

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 students ages 11-21, within the disability areas of Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disturbance, Other Health Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Multiple Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, and Speech or Language Impairment, to bellcate School in Essex, 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 students ages 11-21, within the disability areas of Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disturbance, Other Health Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Multiple Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, and Speech or Language Impairment, to bellcate School in Essex, VT. This approval is for five years, through June 30, 2022.

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

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 166 (b)
State Board Rule 2228 et seq

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The bellcate School is an independent, LLC day facility providing educational, therapeutic, and reintegration services for male and female students ages 11-22. The school was founded in 2004 and is mainly located in one location in Essex Junction with rented program facilities nearby. Accepted students are in need of specialized services in a self-contained classroom 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. The bellcate School is privately owned and managed by Jesse Bell who provides effective leadership and vision for the institution. Peter B. Gilmore visited the school on behalf of the Agency on February 20, 2017.

GENERAL EDUCATION: REPORT OF FINDINGS

1. The descriptions of the school in the application, on the admissions brochures, and on the website are accurate. The purpose, values, and philosophy of the school are clearly presented on the website and serve as the guides for all aspects of life at the school. These tenets are reviewed regularly during the school year and discussed openly by all faculty and staff. Recently, it has been suggested that the school considered fashioning a mission statement to guide the functioning of the institution.
2. The course of study is highly individualized to student needs and is adequate to meet the educational purposes of the school. The school provides a unique 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) library services through books on site, proprietary communications software, and 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 in safe, inaccessible files in the cloud and/or on site. All students are on IEPs and the sending school LEAs work with bellcate School staff to devise and implement IEPs yearly. Students are occasionally reintegrated into public school programs after their time at the bellcate, but the majority finish out their basic education there after developing life, school, work, and communication skills. At each of the three levels, (Red, Blue, Green) the school uses a holistic team approach to educating students and according to the staff interviewed, it is highly effective.
3. Although basically located in one large (20,000 sq. ft.) building on the Essex Junction campus, the school uses multiple sites for specific functions such as the farm and basketball programs. The school administration is located at the main campus. This building is leased by the institution which over the years has come to occupy more and more of it. There is enough space within the main building for students to enjoy common and classroom environments, and each of the teachers and administrators has sufficient office/working space as well. The building meets relevant health and safety standards as represented by updated certificates of inspection. The facility has a built in kitchen area for providing meals as well as teaching culinary and life skills. There are emergency, safety, and evacuation plans for the building and all are accessible to the

staff. Overall the campus is a clean, effective facility, fairly new, and kept up with regular maintenance as necessary.

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 or Professional degrees in related areas. Upon interview, the long term staff at school proved to be experienced, dedicated, professionals. They each have certifications 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 in highly effective teams at the school, and bring a wealth of experience, education, and dedication to their work. The staff interviewed showed that exceptional care and education of the students was at the very core of their efforts. Professional development at bellcate is appropriate to the techniques used with the students, occurs regularly, and incorporates outside experts as well as "teachers teaching teachers" which takes advantage of the seasoned veteran staff assisting newcomers. There is a healthy amount of turnover in staff each year with a few moving on for various reasons, but most staff have been at the school for a good long time. New staff undergo a rigorous orientation and are brought up to speed quickly and effectively. The school is strongly dedicated to self-improvement with the common response by faculty to this query being "unquestionably" or "undeniably". Evidence of improvement was everywhere as new approaches and curricula are tried (such as the new basketball and radio programs) and older, outmoded, approaches are replaced. Overall, this aspect of the school was omnipresent and quite impressive.
5. The back office administrative systems at bellcate are secure and appropriate for the running of the organization. On and off-site databases serve as secure 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 school employs an accountant (part time) and bookkeeper who maintain a system of accounts payable, accounts receivable, budget tracking, and payroll. There is a yearly budgeting process that involves the main administrators with input from the staff. A letter from an accounting firm who has worked with the school since 2005 stated the school has shown they understand and implement good business practices to insure financial stability while at the same time providing the best possible resources for their employees and students. Conversations with the owner, current administrators, and individual faculty assured that all is financially intact at the school. In fact, faculty feel well remunerated by the school and appreciative of the benefits package.

The bellcate School of Essex Junction is an organization that is committed to serving this very needy population of students in an individualized yet holistic way. Many stories were shared of successful students reintegrating with their public schools or "graduating" and moving on to adult programs. The staff spoke of loving their jobs and many spoke of feeling a strong sense of

purpose in their profession as well as wonderfully strong support from the organization. The environment in which they teach is at times intense, but again, they all spoke of feeling happy to work there. The staff are held to high standards and they know what is expected of them. They are often included in the decision making process and all serve in multiple capacities in the school. The “star-based” administrative system keeps everyone involved. It is easy to see how this quality school reflects the hard work of these dedicated professionals, and how it flows to the children and families in their care.

This school, with its effective programs and especially its evident record of success with children is a credit to independent education in Vermont. They take on very difficult but manageable cases, apply known methods with veteran staff, and literally change the lives of their students to a remarkable degree. It demonstrates the value of independent schools to be reliable and successful components of the larger educational community in the state, and shows that new and successful ideas can happen when educators are given the freedom and resources to devise and implement them.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

The bellcate School is seeking re-approval as an independent school in the areas of: autism spectrum disorders, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, and traumatic brain injury.

The bellcate School is located in Essex Junction, Vermont and utilizes a building that has been renovated and customized to meet their needs. The bellcate School is highly respected among the referring school districts in the area. They are known for their success in working with students with extremely intensive needs and behaviors who have been unsuccessful elsewhere. bellcate has an admissions process that requires that each student must want to be there. If a student does not want to be there they are not accepted into the program. All programming is designed to meet the individual student’s unique learning needs. They are incredibly individualized yet each student’s program is designed to introduce, expose, and include the student in the bellcate community. Each student works to develop the skills needed to be a contributing member of a community. As students acquire skills their educational program is modified to recognize the growth and to create new and meaningful challenges.

bellcate maintains a high level of collaboration with not only the sending school districts but the parents and guardians as well. This is another area where bellcate stands ahead of many schools. In the application there is a full description of their treatment team model which utilizes what bellcate refers to as the “wolfpack teaming process”. They have had huge success with this model in supporting students who team with the key mentors/leaders in their life (in addition to their parents) in moving towards self-regulation and reaching goals.

Bellcate enrolls a maximum of 30 full day students ages 11-22, regardless of gender orientation or grade. bellcate’s student population is comprised of three teams: blue, green and red. The

blue team programming is designed to serve students with emotional disturbance, learning disability, other health impairment, and autism who are at, around or above grade level ages 15-22. The green team is designed to serve students with intellectual disability, developmental delay, TBI and/or students 11-22 years of age who are well below grade level. The red team programming is designed to serve students ages 11-22 with multiple disabilities, TBI, developmental delay, and/or autism with significant public safety challenges.

The bellcate School was visited by Vermont Agency of Education special education consultant on 5/18/16. The agency employee interviewed staff, toured facilities, observed staff/student interactions and reviewed student files and IEPs. File reviews were conducted for students diagnosed with: other health impairment, autism spectrum disorders, and intellectual disability. The staff was engaging, knowledgeable, cooperative and professional. The facilities were clean, the amount of space was appropriate for the number of students enrolled and organized as needed for the individual needs of the students.

The following rules were reviewed for compliance:

2228.1 – MET– The bellcate School demonstrated the policies, procedures and staff training to support students in the disability categories of: autism spectrum disorders, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, 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 IEP review, (3) implementation of IEPs through progress reporting and behavioral data.

2228.3.2 – MET – Special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists were licensed by appropriate local 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 bellcate School has met the minimum requirements for approval.

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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