

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 in grades 5-12 within the disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning), Speech or Language Impairment, and Other Health Impairment, Ch.O.I.C.E. (Changing Our Ideas Concerning Education) Academy in Barre, VT?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students in grades 5-12 within the disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning), Speech or Language Impairment, and Other Health Impairment to Ch.O.I.C.E. (Changing Our Ideas Concerning Education) Academy in Barre, VT. This approval is for five years through June 30, 2020.

Approval is subject to the condition that the school immediately report to the Agency of Education whenever any 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:

1. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy is an integrated transitional mental health treatment facility and education center which serves child and youth in grades 5-12 within the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance, Specific Learning Disability, Intellectual Disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder (high functioning), Speech or Language Impairment, and Other Health Impairment. There are a number of therapeutic education services offered at the school. The general high school milieu can serve up to 21 students in a group treatment setting, with the ability to serve six of the 21 students in the School to Work Zone classroom. The School to Work Zone provides small group instruction and behavioral support to youth not amendable to the group treatment available in the general high school milieu. The Individualized Program (IP) can provide individualized

academic and clinical support to up to six students with severe mental health and academic needs. The elementary/middle program can serve up to eight students from grades 5-8. The target population is from the Washington County Mental Health Services' catchment area, although they are willing to serve out-of-county youth on a space-available basis. All children and youth admitted need to fit the 264 criteria for serious emotional disturbance.

2. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy was granted renewal of general and special education independent school approval by the State Board of Education on October 19, 2010 through June 30, 2015. An amendment in May of 2012 enabled the school to add the Zone Program, rather than continuing to operate this program as a separate school.
3. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy was visited on behalf of the Secretary of Education by Alicia Hanrahan, Chris Case, and Tracy Harris on May 26, 2015 and on September 3, 2015.
4. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy is located on the first and second floors of a building owned by Washington County Mental Health Services, Inc. There are seven classrooms through the building. Six classrooms can serve up to seven students. The art room has the capacity to serve up to eight students at one time. There are four smaller rooms available adjacent to each program that allow for students in the group milieus to receive small group or individualized instruction/support, if necessary. There are six individual study rooms in the Individualized Program area of the second floor and one on the first floor for students with more individualized behavioral and emotional needs to use. The second floor has a small library/computer lab which houses multiple computers, books and resource materials to be used by staff and students. Five timeout/relaxation rooms in the school allow the students to have a space to be alone and relax. Each of these rooms is painted with a woodland scene and has one wall coated with chalkboard paint so that the students can process emotion through drawing and/or writing. The "cafegymatorium" is a relatively large multipurpose space available off the kitchen on the first floor for small PE and indoor physical activities. There is a conference room on each floor, a lunch room and kitchen, an Academy store, and a student lounge that is an adolescent friendly, comfortable room, that youth can earn the privilege to spend time in when appropriate depending on their programming. The second floor is handicapped accessible by means of an elevator. A copy of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO) for the facility is on file at the Agency.
5. The minimum course of study, as prescribed in 16 V.S.A. §906, is provided and adapted to the age and abilities of the students. The curriculum was designed following the Vermont Framework of Standards, and is currently being aligned to the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards. Support services, including a basic resource/library computer lab, computers in each work/study room, and various multi-media forms. Clinical and therapeutic services are provided by Washington County Mental Health Services (WCMHS). Other resources in the Central Vermont area are utilized as needed. Related services are provided by the school district(s)

6. The staff includes a High School Coordinator, an Elementary/Middle School/IP Coordinator, a Children, Youth and Family Services (CYFS) Coordinator, ten educational instructors (language Arts (2), math (2), science (2), social studies (2), art and physical education), two licensed Special Educators, a Special Activities Coordinator, a Transitional Services Case Manager, a full-time nurse, and fourteen education support specialist/behavioral interventionists. Mental health clinician and case manager services are provided through WCMHS. The staff is overseen by the Director of Therapeutic Education & After School Services. The staff is qualified by degree, training, and experience in the area(s) to which they are assigned. The school has a professional development program in place for the staff.
7. The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours each year which is not less than that required of a public school serving the same grades.
8. Student health, assessment, and attendance records were reviewed onsite and found to be in good order. Fire drill records were reviewed as well.
9. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy has developed policies for admissions, discipline, and significant change in placement for students eligible for special education. These were reviewed and found to be appropriate.
10. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy's special education staff coordinates with the Local Education Agencies (LEAs) by maintaining educational records, participating in evaluation procedures, development of IEPs and planning for reintegration, implementing IEPs, and providing prior notice to the sending LEAs regarding the need for a change in a student's program or placement.
11. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy has a policy on prevention and reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.
12. Ch.O.I.C.E. Academy has provided adequate evidence of financial capacity in the form of the prior fiscal year audit of its parent organization, Washington County Mental Health Services, Inc., prepared by the accounting firm of Kittell, Branagan & Sargent, Certified Public Accountants. A review of the audit raised no concerns regarding financial capacity.

COST IMPLICATIONS: none

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