

Priority Placements, Inc.

Student and Family Handbook

2020-2021

Special Message Re: A Safe Re-Opening

A separate document is being provided to start the year that offers initial information re: our re-opening plans. As stated in that piece it is a living document and will continue to adjust as additional information is provided from the state of Vermont. Some of our standard policies may be adjusted before the start of the year to account for all health and safety concerns (location of personal cell phones, whereabouts in the building, etc.). Mentioned in that document is the expectation that all masks worn from home must meet all dress code expectations and be considered non-distracting to other students/staff and provide sufficient safety to the student. Please reach out at any time with questions regarding Priority Placements handling of a safe re-opening.

Our Mission

The purpose of Priority Placements, Inc. is to provide safe, positive, and predictable outcomes to distressed children and adolescents in need of an educational placement in the Windham County catchment area. When a student is suddenly unable to access his/her public education (due to a variety of factors) school administrators and special education case managers, as well as parents and caregivers, need a well-managed and effective placement for the student who is in need of rapid and reliable educational and social support services. This program is designed, staffed and managed in order to provide a high degree of professional supervision and stabilization, appropriate academic courses, beneficial social development activities, and crisis prevention. The purpose of this intensive planning and implementation is so that the student, school team, family members, and other involved parties are not struggling with repeated placement disruptions. Providing a calming and structured placement for distressed youth, along with well-conceived and accessible educational services, allows for more comprehensive assessment, planning and reintegration efforts to occur. Through active involvement with each team, we support the objective of successful reintegration of students by providing partial day options, student transportation/visits to and from the public schools, along with troubleshooting/maintaining the momentum of the reintegration plan. However, there are some students that may benefit from a longer-term educational placement and we are able to support students in this way as well.

Confidentiality

Priority Placements maintains compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Priority Placements will not share personal information about its students unless explicit permission has been granted through a Release of Information and/or that person is a documented member of the student's educational team, including relevant classroom teachers and assistants.

Priority Placements employees are considered Mandated Reporters. This means that we will report any suspicions we hold regarding abuse (of any kind) or neglect of a minor. That includes any student under the age of 18. Once a report has been made, the outcome is determined by the Department of Children and Families. Priority Placements will not inform families if such reports are made, unless we are directed to do so by DCF.

Our School Objectives

*We ensure we meet students where they are academically; we differentiate instruction for all students as needed; and we work to increase skills, confidence, and strategies to move forward with success.

*We work toward growth with academic capacity and self-confidence, allowing each student to achieve success when re-integrating into other educational opportunities.

*We work to re-engage students with academics using a wide variety of curriculum, topics of interest, and project-based learning. Embracing *Common Core* allows teachers to reach students with varied areas of interest.

*We work to have all students find ownership and excitement with their academic attempts and progress. Successes are not ignored but are embraced and acknowledged whole-heartedly by staff to encourage students to be life-long learners.

*We always strive to have all students practicing socially acceptable behaviors in the classroom and community with peers and teachers. Clarity regarding expectations and follow-through with each student is required of all staff in order to obtain optimum results for every student.

*We keep social-emotional health is at the forefront of all our planning for students inside and outside the classroom.

*We ensure that students are instructed and learn necessary skills for academic success, but also social and life skills which are necessary to function successfully in real-world situations.

Our Programming

Our school program uses many appropriate methods of instruction to engage/re-engage students who join us. This entails mostly instructor-led instruction, but also includes demonstrations by teachers, independent practice time, and controlled practice of skills. Importantly, and whenever possible, students work with a peer or peers to learn and perfect skills in order to enhance each student's ability to have effective communication/problem-solving, care for others, and acceptance of different approaches.

Our school program offers courses in life skills which incorporate job skills, community exploration and social skills. Each of these courses helps to ensure students are learning necessary strategies for real-world situations in every way possible. These courses are easily tailored to goals set forth for each student individually, students by age/grade, and by maturity and skill level. These courses allow students to learn self-help skills, coping strategies, and proper ways to engage with themselves and others. Various skills are taught and can include DBT skills, executive functioning strategies, and any other daily living tasks and self-management tasks specific to any student's needs.

Special education students are case managed by our Special Educator, who follows and interprets IEP's, in collaboration with the Program Directors and Therapeutic Support Specialist to ensure all needs are being met. The special educator will provide direct instruction and direct observation as agreed upon by the teams at the time of admission. The team at Priority Placements always works in conjunction with public school team members and outside agencies for all special education students, but also for general education students as necessary.

Documentation Due Before Admission

Sending schools are responsible for providing necessary records, evaluations, and information on each student before admissions decisions can be made and a spot guaranteed. We provide the case manager with a packet of information to complete. In addition, **guardians** are responsible for completing all our internal paperwork as requested. This typically includes a contact/permission sheet, medical fact sheets, release of information document, and must supply updated IMMUNIZATION records. Please see the VT DOE immunization information requirements sheets.

Medication that is given by our staff during the school day must be brought in a labeled bottle (from pharmacy) and have a doctor note provided or the medication CANNOT be given out. Medication will be counted with the guardian and staff member when it comes into the building. A student may not carry in their medications. Medications will only be sent home by request from the guardian and be handed to a guardian or assigned adult.

Handle with Care

When a student's behavior poses an imminent and substantial risk of physical injury to the student or others Priority Placements staff may use non-violent restraint as taught by the Handle with Care program. This program is recognized by the State of Vermont. Our program follows all rules and regulations outlined in Vermont State Rule 4500. Communication with family and sending schools will occur if such an incident transpires. It is important to know that Priority Placements staff is directed to do everything in their power to avoid physical restraint. Verbal de-escalation is always attempted and the offering of another space to cool down can be given if the student is safe. However, it is most important to all staff that safety remain the main priority and if a student is unable to show they can be safe a restraint may be necessary.

Care and Cleanliness of Program Space

Our program has a reputation of providing clean, well-cared for, and attractive physical space for staff and students. The components of this include:

*Well-maintained buildings with all safety, mechanical, heating, plumbing, and electrical systems functioning and appropriate for the expenditure of public funds used for a program serving the needs of public school children. We are subject to inspections by health, fire and safety, Vermont Department of Education, and school district officials;

*Functional, non-institutional furnishings, equipment, and storage arrangements which allows for an uncluttered, spacious, visually soothing and easily cleaned/maintained program; Routine recycling and waste disposal systems which reduce the build-up of clutter, dirt, dust, and which prevent the need for major end-of-school-year overhauls;

*Professional-level cleaning at each site weekly during the school year;

*Orderly space for curriculum, supplies, and equipment to provide staff with ready access, procurement of needed replacements, and management of useful materials.

Use of Vehicles

All staff that transport students for classes at their sending schools, meetings, community exploration, etc., are licensed drivers. All staff must adhere to all laws regarding operating a motor vehicle including electronic usage, highway safety regulations, seatbelt laws, etc. Staff drive their personal vehicles as well as vehicles owned by Priority Placements.

Visitors to the Programs

Any and all visitors will need to be identified before entering the building. No student will be left unattended with a visitor unless a plan has been put in place. An example of this may be a scheduled time with a therapist or with a member of their school team. Any family, friend, or outside agency must be cleared by the site manager or director. Parents will always be notified if an 'unexpected' visitor shows up to see their child. If law enforcement or DCF personnel is to ask for a conversation with a student, we will follow their lead and supervise any conversations as permitted. We request that family members do not drop by unannounced as it can be disruptive to the student's day. We ask for school personnel to give notice for a visit as well so that students can be prepared. However, we understand there are times when visits may be unexpected.

Fire and Evacuation Drills

Evacuation routes are posted at each site and staff in each building are assigned to lead and support monthly practice drills and keep record. Students are supported by being taught and practicing expectations during these drills. We understand that some students may be overwhelmed by the noise and/or act of such a drill and we will work with those students to ease their anxiety beforehand.

Communication

Communication during school hours to share information regarding a student's morning, transportation or pick-up changes, etc., should be directed to that site's primary phone line. All general questions or concerns should be directed to Sarah Newman or Evan McNamara directly and they will be responsible for communicating with other team members as necessary and getting back to you in a timely manner.

Priority Placements will cancel school based upon Windham Southeast School District decisions. Please check local listings for closures. On a *very rare* occasion Priority Placements may find the need to have a closure and a call would go out to families from staff.

Mailing Address: PO BOX 2428, Brattleboro, VT 05303

Executive Director: Leslie Todd Phone: 802-258-1556

Director: Sarah Newman Phone: 802-579-8348

Asst. Director: Evan McNamara Phone: 802-258-7954

23 Marlboro Road (West Campus)
West Brattleboro, VT 05301
Grades K-6
Site Phone: 802-258-7958

88 High Street (East Campus)
Brattleboro, VT 05301
Grades 7-12
Site Phone: 802-258-7954

Additional Communication Expectations Below:

RE: Absences

Parent or guardian is required to call the Priority Placements, Inc. phone number to report that a student will not be in attendance with the reason given. Staff will report the absence to the public school as an excused or unexcused absence. If we do not receive a call, we will report the absence as unexcused and notify the parents that his/her student is not present. If a student refuses to come in that is counted as an unexcused absence.

RE: Truancy

Priority Placements will report attendance to the sending schools and follow the sending schools truancy policy. Typically we will notify the school when a student has reached 7, 10, 15 unexcused absences. We will report to DCF as directed and/or feel necessary given situations around unexcused absences. We stress that guardians call and confirm the reason for a student's absence and expect notation from therapy and doctor appointments as often as possible.

Students learn best when consistently present for their school day and this will be stressed during a student's enrollment time with us!

RE: Early Release/Appointments, etc.

Parent or guardian is required to call the Priority Placements, Inc. phone number to notify staff if a student will be leaving early and with whom. Any other departure will be reported to the public school as unexcused.

RE: Alternate Transportation

All transportation occurring with bussing, taxis, and any other mode of transportation will have a plan put into place at the time of referral in regard to who is expected to make phone calls letting drivers know when a student will not be needed. Often, this will be the responsibility of the parent/guardian as you will be able to provide the information in a timely manner.

RE: Student Walk Out

Any student, regardless of age, that leaves the program site without permission will have a parent/guardian notified immediately. A student that walks out will not be allowed to return until the student, guardian, and site manager/director meet to discuss how that will be avoided in the future. We will do our best to be available ASAP as to not delay return to programming. In a rare circumstance, the return meeting may be deemed unnecessary, however, that is solely the decision of the program director. Any additional walk outs will result in a meeting with the case manager as well to help determine whether our program is an appropriate fit.

Students at the 7th-12th grade site may be considered eligible to take part in a 'walking contract' if the student's guardians and school team feel that an independent, timed break may be beneficial to the student's ability to self-regulate. If so, a contract would be drafted by the program director and signed by all parties involved in the student's plan.

Food and Beverage Policy

Priority Placements, Inc. has a strict policy asking that parents/caregivers do not supply food or beverages for their students to bring to our program. Additionally, we want all students to understand that this is our policy and not yours; and that they are expected to adhere to this policy whether you supply the supplemental food and beverages, or they choose to buy for themselves. We realize this diverges from the general policies at many schools and workplaces.

Though we provide water throughout the day ***we will allow water to come in a container with no graphics only (it should not be flavored or carbonated). If the bottle is not clear the student will be asked to start with an empty bottle that will be filled with water upon entering the building.***

A cornerstone of our program is that food is shared and what is served here is appealing to most children, teens and adults. We have found that drinks and food from outside the program lead to difficulty in a variety of ways, particularly because it creates poor appetites for our noontime meal; it creates a sense of dependency on a particular drink or food; it promotes inequality among students, it can create a refrigerator mess/recycling obligation for staff or other students; it can create a caffeine or sugar reaction which interferes with learning (we realize some will argue that it helps with concentration); and it can lead to unnecessary problems/power struggles, which create discomfort for other students.

We have no objection to you providing your student with whatever food or drinks you wish before they arrive; however, please do not send any in with them.

Our lunch and snack times are times that staff work to create community between staff and students. Social skills are weaved into these important pieces of the day. Skills that are addressed include things such as how to carry on appropriate conversation at the table, table manners, supporting each other's ideas, and how to enjoy each other's company whether you are friends or not.

Additionally, please communicate with us at the time of referral about your student's food preferences so we can build that into our lunch/snack schedules.

Supervision

Staff is required to provide error-free supervision for assigned and unassigned students. This includes, but is not limited to, eyes- and ears-on supervision when any student is interacting with another student or a member of the public. Permitted students are allowed to be by themselves in a room to complete work or to “break” alone for a few moments if it is part of their individual plan and they are deemed responsible enough to act appropriately with this time. However, the classroom door must be open and a staff member must be keeping eyes and ears on that space.

Discipline

Though Priority Placements, Inc. staff works to maintain and help every student succeed with our programming there are circumstances in which consequences are required. Supervision is of utmost importance to our program. We are always certain how any event transpires and can respond immediately. Staff complete incident reports for any act, little or significant, that occurs day to day. We work to be ahead of all issues that may arise and find ways to alleviate the need for discipline. Non-compliance around rules such as hat wearing, swearing, and work refusal will be handled by staff offering a space to allow the student to quietly prepare themselves to start or restart the day successfully. Students can choose to talk with a staff member about the reasoning for the non-compliance and find a way to move forward. Students can ask for a movement break as well. Staff will always remain patient while waiting for compliance. We find that compliance around basic, reasonable expectations results in positive outcomes and a lessened desire for students to create power struggles over minor details. This allows more focus on all the right things!

Any situation that includes a violent act of any kind, bullying or harassment (please see definition in the next section) in or outside of the program, being under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or having any drug, weapon, or illegal paraphernalia in our programs will result in an investigation by the Program Director and Site Manager. Any and all serious incidents are discussed with the students sending school as they are enrolled in that school system as well. Further discipline may or may not be deemed necessary by the sending school.

Tobacco use is prohibited on our premises and also not allowed in any student’s possession regardless of age at any time and for any reason.

In order to ensure safety for students, staff, community members, and our program space we reserve the right to examine school property at any time, including desks, cubbies, computers, etc. Priority Placements administration and/or designated staff person may also search students and search or seize student property when it is reasonably believed that the search will reveal evidence of a violation of law or a school rule. When evaluating reasonable grounds, the school will consider the reliability of the information received, the availability of corroborating evidence, the severity of the suspected infraction, and the intrusiveness of the search to be carried out.

Bullying/Harassment

Priority Placements, Inc. has a zero-tolerance policy for bullying and harassment of any kind. Bullying is when someone repeatedly and intentionally uses words or actions against someone or a group of people to cause distress and risk to their wellbeing. Bullying can occur in various ways. Face-to-face which involves physical actions or direct verbal actions. Covert bullying is less direct and includes spreading rumors/lies and excluding others from activities and groups. Cyberbullying occurs using information or communication technologies. Any form of bullying in or out of our program that leaves another student feeling unsafe, rejected, depressed, ashamed, afraid or stressed will result in immediate disciplinary action (please see discipline procedures). Below are additional examples of bullying (this is not an all-encompassing list):

- *Giving nasty looks, making rude gestures, constant negative teasing
- *Harassing someone based on their race, sex, religion, gender or disability
- *Intentionally stalking someone
- *Intentionally and repeatedly hurting someone physically
- *Spreading rumors/lies

When violations occur and depending on the severity of the incident the student may:

- *Not be allowed around other students for a specific number of days while in the building;
- *Be required to attend a meeting between Priority Placements staff, the student, and guardians prior to returning;
- *Be required to meet with Priority Placements staff, the student, guardians, and school team to discuss re-entry with a contract in place outlining expectations. This may or may not include an understanding that the student must start off-site, with a tutor, before re-entering the main site;
- *May be suspended;
- *May be reported to the authorities;
- *May be referred to the sending school for a change of placement.

Priority Placements, Inc. has specific policies in place regarding, electronics usage, dress code, and personal possessions. These were created as our program has learned over time that these procedures help set the tone for a respectful setting. These policies clearly state the process for handling any resistance by a student or guardian. As stated below, we find that with basic requests met our day to day programming runs smoothly and each student can have the best day possible. Only the directors can decide to handle the following situation in a varied way.

**Policy: Personal Possessions
(including backpacks, purses, objects from home, etc.)**

This policy pertains to all students enrolled at the Priority Placements, Inc. educational program.

Personal possessions are to remain at home as PPI does not require anything to come and go with students. Anything brought in is to remain at the designated location at each site for the duration of the day. Students will not be allowed to go back and forth to their bags. Students are not to carry items in their pockets. Wallets, keys, etc., can be locked up when entering the building and returned at the time of dismissal. It is easiest to not bring anything into the building that is not needed for the day!

Articles of clothing used for layering must be brought from room to room and should be taken care of appropriately. That means no articles of clothing should be thrown on the floor or under chairs or desks. An extra layer should be worn or placed neatly on the back of the seat where you are.

Feminine products will be in every bathroom to alleviate the need for purses to be carried around. If there is another personal care need that must be met it can be discussed with Sarah Newman and/or the site manager.

A student will not be considered ready for the day or ready to start class until this expectation is met.

Remember:

Put your things in the appropriate places upon arrival; this will assure you are in compliance with this policy.

Policy: Electronics Usage
(including cell phones, listening devices or computing devices of any kind)

This policy pertains to all students enrolled at the Priority Placements, Inc. educational program.

Electronics usage on the property is governed by directions given by any teacher or adult staff member. Therefore, phones and music devices (any other small device that is carried in a pocket) is to be placed in the designated basket in each classroom before the start of each class. Computers or any device larger than pocket size will be turned into the site manager or assigned staff member at the start of a day.

Personal devices are not to be used during the day, at any time, in the building or in the community without permission. Permission to take an “electronics break” may be granted by any teacher or adult staff member at the adult’s discretion. Students must ASK PERMISSION and receive a positive response before using the device.

Violations of this policy would include not depositing your device into the assigned basket at the start of a class period, not asking permission and waiting for an affirmative response, etc. A student will not be considered ready for the day or ready to start class until this expectation is met.

Remember:

Turn in your device, ask permission, and follow the direction: this will assure you follow this policy.

**Discipline Procedures Specific to Electronics Usage and
Personal Possessions Policies:**

Violation of these policies will result in a MANDATORY meeting with the student, staff member, and Sarah Newman. The purpose of this meeting will be to determine whether a student can have the personal belonging in his or her possession when entering the building.

A second violation of these policies will result in a MANDATORY meeting with student, staff member, Sarah Newman and PARENT OR GUARDIAN. The purpose of this meeting will be to determine how the parent/guardian is going to assure that the student is able to comply with this policy if the item continues to come into the building.

A THIRD violation of these policies will result in a MANDATORY meeting with student, staff member, Sarah Newman, PARENT/GUARDIAN and CASE MANAGER to consider a restrictive plan to be followed and steps in place to refer to an alternate school placement as necessary.

Policy: Dress Code

All students at Priority Placements, Inc. are expected to arrive at school in appropriate clothing. Clothing is anything worn on the body that is viewed by others.

Clothing that is NOT considered appropriate for this program is as follows:

1. Clothing with a slogan/saying that is derogatory in anyway or promotes violence, poor language, or drug use;
2. Pajamas;
3. Low cut shirts or low riding pants where cleavage is apparent to others;
4. Clothing with holes in inappropriate places;
5. See-through material;
6. Hats/hoods/bandanas are not to be worn in the building.

Clothing must always cover up undergarments of all kinds.

Students are expected to be presentable to the public as we have many different types of outings embedded in this program. In addition, it is our goal that every student feels comfortable here with all other students and staff. Students are capable of successful days when they look and feel good and are correctly dressed for the occasion.

Students may be offered clothing to put on if they are in violation of the dress code policy. If he/she declines a call will be made to the guardian. It will be up to the guardian to provide appropriate attire at that point and/or the student may need to be away from other students the remainder of the day or sent home.

Constant violation of this policy will result in any or all of the following consequences based upon staff decisions:

1. Meeting with the Site Manager to clarify expectations.
2. A meeting with the Site manager and parent/guardian to discuss ways for the student to meet the dress code expectations.
3. Parent being called to transport the student home to change. Missed work or community service will be made up after school.
4. Team meeting with sending school personnel if a resolution is not made in the previous attempts.

Curriculum

According to Vermont Statute we are required to offer the minimum course of study (at the least):

§ 906. Course of study

(a) In public schools, approved and recognized independent schools, and in home study programs, learning experiences shall be provided for students in the minimum course of study.

(b) For purposes of this title, the minimum course of study means learning experiences adapted to a student's age and ability in the fields of:

- (1) basic communication skills, including reading, writing, and the use of numbers;
- (2) citizenship, history, and government in Vermont and the United States;
- (3) physical education and comprehensive health education, including the effects of tobacco, alcoholic drinks, and drugs on the human system and on society;
- (4) English, American, and other literature;
- (5) the natural sciences; and
- (6) the fine arts.

Priority Placements offers Literacy (reading and writing), Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies at the primary level. We offer physical education, health and wellness, and art explorations throughout the week. We offer life skills and social skills times as discussed earlier in the handbook. We plan numerous community experiences and field trips during the year (physical activities, museums, plays, etc.). A daily schedule will be available in your welcome packet.

Priority Placements works with high school students to take courses to help them meet their graduation requirements from their sending schools. This can include completion of senior projects, help finding and completing community service opportunities, etc. At the middle/high school level we also offer physical education, health and wellness, Art History and Concepts, Life Skills and Social Skills. Community Outings and field trips are essential with this age bracket as well! High school students schedule change each semester and will be discussed with their team. A clear plan will be available to any member of the team at any time! Our course of study can be provided.

We use the Common Core Standards to guide our work with students. These standards allow for variation in the way skills are learned, which is fantastic for our program as we work with such diverse learners!

Remote Learning

Remote learning may be a reality again during this school year, though we will be hopeful it will not be. If this scenario occurs, students will be supported with 1:1 and small group sessions through various modes of communication. Students will all have a Priority Placements email account allowing them to access google classrooms that will support their learning. Weekly plans will be made clear and concise for students and guardians. Support will be provided to assist everyone with accessing learning in a more trying configuration! We will continue to meet the individual needs of each student.

Grading

Grades are reported quarterly along with a brief narrative for each course of content studied, assignments completed, and behavior notes. Priority Placements has a set scale for grade calculation (see below). Staff complete biweekly notes that describe work completed, current grade, and behavior notes that is reviewed by the program directors. Plans are put into place for students that seem to be struggling for any reason and in any area of the day. The information is used for the narratives mentioned above and provided to guardians and the sending school. Credits for high school students are awarded based on the sending school's earning system. Typically, the credits are earned by time on learning and work completion. Priority Placements works in conjunction with school guidance counselors, registrars, and administration. Student's keep portfolio's that include their best work (particularly in core subject areas) and provides easy access to case managers as necessary. We work with each school district to provide the necessary information to ensure all expectations are met.

Student Grading System

All staff is expected to track student grades in the same manner to provide consistency of expectations to the students and to the school districts. The breakdown for grades should be as follows: 33.3% Readiness to Learn, 33.3% Participation, 33.3% Project/Work Completion. The scale for recording each piece daily should be 0-3.

Readiness to Learn refers to the student's ability to enter the classroom in an appropriate way and settle in for class to begin.

Participation refers to the student being able to maintain proper behavior and attitude that allows him/her to take part in planned lessons and activities. This also includes the student being able to positively/appropriately discuss any reason that he/she may need a variation on expectations for that day.

Project/Work Completion refers to the student working on assigned tasks, as capable, for the expected length of time.

Attendance is simple. The student is physically present or not. Once a student reaches 5, 7, and 10 misses from a class the teacher will notify the directors. *If the student is absent he/she should receive 0's across the board for readiness to learn, participation, and project/work completion.* An excused absence will not count against a student.

What does 0-3 look like?

0: Nothing is accomplished, no effort to turn things around.

1: Some effort given, but very minimal and/or no effort followed by a short burst of effort while maintaining uncooperative attitude.

2: Satisfactory behavior and attitude throughout most/all of the period. Work completed and classroom behavior maintained with little redirection.

3: Able to stay on task, complete all (or most of) what is expected with appropriate effort and behavior. Willingness to ask for and receive help.