

**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 K-12, within the disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Speech/Language Impairment, and Developmental Delay to Soar Learning Center, St. Albans Bay, VT?

**SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

**That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general and special education independent school approval, to serve students in grades K-12, within the disability categories of Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Speech/Language Impairment, and Developmental Delay to Soar Learning Center, St. Albans Bay, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2022.**

**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. § 166 (b)  
SBE rule 2228 et. seq.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

1. Soar Learning Center is a therapeutic day school affiliated with the Northwestern Counseling and Support Services, Inc. (NCSS) as part of the Children, Youth, and Family Division. It is also accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) as a day treatment program. Soar Learning Center's educational philosophy is to provide children with high quality educational opportunities and personal growth experiences in a safe, supportive, and respectful environment. By integrating academic, behavioral, and clinical services within the framework of a typical school structure and setting, the school is able to assist students in achieving success in their public school and community. The school enrolls male and female students, grades K-age 21 from

Franklin, Grand Isle, Chittenden, and Lamoille Counties. Soar Learning Center when initially founded was known as Project SOAR.

2. The State Board of Education last granted independent school approval to Soar Learning Center through June 30, 2016.
3. Soar Learning Center was visited on behalf of the Secretary of Education by Brian Morgan on May 10, 2017.
4. The school is located in the former James P. Callaghan School in St. Albans Bay. It is a 35,000 square foot, single level structure. The space includes five elementary/middle school classrooms, four high school classrooms, and two Life Skill Education Alternative Program (LEAP) classrooms. Within the facility there is a library, a K-8 computer lab, art room, music space on the stage in the gym, a grade 9-12 computer lab, gymnasium that doubles as a dining hall for breakfast and lunch, a full kitchen, a home/school coordination office, a clinical office, an elementary/middle school students support center, high school student support center, time-out rooms, administrative offices, student and staff bathrooms, student/staff showers, and a multi-purpose/conference room. The outdoor area of 10.69 acres encompasses a playground, maple sugar house, greenhouse, and a ropes course. The facility meets all state and federal health and safety regulations and is handicapped accessible.
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. Soar Learning Center has a standards-based curriculum and teachers and special educators are expected to differentiate instruction utilizing the VT Standards to meet the needs of all students. Soar Learning Center's model of care is a multidimensional approach that includes curriculum-based instruction, behavioral management, case management, and home/school coordination. The school currently serves 72 students: 41 in elementary and middle school, 22 in the high school, and 10 in LEAP. LEAP is a 1:1 educational and functional life skill program providing individual staff/student day-long support, under the auspices of a classroom/special educator and a behavior consultant.
6. Soar Learning Center has the resources to meet its objectives. The staff includes five elementary/middle school teachers and five high school specialists for science, social studies, English, math, and physical education. The staff members are supported by a program director, a program supervisor, three licensed VT special educators, four team leaders, five home/school coordinators, four school-based clinicians, and 29 behavior interventionists (BI) and three BI service coordinators across the three programs. A review of an auditor's report prepared by a certified public accountant firm evidences that the school is financially sound.
7. The health, safety, attendance, and assessment records were reviewed and found to be in good order. Fire drill and evacuation drill records are also in good order.

8. 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.
9. Soar Learning Center has a policy on prevention and reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

### **Special Education**

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. Unless otherwise stated within the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), the Soar Learning Center's graduation requirements, by policy, are identical for all students. All special education staff hold appropriate and current licensure for the positions they are assigned.

Soar Learning Center is located within a former elementary school located within the city of St. Albans. As such, the facility provides an adequate space for group and individualized learning environments that help meet the various needs of its students.

Soar Learning Center staff coordinates and communicates with the student's Local Educational Agency (LEA) throughout a highly deliberate referral process, the development and revision of the student's programming and services, as well as the reevaluation of students for special education eligibility through their participation at the student's IEP and Evaluation Planning Team meetings. In addition, the Soar Learning Center staff invites Local Education Agency representatives and families to attend the school's planned activities that enable the LEA to remain in contact with students and families during the time they are placed in a program outside of the local school district operations. Soar Learning Center's direct connection to local mental health services is vital to the needs and success, through its direct support of the students as well as the families of the students. The entire school incorporates a positive behavior management system which identifies and rewards positive student behaviors as witnessed during the site visit.

The Soar Learning Center is currently approved for the disability categories of:

- |                                 |                               |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Intellectual disability      | 2. Other Health Impairment    |
| 3. Specific Learning Disability | 4. Emotional Disturbance      |
| 5. Autism Spectrum Disorder     | 6. Multiple Disabilities      |
| 7. Orthopedic Impairment        | 8. Speech/Language Impairment |

The school seeks to continue serving students with these disabilities in grades K through 12 and seeks to add to its current programming the ability to work with younger students identified with a Developmental Delay. Inasmuch as Soar Learning Center already adequately addresses

many of the categories of disability that would lead to an early identification of a Developmental Delay, it would seem appropriate to grant their request to include this disability category to their programming.

Soar Learning Center has some community partnerships that enable the older students to participate in job shadowing, internship and apprentice opportunities. The Center also maintains a working greenhouse, a sugarhouse, and gardens in which students learn valuable vocational and interpersonal skills.

In the special education site review of the school, conducted on May 17, 2016 by VTAOE Program Coordinator Ernest Wheeler, it was noted that staff has received numerous professional development opportunities to address both the academic and functional performance needs of their students. A review of sample files indicated that a significant need existed in the development of appropriate postsecondary transition plans and Vermont Agency of Education PowerPoint training and checklists were provided to the Soar Learning Center administration for this purpose.

The school provides a caring and appropriate educational environment for students otherwise challenged by a public school placement and the VTAOE endorses its continued approval as an independent school serving the special education population.

**FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:** none

**STAFF AVAILABLE:**

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