

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

District: Berlin Township School District

County: Camden

Monitoring Dates: October 1,2 & 3, 2003

Monitoring Team: Michael Lee and Kenneth Richards

Background Information:

During the 2002–2003 school year, the Berlin Township School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Berlin Township School District with an opportunity to evaluate its 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 Berlin Township 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 district administrative offices on September 9, 2003. 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 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, building principals, general education and special education teachers, speech therapists and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for the inclusion of preschool handicapped students in the district's general education preschool programs.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

The district is also commended for their efforts in the area of cultural diversity. Students benefit from the experiences shared by an educator from Africa who visits the school on an ongoing basis to share his experiences and by teaching students about the customs and culture of Africa.

The district provides additional support to all middle school students through the homework club which is conducted after school. Elementary school students benefit from a program that offers additional reading instruction. Both programs are provided at no cost to parents.

The district has also entered into a partnership with Rowan University which provides extensive training in inquiry-based science instruction for teachers at the elementary level. Additionally, staff at both the elementary and middle school levels have been trained in the instruction of social skills development through the Second Step program.

Data Summary:

The district's data indicate an increase in the percentage of students with disabilities who receive instruction in general education. Over a three year period, the district's trend is toward placing more students in mainstream settings for the majority of the day. To support this initiative, the district has increased the number of special education staff in order to expand their in-class support program.

The district is commended for increasing the number of preschool disabled students who receive their educational programs in general education preschool settings. Two years ago the district implemented a general education preschool program that has provided the opportunity for preschool disabled students to be educated in the least restrictive environment. As a result, 40 % of preschool disabled students are educated in general education early childhood programs.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

Evaluation, Reevaluation, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation (8th grade), Programs and Services and Student Records were determined to be areas of compliance by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the on-site visit.

Section I: General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of professional development. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training.** The plan needs to be revised to include this element.

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

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of extended school year, provision of related services, length of school day/year, facilities and certification.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of transfer students. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

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

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents and notice of meetings. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address the area of notice of meeting because the identified activities do not inform the parent that at the discretion of the parent or district others with expertise may be invited nor does it inform the parent or adult student that transition will be discussed at the meeting. The improvement plan also lacks an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent use of the amended notice of meetings. The plan needs to be revised to include these components. Furthermore, the district did not submit an improvement plan to address the area of surrogate parents and is required to do so.**

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

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of child find activities, direct referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the referral process and pre-referral interventions. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address these areas because it identifies funding as the barrier. As such, should the board not allocate the necessary funds, the plan has no alternate strategies. The plan needs to be revised to include alternate strategies in the event additional funds are not allocated.**

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

An additional area of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding health summary and vision and hearing screenings.

Area(s) of Need:

Health Summary and Vision and Hearing Screenings – During the on-site monitoring visit, record review and information obtained through staff interviews determined that a health summary and vision and hearing screenings are not conducted for students referred for a special education evaluation during the summer months.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure vision and hearing screenings are conducted and a health summary is developed and provided to the child study team by the time of the identification meeting. Implementation of these activities will ensure the identification team has appropriate information to determine whether an evaluation is warranted as well as the nature and scope of the evaluation.**

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of eligibility meetings and participants, statements of eligibility, criteria and signatures of agreement/disagreement and rationale.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of the provision of a copy of evaluation reports to parents ten days prior to the meeting. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

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

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of meetings, participants, required statements and considerations, Present Level of Educational Performance documentation, age of majority, provision of IEPs to parents, implementation dates and 90-day timelines.

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

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

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

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of preschool regular education access, individual decision-making, continuum, supplemental aids and services and LRE considerations and documentation. Furthermore, the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of school age individual decision-making, regular education access, continuum, supplemental aids and services and LRE considerations and documentation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of school age least restrictive environment documentation and participation of students attending out-of-district placements in nonacademic and extracurricular activities. The barriers identified by the district included a lack of sufficient discussion and consideration of the potential harmful effects on other class mates by students with behavioral difficulties and a lack of a concerted effort to make students placed in out-of-district placements aware of extracurricular and nonacademic activities. The district's plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

No additional areas of need were identified during the on site monitoring process

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of age fourteen "Transition Service Needs" including interests and preferences. The district's plan is sufficient to address this area of need.

No additional areas of need were identified during the onsite monitoring visit.

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 and early intervention to preschool disabled by age three.

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

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Berlin Township School District on October 1, & 2, 2003. The purpose of the monitoring visit was to verify the district's report of findings resulting from their self-assessment and to review the district's improvement plan. The district is commended for the exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of that review the district was able to identify all but one area of need and develop an improvement plan that with some revision will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the many areas determined by the district and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, the two parents who attended the meeting expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Parent input was also obtained during parent phone interviews conducted as a part of the on-site visit. These parents praised the efforts of the child study team and teaching staff and indicated their pleasure and satisfaction with the services and support provided by the district.

Areas demonstrating compliance with all standards included Evaluation, Reevaluation, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation, Programs and Services and Student Records.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies, procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, extended school year, provision of related services, length of school day/year, facilities, certification, consent, written notice, notice on native language, independent evaluations, interpreters at meetings, child find activities, direct referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants, eligibility meeting and participants, statement of eligibility, criteria, signatures of agreement/disagreement rationale, IEP meetings, participants, required statements and considerations, IEP implementation, Present Level of Educational Performance documentation, age of majority, provision of IEP to parents, 90 day timelines, preschool individual decision making process, regular education access and continuum and school age individual decision making process, regular education access and continuum, supplemental aides and services, pre school transition planning conference and early intervention to pre school disabled by age three.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff development, transfer students, surrogate parents, notice of meeting, referral process, pre referral interventions, copy of evaluation reports to parents at least ten days prior to meeting, teacher access and responsibility, school age least restrictive environment documentation, notification and participation of out of district students in extra curricular and non academic activities and age fourteen transition services including interest and preferences,

The on-site visit identified an additional area of need within the various standards regarding health summaries and vision and hearing screenings during the summer.

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

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