



## Winston Prouty Will Purchase Austine School Campus

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN - JAN. 25, 2016



*Ava Keppler, 5, makes a cake in a grain and corn box while Winston Prouty Center Executive Director Chloe Learey lends a hand. The center expects to move into the space formerly occupied by the Austine School in June.*

HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN / VPR

Brattleboro's historic Austine School campus will soon have a new owner.

The U.S. bankruptcy court approved the sale of the former school for the deaf and hard of hearing to the Winston Prouty Center, an early education program in Brattleboro.

In the end, it simply made financial sense for the Winston Prouty Center to

purchase the 177-acre campus.

Winston Prouty has about 50 kids up to 5 years old in its early learning program, and the center is at capacity.

The early education center was planning a \$2.4 million expansion just as the Austine School was closing.

Winston Prouty Executive Director Chloe Learey says for about the same money the early education center gets a beautiful wooded campus, with plenty of room for the kids to run around, as well as extra space to expand and start new programs for families and children.

**" We can't do this alone. This is not our project. We are taking the lead and we're happy to lead the way, but we need support." — Chloe Learey, executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child Development**

"The moment I started walking around I thought, 'Why would we build something new if we could use the space that already existed?'" Learey says. "And then it didn't take long to do some numbers and say it could actually cost us a lot less to buy that big campus and sell it off or rent off pieces than to build here."

Learey says owning the Austine School campus opens the doors to all sorts of ideas, from integrating senior housing with the early education center to providing more family-based services on site.

"We work with a lot of different agencies and we collaborate closely with them and we believe in that," she says. "If we can do something that brings together the community, helps reinvigorate an asset, creates a better resource, we do that hoping that the community will follow. We can't do this alone. This is not our project ... We're taking the lead. We're happy to lead the way, and we need support."

The Austine School board of trustees voted to close the school in April, 2014.



*The historic five-floor, 30,000-square-foot Holton Hall on the Austine School campus was built in 1911.* CREDIT HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN / VPR

The Vermont Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, which ran the school and owned the campus, declared bankruptcy in September of that year.

The state of Vermont has been supporting the Austine School since 1910, and

by the time the school closed the state held a \$5.6 million lien on the property.

Assistant Attorney General Jacob Humbert says the state wanted a public bid and auction, but ultimately no one else made an offer on the Austine campus.

"The state will likely receive very little, or perhaps nothing in payment of its proof of claim before the bankruptcy court," Humbert says. "The reality of the situation was that very likely, unless there had been an overbid of some substantial amount, the state wouldn't have likely seen a large amount of that statutory lien that had been established over a course of roughly a century of appropriations to the Austine School."

Winston Prouty will pay \$2.75 million for the campus, which includes three large buildings, two dormitories and more than 100 acres of forested land.

There are currently a number of tenants on the former Austine campus, including the University of Vermont Extension, a private Waldorf school and a team building education organization with a ropes course.

Learey says rental payments from those groups will help offset the costs of running such a large campus.

She expects the move will initially allow the early education center to add 15 or 20 more students. Learey expects to move on to the campus in June.

<http://digital.vpr.net/post/winston-prouty-will-purchase-austine-school-campus>