

**State Board of Education
June 20-21, 2016
Item C3**

**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 Southshire Community School, North Bennington, VT?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the Vermont State Board of Education grants renewal of general independent school approval, to serve students in grades K-8, to the Southshire Community School of North Bennington, Vermont. 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 any changes occur in enrollment, programs, facilities, financial capacity, staffing, or administration, during the approval period.

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

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Southshire Community School is a non-traditional, progressive school, where the emphasis is on ‘community’. Founded by parents in 1987, the school is governed by a Board of Directors that consists almost entirely of parents elected by parents. The student body reflects the community, in that parents pay what they can afford, and many parents contribute more than the nominal tuition. The school does, indeed, have a diverse student body – students from mixed economic and social backgrounds, and a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The school serves 29 students aged between 4.5 and 13 years, fourteen girls and fifteen boys. Parents and grandparents volunteer to amplify and enrich the already broad educational offerings. The school strives to inculcate the philosophy of learning for its own sake. Children are given the opportunity to explore their own interests, both individually and in groups, in a safe and stimulating environment. This visitor found a school that was a whirlwind of activity!

On behalf of the Agency, Brian Morgan visited the school on June 2, 2016.

GENERAL EDUCATION REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. Southshire Community School was last granted renewal of independent school approval by the State Board of Education on September 20, 2011 through June 30, 2016.

2. Description of Facilities

Southshire Community School is housed in a renovated, handicapped-accessible farmhouse on 2.5 acres. The farmhouse was the former Cutler farm, and before that the Coleman Farm, and was the first building in N. Bennington. As a note of interest, the upstairs was used originally as a dormitory for young children whose families could not afford to house or feed them, and who worked on the farm in exchange for their board and lodging. In 2004 a 102-year old woman in the nearby retirement home heard that children were again at the former Cutler Farm and came to visit. She reminisced about living at the Farm as a four year old and sleeping in that dormitory. The former dormitory – the upper floor – is now one open space used as a classroom and a group meeting area. The main floor has a total of seven rooms that are used for classrooms, all-school meeting, a kitchen, a woodshop, library, art/game room, and a cubby area. An old barn is currently used for storage. The surrounding acreage makes for an inviting play/recreation space. A certificate of occupancy is on file.

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

A minimum course of study as prescribed is provided and adapted to the age and capacities of the students. While the course of study is experiential in nature and the pathway of learning follows a student's interest and passion, teachers ensure that the VT Common Core and the VT Framework guide the curriculum. There are three multi-age learning groups within Southshire Community School that comprise the student body and as each individual student develops a sound understanding of the skills to which s/he is introduced, s/he progresses into the next level of learners. All students have a one-on-one weekly "check-in" with the teacher who is responsible for supervising the student's learning progress. Each student has weekly goals to accomplish in all areas: independent work, all core subjects, special projects, and social relationships. The student receives feedback focused on his/her learning and receives any support that might be called for. This approach allows students to learn at their own pace. The over-arching goal of the Southshire Community School learning program is that students gain the confidence and skills to advocate for themselves,

4. Staffing: adequacy; qualifications; professional development.

The staff is qualified by degree, training and/or experience for their positions. There are three full-time teachers who are all very experienced and fully qualified. Professional development is a priority and each full-time teacher is entitled to three professional days annually. The school budget allows for professional development. Volunteer 'adjuncts' amplify the core curriculum in areas such as: music, French, yoga, swimming, skiing, and carpentry.

5. Financial capacity and audit.

The school submitted evidence of financial capacity to carry out its program for the period of approval. A notarized letter affirms that the Southshire Community School has operated with an excess of revenues over expenses for each of the past two years. It also states that there are sufficient funds in reserve for the school to function for more than a year, even with zero revenues. In addition to this year's budget, this reviewer also received a copy of the school's very healthy investment account summary, and the FY14 Form 990.

6. Student attendance and assessment records. Fire drill and safety records.

These records were reviewed and found to be in good order.

7. Operating schedule. Number of instructional hours.

The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year that is not less than that required of a public school serving the same grades.

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

Review of the school's *Parent/Student Handbook* reveals that the school has developed policies for admission and discipline. The school has a policy on prevention and reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

9. School improvement plans.

The school hopes someday to be able to renovate the barn that is adjacent to the farmhouse. They have already contracted for a feasibility study to assess such a project.

10. Summary and recommendation.

The Southshire Community School is a vibrant learning community. On the day of this visit the school was humming with activity. Students were busy preparing costumes for their spring play in a week's time, yet they were not too distracted to welcome this reviewer and engage him in adult conversation. An 8-year old, very articulate Henry toured me around the facility and introduced me to many other students. All these students without exception appeared to be very comfortable in their own skin and very happy to be at the Southshire Community School. I recommend that the school be reapproved for the next 5-year period.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

Cassandra Ryan, Finance Analyst
479-8545