

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

**District:** Alpha Public School District

**County:** Warren

**Monitoring Dates:** October 5, 2004

**Monitoring Team:** Zola Mills and Tracey Pettiford-Bugg

***Background Information:***

During the 2003–2004 school years, the **Alpha Public School District** conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the **Alpha Public School District** with an opportunity to evaluate 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 permit the district the opportunity to identify its areas of strength, promising practices, as well as areas needing improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The **Alpha Public School District** developed an improvement plan to address 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 **Alpha Public School** on September 27, 2004. Information obtained from that 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 a 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 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 district is commended for its after school program, ASK. This program provides tutoring 1 to 3 hours a week after school to improve academic skills for both students with disabilities and nondisabled students.

The district is also commended for their Kindergarten Listening Program which is designed to stimulate and strengthen auditory processing skills. The classroom teacher

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and the speech language therapist work together to develop listening skills and assist students in applying these skills across the entire kindergarten curriculum.

Additionally, the district is commended for its substance abuse program which teaches appropriate decision making skills and the Peer Mediation Program that allows students to learn the necessary skills to manage their own conflict resolution. Both students with disabilities and nondisabled students participate in these programs. Students in the eighth grade are trained by the guidance counselor and take their year long responsibility as a peer mediator very seriously.

### **Data Summary:**

A review of the district data reveals that the total classification rate of 16.6% was near the state average of 16.2 in 2003. The district is commended for a commitment during the last four reported years to educating students in the least restrictive environment. The district reported that the percentage of students educated in the general education setting for more than 80% of the school day, rose from 55.4% in the year 2000 to 67.7% in 2003. The district rate continues to exceed the state average of 41.3%. Although there only 4 preschool students receiving special education, 3 are in a combination of general and special education programs in community preschools and neighboring public school programs. One preschool disabled student is educated in a self-contained special education program in a public school.

### ***Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:***

**Reevaluation, Discipline, Transition to Preschool and Statewide Assessment** 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 compliance in the areas of policies and procedures, parent training and dissemination of IDEA information.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of professional development for staff in the areas of specific disabilities. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this need.

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

#### ***Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)***

##### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of extended school year, related services, length of day and year, transfer students and certifications.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of facilities. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area. The district also identified a concern with writing goals and objectives in a clear and consistent manner. This is addressed under Section VIII, IEP.

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

### ***Section III. Procedural Safeguards***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of surrogate parents. The district has developed a surrogate parent procedure that has been approved by the Warren County Superintendent's Office. The district is now in compliant in this area.

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

### ***Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of referral process, direct referrals, summer referrals and identification meeting timelines and participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of Child Find, hearing and vision screenings, health summaries and the pre-referral process. The district has developed and implemented new procedures for Child Find, pre-referral interventions, health summary and vision and hearing screenings. The district's improvement plan was sufficient to address these areas. Record review indicated the new procedures are being implemented; therefore, these areas are now in compliance.

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

### ***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, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations, and independent evaluations.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of functional assessments, written reports, acceptance or rejections of reports, instructional implication in speech reports and documentation of educational impact of speech problem by the student's teacher. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. Record review indicates that as a result of the district's development and implementation of appropriate activities these areas are now compliant.

An additional area need was identified during the comprehensive review of student records regarding preschool initial evaluations.

### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Required evaluations for preschool initial evaluations** - The district is presently requiring only one evaluation by a member of the child study team instead of the required two, and one evaluation by the speech language therapist.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that two child study team members will conduct initial evaluations for preschool students. If a speech-language evaluation is warranted, the speech-language specialist will conduct the evaluation in addition to the evaluations by the two team members. This will ensure that the required participants are involved in the evaluation process providing sufficient data for the determination of eligibility for special education and related services. 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 compliance in the areas of meetings and participants, criteria, documentation of eligibility and signature of agreement or disagreement and a space for the rationale.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of the provision of evaluation reports to parents ten days prior to the meeting. The district has developed and implemented a procedure that has brought this area of concern into compliance.

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

### ***Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of meetings and participants, present level of educational performance, alignment of goals and objectives with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority,

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implementation dates, annual review and ninety-day timelines, provision of the IEP to parents and teacher access and knowledge.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of considerations and required statements and clear and consistently written goals and objectives. The district formulated a plan under Section II, Free Appropriate Public Education, as well as the plan here. The district's improvement plan has been implemented and these areas are now compliant.

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

### ***Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the decision making process regarding least restrictive environment, and general education access.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of consideration and availability of supplementary aids and services, sufficient staff to ensure all necessary program options, professional development in the areas of inclusion and special education law, nonacademic and extracurricular participation and continuum. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. The district has developed and implemented a procedure to notify out-of-district students of nonacademic and extracurricular participation on a monthly basis. This area is now in compliance.

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

### ***Section X: Transition to Post-School***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of agency involvement, student and agency invitation and age 16 needed transition services.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of age 14 transition service, needs and preferences, and interests. The activities to ensure age 14 transition services needs have been implemented and this area is in compliance. The preference and interest survey is being developed. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

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### ***Section XIII: Graduation***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During the self assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in allowing students placed out of district to participate in graduation exercises. Written notice of graduation and choice of diploma are not applicable to this preschool through grade eight district.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of IEP graduation requirements. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

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

### ***Section XIV: Programs and Services***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of consultation time. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

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

### ***Section XV: Student Records***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of access and requests, access sheets, maintenance and destruction of records and documentation of locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of staff knowledge of the district's policies and procedures regarding student records. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

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

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## **Summary**

Special education monitoring was completed in the Alpha Public School District on October 5, 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 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 develop an improvement plan that with some revision will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for initiating activities that have brought many areas into compliance prior to the comprehensive desk audit as well as the many areas determined by the school and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

The district's data show an increasing trend toward placement of special education students in the least restrictive environment over the last four years. The district places over 90% of their special education students in a general education setting for at least 40% of the school day.

Three parents attended the focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit and only one of those was a parent of a student receiving special education. The parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services and with the district's responsiveness to the needs of all children.

Additional phone interviews with randomly selected parents also indicated satisfaction with the district's programs.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies and procedures, parent training, dissemination of IDEA, extended school year, related services, length of day and year, transfer students, certifications, consent, content and provision of notices of meetings, content and provision of written notices, meetings, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, referral process, summer referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants, multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations, independent evaluations, reevaluation timelines, planning meetings, participants, reevaluations completed by June 30<sup>th</sup> of students' last year in preschool, eligibility meetings and participants, criteria, statement of eligibility, agreement or disagreement and rationale, IEP meeting and participants, present level of educational performance, alignment of goals and objectives with the Core Curriculum Content Standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review and ninety day timelines, provision of IEP to parents, teacher access and responsibility, decision making regarding least restrictive environment, regular education access, age sixteen needed transition services, agency involvement, student and agency invitations, preschool transition planning conference, placement in program by age 3, procedural safeguards, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, behavioral intervention plan, functional behavior analysis, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, participation in statewide assessments, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternate assessment, out of district participation in graduation, class size and waivers, age range and waivers, group sizes for speech, home instruction, access to student records, access sheets, maintenance and destruction and documentation of locations.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified an area of need regarding staff development, facilities, surrogate parents, Child Find, pre-referral process, functional assessments, written reports, accept or rejection of reports, provision of a copy of evaluations to the parents ten days prior to the meeting, instructional implication in speech reports, educational impact of speech problems by student's teacher, considerations and required statements, consistently and clearly written goals and objectives, consideration and availability of supplemental aids and services, nonacademic and extracurricular participation, continuum, age fourteen transition service needs, preferences and interests, graduation requirements, consultation time, sufficient staff and staff knowledge of student record policies and procedures.

The on-site visit identified an additional area of need within the various standards regarding evaluation by two child study team members in addition to evaluation by the speech language therapist when a speech and language evaluation is warranted for preschool initial evaluations.

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