

**The Barra School, Inc is a 501c3 nonprofit** educational organization based out of East Corinth, Vermont. Operating on a cohort-model, we utilize trauma-informed, forest-based therapeutic practices to provide **FREE** year-long overnight programming and ongoing mentorship and support for cohorts of at-risk youth and their families. **We specialize in working with neurodivergent and LGBTQIA+ youth** and our organization is founded on the belief of equitable access to all. We recognize that socio-economic and family dynamic barriers often preclude many youth from receiving the opportunities and services they desperately need, and therefore **we work hard to eliminate all barriers to access, providing all of this programming (along with all gear, equipment, clothing (if necessary), food, and transportation) for free. All costs (including staff and visiting teachers) are covered by grant funding.**

Presently, we work with two cohorts of youth a year; each cohort gathers one weekend a month and each week of school vacation. In the summer we run weekly weekend programming which culminates in a two-week long immersive experience. **This amounts to 26 weekend overnights and 4 full weeks of overnight programming, for a total of 1,920 hours of FREE therapeutic programming a year for LGBTQIA+ youth.** While we run largely based out of our riverside campsite along the Waits River in East Corinth, youth voice and choice helps to drive much of our program, and based on their interests and needs, we have rented cabins managed by the Dartmouth Outing Club and Merck Forest and Farmland Center, backpacked in the Pemigewasset Wilderness, canoed in the Saranac Lakes, and partnered with South Road Pottery Studio in Bradford to provide a combined wilderness and arts experience. **Please see the attached testimonials for info about our programs and reflections from participants and their families.**

Information About the Youth We Serve Summer 2022 - Summer 2023 Data	Ages 9-10	Ages 11-13	Ages 14-18	Total
Youth Served	3	6	12	21
LGBTQIA+ Identified Youth	2	6	12	20
Youth With Documented Disabilities	2	5	12	19
Youth With History of Trauma/Abuse	3	6	12	21
Low-Income Youth	3	4	10	17
Youth in Foster Care or Experiencing Homelessness	1	2	3	6
Youth Who Identify as MultiRacial/Non-White	2	3	8	13
Youth in the Juvenile Justice System	0	1	2	3
At-Risk Youth	3	6	12	21
Orange County Youth (Topsham, Corinth, Williamstown)	3	5	7	15
Washington County Youth (Northfield, Barre/Cabot)	0	2	1	3
Windsor County Youth (Woodstock)			1	1
Chittenden County Youth (South Burlington)			2	2

Over the past 3 years, we have been fortunate to have received a number of substantial ESSR fund grants. Because of this we have been able to purchase all of the gear, equipment, food, clothing, and supplies necessary to run this program; cover all staffing costs, including a director, trip leader, and 4 visiting teachers; as well as cover all necessary insurance, rental, and travel expenses. Despite a recent sizable donation, and two small grants, in order to continue offering the high-quality, desperately needed programming we provide, we will need a larger grant award to cover the remaining costs for staffing, transportation, consumable supplies, and food. Nation-wide grants are a long-shot for an organization like ours. **We rely on Vermont-based summer and afterschool program specific funding, such as Act 78, to continue providing critical services to one of our state's most vulnerable populations of youth.**

## The Barra School's Grant-Writing/Management and Programmatic Partnerships

In addition to our highly specialized programming for at-risk LGBTQIA+ youth, The Barra School partners with the Blake Memorial Library in East Corinth to help run and manage a comprehensive year-round afterschool program (along with a full 5 week summer day camp program) for local youth ages 4-14. We lend expertise and staff support in grant writing and grant management; loan out gear, equipment, and supplies; and offer full use of our riverside campsite facilities for programming, for free. Our goal is to do everything we can to ensure all area youth and their families have access to quality childcare, nutrition, social-emotional services, and enrichment experiences, and to create local jobs/job training opportunities and support local farms and businesses in the process.

2021-2023 Data : Partnership With BML					
Number of Unique Youth Served	124	Number of Families Served	92	Number of Youth Attending Per Week (Summer)	60-75
Number of Youth Attending Per Week (After-School)	25-30	Number of Youth Receiving Mental Health Services Through Our Program	12	Number of Youth With Disabilities Requiring a 1 on 1 or Specialized Services	13
Number of Low-Income Families	78	Number of Families Accessing Early Drop-off/Late Pick-Up (Extended Care)	22	Youth Counselors in Training	6
High School Employees	10	College-Aged Employees	8	Adult Employees	10
Senior Citizen Employees	4	Community Volunteers	5	Parent Volunteers	8
Summer Employees	20	AfterSchool Employees	9	Year-Round Employees	3
Local Farm Partners	3	Local Small Business Partners	4	Family Fee for Youth Participant (refundable based on participation)	\$25 a week/ Free
Daily Hours Summer (21-23)	9	Daily Hours Afterschool (22-23)	2.5	Number of Days A Week Afterschool (22-23)	2
Total Hours Per Summer (for 3 consecutive summers)	225	Total Afterschool Hours (22-23)	180	Projected Number of Days A Week Afterschool (24-25)	5
Projected Number of Hours a Week Afterschool (24-25)	15	Projected Total Hours of Afterschool Programming (24-25)	585	Projected Vacation Days or Saturday Programs (24-25)	20

Given that The Barra School's LGBTQIA+ program serves youth across counties and school districts, and given that we partner with our local library to run a separate comprehensive afterschool and summer camp program for youth ages 4-14, having to contract with an LEA in order to receive funding would be a logistical nightmare for us and would limit or reduce the programming we could offer and the populations we could serve. Given that there is less than a month left in this grant-writing period before applications are due, forcing nonprofits to now contract through an LEA would disqualify many high quality and very necessary programs currently providing services to the youth and families of Vermont, as these contract-based applications would require massive amounts of planning/negotiating that most of us would not have enough time for. Act 78 funds were meant to offer opportunities not afforded by 21CCLC grant funding which is limited to LEAs. Given that we have already contacted our local school and were told they didn't have the capacity to apply as an LEA, but welcomed our doing so and offered use of their facilities, we have little hope of gaining access to any of these funds if we are unable to apply for them on our own. This would mean that our town's comprehensive summer day camp and afterschool program would be completely eliminated and our specialized at-risk and LGBTQIA+ programming would be dramatically reduced or would become entirely cost-prohibitive for the population we serve. We urge you to create the Special Fund and allow nonprofits to apply for and use Act 78 funding.

## Testimonials/Programmatic Success Stories: Barra School LGBTQIA+ Programming

On the ride home from our last program one trans youth who has been in the middle of some massive DCF investigations of their family and who has struggled with eating disorders and other mental health issues stated that since they've started attending Barra School programming (in the summer of 2022) life has gotten better for them because they now have new friends who support them and programming sessions to look forward to. Because of this, it's easier for them to get through the hard times going on at home. This youth's family is not supportive of their LGBTQ+ identity but have let them participate in our "At-Risk" program. Because our "At-Risk" program is specifically geared toward LGBTQ+ youth, this individual has gotten the support and resources they need to be successful, including mentors and a community of peers they never would have met before. Given that they get bullied in their school environment, participation in Barra School activities has been massively helpful for them. While they struggle to eat at school and hide in the bathroom during lunch, they help cook and eat meals family style at Barra School programming without any issues whatsoever.

While we had a few kids back out unexpectedly the day before our canoe trip, we were successful in completing a 6 day end-to-end canoe trip through the Saranac Lakes and surrounding ponds, which included 6-10 miles of canoeing each day, reading maps and using compasses to navigate, camping at various styles of campgrounds (from large and popular places with water/shower facilities to remote tent sites and lean-tos, including a few private island sites), hiking and backpacking excursions, a 10 hour carry over a mountain (hauling all of our packs, gear, food, and equipment - including the canoes), and numerous hours spent fishing, journaling, meditating, forest-bathing, cooking/eating, playing games, and singing/telling stories around the campfire. (Please see attached short essay about this incredible trip.)

Through our program youth have gained life skills and personal resiliency skills related to mindfulness, health and wellness, and empowerment and communication. They've learned how to hike and be outdoors safely year-round, how to find joy and comfort from nature, how to coexist in stressful environments and work as a part of a team (as well as how to use their gifts, resources, strengths, etc to be a positive contributor to that team), and how to care for themselves (through cooking lessons, journaling and meditation sessions, exercise, and basic body-care practices that many struggled with (such as brushing/flossing/bathing)). Through lessons and expectations around these in the wilderness setting youth were able to transfer these skills/practices to their personal and home lives and have benefited greatly. We've seen shifts and successes and so much growth among our youth and the funding from grants has allowed us to create and implement the programming which directly supported it all.

### **A few messages from parents:**

"We know you always have our kiddo and all the kids in your charge best interests at heart. We truly appreciate all the work, love and time you put into this wonderful experience. It sounds like the camping trip was awesome! You and your crew have been so pivotal in improving our kiddo's self esteem and overall mental health. They complained about the carrying of the canoes, but during the telling of the story it was obvious how proud and strong they were feeling. Thank you so much!"

"Thank you for all you've done for our kiddo; you've helped create some of their fondest memories and proudest moments. We're indebted to you!"

"I can't believe you got my kiddo to hike a mountain or put on snowshoes. I don't know how you did it. He's the kid who's afraid of bugs and who is glued to his computer day and night. But, you've given him something I never would have imagined was possible and I couldn't be happier. Thank you!"

### **A few messages from youth:**

"When I asked my parents to let me attend I never thought they'd say yes, but because you provide transportation and everything we need they didn't have any reasons to say no. Wow. I'm not sure they really understand what it is we do each weekend, but that's ok. They know I love coming and that's all that matters!"

"You all work so hard to make sure we have such a good experience that I sometimes think, how is it possible that we all get to do this, that we even deserve it, but then you prove to us every time that we're worth it and I think, wow, how'd a group of misfits like us ever get this lucky, so thank you. Truly. You've changed my life in ways you'll never know. I hope you keep doing this because even though I'm graduating, there are other kids who need it just as much so I hope they can learn about this and find it and feel at home like I have. Thanks again."

"I can't believe that we get to spend so much time doing such cool things and that it doesn't cost us anything. If it did I definitely couldn't come but it doesn't so I can and that is just so awesome."

“My favorite meditation is the one where we imagine our energy growing like a ball of light in our bellies. Every time I grow the light I feel more and more alive. On days when I’m not feeling so great I imagine growing my ball of light and it helps me feel better and more in control, like I have the power to turn things around. Thank you for teaching us that.”

“Not gonna lie, I’m not an outdoorsy kid. I hate hiking. But I’d do anything to hang out with all of you and it’s kinda amazing, I’m feeling stronger than I was last year and my pack didn’t feel nearly as heavy this trip. So, that’s something! And, I’m probably never going to paddle a canoe again, but at least now I know I can!”

“I’m not sure what to say here except I’m gonna miss all of you when I go back to my mom’s house. I hope there’s a way for us to stay in touch because this has been the best group I’ve ever been a part of.”

### **Testimonials/Programmatic Success Stories: Barra School’s Support of BML’s Comprehensive Summer and Afterschool Programming**

One youth who typically went through their school days with 1on1 paraprofessionals and behavioral interventionists was able to participate without an aide and as successfully as the other youth in the program. While there were some challenges, we were able to meet them and respond in a way which was successful. Because we spend a lot of time outdoors, hiking to our riverside location and various local spots, the program was a great fit for some very active youth who needed to move their bodies in ways that the traditional classroom/school environment doesn’t allow for.

#### **From parents:**

“My two daughters age 7 and 9 at the time attended BML’s afterschool program. My daughters enjoyed their time there. It gave them time to think outside the box and be creative. They also met many new friends and when I picked them up at the end of the day I would often hear them sharing ideas with their new friends. These kids ranged in ages but they were so inspiring to each other and lifting each other up daily. My girls would come home and brag about their day and what they did including all the new things or techniques they were learning. I’m grateful they had this opportunity.”

“The library’s program provides a way for our kids to be involved with our local community and access local resources. I cannot say enough good things about this program. The opportunity to interact with a variety of social groups through BML summer and afterschool programs, allows our children to learn about the importance of diversity and inclusion.”

“As a retired educator and the former principal of the Waits River Valley School, I am well acquainted with the needs of children and families in this community. The library’s afterschool and camp programming provides one of the very few opportunities available for all children to socialize, explore, and learn more about themselves and their environment outside of the school day. It is an important service that the community needs; I hope they will continue to be funded.”

#### **From youth participants:**

“When you asked me to be a CIT I wasn’t sure if I could do it. But, I did and being a CIT allowed me to spend more time with my friends and be helpful to the younger kids in the program who now look up to me. I even got a babysitting job because of being a CIT.”

“My favorite activity was the birdfeeder and birdhouse design challenge. We designed one with a soda bottle and then made it and then made one with pinecones and then when we were done we got to make real bird houses out of wood and paint them. I love mine.”

“I wish we could have afterschool with Ms. Miranda every day because it’s my favorite.”

“I really liked reading *My Side of the Mountain* every week and creating my journal of outdoor survival skills. I can’t wait until we go on our fishing trip so I can try out the fishhooks I’ve been making.”

“I’ve learned so much Spanish in afterschool at the library. I didn’t think I could learn it but I have.”

“This program has taught me so much about the environment and why we need to protect it. Reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* and making baskets has given me a new appreciation and understanding of what indigenous people’s lives were like and what their values and beliefs are. I enjoyed sitting in my sit spot and writing in my journal and reflecting on our Council discussions. I can’t wait to share what we’ve learned with our parents and eat the succotash we’ve been making. Thank you for opening my eyes to this. I hadn’t really thought about global warming and the environment before, but now I realize how important it is to do my part and encourage others to protect what we have. I want to be able to sit on a rock in the river for the rest of my life and that might not happen if we don’t take care of the earth.”

## A Brief Essay Highlighting The Work The Barra School Does (Totally Worth the Read)

The morning of our portage was tense as the group of us looked over the maps and charted the course. Staff were divided as to which land route to carry from Upper to Middle Saranac Lake. Neither of us were fully familiar with the routes, having worked lightning fast to bring this youth-driven trip idea to fruition and despite our research and tips from local guides, we couldn't agree on the best way to go. Ultimately, one of us let the other take the lead, despite the reviews they'd read online of the current trail conditions, hoping that somehow, it would all work out. The important piece was ensuring that the youth felt confident that no matter what happened, staff knew what they were doing and everything would work out. And while we did know what we were doing, taking an idea kids had just two weeks prior and putting it into motion as a fully-fledged adventure that was bomb-proof was a nearly impossible task and yet, there we were, three days into a week-long canoe-trip supporting The Barra School youth as they learned how to navigate the map we, ourselves, were becoming more familiar with.

After some discussion and more map and compass work with the kids, we loaded our gear into our canoes and headed out. Our morning was peaceful, and in high spirits we enjoyed an early lunch at a lean-to campsite on Upper Saranac Lake before crossing a sheltered cove to where we would begin our portage. The map said 1.5 miles - an easy hike for all of us at that point, though no easy feat for carrying canoes and packs and canoe-trip packed gear. We anticipated it would take the afternoon and at most part of early evening and that a good paddle would take us from there to our island campsite on Middle Saranac Lake. We couldn't have been more wrong.

Within the first quarter mile of our journey we had one sprained ankle, two stuck canoes, multiple sore and bruised shoulders, and a growing frustration among the youth. We had been carrying for two full hours (almost half the time we thought it would take) and had barely moved a fraction of the gear a fraction of the way. We paused to regroup. One trip leader thought we should turn around, haul everything back to the water, and paddle to the next (flat and much shorter) carry which was six miles away, trading 13 miles of paddling for less stress and stain, while the other was adamant the original plan was the best and much more optimistically wanted to continue the process we'd begun. Coming to a begrudging consensus, we forged ahead. Little did we know that ahead would lead us over massive rocks, roots, and downed trees, and over trails that now were streams and log bridges that had sunken into swamps, sucking sneakers and socks and hats into the cold and murky mud.

At the point where it grew dark enough to require headlamps, we had only succeeded in carrying some of our packs and a portion of our food to the entrance of Middle Saranac Lake, leaving our canoes, the rest of our food, a few packs, and more gear scattered at various points in between. After taking a moment to refuel, rehydrate, and regroup, we ventured back to shore of Upper Saranac Lake, a dotted line of lights to start hauling the rest of our belongings into the woods. The kids were tired and sore and starting to get cranky. It was by all stretches of the imagination miserable and continuing the process any further downright dangerous, yet there wasn't much else we could do but collect our most necessary gear and find enough food to feed the group for the night. Attempting to make the situation bearable, trip leaders were doing all they could to boost morale and just get the job done, but even that was feeling futile.

And then somewhat suddenly something shifted. After ranting and raving and releasing their frustrations and anxieties that we were never going to get everything carried, that we were going to be sleep walking through the woods all night, the youth rallied. They started strategizing new ways of moving our gear and the canoes to make the process smoother and go more efficiently. They got excited by the brainstorming and suddenly began to work as a team, just as we did during cabin and tenting weekends, discussing and assigning roles and responsibilities for their plans which played to everyone's strengths, limitations, personal preferences, and needs. They tried things. They failed. They laughed. They gave new ideas. They tried those. And little by little everything started moving. Like a game of leap frog one group passed the other, cheering them on as they went by to drop gear and go back for the next load. And just like that, everything started to inch closer and closer to the shore. There were laughs and cheers and songs (and yes, admittedly, still some swears) but the kids were doing the work, the real work, the harder work that we'd been training them to tackle all along.

The next morning would bring a half day more of moving canoes before we could put in the water and set off for our restful island retreat. Our sturdy footwear was completely soaked and some of our gear damaged, but when we reached a good stopping point, we sat around the campfire as usual. A little bruised, bandaged, and bug-bitten, but eating a hodgepodge of the fastest meals we could dig out of the bags that hadn't broken in the swamp or been left along the trail until morning. With bellies full of mac and cheese with hotdogs, grilled cheese and freeze dried pad thai, the kids still found the energy to tell ghost stories, pop popcorn, and play a few games before turning in to bed (it was camp, afterall).

The next morning half the group went shoreline fishing for breakfast while the other half worked on loading gear, taking stock, and game planning. They braided hair and found missing socks and pretended their hiking boots were warm and

dry as they dressed up and formulated a new process for carrying the canoes. Overhead was their idea, to be executed in teams of three or four. As they talked it through they lined each other up to match heights and strengths and determine the best positions. Once everyone's chosen breakfasts were cooked, our bellies full, and our gear packed and stored on the shore, we headed back into the woods to brave the sneaker sucking swamp and the rocks and the roots and the streambed trail.

To witness these youth collaborate and communicate and succeed as a team - the groups of them looking like canoe caterpillars lifting and bracing and moving together. To watch them walk up and over and through obstacle after obstacle after obstacle. To hear them support each other and call out cues and stop and start and tilt and shift. To be a staff member under one of those canoes with them, carrying the weight as a part of the team, not the leader or the boss or the adult but a member of the group. To experience that. There is no other satisfaction like it. To be so immersed in the process that you almost don't want it to end. And to also feel in that strange and surreal moment the relief to once again be sliding boats into the water. To witness the kids feeling the same way - somewhat reluctant to leave, to end the moment, yet absolutely thrilled that all they had to do before dinner was paddle seven miles and set up their tents. Like that was just a normal, easy thing to do. To watch the transformation in them as what had been a monstrous thought just days prior was suddenly an easy feat compared to what they had just accomplished. And what you had.

Individually and together the youth on our canoe trip overcame more obstacles than we could ever imagine conjuring for a week-long immersion culmination challenge. And while the youth grumbled and groaned and joked about what a mistake that trail was and how their bodies would never recover and their shoes would never dry, and while us staff had at one point almost completely disowned each other, we all pushed off from the shoreline paddling strong with our heads held high knowing that no matter what came next we could handle it together, for we'd done the hardest of hard things, even when we didn't want to, and even when we thought we couldn't.

At pickup back in Vermont just a few days later unloading their gear and preparing to depart with their families, the kids grumbled and groaned again as they gloated over the details of the story, showing off their bruises and bug bites. Except this time they did so with a twinkle and a smile. They had survived this really hard thing. They didn't think they could, but they did. And for that moment at least, and for possibly a lifetime, nothing could take that away from them.

This is what cultivating youth voice and choice and vision and leadership and community and resiliency looks like. This was the dream we had when we came together to build The Barra School and thanks to the grantors who have believed in us enough to provide the funding necessary to make it possible, there is a group of young LGBTQIA+ youth who are stepping into the world each day a little more prepared to handle whatever might come their way.

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February 7th, 2024

Dear Committee Members,

We hope you found the information put together here compelling. Because of ESSR grant funds we have been able to provide so much for LGBTQIA+ youth in Orange County and beyond, as well as for the youth of Topsham and Corinth through our partnership with the Blake Memorial Library. We hope to continue this work through the use of Act 78 funds and urge you to approve the creation of a Special Fund so that nonprofits like ours can access these monies for the critical work that we do for Vermont's most vulnerable youth.

We welcome your comments, questions, or feedback and can be reached via e-mail at [thebarraschool@zohomail.com](mailto:thebarraschool@zohomail.com).

On behalf of all the youth who have accessed our programming and who will do so in the future, we thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,



Miranda Miller, Founder and Executive Director

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