adopt an identity with his/her small group within the “House”. Each House has its common room, where the group can meet. House Leaders spend 75% of their time on service coordination, supervision, professional development, program develop and leadership and 25% on teaching. 94 West Canal St .is an extensive labyrinth of classrooms, activity spaces, offices, and studios. The floor plans in the application file are an apt illustration of the school. All my interviews took place at this location.

1025 Airport Drive, South Burlington, VT 05401 is the other location, where more of the group-based programming happens. The floor plan of this location is also included in the application file.

Classrooms and studios are well equipped. The music studio has a sizable collection of different musical instruments. The photography studio is very well endowed, and I am happy to report that students begin their photography study by building a pinhole camera! Classrooms are amenable to either 1:1 work or small groups of 4-5. There is also a fledgling library that is growing gradually.

There is not a dining hall *per se*. Food is supplied by Burlington School District and students often take their lunch in their House common room. There is a well equipped kitchen that is used for the culinary arts class.

All in all, the ambience of the school is welcoming and warm. Minus the front office entrance, every door outside and inside of the building are locked and secure to ensure that anyone accessing the building or classrooms is doing so intentionally and safely. All of the spaces in the school are easily exited. There are no seclusion rooms or containment rooms to prevent students from leaving.

3. Minimum course of study as prescribed in 16 V.S.A. §906.

Centerpoint School serves students from six different counties and countless different schools. Most, certainly, are from Chittenden County, but students often arrive with gaps in their educational background. Centerpoint School is by definition, a transitional program, but students can, and often do graduate from the school. There is a 24-credit graduation requirement, and the curriculum is anchored in the Vermont State Standards and a student’s individualized IEP. The minimum course of study complies with 16 V.S.A. §906. The school tailors the educational program to individual students, which is especially important, given the gradual increase in middle school students in recent years.

All courses at Centerpoint School are experiential and personalized, and the school doesn’t use grades on student coursework unless it is relevant to the student’s goals. Course credit is allocated on a quarterly pass/fail basis. There are essentially three modes of assessment: attendance and participation; II. progress towards meeting a standard; and III. demonstration of a product, e.g. a completed project, or even a conference with the teacher.

Teachers report that there is a gradual shift towards proficiency-based learning, which is more appropriate for the students that Centerpoint School serves.

4. Staffing: adequacy; qualifications; professional development.

The application includes a comprehensive list of the Centerpoint School staff with their qualifications. There is no doubt in this reviewer’s mind that Centerpoint School has a superbly qualified, dedicated, and long-term staff at its disposal. That said, the school has provided an atmosphere of wellness and wellbeing for the adult population that enables staff members to function at high energy.

5. Financial capacity and audit.

Centerpoint School has provided an audit in its application, as well as other financial data. Finances are handled by the Howard Center for Human Services. Centerpoint School has a two-fold tuition structure: I. students tuitioned in by school districts, and II. income from Medicaid. There is additional grant funding through Howard Center and the Northeastern Family Institute.

6. Student attendance records. Fire drill records.

Attendance and fire drill records were examined and found to be in impeccable order. There are monthly fire drills. In 2001 fire alarm pull boxes were installed in the school, much to the anxiety of the Executive Director, who feared the worst, given the student population. Incredibly, there has only one instance of a false alarm since 2001. This factoid speaks volumes about the students' sense of belonging and loyalty to this school.

7. Operating schedule. Number of instructional hours.

The application file contains examples of student schedules and instructional hours. Much of the educational program is community-based, however, so hours working at an internship, for example, are counted as instructional hours.

8. Policies: admission, discipline, harassment/bullying.

All these policies are carefully described in the application file, and this visitor found that the policies were borne out in conversations. The admission of a student is rigorous. It begins with a referral, followed by a series of interviews to ensure that Centerpoint School can serve the particular student. The school always carries a waitlist of students, though the length of the list varies.

Discipline is designed to be restorative and community-based. Responses to student behaviors are individualized based on a clinical understanding and their personal development goals. Centerpoint is constantly supporting students to work through behavioral challenges that are presenting and therefore does not use suspensions or expulsions as a response to challenging behaviors. Instead, responses may include interventions aligned with their need to focus on their own goals without impacting others by being out in the community for their coursework.

There is a rigid policy against harassment, hazing and bullying. The entire school operates on relationships, so any anti-social behavior is not tolerated.

9. School improvement plans.

The "House" model that was introduced two years ago has been deemed to be very successful and will continue. While there will be no growth beyond 50 students in the future, the staff is aware that the demographic is changing and that the school must be nimble as it responds to those changes. The current opiate crisis is certainly affecting the community. The growing number of refugees that have been resettled in Winooski poses the question of diversity at the school. There is currently only one African-American student in the school and no speakers of English as a second language. It should be noted that all of the students are on IEPs or 504s. For complex reasons, ELL students and refugees are underrepresented holistically in special education which is reflected in the school's referrals.

10. Summary and Recommendation.

The salient feature of this visit to this remarkable school is the notion of service. The extremely dedicated school staff talks about the students and families whom they serve – incessantly. Given the dedication that they exhibit, the longevity of many of them is all the more remarkable. Renewal of this program is recommended.

SPECIAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS:

Centerpoint School maintains a balance between offering common core aligned academics, special education services, and a therapeutic component essential for students. There are two (2) licensed special educators who provide services to students in addition to being available for all staff when necessary. There were 40 students, ages 11-22, enrolled at Centerpoint School, located on two (2) separate campuses in Winooski and South Burlington, and divided into five (5) groupings utilizing a house system. Students are not grouped by age, but rather therapeutic needs, best fit with program and people, as well as the academic courses necessary for them to return to a home school or graduate from Centerpoint School. Each house has a specific focus which allows flexibility for both students and staff as individual needs change with time and treatment. There are 4-8 teachers in each house which provides students with an adequate amount of instruction and support.

Aspen House is community based and focused on job skills training. *Cedar House* provides lower level academics and generally retains younger students who stay with the program for longer periods of time. *Sequoia House* focuses on group programming with some 1:1 support throughout the week. Academics are at a higher level than other house groups and students here are truly classic emotionally disturbed students with goals to attend a tech center or some classes at their public school. *Magnolia and Maple Houses* are more diverse with students of various capabilities, most need 1:1 attention and have high anxiety issues around school settings.

Centerpoint School staff coordinates and communicates with the student's Local Educational Agency (LEA) throughout the time a student is enrolled. Centerpoint School staff actively participates in the student meetings including therapeutic, IEP and Evaluation Planning Team meetings--from the referral process, the development and revision of the student's programming and services, as well as the reevaluation of students for special education eligibility Centerpoint School staff work to promote collaboration among all parties involved in a student's educational support system.

Centerpoint School is currently approved for the disability categories of: Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, and Emotional Disturbance (mild). Centerpoint seeks re-approval for these four (4) categories, as well as the additional category of Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning).

Special education policies, procedures and staff licensures were reviewed. All policies and procedures are aligned with special education regulatory requirements. This includes policies in regard to discipline, suspension and expulsion, and the school's least restrictive environment practices which fully align with federal and state regulations. Unless otherwise stated within the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), Centerpoint School's graduation requirements, by policy, are identical for all students. In the special education site review of the school, conducted on February 18, 2016 by VTAOE Education Program Coordinator Tonya Rutkowski, it was noted that staff has received numerous professional development opportunities to address both the academic and functional performance needs of these students. Students and staff were both interviewed. One teacher stated that most teachers want to "meet every student with unconditional regard and with conditional response to behavior". Students liked the daily check-in and one

said “Centerpoint is like a regular public school, but structured differently.” While another student stated that he needs the hands-on learning available at Centerpoint School. I think he summed up Centerpoint School in this statement made during our interview – “In order for the human brain to learn, it needs to experience.”

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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