

**AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Montpelier, Vermont**

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of kindergarten approval to Mary Johnson Children's Center, Middlebury, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of kindergarten approval to Mary Johnson Children's Center, Middlebury, VT for a term through June 30, 2022; and

This approval is conditional on the requirement that the school reports to the Agency of Education within five business days 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., Section 166 (b) (1)
SBE Rules 2270

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. The State Board of Education shall approve an independent school which offers kindergarten but no other graded education if it finds that the school substantially complies with the Board's rules for approved independent kindergartens, promulgated as Series 2200 (Independent School Program Approval).
2. Mary Johnson Children's Center is seeking renewal of approval as an independent kindergarten.
3. Upon receiving Mary Johnson Children's Center's application, the Secretary appointed a review committee to visit the school and make a recommendation as required by SBE Rule 2222.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

J. Deborah Ormsbee, Independent School Review Coordinator

Independent School Review Report

REPORT

December 6,
2019-
Renewal

Mary Johnson Children's Center

Middlebury, VT 05753

Submitted by

Independent School Review Team Members:

Education Representatives:

J. Deborah Ormsbee & Pat Pallas-Gray



The AOE's independent school review team met with Mary Johnson Children's Center staff on Friday December 6, 2019. Interviews were conducted in the Center's main office located on the first floor of the school building. Personnel present for interviews were the director, school business manager, two classroom teachers, and parent & family outreach program coordinator. Additional staff present during Agency program review were the Center's chef, new Human Resources Coordinator and an Executive Assistant.

Mary Johnson Children's Center is currently seeking renewal for their Kindergarten program. Educational objectives are aligned with State Board of Education Rules 2200 Series. The Center's program objectives are as follows:

- Aligned with and compliant under Act 166 program requirements
- The Center has a total of 5 classrooms: infant/toddler, 2 to 3-year-old children, 4- 5 years old and currently serving 18 students in the 4 to 5-year old classroom; which is the maximum number of students allowed for this classroom
- Five students have IEPs and are receiving LEA push-in special education services
- Educational programming is provided 5 days a week, however, some students only attend part-time
- The program meets kindergarten minimum course of study requirements under SBE Rule Series 2200
- Staff implement comprehensive grade level literacy and math based instructional services as well as provide other core content curriculum including art, music, wellness and physical education
- Students have access to specialized services, as needed, such as but not limited to a speech language specialist, occupational therapy, trauma informed mental health services and intensive family-based services and supports
- Mary Johnson's mission is fully integrated into the student curriculum, parent/family engagement activities and professional development opportunities both required of and provided for school staff.

At the time of program review, Agency staff were able to confirm program objectives are aligned with State kindergarten program requirements and strictly adhere to State Board Rules for "minimum course of study" and include: differentiated instruction, project-based learning, Vermont Early Learning Standards, and utilization of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. Trauma informed and social emotional practices to provide additional support for closing student achievement gaps, as needed, are imbedded in all areas of academic learning, behavioral plans

and life skill community-based activities. All School personnel members are trained, annually, on current best practices for core instruction and other program areas as identified by school director, teaching staff, Board members and parents of currently enrolled students.

Kindergarten Application Requirements
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<i>Vermont Rule 2271.1</i>

Mary Johnson Children Center’s application was complete and included all required documentation at the time of submission.

Program Description & Enrollment

<i>Vermont Rule 2272.2, 2272.3 & 2272.4</i>

The Center was developed in 1970, and several current Board members are some of the original founders of the school. The Center’s school board is comprised of members from a variety of demographic groups such as; parents of currently enrolled students, business professionals, lawyers, members of the medical profession, and retired educators. The Board meets regularly and provides governance and oversight of all aspects of the school’s programing including fiscal capacity. The Board of Directors meets ten times a year.

Mary Johnson Children’s Center provides educational services at several sites within Addison County. The Kindergarten program is housed in the Center’s main building on Water Street in Middlebury. The school offers several programs, which support children and families. The programs are not conventional or fixed but support the importance of play. The curriculum is based upon several important principals which are: high interest, evidence-based and reflective of best practice. Student educational programs are responsive to the interests of students, teachers, and families and ensure minimum course of student requirements through development of individualized learning plans, small group instruction and direct instruction for students as needed. The school’s guiding principles are drawn from those of the Center: emphasize child-centered growth and development—physically, socially emotionally, and cognitively—and respect individual needs. A core value of the program includes the importance of helping students to understand the natural world around them. The Center has green space that enables teaching staff to develop and implement environmental educational activities, enrichment opportunities and foster individualized student exploration.

Additionally, Mary Johnson Children’s Center is licensed to operate an early childhood program by the Department of Children and Families Child Development Division, is a Five-Star recognized program, and is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The Vermont State Board of Education has continuously approved

Mary Johnson Children’s Center since 1988, and it is identified by current AOE Independent School Team members as an exemplary educational program. At the time of the Agency’s site review visit, 18 students were enrolled in the Kindergarten program building. Five students have IEPs and are receiving LEA push-in special education services.

Currently there are no kindergarten-aged students enrolled in the program. However, staffing and programing is in place, to serve students immediately upon enrollment and for those students currently preparing to make educational transition to kindergarten. The school’s administration and teaching staff have incorporated into each student’s individualized learning plans, transitional supports to ensure educational programing is cognitively and educationally appropriate throughout the transition to kindergarten.

Student Records & Confidentiality
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<i>Vermont Rule 2273.1</i>

AOE representatives verified that Mary Johnson Children’s Center student records and electronic filing system continues to meet State and Federal confidentiality requirement standards. Student education records and other related paper documentation is kept in a secure, locked storage facilities in the school’s main office on the first floor of the building. Staff have access to student files, when appropriate for developing educational programs, adapting learning activities and assessing student learning.

The Center’s staff are provided with required confidentiality training that includes student files, meeting notes, IEP evaluation documentations for identified students, health records and other documentation pertaining to family and student information.

Professional Staff

<i>Vermont Rules 2272.4 & 2272.5</i>
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Mary Johnson Children’s Center is currently accredited through The National Association for the Education of Young Children. School administrators encourage teaching staff to take advantage of national professional development opportunities offered by NAEYC. The Kindergarten must undergo extensive and rigorous program development, curriculum and assessment implementation and staff training in order to maintain their status as a NAEYC school. Additionally, Mary Johnson Children’s Center is recognized in Vermont as a Five Star kindergarten program. The Department for Children and Families, Child Development Division’s Five Star Certificate is posted in a public location in the school’s main office.

The Center’s teaching staff are experienced teachers who integrate the school’s mission, values and quality education indicators in lesson plans and enrichment activities. The school’s curriculum complies with The Department of Children and Families’ requirements for

developing, implementing and assessments that reflect age-appropriate educational experiences for young children.

All regular kindergarten staff are full time. The makeup of the team is as follows: a bachelor's degree teacher licensed in elementary education, a bachelor's degree teacher with an early childhood core certificate, and a bachelor's degree teacher with an associate degree in early childhood education. Support staff all have either college degrees, enough professional development credits or a combination of both in order to meet the State's requirements for determining professional proficiency.

Supplemental to core instruction staff, the Center personnel receives push-in LEA services from a licensed speech language pathologist and an occupational therapist. All students are provided access to these specialists to evaluate regular educational development and to provide individualized progress monitoring, as needed.

In addition to maintaining relevant licensure, school staff members (including support personnel) are expected to participate in and satisfactorily complete additional required professional development to address the following educational requirements for identified targeted caseload students:

- IEP, evaluations and assessments
- Minimum course of study professional development
- Special education instruction
- Classroom management
- Student Self-Regulation and Trauma Informed Instruction practices
- Other areas identified by the school's director
- Topic specific professional development identified and requested by individual teaching staff

All Mary Johnson Center personnel members are trained, annually, on current best practices for core instruction, trauma informed and behavioral interventions. Currently the school's staff have not been invited by the LEA to attend professional development opportunities, as required. However, the Center's program director has established goals and processes for working more closely with the LEA in order to access appropriate and all available professional development opportunities.

Kindergarten Methods of Instructions & Evaluations

<i>Vermont Rule 2272.1</i>

Mary Johnson's school administrators, teachers, support staff and Board Members have worked to develop evidence-based, best practice instruction methods for all students, in concert with implementing any LEA required curricula as part of an IEP for identified students. Special Education push-in services are provided by the LEA, as well as, any additionally required

contracted services to assist with student's educational program needs. The Program Director and LEA Special Education Director collaborate to ensure transition plans are effectively developed in accordance with IEP goals.

Parents and school personnel collaborate to develop age-appropriate transition plans for enrolled students not requiring an IEP or a 504 Plan.

Agency of Education representatives reviewed program materials and observed classroom that included:

- Kindergarten, nature-centered STEM project-based curriculum and activities
- Integrated Arts Program
- Life Skills, collaborative group skills and social-emotional development skill-based group activities
- Play-based, high-interest student activities that are: individualized, in small group-milieu
- Physical Education activities
- Community skills practice
- Evidenced based literacy and math curriculums

Instructional staff are trained to ensure successful adaptations to curriculum are completed with fidelity and meet student developmental needs. The curriculum includes student specific goals to ensure each child's transition to the kindergarten program is educationally and developmentally appropriate.

Student evaluations, assessment strategies and progress monitoring are reviewed weekly to ensure students are meeting developmental benchmarks. School staff and parents collaborate to develop each student's individual learning plan.

Mary Johnson Children's Center program utilizes minimal technology in the classroom however, technology is in place to support and enrich the curriculum.

One of the teaching staff's primary focus is on engaging students in authentic learning activities that will foster individual thinking skills, foster opportunities to explore the natural world, support and strengthen individual curiosity and nurture student excitement for lifelong learning.

Codes of Professional Conduct and School Environment:

All staff receive professional development that ensures proper management of student educational spaces and staff offices including safety and first aid training. Mary Johnson's handbook includes a specific conduct policy that outlines expectations for staff, family members and students.

Program administrators, teaching staff and support personnel have put forth great effort in creating a welcoming, soothing student-centered educational environment. Classrooms, group activity spaces and individualized student learning spaces are clean, relaxing and welcoming. The school's entire facility exudes an air of tranquility and an attention to detail that incorporates the school's educational philosophy, core values and mission. All school

classrooms and common spaces post school values and mission statements for students and community members. Mary Johnson is primarily a general education school and to- date, student’s behaviors have not required the use of environmental management techniques requiring either suspension or expulsion or implementation of Therapeutic Crisis Intervention techniques. However, school personnel are trained in and are familiar with procedures for using adapting techniques. Moreover, the school employs a licensed special educator whose primary responsibilities include family and parent engagement activities and supports, as well as, home to school support programing.

All staff members are trained annually and have a thorough understanding of the program’s strength-based approach toward discipline of children who come from a variety of backgrounds. All training is completed and includes consideration of students with IEPs or 504 Plans, and personal learning plan objectives.

Facilities, Health & Safety
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<i>Vermont Rule 2272.2, 2272.4 & 2273.1</i>

School Facilities & Safety Materials:

The Center is in a renovated and expanded farmhouse in a quiet residential neighborhood in Middlebury. The first floor houses the preschool program, the main office, coatroom, school kitchen, lunchroom and two gender neutral bathrooms. The kindergarten is located on the second floor and is accessible via an elevator, if needed. Additional bathrooms are located on the second floor. The kindergarten environment is open and appointed with several additional student spaces that provide a variety of rich, authentic learning opportunities. The school has an ample playground located at the back of the building and contains a variety of physical fitness enrichment equipment. The entire green space is surrounded by a secure fence, including a gate with a locking mechanism. The green space doubles as a classroom providing a variety of outdoor opportunities for learning and playing in small groups.

The school’s main entrance is locked, has a video and an audio security screening system in place and the doors are opened by qualified school personnel, primarily main office staff.

The building meets all State requirements pertaining to use as an educational facility for kindergarten aged students. The building also meets ADA requirements and is accessible via wheelchair pathways, has an elevator for accessing the second floor and door-casings provide both access and egress for all handicap assisted technology or wheelchairs. School personnel are trained to assist students with disabilities in cases of emergency for finding alternative egress routes should the elevator become disabled.

Students are introduced to monthly fire drills using whistles instead of fire drill alarms, due to cognitive development and student’s inability to understand purpose for the drill and fear engendered by alarm system. After ample practice and through therapeutic responses, students learn to tolerate fire alarm and understand purpose for the monthly activity.

First Aid and other life-saving equipment is visible and meets health and safety requirements, including date of last inspection. All staff members are required to attend First Aid and emergency response specialized training during August in-service each year.

Nursing Services and Medications:

The Center does not currently employ a nurse or provide visiting nursing services for students. Students are required to take medications prior to attending school and staff are trained to administer medications, as needed, for students. In addition, Epi-pens are readily available for students whom have allergic reactions. Staff members authorized to dispense medication receive appropriate and required training annually, as well as, First Aid and CPR training. Annual training on use and disposal of Epi-pens or other sharps is required of staff, and training records are kept on file in the main office. Mary Johnson’s school policies, procedures and safety protocols are included school handbook.

The precautions section of the handbook includes procedures that school personnel follow when required to address blood borne pathogens, infectious body fluids and toxic substances. In addition to medical precautions and procedures, staff are trained on food safety as proscribed by the USDA, cleaning of the school kitchen, lunchroom and classroom materials (including toys and educational manipulatives) and outdoor equipment if required.

Immunization Policies & Records:

The Mary Johnson Children’s Center’s student immunization records are contained in a secure, confidential locked filing system and included in student files in the main office.

Staffing Safeguards:

Background checks are conducted prior to start date for all newly hired employees. Fingerprint supported criminal record checks and VT adult/child abuse registries are checked annually, and both reports are contained in a confidential filing system available for review upon request.

Health, Wellness & Hazing Policies:

The school community, Board of Directors and school administrators have developed strong anti-bullying, anti-hazing and anti-harassment policies and corresponding procedures that are updated and reviewed with staff annually during August in-service. Included in this section of the handbook is strict school policies for requirements and expectations of staff regarding mandatory reporting and specific protocols for assuring students are released to identified parent and family members, only.

Mary Johnson Children’s Center -School Financial Capacity

Agency Independent School Team review of school application and files comply with State Board Rules and Title 166 requirements for fiscal capacity and tuition payments. The school’s handbook includes tuition payment options for families, as well as, outcomes for non-payment. Disclosure of Act 166 and the State ten hour per week requirement is thoroughly include in the finance section of documentation provided to families and parents of enrolled students.

At the time of program review, Agency staff confirmed The Center has the financial capacity to ensure educational programing through the end of the school year. Additionally, Independent School Team members confirmed the school is in compliance with accounting best practices and

has sufficient data to support and meet current fiscal program responsibilities. All of Mary Johnson’s accounting practices meet requirements for fiscal capacity under State Board of Education Rules Series 2200 ... [the] “program has financial capacity to carry out its educational purpose for the period of approval.”¹

Independent School Team, Agency of Education Recommendations

The Mary Johnson Children’s Center has met all State Board of Education rules and statutory requirements under Title 16. It is the recommendation of the Agency of Education’s Independent School Team that Mary Johnson Children’s Center be granted the maximum program renewal of two years.

¹ Guidelines for Vermont Approved and Recognized Independent Schools, Rule Series 2200, Vermont State Board of Education, 2009., pg. 22.