

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of year-round general and special education independent school approval to serve a maximum of 30 female students ages 11-20, within the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance (ED), Intellectual Disability (ID), Multiple Disabilities (MD), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Speech or Language Impairment (SLI), Other Health Impairment (OHI), Hearing Loss (HL), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), to Vermont School for Girls, Bennington, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of year-round general and special education independent school approval to serve a maximum of 30 female students ages 11-20, within the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance (ED), Intellectual Disability (ID), Multiple Disabilities (MD), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Speech or Language Impairment (SLI), Other Health Impairment (OHI), Hearing Loss (HL), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), to Vermont School for Girls, Bennington, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2023.

Approval is subject to the condition that the school immediately reports 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: 16 V.S.A. § 16 V. S.A., Section 166 (b) State Board Rule 2228 et seq.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Vermont School for Girls (VSG) is an independent residential school providing educational, therapeutic, and reintegration services for up to 30 female students ages 11-20. Originally founded as the Bennington School, the school was recently acquired by Becket Family of Services, and operates under Vermont Permanency Initiative (VPI)-South, Inc. dba Vermont School for Girls. Accepted students are in need of specialized services in a self-contained classroom and living environment due to academic and emotional difficulties that interfere with their ability to function in a traditional school environment. The school serves previously traumatized students with emotional disabilities, learning impairments, specific learning differences, and other health impairments. The Core Purpose of the school is to provide a safe, therapeutic, effective educational program coupled with clinical support for all students. Their motto is Connect, Grow, Thrive, and it is recognizable throughout the campus.

GENERAL EDUCATION

Peter B. Gilmore visited the school on behalf of the Agency on August 31, 2017.

Review Findings:

1. The description of the school in publications and the Application is generally accurate, and reflects the essence of the school. The website however, where most families would seek and obtain information on the school is scant, and a poor reflection of what is offered by the school, the types of children they serve, and what is happening each day. As part of the larger VPI South website, there is little indication of the life of the school and caring professionals employed at VSG reflected in the description. The Core Purpose, Core Values, and Philosophy of the school do serve as the guides for aspects of life at the school in practice. These tenets are reviewed regularly during the school year and discussed openly by faculty and staff. In response to Mr. Gilmore's report, the Education Coordinator at the school stated the website is being redone starting in October 2017 by a branding and publishing firm.
2. The academic course of study is individualized to student needs and is barely adequate to meet the educational purposes of the school. The school provides a minimum course of study that is age and ability appropriate, and it is presented in a highly individualized way. The school makes available the support services necessary to meet the requirements of a minimum course of study and its educational purposes including (a) guided access to the internet, (b) administrative services and facilities including on-site administrators, computer databases for tracking information, emergency and safety plans, set schedules, etc., (c) counseling services including on-site counselors, therapists etc. and (d) a system of record keeping both electronic and paper that are stored on site. Some of the students are on IEPs and the sending school LEAs work with Vermont School for Girls School staff to devise and implement IEPs yearly or as needed. Students are reintegrated into public school programs after their time at the Vermont School for Girls School, and some finish out their basic education there after developing life, work, and communication skills. The school uses a team approach between teachers and counselors in educating students and according to the staff interviewed, it is effective. According to some staff however, reintegration is hampered by a lack of services available. The Education Coordinator reported that they agree with Mr. Gilmore's review and has a plan of updating materials. In September, the school purchased a new science curriculum and will be updating the social studies curriculum based around the C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards in 2018. It is the goal of VSG to have updated all core subjects by 2019.
3. Located on one campus, the school uses several buildings and a campus amongst them to serve multiple age groups. There is enough space within these areas for the common and classroom environments, and teachers and administrators have sufficient office/working space as well. The buildings meet relevant health and safety standards as represented by updated certificates of inspection, and some have been recently significantly renovated. There is a small kitchen area for serving daily meals that are prepared on site by staff and at times with help from students. There are emergency, safety, and evacuation plans for the buildings. The Crisis Management Plan is available

in every facility and secured in the meds room. Due to the nature of the content and the trauma of their students, this plan would not be widely distributed in paper form. All staff are informed of the Crisis Management Plan during orientation and this is reviewed during yearly mandatory staff meetings. There was a room off the hallway in the academic building used for students to take time-outs and according to staff, it was used regularly. Overall, the main buildings are in good shape and serve the functions of the school adequately. The school is to be commended for recent and planned facilities upgrades and improvements as they add greatly to the atmosphere of the school.

4. The school employs a professional staff in sufficient number who are qualified by training and experience in the areas in which they are assigned. All the general education staff have at least a bachelor's degree in their field of instruction and some hold Masters Degrees in related areas. Upon interview, the long-term staff at VSG proved to be experienced, dedicated, professionals. They each have licenses applicable to the needs of the students and experience teaching the age groups they encounter. Staff appropriately oversee the students during the entire school day never allowing students to venture off on their own. Teachers and professional staff work together, and bring a wealth of experience, education, and dedication to their work. Professional development at VSG is appropriate to the techniques used with the students. There is turnover of employees however, the school is careful about hiring appropriate replacements. Staff working at the school for many years who are deeply experienced expressed love for their jobs and admiration for the new direction of the school in recent years. It was obvious that the care and education of the students was at the very core of their efforts. The school is to be commended for recent additions to the faculty aimed at helping them deal with stressful jobs and relationships.
5. The back office administrative systems at VSG are appropriate for the running of the organization. On site databases serve as storage for admissions and contact information, daily attendance along with all biographic information on students and families, academic records, immunization records, performance tracking, etc. The Becket organization employs a Finance Manager who maintains an accounting system of accounts payable, accounts receivable, budget tracking, and payroll. A yearly budgeting process involves the main administrators. As with other Becket institutions visited by this evaluator, all is financially intact at the school.
6. When asked about the curriculum, all staff agreed to the use of experiential projects, field trips, manipulatives, computers, life skills, arts, graphic organizers, videos and movies, as well as hands-on learning all of which are expressed in the Application. There were indications of these parts of the curriculum available and faculty seem to make the best of the various resources at their disposal. Strategic Planning with a specific focus on modernizing the resources and curriculum followed by an influx of funds to actualize these new approaches and hire experienced staff would greatly help the school in its mission.

Recommendations to the School:

The Vermont School for Girls School is an organization that is committed to serving this very needy population of students in an individualized way. The staff spoke of loving their professions and many spoke of feeling a strong sense of purpose in their jobs. The environment in which they teach and serve students is at times intense, but again, many spoke of feeling happy to work there. The staff members are held to good standards and they know what is expected of them by a local administration that obviously cares for them. It is easy to see that the success of the school reflects the hard work of these dedicated professionals, and how that success flows to the children and families in their care.

- 1) It is strongly recommended that the school embark on a regular schedule of Strategic Planning involving all levels of governance and administration and all constituent groups of the school community.
- 2) The academic curriculum, curriculum materials, and teaching facilities are outdated and in need of immediate attention. It is strongly recommended that the school address this issue forthwith. One suggestion is that the school consider a schedule of retreats over the next few summers where chosen disciplines meet to fully renovate what they teach and how they teach it. The school should then budget for the new curricula, materials, facilities, and staffing as necessary. It is the goal of VSG to have updated all core subjects by 2019.
- 3) The school should seriously consider a program of tuition reimbursement for faculty at nearby colleges as a strategy to attract and retain younger staff as well as educate all staff in modern teaching and counseling techniques. While VSG does not have a “tuition reimbursement program”, the school has supported staff in pursuing licensure via on-line classes and conferences when possible.
- 4) The school should consider hiring a dedicated Grant Writer to access funds available to schools to fund programs, staffing, and materials.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Approval Recommendation

Five year special education approval in the disability categories of; autism spectrum disorder (ASD) hearing loss (HL), emotional disturbance (ED), intellectual disability (ID), multiple disabilities (MD), specific learning disability (SLD), speech or language impairment (SLI), and other health impairment (OHI).

In addition, the AOE recommends that Vermont School for Girls implement the following prior to its next review:

- A. Update its service documentation to ensure case management and full day services such as behavior intervention are accounted for.
- B. Provide an updated application process to ensure that VSG does not accept students who qualify under an alternate disability category other than those approved.

Rationale

Based on the rules for Special Education Approval for Independent Schools, The Vermont School for Girls (VSG) has met the minimum requirements for independent school approval.

School Description

VSG is seeking re-approval in the areas of: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), hearing loss (HL), emotional disturbance (ED), intellectual disability (ID), multiple disabilities (MD), specific learning disability (SLD), speech or language impairment (SLI), and other health impairment (OHI).

Review Description

VSG, located in Bennington, Vermont, was visited by Agency of Education staff on 4/25/2017. During the visit, the Agency employee interviewed staff, toured facilities, observed staff/student interactions and reviewed student files and IEPs. Comprehensive file reviews were conducted for three (3) of the 30 Vermont students. The students reviewed qualified under the disability category of emotional disturbance.

Review Findings

2228.2 - VSG demonstrated the policies, procedures, staff training and resources to support students in the disability categories of; autism spectrum disorder (ASD), hearing loss (HL), emotional disturbance (ED), intellectual disability (ID), multiple disabilities (MD), specific learning disability (SLD), speech or language impairment (SLI), and other health impairment (OHI).

2228.3 - VSG demonstrated that they have written policies and/or procedures in the areas of: (1) admissions, (2) least restrictive environment, (3) discipline, (4) graduation, (5) faculty qualifications, and (6) faculty-student ratios.

2228.3.1 - VSG demonstrated evidence of minimum maintenance of (1) educational records, and coordination with LEA and parents through data and file review, (2) participation in evaluation and IEP procedures through IEP review, (3) implementation of IEPs through progress reporting.

Note on Evidence

Based on a review of three IEPs, school documentation of schedules, staffing, and contract services, the following services were found to be inconsistent and have since been addressed by additional documentation:

- A. Case management services documentation was missing in all three cases.
- B. All day services such as specialized support, and behavior intervention were missing documentation in all cases where those services were listed.

2228.3.2 - VSG meets expectations regarding licensed staff. The two special educators providing special education services and the speech and language therapist on staff were licensed by the Agency of Education.

2228.4 - VSG demonstrated policies, procedures and written agreements outlining tuition and establishment of division of legal responsibilities with regards to students on IEPs.

Questions: Contact Chris Kane at chris.kane@vermont.gov

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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