

**State Board of Education**  
**August 23, 2016**  
**Item C6**

**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 students ages 5-22 in grades K-12, within the disability categories of Emotional Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Speech or Language Impairment, Developmental Delay, Orthopedic Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Autism Spectrum Disorder to Sheldon Academy, Rutland, VT?

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

**That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students ages 5-22 in grades K-12, within the disability categories of Emotional Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Speech or Language Impairment, Developmental Delay, Orthopedic Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Autism Spectrum Disorder to Sheldon Academy, Rutland, 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 Ruled 2228 et seq

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Vermont Achievement Center (VAC) is a private, non-profit organization that has offered innovative and responsive programs for children and families since 1937. VAC operates Sheldon Academy, which is a multidisciplinary, coeducational day treatment program with the capacity to serve up to 30 students (although 20 is optimal) ranging in age from 5-22 in grades K-12 within the disability categories of Emotional Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairment, Speech or Language Impairment, Developmental Delay, Orthopedic Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Autism Spectrum Disorder. Students at Sheldon Academy all come with an IEP and they are referred by their home school districts as students who are not able to function effectively in a traditional school environment. Sheldon Academy was visited on Tuesday, May 24, 2016 by Brian Morgan. Sheldon Academy was last approved by the State Board of Education on August 9, 2011 through June 30, 2016.

## GENERAL EDUCATION FINDINGS:

- 1. Description of facilities:** Sheldon Academy is housed in the southern-most section of the Vermont Achievement Center building. It consists of two floors laid out in an “L” format. One wing of the main level (1<sup>st</sup> floor) includes the Sheldon Academy administrative offices, a licensed nurse and clinical staff, as well as the VAC’s cafeteria and kitchen. The other wing of the main level houses the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Program and includes two classrooms, an art room, a Therapeutic Advocate’s office, two “thinking-feeling” spaces, and general multi-use space. The lower level (ground floor) includes classrooms for elementary, middle school, and high school students. There is space to expand to a fourth classroom, as necessary. Access to the Sheldon Academy is through double doors located at the West-facing lower level wing. All entrances to VAC and Sheldon Academy are secure, with entrance via electronic pass card only. The facility meets state and federal health and safety regulations and is adequate to meet the needs of Sheldon Academy. A copy of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO) for the facility from the Division of Fire Safety is on file.
- 2. Minimum course of study as prescribed in 16 V.S.A. §906:** The minimum course of study, as prescribed in 16V.S.A. §906, is provided and adapted to the learning style(s), age and abilities of students at Sheldon Academy. Placement at the primary/intermediate level is dependent on social, emotional, and cognitive level of functioning. Sheldon Academy has support services, including individual/group counseling and art therapy, available to meet its educational goals. At the time of the visit there were a total of 19 enrolled students – 7 HS, 5 Elementary, 7 diagnosed with ASD.
- 3. Staffing: adequacy; qualifications; professional development:** Every classroom is staffed by a teacher who is licensed in special education, a counselor, and at least one Therapeutic Advocate. Staff members are supported and overseen by the Director of Education and a Program Supervisor. The staff is qualified for their position and a plan of professional development is in place. The staff is by necessity nimble, given the flux in student population from year to year. For example, this year has seen many fewer HS students than last year, and many more students on the spectrum.
- 4. Financial capacity and audit:** The FY15 Form 990 indicates that the school’s financial status is considerably stronger than in the previous year. Upon examination of the 2015 financial report by its C.P.A. firm, Brian Morgan can conclude that the school is in a stronger financial position than in the previous two years.
- 5. Student assessment and attendance records. Fire drill records:** Student assessment and attendance records were reviewed and found to be in impeccable order. The school conducts fire drills on a regular basis. The most recent, but unscheduled fire drill took place on 5/23/16, the day prior to this visit!
- 6. Operating schedule. Number of instructional hours:** Sheldon Academy maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year, which is not less than that of a public school serving the same grades.

- 7. Policies: admission, discipline, harassment/hazing/bullying:** The Parent Student Handbook, last revised on 3/9/16, includes thorough policies on confidentiality, maintenance of educational records, admission, discipline, and harassment/hazing/bullying. Sheldon Academy's policies are as stringent as the Agency's model policies.
- 8. School improvement plans:** Sheldon Academy is experiencing a tendency towards more younger students and fewer HS students who are being referred. The biggest change since its last reapproval five years ago has been the growth of its ASD Program. The Director of the school sees strength in the school's ability to flex and tweak programs to accommodate student populations that can and do change from year to year. He cites the culinary arts program and access to the VAC swimming pool as advantages in maintaining a viable enrollment.
- 9. Summary and recommendation:** Sheldon Academy is staffed by remarkably dedicated individuals, and its ability to flex and tweak its programs is a gift. I recommend that Sheldon Academy be reapproved for another five year period.

#### SPECIAL EDUCATION FINDINGS:

Sheldon Academy is part of the larger educational community at Vermont Achievement Center (VAC). This relationship with VAC allows access to a greater variety of community resources including the only therapy pool in the Rutland area!

Currently Sheldon Academy, offers a therapeutic day-treatment and special education program for children ages 6 to 22 in grades 1 – 12. Recent referrals have prompted them to request approval to serve students in age 5 or in kindergarten grade and to include additional special education disability categories for these students. Sheldon is currently approved for the disability categories of: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, and Speech Language Impairment. Sheldon seeks re-approval for these six (6) categories, as well as the three (3) additional categories of Developmental Delay, Orthopedic Impairment and Traumatic Brain Injury. Sheldon Academy has the capacity to serve up to a total of 30 students and still be able to maintain a least restrictive environment for all enrolled students. There are two (2) licensed special educators who provide services to students in addition to being available for all staff when necessary. Additionally, Sheldon Academy has enough support staff so that the adult to student ratio is always 1:1 with a very few needing 2:1 adult/student support.

In the special education site review of the school, conducted on May 17, 2016 by VTAOE Education Program Coordinator Tonya Rutkowski, a review of written agreements between Sheldon Academy and the LEA clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of each. Related services are provided by the LEA either through a separate contract with the provider or by sending a school employee to the facility for these services. Sheldon does not offer high school diplomas, but sends progress reports back to each LEA who then issues both the transcripts and diplomas for students. Sheldon Academy staff coordinates and communicates with the student's Local Education Agency (LEA) throughout the time a student is enrolled. They actively participate in student meetings including therapeutic, IEP and Evaluation Planning Team

meetings. In addition, 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.

Their staff works hard to make sure that students get the kind of therapy and educational supervision they need to be successful and independent citizens.

**COST IMPLICATIONS:** none

**STAFF AVAILABLE:**

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