

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

District: Port Republic School District **County:** Atlantic

Monitoring Dates: September 24, 2004

Monitoring Team: Michael J. Lee

Background Information:

During the 2003-2004 school year, the Port Republic School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Port Republic School District with an opportunity to evaluate performance, 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 permit the district the opportunity to identify its areas of strength and promising practices, as well as areas needing improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The 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 Port Republic School on the evening of September 23, 2004. Information obtained from that meeting and through additional telephone interviews was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site visit, the OSEP team reviewed district documents, including district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers and related service personnel, and other relevant information, including pupil records for students in special education and students eligible for speech and language services. Interviews were conducted with the district's superintendent/principal, the special education director, general education teachers, special education teachers, child study team members, the speech and language therapist, and the vice-president of the Parent Teacher Society.

District Strengths:

The Port Republic School District is commended for 100% parental participation in evaluation planning, eligibility and IEP meetings for the past two school years. An ongoing initiative is to encourage parents through written, telephone or in-person communication to contribute to all aspects of the special education process, as well as to

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the larger school community. In addition, the district takes great pride in a commitment to providing education to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Presently, all students receiving special education, those educated in and out of the district, participate for at least one class a day in a general education classroom. Moreover, all students have access to extracurricular programs including enrichment and recreational activities and social events

Data Summary:

For the past four years, the Port Republic School District's classification rate of students requiring special educational programming and services has been significantly below the state average. During the 2002-2003 school year, 9.9% of the district's resident enrollment, as compared to the state average of 13.9%, was found eligible for special education. In contrast, the number of students found eligible for speech and language services has continued to increase. For the school years from 2001 to 2003, the classification rate for students eligible for speech-language services has been 6.1%, 7.4% and 10.0%, respectively, as compared to the state averages of 2.1%, 2.1% and 2.0% for the same period. During the self-assessment process, the district did not recognize this as an area of need but as an example of its commitment to educating students in academic areas in the general education setting.

A review of placement data for the past four years indicates that the Port Republic School District is including students with disabilities in general education classrooms for greater periods of time during the school day. Data from 2003 are most significant, with 82.2% of students receiving special education placed in general education settings with their non-disabled peers for more than 80% of the day, 14.4% between 40-80% of the day, and 3.6% less than 40% of the day; as compared with the state averages of 41.6%, 30.9%, and 17.7%, respectively.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance with All Standards:

Reevaluation, Individualized Education Program, Least Restrictive Environment, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Programs and Services, and Student Records were determined to be areas of compliance by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the monitoring activities.

Section I: General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns regarding in-service training for professional and paraprofessional staff who provide special education or general education services. The district indicated that staff require ongoing professional development in the areas of instructional strategies and adaptations for students with disabilities, inclusionary educational practices, positive behavioral supports and interventions, and eighth grade transition practices which relate to post-secondary opportunities. In addition, the district noted that special education teachers require in-servicing to promote enhanced math and language arts instruction and improve performance on statewide assessments. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to

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address these areas of need. During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that the district has begun to implement its improvement plan to address in-servicing of staff.

No additional area of need was identified during the on-site monitoring visit.

Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of oversight of IEP implementation, provision of programs and related services, length of school day, transfer students, facilities and certification.

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

Area(s) of Need:

Extended School Year – Interviews and record review indicated that, for those students with disabilities who require extended school year programming, IEPs do not consistently include the description of the services needed, goals and objectives, implementation dates, and frequency, duration and location of services. As a result, review of a student's IEP by a parent, case manager, teacher, related services provider or administrator would not provide a clear understanding of the service(s) required.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that ensure that a student's IEP includes criteria used to determine the need for extended school year services, a description of services needed, goals and objectives, implementation dates, and frequency, duration and location of services. This will ensure that the extended school year program meets the individual student's needs as determined by the IEP team. The improvement plan must include procedures, training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.**

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of consent, notice of meetings, meetings, written notice, notices in native language, interpreters, and independent evaluations.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding surrogate parents.

Area(s) of Need:

Surrogate Parents – Staff interviews and document review indicated that the district lacks procedures to ensure that a surrogate parent is identified and trained and provided when necessary.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure the district has the ability to select and train surrogate parents in the event**

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one is needed. Implementation of these activities will ensure a student's rights are protected in the event the natural parent is unavailable. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of Child Find, referral process, pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, and identification meeting timelines.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site monitoring visit regarding the health summary, vision and hearing screenings, and participation of child study team members at the initial identification meeting.

Area(s) of Need:

Health Summary and Vision and Hearing Screenings – Record review and staff interviews indicated that, at the time of the identification meeting, a health summary and results of the vision and hearing screenings are not available.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that the school nurse develops health summaries and conducts vision and hearing screenings on every child referred for an evaluation and provides this to the team prior to the identification meeting. Implementation will ensure that the identification team members have necessary information to identify suspected areas of disability and to determine the assessments needed to make an appropriate eligibility determination. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.**

Participation of Child Study Team Members – During in the on-site monitoring visit, interviews and record review indicated that, when a preschool age or school age student is referred for an initial evaluation, the full child study team is not in attendance at the initial identification meeting, along with a parent and general education teacher.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure the full child study team participates in identification meetings. This will ensure that appropriate decisions are made regarding the need for an evaluation and, if an evaluation is warranted, the nature and scope. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.**

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, functional assessments,

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bilingual evaluations, written reports and documentation of acceptance/rejection of reports.

An area of need was identified during the on-site monitoring visit regarding provision of the evaluation plan.

Area(s) of Need:

Provision of the Evaluation Plan – Child study team interviews and record review indicated that assessments in the evaluation plan are not being conducted as written. Because of the unavailability of staff, in some cases, a required assessment is not done or another is substituted in its place.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure all assessments identified in written notice are conducted. Implementation of these activities will ensure that the appropriate information is available for consideration by the eligibility team members to make appropriate eligibility determinations. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of eligibility meeting and participants, criteria, and statement of eligibility.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site monitoring visit regarding signature of agreement or disagreement and copy of evaluation reports to parents.

Area(s) of Need:

Signatures of Agreement or Disagreement – Interviews and record review indicated that the IEP team does not express assenting or dissenting opinions regarding eligibility determinations for students eligible for special education or for students eligible for speech and language services only.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that district personnel have an opportunity to state in writing whether they agree or disagree with eligibility determinations. Further, the district will document the rationale for any disagreement. Implementation of these activities will ensure parents are fully informed of any differing opinions regarding these eligibility determinations. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.**

Provision of Evaluation Reports to Parents – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that the district is not providing copies of the evaluation reports to parents ten days prior to any meeting where eligibility or the ongoing need for services is to be discussed.

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- The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that evaluation reports are provided to parents ten days prior to the eligibility meeting. Implementation of these activities will ensure that a parent has the opportunity to be fully prepared to participate in the decision-making process regarding the student's eligibility and programming needs. The improvement plan must also include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.

Section X: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of transition from early intervention to preschool by age 3 and agency involvement.

An area of need was identified during the on-site monitoring visit regarding the preschool transition planning conference.

Area(s) of Need:

Preschool Transition Planning Conference – Interviews and record review indicated that district personnel do not participate at transition planning conferences.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure a member of the child study team participates in the early childhood transition planning conference. Implementation of these activities will ensure that sufficient information is obtained from early intervention staff regarding the student's strengths and needs to make appropriate decisions regarding eligibility, programs, and services. This plan must include an oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of age 14 transition services needs and inviting students to IEP meetings.

No additional area of need was identified during the on-site monitoring visit.

Section XIII: Graduation

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the area of documentation of age 14 IEP requirements.

No additional area of need was identified during the on-site monitoring visit.

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Port Republic School District on September 24, 2004. 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 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 public focus group meeting, three parents participated and expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Additional parents were contacted by telephone as part of the on-site activities. In general, the district was praised for its high quality of education, its academically challenging instruction, the emphasis on including students with disabilities in general education classes, the effective communication between school and home, and the availability and professionalism of the child study team and related services staff. Parents noted that special education timelines are maintained, meetings are conducted when necessary, IEP documents are kept current and the range of programming options is adequate. However, specific concerns were raised over the limited number of small instructional classrooms within the single-school district, the need for ongoing professional development for staff, and the limitations in the availability of speech and language services due to the part-time employment of the related services provider.

For the past four years, the district's classification rate of students requiring special educational programming and services has been significantly below the state average. In contrast, the number of students eligible for speech and language services has continued to increase dramatically. With regard to placement, the district has been increasing the number of students with disabilities being educated in the general education setting.

Reevaluation, Individualized Education Program, Least Restrictive Environment, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Programs and Services, and Student Records were sections demonstrating compliance with all standards.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during monitoring activities included policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, oversight of IEP implementation, provision of programs and related services, length of school day, transfer students, facilities, certification, consent, notice of meetings, meetings, written notice, notices in native language, interpreters, independent evaluations, Child Find, referral process, pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, identification meeting timelines, multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, functional assessments, bilingual evaluations, written reports, documentation of acceptance/rejection of reports, eligibility meeting and participants, criteria, statement of eligibility, early intervention to preschool disabled placement by age three, agency involvement, age fourteen transition services needs, student invitation to IEP meetings, and documentation of age 14 IEP requirements.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding in-service training for professional and paraprofessional staff who provide special education or general education services.

The monitoring activities and on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding extended school year, surrogate parents, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, participation of child study team members at the initial identification meeting, provision of the evaluation plan, signature of agreement or disagreement, copy of evaluation reports to parents, and preschool transition planning conference.

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