

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

**District:** Belvidere School District

**County:** Warren

**Monitoring Dates:** November 9 and 10, 2004

**Monitoring Team:** Zola Mills, Gladys Miller, Jenifer Spear, Carol Raff and Susan Wilson

***Background Information:***

During the 2003–2004 school years, the **Belvidere School District** conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the **Belvidere 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 identify areas of strength, promising practices, areas that need improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The **Belvidere 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 **Belvidere School District** on October 25, 2004. 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 school policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related service personnel, and other relevant information. A representative sample of student records was also reviewed. Interviews were conducted with the school's special education administrators, building principal, general education and special education teachers, speech therapists and child study team members.

**District Strengths:**

The district is commended for an extensive middle school program where all students receiving special education, regardless of disability, are educated in general education settings with supplementary aids and services.

The district prides itself on working closely with the community on projects such as Habitat for Humanity, Tree City, window painting for the holidays and third grade

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participation in community cleanup. These programs are available to all students and engender a sense of civic responsibility, a work ethic and improve self-esteem. The district also takes advantage of its location in the county seat and works closely with the county prosecutor's office to run proactive programs to raise drug awareness and to prevent harassment and bullying.

### ***Data Summary***

A review of the district's reported data indicates a classification rate, excluding students receiving speech, of 15.2% in 2001, 14.6% in 2002 and 14.9% in 2003. The state classification rates for the same period are 13.2%, 13.4% and 14.1% respectively. Although the district rates are close to the state average, pre-referral interventions are addressed in the improvement plan to reduce the classification rate. The district is to be commended for their practice of inclusive placement of students for students ages 6 to 21 years. A total of 93.4% of these students are in general education settings more than 40% of the school day. Only 4.9% are in the general education setting less than 40% and only 1.65% of the students are placed out of district. The state numbers are 82%, 17.6% and 9.8% respectively.

For students ages 3 to 5, no students were in general education early childhood settings at the time of the monitoring. A total of 70% of preschoolers with disabilities were in a self-contained preschool disabled classes and 30% attended preschool general education classes on a part-time basis. This was identified by the district as an area of need and addressed in the improvement plan.

### ***Section I: General Provisions***

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

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

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

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

**Parent Training** – Parent interviews and the parent concerns expressed at the public focus group meeting held during the monitoring process indicate that there is no parent training available to help parents understand either their child's disability or the special education rules and regulations.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that ensure that parents have access to information, training or workshops on special education issues. Implementation of these activities will ensure that the parents have the tools and information necessary to enable them to ensure that the needs of their special education student are met. The plan must include procedures and an administrative oversight to ensure implementation of the procedures and the activities.**

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### **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 services for students eligible for special education and related services, related services of occupational and physical therapy, length of day and year, facilities and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of extended school year for students eligible for speech and language services, related services of speech and counseling and goals and objectives for students eligible for speech and language services. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these concerns.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding transfer students.

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

**Transfer Students** – A review of records indicated that there is no date of enrollment in the file for students transferring into the district so it cannot be determined if the IEP was reviewed in a timely manner nor is there any indication that the incoming IEP was accepted, revised or implemented as written.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities that ensure that IEPs for incoming transfer students are reviewed in a timely manner. The activities should ensure that incoming IEPs are stamped when received and immediately reviewed by the child study team. The team must determine whether the IEPs will be implemented as written or place the student in an interim program consistent with the current IEP until a properly constituted IEP team convenes to revise the IEP. Implementation of these activities will ensure that the needs of transfer students are met. The plan must include procedures and an administrative oversight to ensure implementation of the procedures and the activities.**

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

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

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

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding content of written notice of the results of a combined reevaluation planning and eligibility meeting where no additional data is considered necessary. This is handled in Section VII, Eligibility.

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

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

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of Child Find, summer referrals and identification meeting timelines and participants for students eligible for special education and related services.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of pre-referral interventions, referral process and direct referrals. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address these concerns as it lacks a mechanism to assess implementation following in-service training. The district will revise its improvement plan to include this component.**

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding identification meetings for students eligible for speech and language services, health summary, vision screenings and hearing screenings.

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

##### **Identification Meetings for Students Eligible for Speech and Languages Services –**

A review of speech records indicated that parents of students that were identified through the kindergarten screening process received a letter requesting consent to evaluate their child for eligibility for speech services rather than an invitation to the parent for an identification meeting to discuss whether an evaluation was needed.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that parents have the opportunity to meet with their child's teacher and the speech therapist at an identification meeting to share information to determine whether a speech evaluation is warranted. Implementation of these activities will ensure that all required participants are involved in the decision whether or not to evaluate. The plan must include procedures, in-service training of the speech language staff and an administrative oversight to ensure the consistent ongoing implementation of the procedures and activities.**

**Health Summary and Vision and Hearing Screenings –** A review of records indicated that at the time of the identification meeting, information concerning the health summary and the results of the vision and hearing screenings are not consistently available.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that the school nurse will develop health summaries and conduct hearing and vision 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.**

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### **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 assessment for students eligible for special education and related services, standardized assessments, written reports signed and dated, bilingual evaluations and independent evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of multi-disciplinary assessment and written reports for students eligible for speech and language services. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address the area of written reports however no plan was submitted for multi-disciplinary. **The district will revise its improvement plan to include in-service training for the speech – language specialists to ensure that a written statement from the teacher regarding the educational impact of the child's communication in the classroom and a teacher interview are included as part of the initial evaluation process. The plan must include a mechanism to measure the effectiveness of the training and an oversight component to ensure that the activities are implemented in such a manner as to bring the district into compliance.**

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding functional assessments and acceptance or rejection of reports with a rationale for any dissenting opinion.

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

**Functional Assessment** –A review of records indicated that a structured observation of the student in other than a testing situation was not documented with the evaluation report.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that ensure that all required components of the functional assessments are addressed in the student's evaluations. Implementation of these activities will ensure that a variety of measurements are used to assess student performance. The plan must include an administrative oversight to ensure implementation of the activities**

**Acceptance or Rejection of Reports** – A review of records indicated that there is no procedure for the acceptance or rejection of outside reports.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure that child study team members accept or reject reports submitted by outside agencies. Implementation of these activities will ensure parents are aware of any report or part of a report that was rejected by the child study team and the reason(s) why it was rejected. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

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### **Section VI: Reevaluation**

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

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of planning meetings, reevaluation timelines and participants and turning age five.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of timelines for reevaluations requested early. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these concerns.

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

### **Section VII. Eligibility**

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

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of participants, criteria, eligibility meeting, signature of agreement or disagreement and a rationale statement.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding documentation of eligibility and the provision of evaluation reports to parents ten days prior to the meeting.

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

**Documentation of Eligibility** – A review of records indicated that when a reevaluation was conducted without additional testing, there was no eligibility statement in the written notice nor in the IEP that was developed at the meeting.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that an eligibility statement is developed at the eligibility meeting and is provided to the parent, included in the written notice or in the IEP. Implementation of these activities will ensure parents are aware of their child's eligibility for special education and related services. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

**Evaluation Reports to Parents 10 Days Prior to the Meeting** – A review of records and interviews indicated that evaluation reports are not consistently provided on a timely basis to parent. As a result, parents may not be prepared to discuss eligibility issues based on the content of the reports at the eligibility meeting conference.

- **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 parents have the opportunity to be better prepared to discuss issues related to eligibility as well as have the opportunity to invite other individuals to review the reports. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

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

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

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of meetings and participants, considerations and required statements for students eligible for special education and related services, alignment of goals and objectives with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review and ninety-day timelines and provision of the IEP to parents.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of considerations and required statements for students eligible for speech and language services, present level of educational performance and teacher access and knowledge. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these concerns.

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

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

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified compliance in decision making with regard to the least restrictive environment for students ages 6 to 21 and general education access.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of in the decision making process and continuum for preschool students. The district's improvement plan activities will not ensure that the IEP team considers an early childhood general education program as a first option for preschool disabled students. **The plan lacks procedures, in-service with a measure of effectiveness and oversight. The district will revise the plan to include these components to ensure the first option considered for a preschool student will be a general education setting with supplementary aids and services.**

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding documentation of the discussion of supplementary aids and services and the notification of out of district students of nonacademic and extracurricular activities.

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

**Supplementary Aids and Services** – Staff members indicated that supplementary aids and services to enable a student to succeed in a general education setting were discussed at IEP meetings; however, documentation of the discussion was not located in IEPs during record review.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that the consideration of supplementary aids and services and program modifications to enable a student to remain in a general education setting is fully documented in the IEP. If the IEP team determines that these measures are not sufficient to enable the student to remain in this setting they should also document why before moving to a more restrictive**

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**setting. Implementation of these activities will ensure parents and other personnel with educational responsibility for the students have full knowledge of the appropriateness of the current placement. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

**Nonacademic and Extracurricular Participation** - Record review and interviews indicated that the district does not notify students placed in out-of-district placements of nonacademic and extracurricular activities in which they may choose to participate.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that students in out-of-district placements are afforded the opportunity to participate in activities within the district. The plan must include an administrative 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 service needs, preferences and interests, 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 lack of planning for community experiences in the transition process and lack of career guidance activities for special education students. No plan was submitted to address these concerns. **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure these services are considered and provided where appropriate for students. The plan must include procedures, in-service, a measure of the implementation of the procedures and an oversight component.**

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 compliance in the area of preschool transition planning conference.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of placement in program by age 3. The district has begun implementation of activities to bring this area into compliance. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this concern.

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



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### **Section XI: Discipline**

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of discipline procedures, suspension tracking, functional behavioral assessment, behavior intervention plan, manifestation determination and interim alternative educational setting.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of procedural safeguards for potentially disabled students, documentation to case manager and provision of student records to appropriate authorities in the case of reported crimes. The district's plan for provision of student records to the appropriate authorities is sufficient to address this concern. The district has implemented a data tracking system and appropriate activities at the high school which are bringing these areas into compliance. **The implementation of this system and appropriate activities needs to be extended to the middle school. The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures and activities specific to the middle school to bring those grade levels into compliance. The plan must include procedures, in-service, a measure of the effectiveness of the in-service training and an oversight component.**

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

### **Section XII: Statewide Assessment**

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

During the self assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of participation, approved accommodations and modification, IEP documentation and alternate assessment.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of staff knowledge of the statewide assessments. The district has begun implementation of activities that will bring this area into compliance. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this concern.

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

### **Section XIII: Graduation**

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

During the self assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of IEP requirements, out-of-district participation and choice of diploma.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding documentation of written notice of graduation.

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### Area(s) of Need:

**Written Notice of Graduation** – Interviews and record review indicated that written notice of graduation was sent to students but was not documented in the student files. This area is also covered under Section XV, Student Records.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that copies of written notice of graduation are retained in student files. The plan must include secretarial procedures in maintaining students' files, in-service, a measure of the implementation of the procedures and an oversight component.**

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

#### Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of consultation time and sufficient child study team staff. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address the concern with consultation time for teachers. **The plan is insufficient to address the perceived need to increase speech therapists to two full time staff. The plan lacks an interim plan to provide required services before the addition of staff in June of 2007. The district needs to revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure that speech-language services are provided as indicated in students' IEPs. The plan must include procedures and an oversight component.**

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

#### Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of access and requests, access sheets 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 for student records. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this concern.

An areas of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding maintenance and destruction of records

### Area(s) of Need:

**Maintenance and Destruction of Records** – Record review and interviews indicated that relevant notices and correspondence as well as educationally relevant records were being purged from recent graduates' files. Additionally, a letter is being sent to the adult students and parents indicating that they have thirty days to notify the district if they wished to pick up their files or the files would be destroyed.

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- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that will ensure that the pupil records rules and regulations are implemented in the district. The plan must include secretarial procedures in maintaining students' files, in-service, a measure of the effectiveness of the implementation of the procedures and an oversight component.**

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## **Summary**

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Belvidere School District on November 9 and 10, 2004. The purpose of the monitoring visit was to verify the district's report of findings resulting from the 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 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 school and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

Data review indicates the district has maintained a classification rate near the state average for the last three years. The district's improvement plan contains activities in the pre-referral area to further reduce the classification rate. For students ages 6 through 21, 93.4% were included in general education for more than 40% of their school day. Although the district successfully includes the vast majority of students with disabilities in this age group, at the time of the monitoring, no preschoolers with disabilities were included in early childhood settings. A total of 70% of preschoolers were educated in self-contained preschool disabled classrooms. The district identified a concern with regard to the continuum of placements and the least restrictive environment for this population. As a result, the district developed an improvement plan that with some revision will address these concerns.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, nine parents, child study team members and an administrator attended. Satisfaction was expressed regarding many of the district's programs and services. Several parents expressed concerns regarding teachers' actual knowledge of and the implementation of the IEP and program modifications required by the IEP. These concerns were recognized by the district and the district's improvement plan addresses these issues in several sections. Concern was also raised as to whether there were high expectations for special education students and whether or not they were receiving instruction related to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards.

Some parents expressed concern regarding the availability of current textbooks. Several parents indicated that there were insufficient staff members to provide in-class support. They were also concerned about the efficacy of the training provided to enable teachers to implement programs successfully. They praised the full inclusion program and felt that it is successful. Most parents felt that the child study team was responsive to their children's needs and that communication between the case manager and parent was positive. Most of the parents present felt the need to have training in special education rules and regulations as well as in specific disability areas.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies and procedures, staff training, dissemination of IDEA, extended school year for students eligible for special education and related services, related services of occupational and physical therapy, length of day and year, facilities, certifications, surrogate parents, consent, content and provision of notices of meetings, provision of written notices, meetings, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, Child Find, summer referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants for students eligible for special education and related services, multi-disciplinary evaluation for students eligible for special education and related

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services, standardized assessments, written reports, 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, agreement or disagreement and rationale, IEP meeting and participants, considerations and required statements for students eligible for special education and related services, alignment of goals and objectives with the core content curriculum standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review and ninety day timelines, provision of IEP to parents, individualized decision making, Oberti factors, consideration and documentation, regular education access, age fourteen transition service needs, age sixteen needed transition services, agency involvement, student and agency invitations, preschool transition planning conference, suspension tracking, behavioral intervention plan, functional behavior assessment, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, participation in statewide assessments, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternate assessment, graduation requirements, out-of-district participation, choice of diploma, class size and waivers, age range and waivers, group sizes for speech, home instruction, access to student records, access sheets and documentation of locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding extended school year for speech students, goals and objectives for speech students, related services of speech and counseling, referral process and pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, multi-disciplinary evaluation and written reports for students eligible for speech and language services, considerations and required statements in IEPs for speech students, present level of educational performance, ninety day timelines when early reevaluations are requested, teacher knowledge, access and responsibility for the IEP, individualized decision making, continuum for preschool disabled students, placement in program by age three, community experiences and career counseling for transition students, documentation to case manager, procedural safeguards, records sent when crime reported, staff knowledge of statewide assessments, consultation time, sufficient child study team staff and staff knowledge of student record policies and procedures.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding parent training, transfer students, content of written notice, identification meetings for students eligible for speech and language services, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, functional assessments, acceptance or rejection of reports, documentation of eligibility, provision of a copy of evaluations to the parents ten days prior to the meeting, supplemental aids and services, written notice of graduation, notification of nonacademic and extracurricular activities and maintenance and destruction of records.

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