

**Indiana State Board of Education
Request for Freeway School Accreditation****Board Meeting Date: June 13, 2018**

School: Gersh Academy at Riverbend (A114)
Administrator: Leanne Sargent-Suarez, Director of Education
Address: 701 N Niles Ave.
South Bend, IN 46617
Grade Span: PK-12
Public/Non-Public: Non-Public

The following executive summary has been compiled by the Indiana Department of Education (Department). This summary includes information presented by the above-mentioned school in its petition to the Indiana State Board of Education (Board) for freeway accreditation. The Department also shared this summary with Board staff for review.

Identity:

Gersh Academy at Riverbend is a non-public school that exclusively serves children on the Autism Spectrum or with related disabilities in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Gersh Academy at Riverbend's specialized programs combine academics with an emphasis on social thinking, therapeutic/clinical services, and vocational or post-secondary opportunities. Gersh Academy at Riverbend is part of the Gersh organization, which currently encompasses eleven (11) programs across Long Island, New York, and in Puerto Rico.¹

Gersh Academy at Riverbend is located in South Bend, Indiana, in a three-story, 8,000 square foot facility that houses both a private school and a residential program for students on the autism spectrum or with related disabilities. These two entities operate independent of one another. Gersh Academy at Riverbend partners with Meridian Behavioral Health Systems to operate the residential program, and partners with the Gersh organization to operate the private school.

Gersh Academy at Riverbend is a candidate for accreditation with the National Independent Private Schools Association (NIPSA), AdvancEd, and the Joint Commission on Accreditation.

School Mission and Academic Objectives:

Gersh Academy at Riverbend's vision is "a world where individuals on the autism spectrum are empowered to thrive." Gersh Academy at Riverbend's mission is to "provide an environment where programs and services are customized around individual needs."

Gersh Academy at Riverbend does not subscribe to one style of teaching or approach to learning. Gersh Academy at Riverbend employs a collaborative approach with a team of professionals focused on a program that works best for each student. Gersh Academy at Riverbend utilizes "Real-Time Functional Therapy". This methodology addresses challenges as they occur rather than waiting for a therapy session to be held.

¹ <https://www.gershacademy.org/>

Gersh Academy at Riverbend employs whole-school strategies to address attendance and student performance. In measuring school performance, Gersh Academy at Riverbend will consider school culture, school connectivity, teacher and school leader engagement and effectiveness, measures of student progress, and outcomes for students. Specifically, Gersh Academy at Riverbend utilizes formative and performance assessments to measure school performance, and also incorporates assessment vehicles such as student portfolios and presentations as additional measures of student understanding.

Enrollment Information:

Gersh Academy at Riverbend exclusively serves students on the Autism Spectrum or with related disabilities. For the 2017-2018 school year, Gersh Academy at Riverbend had a total of four (4) students enrolled, and all students were enrolled in grade 2. Gersh Academy at Riverbend is currently enrolling students for the 2018-2019 school year, and currently projects an enrollment of about 15 students.

Gersh Academy at Riverbend predominantly serves the geographic area of St. Joseph County, Indiana, which includes South Bend and Mishawaka.

Curriculum:

Gersh Academy at Riverbend has aligned its curriculum and instruction to the Indiana Academic Standards. The foundations of academic learning at Gersh Academy at Riverbend are as follows:

- Read with comprehension, write effectively, and communicate successfully in a variety of ways and settings and with a variety of audiences.
- Know and apply the core concepts and principles of mathematics; social, physical, and life sciences; civics and history, including different cultures and participation in representative government; geography; arts; and physical education.
- Think analytically, logically, and creatively, and to integrate technology literacy and fluency as well as different experiences and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems.
- Understand the importance of work and finance and how performance, effort, and decisions directly affect future career and educational opportunities.

The academic program at Gersh Academy at Riverbend includes English/language arts and literacy; social studies; mathematics; computer sciences; health and physical education; and visual arts curricula. Further, functional life skills instruction and behavioral supports are incorporated into the academic programming. Given the population at Gersh Academy at Riverbend, a blended academic model, which incorporates students with different levels of academic and social/therapeutic needs in the same classroom.

Performance Data:

Gersh Academy at Riverbend had no students enrolled in tested grade levels during the 2017-2018 school year. Therefore, Gersh Academy at Riverbend does not have any performance data available for consideration.

Gersh Academy at Riverbend did administer the Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills (CIBS-II) to its students. The CIBS-II is a criterion-referenced assessment that includes a comprehensive collection of valid, reliable, and well-researched reading, English, and math assessments for students with special needs in pre-kindergarten through grade 9. The CIBS-II measures academic achievement, and assesses each student's strengths and needs in the classroom to assist with the establishment of educational goals when writing individualized education programs (IEPs).

Staffing:

Gersh Academy at Riverbend has one licensed teacher on staff with a Masters level in severe disabilities and special education, and one teacher aide. Gersh Academy at Riverbend intends to hire all licensed teachers with backgrounds in special education and mild to severe disabilities. The intended classroom structure at Gersh Academy at Riverbend is to have one teacher with two aides for every eight students.

Gersh Academy at Riverbend requires all personnel involved in student learning to participate in professional development courses and workshops that are developed to build on each individual's knowledge base. Gersh Academy at Riverbend's professional development plan is based on current, research based theories that:

- requires and fosters a drive for continuous improvement;
- aligns itself with the Department's standards;
- recognizes that it is a process and provides sufficient time, support, and resources to allow teachers to master new content and expectations;
- uses theories that are research-based and have proven valuable in increasing student learning and development;
- requires an evaluation process that is ongoing;
- uses a variety of approaches to improve instruction; and
- provides the opportunity for staff reflection and refinement necessary to ensure improvement.

Considerations:

410 IAC 6-5.1 outlines the health and safety requirements for school buildings and school sites with which all schools must comply. 410 IAC 6-5.1-1(i) defines a "school" as any place, or structure in which systematic instruction of any kind or grade is carried on for more than ten (10) persons for five (5) hours or more per week or two and one-half (2 ½) hours or more per day, including preschools, kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools providing instruction to meet the compulsory attendance law under IC 20-33-2. Because the enrollment at Gersh Academy at Riverbend was less than ten (10) students, it does not meet the definition of a "school" under 410 IAC 6-5.1. Therefore, it is not required or compelled to comply with health and safety requirements for school buildings and school sites.

Recommendation:

The Department and Board staffs jointly recommend the Board enter into a contract with Gersh Academy at Riverbend for freeway accreditation.