

## Brattleboro Early Ed Center Moves Into Former Austine School For The Deaf

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN • AUGUST 1, 2016



The Winston Prouty Center for Child Development moved from their cramped space in Brattleboro into the sprawling former Austine School campus earlier this month. *Howard Weiss-Tisman / VPR*

A Brattleboro early education center is all moved into its new home in the former Austine School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

The Winston Prouty Center for Child Development purchased the historic campus after the Austine School declared bankruptcy and closed two years ago.

Winston Prouty serves kids from 1 to 5 years old, and they moved from their cramped space in Brattleboro into the sprawling former Austine School campus earlier this month.

Winston Prouty Director Chloe Learey says the early ed center wanted to expand in its old space when the Austine School for the Deaf closed after 100 years.

"I think if we had just added on where we were we just would have been little old us, doing what we do," Learey says. "But here, it feels like being part of something bigger. Something bigger that has a purpose."

That purpose, Learey admits, is still developing.

Winston Prouty is using a fraction of the space at the former Austine School, which includes two dorms, a historic five-floor building and more than 100 acres of forest.

At one point, Austine was the state school for all deaf students, and more than 100 people lived on campus and attended classes.

The school closed after years of declining enrollment, largely due to changes in special ed laws that allowed deaf students to attend their own public schools.

"We're going to hold [the campus] and help it move forward and come back to life, but it has to be a community investment and a community resource." - Winston Prouty Director Chloe Learey

There are a handful of other tenants in place. But Learey says the Winston Prouty board wants to bring in other socially-minded organizations, with an eye toward groups that can help serve the families that have kids at Winston Prouty.

"This is a community resource," she says. "It is not our campus. We're taking the lien. We're going to hold it and help it move forward and come back to life, but it has to be a community investment and a community resource. So if there is any sort of cohesive vision, that would be it."

The move allowed the school to add two classrooms, including a new infant care program.

Staff are already moved in, and people who used to share partitioned cubicles now have their own offices, some overlooking the nearby hills.

The new space includes a commercial kitchen, which Learey says she wants to rent out or make available to community groups.

She says the plan is to retain ownership of the property and sell off portions of the buildings to other organizations for office use.



Brandy Levesque, left, talks to Joanne Shaw in Shaw's new office at The Winston Prouty Center for Child Development *Credit Howard Weiss-Tisman*

<http://digital.vpr.net/post/brattleboro-early-ed-center-moves-former-austine-school-deaf#stream/0>