

**New Jersey Department of Education
Special Education Monitoring**

District: Hamilton Township School District

County: Atlantic

Monitoring Dates: January 21, 22, & 23, 2002

Monitoring Team: Julia Harmelin, Jane Marano and Kenneth Richards

Background Information:

During the 2001–2002 school year, the Hamilton Township School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Hamilton Township School District with an opportunity to evaluate its strengths and areas of need with regard to:

- The provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment;
- The protection of procedural safeguards for students and their families;
- The development and implementation of policies and procedures resulting in procedural compliance; and,
- The organization and delivery of programs and services resulting in positive student outcomes.

The self-assessment was designed to identify areas of strength, promising practices, areas that need improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The Hamilton Township School District developed an improvement plan to address identified areas of need.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) conducted an on-site monitoring to verify the self-assessment findings, to assess the appropriateness of the improvement plan, and to determine the progress in implementing the plan.

As the first step in the on-site monitoring process, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) held a focus group meeting for parents and community members at the Hess Elementary School on January 14, 2003. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site visit, the NJDOE team reviewed district documents, including district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related service personnel, and other relevant information, including a representative sample of student records. Interviews were conducted with the superintendent, district's special education administrators, building principals, general education and special education teachers, speech therapists and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for the development of programs that enable students to be educated in district based programs. The Young Autism program serves children ages three to six and provides instruction that relies upon the newest educational research and includes goals to increase the opportunity for mainstreaming.

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The district is the recipient of New Jersey Department of Education Building Grants. This funding has enabled the district to implement Teaching for Success programs in grades two through seven that rely on a team teaching approach in general education settings. This program has been identified by the New Jersey Department of Education and the New Jersey Network as an exemplary education practice.

The district has also developed programs for students with diversified needs. The in-district New Horizon alternative program provides students with a blend of academic instruction that has a strong emphasis on behavioral support with the goal to return students to the middle school program.

The district has a swimming pool at the elementary school to provide hydrotherapy for those students who require it.

Maintaining high risk students in district is a priority. The district has employed a mental health counselor to support these students and their families. This staff person also serves as the district representative to the county wide mental health initiative.

The district also provides parents and the community with a wealth of information through their comprehensive web-site.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

Least Restrictive Environment, Statewide Assessment and Graduation were determined to be areas of compliance by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the on-site visit.

Section I: General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of policies and procedures and dissemination of IDEA information.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding staff training.

Area of Need:

Staff Training – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through interviews that regular education teachers require IEP implementation training and paraprofessionals require additional training in the areas of disabilities and the needs of those students to whom they are specifically assigned.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure it provides staff training related to students with disabilities. The plan must include a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

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Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of length of school day/year, transfer students, facilities and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of related services. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in this area.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding extended school year.

Area of Need:

Extended School Year – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through record review that IEPs do not include implementation dates for extended school year programs nor do they consistently identify related services that are to be provided during the extended program. Instead, program descriptions state therapies would be provided as appropriate.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that extended school year related services and implementation dates for extended school year are identified in IEPs. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of notice of meetings, meetings, independent evaluations and consent for implementation of initial IEP, re-evaluation and release of student records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents and consent for initial evaluation for speech and language services. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address the area of surrogate parent because it lacks in-service and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.** The plan needs to be revised to include these components. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address the area of consent.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding notices in native language and written notice.

Areas of Need:

Notices in Native Language - During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through record review that although the nature and scope of the evaluation is provided in native

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language, all other forms of written notice, such as the eligibility conference report and the IEP are not, even when feasible.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that all notices are provided to parents in their native language, when feasible. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Written Notice - During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through record review that the provision of written notice within fifteen days could not be verified because these notices were not consistently dated. Also, written notice following the eligibility meeting when the student was determined not to be eligible for services does not contain all required components.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure written notice includes all required components and that written notice is provided within fifteen days of a meeting. The plan must include a mechanism to ensure all notices are dated. The plan must also include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of child find activities, referral process, direct referral, summer referrals, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, identification meeting timelines and participants for school-aged children.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding identification meeting participants for preschool students.

Area of Need:

Identification Meeting Participants for Preschool Students - During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through staff interviews and record review that regular education teachers do attend identification meetings for preschool students.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure regular education teachers consistently attend identification meetings for preschool students. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

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Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of multi-disciplinary assessments, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations, and ninety-day timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of functional assessments, written reports, acceptance/rejection of reports and all areas evaluation for speech and language services. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding written reports.

Area of Need:

Written Reports - During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through staff interviews and record review that written reports are signed but not dated by the child study team. As a result, one cannot determine when the reports are developed.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure written reports are dated. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section V: Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of planning meetings and participants of school-aged students, and meetings by June 30th of the student's last year in preschool.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of three-year timelines and conducting an evaluation sooner than three years if warranted or requested. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding reevaluation participants at preschool student meetings.

Areas of of Need:

Participants for Preschool Reevaluation Meetings - During the on-site monitoring, it as determined through record review that regular education teachers do not attend reevaluation meetings for preschool students.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that regular education teachers consistently attend reevaluation meetings for preschool students. The plan must include an**

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administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of meetings and participants for students eligible for speech and language services, criteria, statement of eligibility, signatures of agreement/disagreement rationale, and copies of evaluation reports to parents. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address the areas of meetings and participants for eligible for speech and language services and copies of evaluation reports to parents and criteria. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address the areas of statement of eligibility, agreement/disagreement rationale and criteria because it lacks an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedure.** The plan needs to be revised to include this component.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding eligibility meeting participants.

Area of Need:

Participants for Eligibility Meetings - During the on-site visit, it was determined through record review that regular education teachers do not consistently attend eligibility meetings.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that regular education teachers consistently attend eligibility meetings. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of IEP meetings and participants for school-aged students who are eligible for special education and related services, goals and objectives aligned to the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review timelines and 90-day timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of IEP to parents, required statements, teacher knowledge of responsibility and transition from elementary to secondary school. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address the areas of IEP to parents and required statements including transition from elementary to secondary school. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address the**

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area of teacher knowledge of responsibility because it lacks procedures and an administrative oversight to bring about the required change. The plan needs to be revised to include this component.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding participants at IEP meetings.

Area of Need:

Participants at IEP Meetings - During the on-site visit, it was determined through staff interviews and record review that regular education teachers are not consistently attending IEP meetings for students attending the New Horizon program and for students eligible for speech and language services.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure regular education teachers consistently attend IEP meetings for those students attending the New Horizon program and for students eligible for speech and language services. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of student invitation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of transition service needs. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit.

Section X: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of early intervention program to preschool disabled program by age three.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of pre-school transition planning conference. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedure.** The plan needs to be revised to include this component.

No additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit.

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Section X: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of procedural safeguards, suspension tracking, manifestation determination and interim alternative educational setting.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation to the case manager. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedure.** The plan needs to be revised to include this component.

No additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit.

Section XIV: Programs and Services

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of group size for speech therapy and home instruction.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of age range, class size, common planning time, personnel and case management responsibility. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address the area of personnel. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address the area of common planning time, age range, class size and case management because it lacks an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedure.** The plan needs to be revised to include this component.

No additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit.

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of access, maintenance and destruction of records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of access sheets. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area. During the on-site visit, a review of records indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding documentation of locations of other records.

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Area of Need:

Documentation of Locations of Other Records - During the on-site visit, it was determined through staff interviews and record review that central files do not document the locations of other records maintained by the district.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that central files document the location of other records maintained by the district.**

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Hamilton Township School District on January 21, 22, 23, 2003. The purpose of the monitoring visit was to verify the district's report of findings resulting from their self-assessment and to review the district's improvement plan. The district is commended for the exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of that review the district was able to identify nearly all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that with some revision will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the many areas determined by the district and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Parents stated students progressed in programs and provided positive feedback regarding the functional skill programs offered in the district. Concerns were raised regarding teacher and paraprofessional knowledge of IEPs, the implementation of supports identified in the IEP, case management responsibility and the impact it had on their ability to monitor IEPs and a need for more consistent communication between the school and home.

Areas identified as consistently compliant with all standards by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included Least Restrictive Environment, Statewide Assessment and Graduation.

The areas identified by the district as consistently compliant during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, length of school day/year, transfer students, facilities, certifications, notices of meetings, meetings, consent for implementation of initial IEP, release of records and reevaluation, independent evaluations, child find activities, referral and direct referral process, summer referrals, vision and hearing screenings, identification meeting timelines, and participants for school age students, multi disciplinary assessments, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations, ninety-day timelines, reevaluation planning meetings and participants for school age children, reevaluation by June 30th of the students last year in preschool, eligibility meetings, IEP meetings, goals and objectives/core curriculum content standards, age of majority, annual review timelines and 90-day timelines, decision-making process, least restrictive environment documentation, considerations of supplemental aides and services, regular education access, participation in non-academic and extracurricular activities, continuum of services, early intervention program to preschool disabled program by age three, discipline procedural safeguards, suspension tracking, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, group size speech therapy, home instruction, access, maintenance and destruction of records

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding related services, surrogate parents, consent for initial evaluation for speech and language services, multi-disciplinary assessments, functional assessments, written reports, acceptance/rejection of reports and all areas evaluation for speech and language services, three-year timelines, conducting an evaluation sooner than three years if warranted or requested, eligibility meetings and participants (eligible for speech and language services), criteria, statement of eligibility, signatures of agreement/disagreement rationale, copies of evaluation reports to parents, IEP to

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parents, required statements, teacher knowledge of responsibility, transition from elementary to secondary school, transition service needs, pre-school transition planning conference, discipline documentation to the case manager, age range, class size, common planning time, personnel, case management responsibility and access sheets.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding staff training, extended school year, written notice, notices in native language, meeting participants, written reports and documentation of location of other records.

Within forty-five days of receipt of the monitoring report, the Hamilton Township School District will revise and resubmit the improvement plan to the Office of Special Education Programs to address those areas that require revisions.