

Pacem Becomes Full-Time Independent High School

by Lexi Shear

The former Pacem Learning Community in Montpelier has received formal recognition from the Vermont Department of Education as an independent high school. Now called Pacem School and Homeschool Center, the organization is accepting applications for its fall 2012 program. Pacem's goal is to create a joyful, mindful, imaginative learning community. Its educational approach aims to foster pursuit of individual intellectual and creative passions and balances student self-direction with teacher guidance. Pacem offers school-day and extra-curricular classes that encourage students to take direct responsibility for their learning and challenge students to reach their fullest potential.

Pacem has provided homeschoolers age 10 to 18 with academic classes and a social community since 2006. Pacem first offered classes with the goal of incorporating peace, arts, community and environmental stewardship into a powerful and student-centered learning community. Building on its existing classes for homeschooled students, the Pacem community has now expanded to a full-time high school.

An independent school must either be

"recognized" or "approved" to legally enroll students full-time and issue a diploma. To become recognized, an independent school must annually demonstrate to the department of education that it has a curriculum, staff and facility capable of providing a comprehensive program. The state requires a minimum course of study in six subject areas: communication (including reading, writing and use of numbers); citizenship, government and history; physical and health education; literature; natural sciences; and fine arts. "Approved" schools are subject to additional scrutiny, and Pacem may apply for that status in the future.

The reasons for choosing an independent school over a public one are as diverse as the kids. For some children, especially older ones, leaving the more structured public school allows time to delve passionately into a single subject of their choosing, like writing, dance, science or movie-making. Homeschooling or a Pacem-style student-centered class gives each child the opportunity to challenge him- or herself intellectually at a high level and fully explore a subject.

Mark Harris, a Pacem board member whose daughter, Phoebe, attends, says that Pacem's classroom and social settings "provide more opportunities for peer interaction

and discussion. Students find a community of peers and mentors."

For others, the reasons for attending Pacem are less tangible. "My child used to love school, and now they dread going; I want them to love learning again," is a theme echoed by many parents. For still others, the pace and social pressures of public school are daunting. In a more relaxed, nontraditional community, these kids open up, and feel free to truly express themselves. While no one school is right for every child, Pacem believes that it's very important for families to have choices about where they send their children to school. There are currently no other full-time, secular, independent high schools in the area.

While state recognition will allow students whose parents are not able or available to homeschool to attend full-time, homeschoolers will continue to be able to take classes at Pacem. Parents of homeschoolers are responsible for overseeing the entire education of their child and filing paperwork with the home-study office in the department of education that documents their child's progress. Most homeschoolers piece together a variety of educational experiences, including parent-taught classes, independent work, tutoring and small group classes to create a complete education. Pacem is part of that mix. In addition to providing academic content that parents don't feel comfortable teaching at home, Pacem provides a social community and extracurricular activities

such as a student-run theater group.

Karin McNeill, a Pacem board member, points out, "Many of our students have been at Pacem since the beginning of their middle-school years. The students love Pacem's style of education and, now older, are looking for invigorating classes at the high-school level."

The faculty are experts in their subject areas, and small class sizes (average is about five students), allow students to gain deep understanding and mastery of concepts, both inside and outside the classroom. Treating Montpelier as its campus, Pacem collaborates with city organizations to structure service-learning internships for all interested students. McNeill, emphasizing its community approach, adds, "At Pacem, students are guided both by their teachers and peers. Each student learns to tap their inspiration, and tune skills through introspection and through participation in the team atmosphere of an inspired class."

Pacem is located at 29 College Street on the Vermont College of Fine Arts campus. To learn more about programs, admissions, tuition and financial aid information, see pacemschool.org.

Pacem will host an open house from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, April 12. For information, call Lexi Shear at 223-1010 or e-mail lexi@pacemlearningcommunity.org.

Lexi Shear is director of Pacem School and Homeschool Center.

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