

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

District: Berkeley Heights School District

County: Union

Monitoring Dates: November 16, 2004

Monitoring Team: Barbara J. Tucker

Background Information:

During the 2003-2004 school year, the Berkeley Heights School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Berkeley Heights 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 Berkeley Heights 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 Columbia Middle School on November 16, 2004. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

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

District Strength:

The district is commended for implementing the Peer Leadership Corps (PLC), which is a group of eighth-grade students who provide leadership services for students at the middle school. The goal of the program is to provide peer-based leadership activities for students that emphasize social, academic and personal responsibility. In addition, the program teaches students to get along and communicate with peers, teachers and family members.

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The district also provides students with an opportunity to participate in the Opportunity Makers, a group of students who volunteer their time for a variety of community services and activities. The students choose their own projects, plan and execute all details themselves, with school counselors available to provide advice and guidance.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

General Provisions, Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), Procedural Safeguards, Evaluation, Reevaluation, Eligibility, Individualized Education Program (IEP), Transition to Preschool, Statewide Assessment and Programs and Services 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.

Data Summary:

The eligibility data provided by the Berkeley Heights School District for the last three years indicate that the district's classification rate has consistently remained at least 3% below the state average of 13.4%. Further review of the eligibility data as well as information from the self-assessment shows, that the district's classification rate consistently declined over the past three years. Additionally, district is 14.1% above the state average of 41.6% for educating its school-aged special needs students in general education classes with their peers for at least 80% of the school day. The district continues to focus on least restrictive environment as an area where they can make additional improvement.

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, and documentation of pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, vision/hearing screenings and identification meetings/participants /timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of health summaries. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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 the areas of decision-making process, general education access, notification/participation of out-of-district students in district extra-curricular programs and continuum of programs/placements.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation of the specific supplementary aids and services as well as program

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modifications that have been considered to try and meet a student's needs in general education classes and an explanation of why these supplementary aids and services are not appropriate. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of statements of transition service needs and needed transition statements.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of agency invitation and steps to take when an agency does not attend IEP meetings. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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

Section XI: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, manifestation determination meetings, interim alternative educational setting, 45-day return and procedural safeguards.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern regarding case managers incorporating appropriate behavioral interventions into new IEPs. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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

Section XIII: Graduation

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of IEP requirements and written notice of graduation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of out-of-district students' participation in graduation activities. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of access/requests, access sheets, and documentation of the location of other records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of maintenance and destruction of records. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Berkeley Heights School District on November 16, 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 Berkeley Heights School District is commended for the identifying all areas of need during the self-assessment process and for developing an improvement plan that is sufficient to bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the implementation of improvement plan activities prior to the monitoring visit.

A review of data indicated that the district's is to be commended for its classification rate which has consistently remained below the state average during the past three years. Additionally, the district is 14.1% above the state average of 41.6% for educating school-aged special needs students in general education classes with their peers for at least 80% of the school day. The district will continue to focus on least restrictive environment as an area in need of improvement. The district is commended for having a 100% graduation rate for its students with disabilities. District data show that at least 82% of those students go on to post secondary education.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, many parents expressed their satisfaction with the district's programs, services and the high quality of staff employed by the district. Other parents expressed the need to have better communications between themselves and district staff as well as improved transition programs and services. Parents also felt that the district provides extensive support for families. One parent stated publicly that she had initially disagreed with the child study team with regard to the classification of her child; however, her child is now very successful "thanks to the continued efforts of the district."

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included child find, referral process, documentation of pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, vision and hearing screenings identification meetings/participants /timelines, decision-making process, general education access, notification/participation of out-of-district students in district extra-curricular programs, continuum of programs/placements, statements of transition service needs and needed transition statements, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, manifestation determination meetings, interim alternative educational setting, 45-day return, procedural safeguards, documentation of graduation requirements in the IEP, written notice of graduation, access/requests, access sheets and documentation of the location of other records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding health summaries, documentation of the specific supplementary aids and services and program modifications that have been considered to try and meet a student's needs in general education classes and an explanation of why these supplementary aids and services are not appropriate, agency invitation and steps to take when an agency does not attend IEP meetings, case managers incorporating appropriate behavioral interventions into new IEPs, out-of-district students' participation in graduation activities and maintenance and destruction of records.

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