

AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant initial general and special education independent school approval, to serve students ages 5-11, within the disability categories of Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Delay, Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, and Traumatic Brain Injury to Charis Learning Center, Jericho, VT?

SECRETARY'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants initial general and special education independent school approval, to serve students ages 5-11, within the disability categories of Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Delay, Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, and Traumatic Brain Injury to Charis Learning Center, Jericho, VT. This approval is for two years, through June 30, 2019.

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)
2228 et. seq.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. Charis Learning Center is applying for initial independent school approval for general education and special education. Charis Learning Center will deliberately practice excellence and seek to empower students to obtain academic and life goals and to utilize resources that will enable them to become lifelong learners. The Director, Mary Asper, is a very experienced speech-language pathologist, having worked in public and independent schools over many years. She holds an MS in Communication Sciences and is a licensed speech-language pathologist. In 2010 she set up a group of therapists to work with supervisory unions in the Northeast Kingdom. When the funding ceased, in 2016 she reached out to the supervisory districts/unions to identify the need for specialized education for students with neuro-developmental and other learning impairments/disabilities. Based upon the response received Ms. Asper made the commitment to establish an independent school for children on the autism spectrum. Ms. Asper signed a lease on the current property seven months ago, and since then has

transformed the property into a warm, welcoming facility awaiting its first students. More importantly, Ms. Asper has prepared all the necessary documentation for the running of a school - parent/student handbook, staff handbook, registration documentation for parents to complete, and documentation required by the Agency of Education for approval. She has benefited from the expertise of an embryonic Board of Directors, one of whom is a CPA. The plan is to begin with only four students in the first year and then to grow to a maximum of fifteen students. Her basic philosophy is encapsulated in the name Charis - a Greek word meaning grace and knowledge. Ms. Asper believes that children need both a foundation of knowledge and love.

2. The Charis Learning Center was visited on behalf of the Secretary of Education by Brian Morgan on March 30, 2017.
3. The school occupies the lower level of a chiropractic center on Route 15 in Jericho. The one-level floor plan totals 2,200 square feet, and includes three offices, three classrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and a reception area. There are three egresses, and there is a play area behind the building. Classrooms will be separated by grade level. A copy of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO) issued by the Division of Fire Safety is on file at the Agency of Education.
4. The minimum course of study, as prescribed in 16 V.S.A. § 906, will be provided and adapted to the age and abilities of the students. All Charis Learning Center students are in need of special education and will receive individualized learning plans based on the curricula guides from Oak Meadow. This elementary curriculum is highly regarded and used by many public schools and home-schooling groups across the country. The curriculum is project-based and very flexible and will suit Charis Learning Center's needs well. All curricular areas will be supplemented with Unique Learning System materials.
5. The school will have qualified staff to meet its objectives. In addition to the Director, who is a licensed speech pathologist, the staff includes a core clinical team and an educational team. The core clinical team is responsible for managing student intake, student transition, therapeutic and behavioral plans. Additionally, the core clinical team conducts diagnostic evaluations as well as triennial special education evaluations. They oversee the work of the educational team in terms of accommodations and supports, program development and therapeutic interventions. The licensed psychologist is responsible for implementation of expressive arts therapies, and the licensed occupational therapist is responsible for the physical education program. The educational team will be comprised of a VT licensed special educator, classroom teachers, classroom assistants and classroom aides. The special educator is responsible for case management services utilizing the IEP process, as well as direct instruction. The classroom teachers are responsible for delivery of the minimum course of study, for differentiating and adapting content and methods to meet individual needs of students, and for overseeing the work of the assistances and aides with the additional support of the special educator. Classroom aides are responsible for 1:1 behavioral intervention

when required and for helping to support the work of the classroom teachers and classroom assistants when needed. Classroom aides also provide materials preparation.

6. Charis Learning Center, Inc., is seeking designation as a 501 (c)(3). As such, profits from the enterprise will be invested in expanding facilities, staff and programs. The capacity of the Center is 15 students at this time. However, full enrollment will take some time. Projected budgets and profit/loss statements have been developed to support enrollment at four, eight, and fifteen students. Staffing will follow the increments of enrollment. The Board of Directors believe that careful planning will allow the school to succeed and be sustainable in many different enrollment levels and environments. The financial information provided supports the Center's ability to be financially viable.
7. The Charis Learning Center will maintain health and safety, attendance, and assessment records. While there are no students enrolled, the databases and the documentation for all record keeping are in place.
8. The Center will maintain 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. The Center also plans on operating a summer program.
9. The Center adopted a policy on prevention and reporting of harassment, hazing, and bullying that is as stringent as the Agency's model policy.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

The Charis School is seeking initial approval in the areas of autism spectrum disorder, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, and traumatic brain injury for students ages 5-11. Charis Learning Center, located in Jericho Vermont, was visited by Agency of Education staff on 3/9/17. The facilities were bright, open, and clean and the amount of space is appropriate for the number of potential students. The space has the resources to provide evidence-based academic, behavioral, and community education as well as the opportunity for kinesthetic movement and exercise. The design, layout and organization of the space is flexible and conducive for teaching a wide range of students and for creating a variety of working environments.

During the visit the Agency employee interviewed staff, toured facilities and viewed a sample file. The staff was engaging, cooperative and professional. Charis staff reported a positive and collaborative working relationship with potential future Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). Staff professional development and training take the form of a general new hire training in teaching and behavioral principals, as well as ongoing support and observations from supervisory staff, regularly scheduled staff development and training days, and financial support for continuing education for professional staff.

The following rules were reviewed for compliance:

2228.1 – MET– Charis Learning Center demonstrated the policies, procedures and staff training to support students in the disability categories of autism spectrum disorder, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, and traumatic brain injury.

2228.3 – MET – Observed 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 – MET – 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 non-instructional agreement review, (3) implementation of future IEPs through sample file review.

2228.3.2 – MET – Special education teacher, speech-language pathologist, clinical psychologist, and occupational therapist are licensed by appropriate state agencies.

2228.4 – MET – Policies, procedures and written agreement outline tuition and establish division of legal responsibilities with regards to students on IEPs.

Based on the rules for special education approval for independent schools, The Charis Learning Center has met the minimum requirements for independent school approval.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS: none

STAFF AVAILABLE:

Cassandra Ryan, Finance Analyst
(802) 479-8545