

Notes on Admission to VoAg Centers

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Under the State of Connecticut law, students have a right-to-apply, but not-to-attend a regional vocational agriculture center, have appeal rights under Section 10-65-5 of the Connecticut general statutes. If denied admission, then:

"Any student denied admission to a program of vocational agriculture or is about to be dismissed from such a program shall be given an opportunity to request an informational review of his/her case before Review Committee at a Regional Vocational Agriculture Center.

The Review Committee shall be composed of at least, but not limited to the following representation: a member of the vocational agriculture staff, an administrator from the school where the vocational agriculture program operates, a member of the operating board of education or their administrative representative, a member of the sending board of education or their administrative, and a member of the regional vocational agriculture consulting committee. Such student may make a request in writing, to the proper vocational agriculture center, addressed to the coordinator responsible for such center, for a review of his or her case. Any such request shall be made within 15 days of such action; the said committee shall conduct such review within 20 days of receipt of such request. The committee through the operating board of education shall within 10 days of such review, notify in writing, the student, and the sending board of education of its decision. The decision shall be final and binding upon all parties."

In Connecticut, every eighth grade student who expresses interest in applying to a regional VoAg Center must follow state criteria: Students must be a bonafide eighth grade student, express interest and be in good standing to apply.

Historically VoAg focuses upon these components for acceptance, good standing, eighth grade status and interest in the field of agriculture or aquaculture.

Good standing clause –

VoAg Centers examine three criteria for good standing and each has a role in determining acceptance. These measures have been adopted in use by VoAg department heads October 2004. (Bracketed items refer to the Sound School.)

Academic Record – no failures – good grades in technology or science. [Low grades may result in probation status for one semester.]

Discipline/behavior – expulsions, suspensions and comments on report cards reviewed – Our labs are rated high hazard industrial, so this is critical for VoAg. Some VoAg centers ask for a discipline report from the sending school.

Attendance – We look at good attendance, and some involvement in school sponsored after school activities. High absence or truancy is a safety matter – missing VoAg labs (safety procedures) can increase the chance of accidents.

8th Grade student completers can only apply

The law asks that VoAg Centers assure the student is an eighth grade graduate. [I'm certain that the early developers of VoAg wanted students of high school age – and in light of the industry applications, we have several home-school students who appealed the requirement that parents / guardians need to prove that the child is an eight grade level. Our district has ruled that a parent or guardian does not need to prove that a student is an "eighth" grader, so we have seen an increase in students who academically are in "eight grade," but only 11 or 12 years old. They have been successful, so far, and most likely benefit from the low class size of VoAg education.]

Interest Criteria for Vocational Agriculture/Aquaculture

The law states that a student must express interest in the subject area. It's not, however, defined how that interest is to be assessed or measured. VoAg applications used to ask for three references from the "farm committee," but that changed in 1955 when VoAg Centers were reorganized. Certainly the number of farms have declined in coastal towns, so many VoAg Centers now have a greater reliance upon guidance and teacher recommendations. Some VoAg centers continue the practice of asking for industry recommendations, [but we do not.] Interest is determined during the interview process with the VoAg teacher as per state regulations and is rated with a rubric to assess interest/experiences. VoAg, with its high hazard classification, must have students who are "interested" and, therefore have an attitude/aspiration to fulfill the program requirements. Students who are not interested in the program are dismissed usually at the end of the first year. (Please see state appeal process, mentioned above).

VoAg and Special Education

Vocational Agriculture classes were organized as a statewide effort in 1878. Local school systems had the agriculture programs as early as 1880, but in the late 1920's, Connecticut started funding VoAg centers and set standards for participation. In 1930, Connecticut had 30 state-funded VoAg centers. During this period, the recruitment process lasted an entire year. New students interested in signing up for VoAg classes would participate in activities during spring planting, December and the fall, (FFA and Grange agriculture fairs). December marked the period of recruiting students from the fall agricultural fair and again with a spring event or open house in May. Today, they are called FFA recruiting activities. Some VoAg centers still require attendance at all three sessions with the May session directed to complete SOE plans (supervised occupational experience/employment). All these activities and recruiting programs predated the American with Disabilities Act, Section 504 and now Specialized Instruction (Education).

Special Education (Instruction) and 504 Students

Special education and 504 students can participate in VoAg programs. [We ask parents/guardians to list any special services or education needs on the application.] Each student application is reviewed by the VoAg teacher for student's good standing, 8th grade status, and interest. If the student meets these admission requirements, the file is passed to the special education department for review. [The review has a PPT component: Will the Sound School and VoAg center meet the needs of a student's 504

plan and/or IEP?] The sending town is responsible for convening and conducting the PPT review to see if it meets the needs of the student. [They often are held at the Sound School with school staff attending them.]

The needs of these students often fall into 3 areas:

Instructional Modifications

Instructional Accommodations

Social/Emotional Specialties

It is important to remember that VoAg education by its very nature --- the use of industry level equipment is classified "high hazard industrial" -- the most dangerous of all educational uses. Therefore, the prudent person rule applies, especially for students that will be in a dangerous position who could cause danger when working with high hazard industry equipment. [Several times we have rejected applicants with a pattern of dangerous or destructive behavior.] VoAg centers tend to have positive experiences with student with high functioning Aspergers Syndrome. Students have participated in modified programs with laboratory limitations, including students with processing deficits -- trouble understanding verbal commands and processing responses. [They have sometimes been excluded from individual high-hazard situations, such as overnight sail training trips.]

Students who could not comprehend verbal commands or respond to instructions especially safety instructions have not participated in high hazard laboratories for obvious reasons. The liability of such students is enormous with high hazard industrial situations. VoAg education requires all students to have an "SOE." One of the successes of VoAg education has been in the area of instructional modifications, especially instructional style. Vocational education always practiced differentiated instruction, especially performance measures, portfolios of industry applications and hands-on activities associated with career experiences. VoAg education contains an enormous number of applied career field trips and practical site demonstrations of agricultural practices.

Several VoAg Centers have noticed a tremendous increase in applications from sending districts that can be classified as "hands on or concrete learners." From this category, VoAg department heads have found that strong interest is a good predictor of success. Department heads all agreed interest in the curriculum is the largest factor in such student success. We have experience with three categories, relating to student learning modalities.

Students that learn "vocationally" or hands on with academic skill deficits (CMT)

Students that learn "vocationally" and have IEP or 504 plans (ADA)

Students that learn "vocationally" with diagnosed learning deficits (DLD) such as executive control/function deficits.

VoAg centers do on occasion deny participation from students with severe motor control and response processing deficits (non-responsive to auditory commands) because it was felt the student could fall off a vessel or tractor or be injured because they could not respond to safety commands by staff. This has been handled on a case-by-case basis or by the high school administrative staff.

Appeal Process

There is a state-mandated appeal process that parents, students and legal guardians can take advantage of. Parent/guardians and occasionally state agencies such as the Department of Children & Families, have requested such reviews.

Attachment: Sound School Application and Guide