

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

District: Absecon City School District

County: Atlantic

Monitoring Dates: February 10, 2004

Monitor: Michael J. Lee

Background Information:

During the 2002-2003 school year, the **Absecon City School District** conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the **Absecon City School District** with an opportunity to evaluate its 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 **Absecon City School District** developed an improvement plan to address these identified areas of need.

As the first step to verifying the self-assessment findings, to assessing the appropriateness of the improvement plan, and to determining any progress in implementing this plan, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) held a focus group meeting for parents and community members, at the Emma C. Attales School Library on the evening of February 9, 2004. Information obtained from this meeting was used to direct the focus of the subsequent monitoring activities. Additionally, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) completed a comprehensive desk audit, including review of a representative sample of student records, as well as reviews of district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related services personnel, and other relevant information, and conducted further parent interviews by telephone. Based on these sources, OSEP staff determined that the district had conducted a thorough review during the self-assessment process and had developed a plan, warranting only minor revision, which will appropriately address all areas of identified need.

District Strengths:

The Absecon City School District is commended for its excellent use of computer technology not only in providing enhanced instruction and learning opportunities for students but also in linking staff via an email system. This means of communication makes possible immediate updates on student needs and progress, and facilitates frequent monitoring, assessment and, when needed, modifications to programs to promote positive student outcomes.

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The district's Distance Learning Lab enables all students to have access to remote educational facilities and alternative sources of knowledge. For example, a student may marvel at masterpieces in the Chicago Museum of Art, practice conversational language skills with someone in Mexico, engage in a dramatic interaction with a student in Europe, and address a jury in a mock trial while he or she serves as a lawyer.

The district is further commended for the guiding role of the Absecon Education Foundation, Inc., its support of its Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), and the operation of the Planned Afternoon Leisure and Study (PALS) program. The self-supporting PALS provides after-school care on all school days, for some holidays and throughout the summer for all children enrolled in grades Kindergarten through sixth. The Absecon Education Foundation, Inc., an independent, nonprofit and community-based organization, serves to develop, support and enhance educational opportunities for all students and residents of Absecon. The PTO has emerged over the past few years as an active and progressive body, instrumental in contributing audiovisual and technological equipment, funds for classroom enrichment programs and visiting authors, cultural assembly programs, after-school and summer enrichment programs, and transportation for class trips.

The district takes great pride in its conflict resolution programs (e.g., "Character Counts," "Peer Mediation," "Banana Splits," and "DeBugging") offered by the guidance counselors. It is also commended for its successes and Best Practices Awards for the International Theme Project and the Shakespeare on Trial project, as well as in the environmental awareness project titled the Growing Garden. This garden features benches, feeders, birdbaths and seasonal attractions. The atrium-located garden permits all students access to planting and allows them to tend the flora while offering a unique venue for creating art projects, conducting science experiments, drawing inspiration for writing and reading.

In addition, the district is recognized for its four-year initiative to revise all curricula. These revisions included the double-period of language arts instruction and technology, the instrumental music program, the Basic Skills and Drop-Everything-And-Read programs, the Veterans' Day Assembly and the incorporation of the themes of unity, tolerance and courage into daily school life.

Data Summary:

For the past four years, the Absecon City School District's classification rate of students requiring special educational programming and services has been only slightly above the state average. This recent status stands in marked contrast to the mid-1990s when the district's rate exceeded the state average by more than six percent. Improvements in the effectiveness of the Intervention and Referral Service (I&RS), as well as expanded general educational resources and programming may be having a positive impact. Further, for students ages six to twenty-one, the district's trend over the past four years has been to place more students in the general educational setting (i.e., between 40% and 80% of the day), providing them with exposure to their nondisabled peers. Yearly fluctuations in the number of special education students remaining in the mainstream setting for more than eighty percent of the school day may reflect the unique needs of students entering the district. In contrast to the state average (26.9%), the district places significantly fewer students in isolated settings (16.4%); that is, excluded from the general education classroom more than sixty percent of the day, or in separate schools

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or residential facilities. Review of data shows an equitable distribution of students across various placements based on their category of eligibility.

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.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of in-service training for professional and paraprofessional staff. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of need.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

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 and facilities.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of oversight of IEP implementation, provision of programs and related services, adaptive physical education, transfer students and certifications. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

During the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit, an additional area of need was identified regarding extended school year.

Area(s) of Need:

Extended School Year – The district does not consider extended school year services for every student determined eligible for special education and related services or eligible for speech and language services. In addition, for those students who are found in need of extended school year programming, IEPs do not include the description of the services needed, goals and objectives, implementation dates, and frequency, duration and location of services. As a result, a 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 extended school year is considered and documented for every classified student and is provided when needed. Additionally, IEPs will include a description of the program, goals and objectives, implementation dates, and frequency, duration and location of services. Implementation of these activities will ensure every student who requires extended school year programming to address identified issues of regression and**

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recoupment will receive the mandated services. The improvement plan must include 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 themselves compliant in the areas of surrogate parents, consent and interpreters at meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of notices of meetings, parental and student participation at meetings, written notices, notices in native language, and independent evaluations. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

During the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit, an additional area of need was identified regarding the provision of N.J.A.C. 1:6A.

Area(s) of Need:

Provision of N.J.A.C. 1:6A – Following the determination to conduct or not conduct an initial evaluation, the district does not provide parents with a copy of the due process hearing rules (N.J.A.C. 1:6A).

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that ensure a copy of the due process hearing rules (N.J.A.C. 1:6A) is provided to parents. Implementation of this activity will ensure parents are fully informed of dispute resolution opportunities and the procedures necessary to efficiently access these services.**

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of Child Find 3-21, referral process, pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, summer referrals and identification meeting timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district did not identify any areas of need.

During the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit, additional areas of need were identified regarding the health summary, vision and hearing screenings and participation of the child study team members at the initial identification meeting.

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Area(s) of Need:

Health Summary and Vision and Hearing Screenings – At the time of the identification meeting, information concerning the 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 will develop health summaries and conduct vision and hearing screenings on every child referred for an evaluation. The results will be presented to the case manager prior to the identification meeting. As a result, the identification team members will have the 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 – When a preschool age or school age student is referred for an initial evaluation, the full child study team is not consistently in attendance at the initial identification meeting with the parent and general education teacher.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that a school psychologist, a learning disabilities teacher-consultant and a school social worker participate as members of the identification team. This will ensure that not only the required participants are involved in the decision-making process but will also ensure that the other members of the identification team are afforded the expertise of these specialists in determining the need for an evaluation as well as the nature and scope of that evaluation. 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 themselves compliant in the areas of multidisciplinary evaluations, functional assessments, written reports and bilingual evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of standardized assessments, particularly regarding speech evaluations, and acceptance and rejection of reports. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

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Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of reevaluations completed by June 30th of student's last year in preschool.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of reevaluation timelines and planning meeting participants. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

During the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit, an additional area of need was identified regarding reevaluation when declassification or a change in eligibility is being considered.

Area(s) of Need:

Declassification or Change in Eligibility – When a special education student or speech only student is being considered for declassification, the district does not initiate the appropriate reevaluation process that will culminate in a determination of ineligibility at an eligibility meeting.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that a reevaluation is conducted before a change in a student's eligibility status. These activities must include the provision of notice of a meeting, participation of all required members of the IEP team, a review of data, a determination whether assessments are needed, and then the provision of written notice regarding the proposed action(s). The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.**

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of meetings, participants and statement of eligibility.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of criteria and signatures of agreement or disagreement rationale. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. The district further identified an area of need regarding the provision of evaluation reports to parents 10 days prior to the eligibility meeting. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient because although the plan indicates the district will provide a copy of evaluation reports, it does not identify how this will be accomplished or what administrative oversight activity will be consistently implemented to ensure provision of the reports ten days prior to the meeting. The district will revise the improvement plan to include these elements.**

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

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Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of age of majority, annual review timelines and 90-day timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of meeting/participants, considerations/required components, present levels of educational performance, goals and objectives aligned with Core Curriculum Content Standards, implementation dates, and IEPs to parents. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. The district further identified teacher access and responsibility for the IEP as an area of need. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient because, although the plan indicates – in part – that they will implement a “new on-line system for IEP distribution,” it does not provide training of staff in either use of this system or awareness of the responsibilities mandated by the IEP. Further, the plan does not identify what administrative oversight activities will be implemented to consistently ensure that staff have access to IEPs, are knowledgeable of their responsibilities and exercise those responsibilities. The district will revise the improvement plan to include these elements.**

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of general education access.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the decision-making process, Oberti, consideration of supplemental aids and services, notification and participation in nonacademic and extracurricular activities, and continuum of programs. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section X: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of preschool transition planning conference, agency invitation and early intervention to preschool disabled placement by age three years.

During the self-assessment process, the district did not identify any concerns.

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No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

Although the Absecon City School District services students from pre-Kindergarten to eighth grade, during the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of age fourteen transition service needs, preferences and interests, survey and assessments, and student invitation. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section XI: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of procedures, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, manifestation determination, and interim alternative educational settings (IAES).

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of convening an IEP team meeting for removals of ten or more school days and behavioral intervention plans (BIP) and functional behavioral assessments (FBA). The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section XII: Statewide Assessment

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternative assessment, and the process for exemption from passing.

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

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

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Section XIII: Graduation

Summary of Findings:

The Absecon City School District is an elementary school district and is not required to address compliance regarding graduation as it pertains to secondary school requirements. However, during the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of participation of out-of-district students in their elementary school graduation. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section XIV: Programs and Services

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of class size waivers, age range waivers, group sizes for speech therapy, and home instruction.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of vacancies, particularly of occupational therapists, and common planning time. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of parent and adult-student access to records, access sheets, maintenance of records, and documentation of locations of additional records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of staff knowledge of procedures and destruction of records. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit.

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Summary

Special education monitoring was completed in the **Absecon City School District** on February 10, 2004. The purpose of this phase of the monitoring process 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 its exceptionally comprehensive review conducted as part of the self-assessment activities. As a result of that review, the district was able to identify nearly all areas of need and to develop an improvement plan that, with some revision, will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the many areas identified as compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs.

A review of data indicated the district has maintained a rate of classification only slightly above the state average for the past four years. Improvements in its Intervention and Referral Service as well as expanded general educational resources may be having a positive impact. Further, the appropriate consideration of placement in least restrictive environments for a majority of the school day is reflected in the district's placement data. Additionally, data show an equitable distribution of students across various instructional settings, based on category of eligibility and racial-gender groupings.

At a public focus group meeting, twenty-seven parents, teachers, administrators and child study team members expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. In general, the district was praised for its academically challenging courses and instruction, the professionalism and high quality of staff, the availability of training opportunities for teachers, paraprofessionals and parents and the functional utility of technology throughout the student's school day. 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 budgetary constraints, the availability of services, the high turnover rate within the child study team and the ability of staff to effectively implement an IEP. While several parents expressed their frustration in "always having to fight to get more" for a child and in having to hear "funding is an issue," the majority reflected that no student is denied what the IEP mandates. In regard to staff turnover, some parents suggested that frequent changes in case management in the past resulted in limited knowledge of the student's needs, inconsistent implementation – and oversight – of the IEP and, overall, a breakdown in the liaison capacity of the case manager. Further, the vast amount of "paperwork" required to be completed by the child study team was viewed by parents as an obstacle to providing quality services. A few parents indicated that general education teachers depart IEP team meetings after only participating for a "few minutes," in order to "get back to the classroom." The implication was that this may explain why some teachers don't know what their responsibility is in implementing an IEP. The vacancy in the position of a full-time occupational therapist, compounded by the district's inability to find any potential candidates, was noted as having long-term impact on those services.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit included policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, length of school day, facilities, surrogate parents, consent, interpreters at meetings, Child Find 3-21, referral process, pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, summer referrals, identification meeting timelines, multidisciplinary evaluations, functional assessments, written reports, bilingual evaluations, reevaluations completed by June 30th of the

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student's last year in preschool, eligibility meetings and participants, statement of eligibility, age of majority, annual review timelines, 90-day timelines, general education access, preschool transition planning conference, agency invitation, early intervention to preschool disabled placement by age three, discipline procedures, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational settings, statewide assessment accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternative assessment, process for exemption from passing, class size waivers, age range waivers, group size for speech, home instruction, access to records, access sheets, maintenance of records, and documentation of locations of additional records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding in-service training for professional and paraprofessional staff, oversight of IEP implementation, provision of programs and related services, adaptive physical education, transfer students, certifications, notices of meetings, parental and student participation at meetings, written notices, notices in native language, independent evaluations, standardized assessments, acceptance and rejection of reports, reevaluation timelines, planning meeting participants, eligibility criteria, agreement or disagreement rationale, copy of evaluation reports to parents, IEP meeting and participants, considerations/required components, present levels of educational performance, goals and objectives aligned with Core Curriculum Content Standards, implementation dates, IEPs to parents, decision-making process, Oberti, consideration of supplemental aides and services, notification and participation in nonacademic and extracurricular activities, continuum of programs, age fourteen transition service needs, preferences and interests, survey and assessments, student transition invitation, convening an IEP team meeting for removals of ten or more school days, behavioral intervention plans, functional behavioral assessments, statewide assessment participation, participation of out-of-district students in their elementary school graduation, written notice of graduation, staff vacancies, common planning time, staff knowledge of student records procedures, and destruction of records.

The focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and comprehensive desk audit identified additional areas of need within the various standards, regarding extended school year, provision of N.J.A.C. 1:6A, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, participation of child study team members at initial identification meetings, and declassification or change in eligibility procedures.

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