

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

District: Downe Township School District

County: Cumberland

Monitoring Dates: February 17, 2005

Monitor: Caryl Carthew

Background Information:

During the 2003-2004 school year, the Downe 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 Downe Township School District with an opportunity to evaluate 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 assist the district in identifying areas of strength and promising practices, as well as areas needing improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The Downe Township 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 Downe Township School on the evening of February 3, 2005. Information obtained from this meeting was used to direct the focus of the subsequent monitoring activities.

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. A representative sample of student records was also reviewed. Interviews were conducted with the district's special education administrator, chief school administrator/building principal, general education and special education teachers, speech therapist and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The Downe Township School District is commended for a commitment to providing regionalized special education programs. The district provides Behavior Disabilities and Cognitive Impaired programs for both in-district students and those placed on a tuition basis from other neighboring districts. Although these are special class programs, they also provide opportunities for students with significant academic and emotional needs to be educated with their non-disabled peers rather than in a separate setting.

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The district houses the Kid's Center program, which is funded through the local hospital. This program provides supportive medical services to families, including counseling, social programs, speakers, parent workshops, and a school-wide snack program at no cost to families.

The district provides a wide variety of extracurricular and non-academic programs for all students, including those with disabilities, such as character education, clubs, and a cooperative theater program with Appel Farm Arts and Music Center. These programs provide a supportive environment for artistic expression, participation in leisure activities with peers, and self-discovery.

Data Summary:

A review of the data submitted by the Downe Township School District as a result of the self-assessment process indicates that classification rates for special education students are below the state average. District personnel report that this is due, in part, to revisions to the Intervention and Referral Services process. The district anticipates that this positive trend will continue. The district placement rates for preschool students indicate that virtually all students are included in general education settings. The district operates an inclusive general education preschool program and parents are extremely pleased with the preschool services. District data indicate a trend over the last three years of fewer students placed out-of-district. Since the 2002-2003 school year, the percentage of students placed out-of-district has dropped by approximate 14%. The district educates few students with disabilities outside of the district; however, the district has identified a need for expanding in-district programs to accommodate all students with disabilities and has addressed the issue in their improvement plan.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

Reevaluation, Discipline, and Graduation 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 area of dissemination of IDEA information.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of policies and procedures. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in this area. The district further identified concerns regarding staff development. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks a mechanism to determine the effectiveness to training efforts. The plan needs to be revised to include this component.**

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

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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, length of school day/year, and facilities.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of certification, goals and objectives for counseling, and oversight of IEP implementation. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas. The district further identified concerns regarding procedures for transfer students. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue. The district also identified concerns regarding maintenance of hearing aids. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this issue because it lacks an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of procedures. The plan needs to be revised to include these activities.**

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding provision of speech-language services.

Area(s) of Need:

Speech-Language Services – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that students eligible for speech-language services do not receive therapy for the full school year. In the spring of each year, the speech-language specialist meets with parents and teachers to develop IEPs for students for the coming year, however these IEPs do not include an implementation date. After the next school year begins, parents are invited to an evaluation planning meeting and are asked to give consent for a speech assessment. Interviews indicate that the purpose of the assessment is not to determine eligibility, but instead to determine if goals and objectives developed at the annual review conference continue to meet the needs of the students. Rather than including this as a method of measuring progress in the IEP, it is treated as a formal evaluation, requiring parental consent. Once the evaluation is completed, parents attend a meeting to discuss the evaluation results and determine the implementation date for services. As a result of this process, services for students eligible for speech-language services are delayed until October, while students receiving speech as a related service begin promptly in September.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that services for students eligible for speech-language are not delayed at the start of the school year. In addition, activities must ensure that the evaluation process for eligible students does not interfere with the provision of therapy. Implementation of these activities will ensure that eligible students receive the services they need as determined by the IEP team. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of procedures.**

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Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of meetings, native language, and independent evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of notice of a meeting, provision of procedural safeguards, and consent. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding surrogate parents and notice of intent to evaluate for speech referrals.

Area(s) of Need:

Surrogate Parents – During the on-site monitoring it was determined that although the district has a policy stating the intent to provide a surrogate parent when necessary, the policy does not identify the method for obtaining and training surrogate parents.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that surrogate parents are located and trained when necessary. The implementation of these activities will ensure that the rights of students are protected.**

Notice for Speech Referrals – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that written notice of a speech identification meeting does not include all the required components. In addition, when a parent requests an evaluation, the parent is asked to complete a form which includes a statement granting consent for the assessment. As a result, the parent is not giving informed consent and has not had the opportunity to first meet with school personnel discuss the evaluation process and then make a determination as to whether or not to grant consent.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that written notice of initial speech identification meetings includes all the required components. It is recommended that the district utilize the notice forms developed by the Office of Special Education Programs. In addition, the plan must include activities to ensure that parents are asked to give informed consent only after the identification meeting has occurred. The implementation of these activities will ensure that parents are fully aware of their rights and have knowledge of the specific actions to which they are granting consent. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the procedures.**

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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 referral process, pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, summer referrals and identification meeting participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns regarding Child Find. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue. The district further identified concerns regarding procedures for making language referrals to the child study team. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in this area.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding vision/hearing screenings.

Area(s) of Need:

Vision/Hearing Screenings –During the on-site monitoring it was determined that the vision/hearing screenings for students referred to the child study team are not completed prior to that identification meeting. As a result, this information is not available to be considered as part of the evaluation planning process.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that vision/hearing screenings are completed prior to the identification meeting for students referred for evaluation. The implementation of these activities will ensure that all necessary information is considered when determining the nature and scope of an evaluation. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of standardized evaluations and written reports.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of acceptance and/or rejection of reports. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in this area. The district further identified concerns regarding bilingual evaluations. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue. The district also identified concerns regarding the educational impact statement for speech referrals. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this issue because it lacks administrative oversight activities to ensure consistent implementation of procedures. The plan needs to be revised to include this component.**

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Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding multidisciplinary evaluations and functional assessments for speech evaluations.

Area(s) of Need:

Multidisciplinary Evaluations – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that preschool evaluations do not consistently include a minimum of two child study team evaluations. The district is considering the speech-language assessment as one of the two minimum required, when in fact it must be considered an additional assessment.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that a minimum of two child study team assessments are completed when evaluating preschool students. The implementation of these activities will ensure that sufficient information is available when determining eligibility for special education and related services. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the plan.**

Functional Assessments for Speech Evaluations – During the on-site monitoring it was determined that speech-language assessments do not include all the required components of a functional assessment.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that speech-language evaluation reports include all the required components of a functional assessment. The implementation of these activities will ensure that all relevant data are included in the evaluation process. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the plan.**

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of meetings, participants, and eligibility criteria.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of certification of agreement/disagreement and provision of evaluation reports to parents. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding eligibility statements for speech students.

Area(s) of Need:

Eligibility Statements for Speech Students – During the on-site monitoring it was determined that notice of eligibility is not provided for students eligible for speech-language services. Although speech-language IEPs include present levels of

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educational performance, notice is not provided to parents regarding how the student was determined as eligible for services.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that notice of eligibility is provided for students evaluated for speech-language services. The implementation of these activities will result in parents having all the required information as to determinations made regarding eligibility. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the plan.**

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of meetings/participants, present levels of educational performance, goals and objectives and their alignment with the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCSs), implementation dates, age of majority, annual review timelines, and 90-day timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of IEP components and teacher access to IEP information. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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 themselves compliant in the areas of individualized decision-making, Oberti, and general education access.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of participation in non-academic and extra-curricular activities and consideration of supplemental aids and services. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas. The district further identified concerns regarding the continuum of placement offerings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue.

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

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Section X: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance regarding implementation of IEPs by age three.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of preschool transition planning conferences. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue.

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 area of statements of transition service needs.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of student interests and preferences and student participation at meetings. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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

Section XII: Statewide Assessment

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of participation, 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 locally determined assessments. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this issue because there is no established timeline for completion of activities. The district needs to revise the improvement plan to include those timelines.**

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

Section XIV: Programs and Services

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Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of apportioned time for case management and common planning time. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas. The district further identified concerns regarding requirements for highly qualified teachers. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue. The district also identified concerns regarding age range waivers. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this issue because the plan lacks administrative oversight activities to ensure that procedures are consistently implemented. The plan needs to be revised to include this component.**

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 parent and adult-student access to records, access sheets, procedures for maintenance and destruction of records, and documentation of locations of additional records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of parent access to student records and procedures for maintaining records. On-site monitoring determined that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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 Downe Township School District on February 17, 2005. 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 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 also 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. The district is further commended for the many innovative and inclusive programs provided for all students.

A review of data indicates that the district maintains a classification rate below the state average, due in part to revisions to the pre-referral intervention process. In addition, the district continues its commitment to maintain students with disabilities in their home school environment and provide access to general education by expanding program offerings.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, three parents attended and expressed their satisfaction with the district's preschool program. No areas of concern were raised in this forum regarding the provision of special education programs and related services.

Standards identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included Reevaluation, Discipline, and Graduation.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included special education policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, extended school year, provision of related services, length of school day/year, facilities, native language, independent evaluations, reevaluations, eligibility determination, IEP development, IEP documentation, IEP revisions, age of majority, timelines for annual reviews, initial evaluations, and reevaluations, individualized decision-making, access to regular education, statewide assessments, provision of programs and services, and procedures for maintenance and destruction of pupil records.

Areas of need originally identified by the district but determined to have been corrected prior to the on-site monitoring visit by the NJDOE included policies and procedures, certification, goals and objectives for counseling, oversight of IEP implementation, notice of a meeting, provision of procedural safeguards, consent, procedures for making language referrals to the child study team, acceptance/rejection of reports, IEP components, teacher access to IEP information, consideration of supplemental aids and services, participation in non-academic and extra-curricular activities, student interests and preferences, student participation in transition planning, apportioned time for case management, common planning time, and procedures for parental access to student records.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff development, procedures for transfer students, maintenance of hearing aids, Child Find, bilingual evaluations, educational impact statement for speech referrals, certification of agreement/disagreement, provision of evaluation reports to parents, participation at preschool transition planning conferences, participation in locally determined standardized assessments, requirement for highly qualified teachers, age range.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards, regarding provision of speech-language services, surrogate parents, notice of intent to evaluate for speech referrals, vision/hearing screenings, multidisciplinary assessments for preschool, functional assessments for speech evaluations, and eligibility statements for students eligible for speech and language.

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