

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Finance

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education grant renewal of general education independent school approval to serve students in grades K-8 to the Aurora School of Middlebury, VT?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

That the State Board of Education grants renewal of general education independent school approval to serve students in grades K-8 to Aurora School of Middlebury, VT. This approval is for 5 years, through June 30, 2022.

This approval is also subject to the condition that the school immediately report to the Agency of Education whenever any changes occur in policies, programs, facilities, financial capacity, staffing, or administration during the approval period.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: Title 16 V.S.A. §166 (b)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

1. The Aurora School, founded 20 years ago serves up to 30 students (25 being most desirable). The mission of the school is to enable children to learn by providing appropriate academic challenge and high expectations; by fostering eagerness to learn through interdisciplinary, thematic, hands-on curriculum; and by providing continuity and security in a small, multi-age setting with family involvement. In year one, the school under the guidance of co-founder and now former HOS/ Director and current president of the Board of Directors Susan Vigne, began as a home school cooperative. The school began to grow quickly and first became a Vermont recognized independent school then an approved independent school. Day to day operations of the school are overseen by the HOS/ Director, Elaine Anderson (former Associate Director). The Aurora School has a Board of Directors which oversees the budget and management of the physical plant of the school, sets policy, appoints an ad hoc staffing/admissions committee and acts in an advisory capacity to the director. Former HOS/Director and co-founder Susan Vigne remains in regular contact with Elaine Anderson the new Director and the school staff as Elaine continues to transition into her role as the new HOS/Director.
2. This reviewer arrived at Aurora just before 8:15 am and left the site at about 1:45 pm. My day began with a tour of the school. I was immediately immersed into the fabric of the school as students had started their day at Exploration Learning Centers. During the course of my visit I observed four classes/lessons ranging from K/1 up to 6/7; had a working lunch with The Co-founder and President of the Board and the HOS/Director during which we had a general discussion about the school, and then

transitioned into review of the application, a review of policies and financial information.

The purpose of the Aurora School is to enable children to discover and understand the world around them, and to grow, develop and excel both academically and personally. As I toured the school, visited classes and sat for snack time it was obvious to me that the students were in fact gaining skills and knowledge in an atmosphere of the staff encouraging attitudes of openness and eagerness to learn. The instructional program I observed is woven into three main strands: Interdisciplinary learning experiences, individual learning styles and valuing the arts, the community and the environment. The theme for this school year (there is an eight year cycle) is North and South. During my visit students were engaged in lessons and activities that led them to a study of the Arctic and the Antarctic that incorporated the core academic areas, while also allowing students to choose individual areas of interest to research and report on. Due to the philosophy and design of delivering the curriculum, individual student needs were easily met and curriculum was adapted to reflect the differences in students' ages and abilities.

It was obvious that students, parents, and staff took ownership of the school community, participated in various jobs to clean and maintain the classrooms and common areas and appeared engaged, happy and eager to be at school.

3. **Description of Facilities:** Aurora School is housed in a one floor, 3,000 square feet, and fully handicapped accessible building. It consists of a large 20'by 40' central room with eight smaller rooms surrounding it. The smaller rooms are used for classrooms, a library, and an Exploration Room. There are three bathrooms and a fully operating kitchen and eating area. The school is on slightly less than one acre with a playground and access to many acres of town forest.

4. **Minimum Course of Study and Required Assets:** A minimum course of study of learning experiences adapted to a pupils age and ability in the field of basic communications skills etc. was evident and is approached in a very unique way at Aurora School. Submitted with the application is a very detailed description of the Aurora School curriculum in each of the disciplines. In general the curriculum is thematic and integrated throughout the instruction students are receiving. This is a key distinction of the Aurora School and is obvious as one reads the curriculum as submitted and as one observes the teaching and learning that occurs on site.

5. **Staffing; Adequacy; Qualifications; Professional Development:** The number of administrative and teaching staff is currently 5 full and part time persons with a small number of parent and community volunteers. The staff listing that was submitted with the application and the resumes available during the visit indicated that all administrators and teaching staff had Bachelors or Masters Degrees combined with many valuable life experiences. The classroom and administrative assistant had an

Associate's degree and had 15 years classroom experience. My observations and interviews indicated a high level of expertise, passion and collegiality. All stakeholders I talked with, knew the mission, the core values and educational objectives of the school. All job descriptions were available and are located in the Family Handbook.

6. Professional/Personal Development opportunities were encouraged with expectations that staff maintain an active intellectual life while continuing to add to their knowledge base and expertise. Professional development/improvement plans are developed and reviewed twice a year with informal classroom observations occurring throughout the school year. A small stipend is available to support staff attending workshops, seminars, trainings etc. In-service trainings are primarily held in two full days and two half days and focus on curriculum design, development and planning.
7. **Financial Capacity:** Available to the reviewer on site was a Notarized Letter summarizing the financial status for the prior fiscal year signed by the Board of Directors. Also presented during our policy and financial review was the current Profit and Loss Statement as well as the current Balance Sheet. These indicated that there was currently a cash reserve in the bank and an untapped line of credit. The reviewer was satisfied with the evidence of financial capacity presented.
8. **Student Attendance and Assessment Records. Fire Drill and Safety Records.** These records were reviewed and found to be in good order.
9. **Operating Schedule; Number of Instructional Hours.** The school maintains an operating schedule that includes a total number of instructional hours of 1,089 hours and 169 days each year.
10. **Policies: Admission, Health and Safety, Discipline, Harassment/Bullying.** Review of the school's family handbook reveals that the school has developed policies for health and safety, admission, discipline and more. The school has a policy on prevention of harassment that is as stringent as the Department's model policy and based on the same.
11. **School Improvement Plans.** To the best of my knowledge the school has no immediate plans to improve the facility. Currently the 7th and soon to be 8th graders are being served in the main classroom building of which there was ample space to do so.
12. **Summary and Recommendation:** The Aurora School has been in operation for 20 plus years. The school visit made it very clear the school lives its educational philosophy and has stayed true to its educational objectives. Kudos to the co-founder Susan Vigne for creating a school that serves students and families in such a caring, authentic and unique way. The school is a joyful place where learning is fun and woven into the fabric of life not just the school day.

The school was visited on January 30, 2017 by Steve Lorenz, a GenEd contracted consultant. Mr. Lorenz is recommending that the SBE grant renewal of general

independent school approval for Aurora School located in Middlebury, Vermont for a period of five years.

COST IMPLICATIONS: None

STAFF AVAILABLE: Cassandra Ryan, Finance Analyst, 479-8545