

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

District: Elmwood Park School District

County: Bergen

Monitoring Dates: April 14, 15, 16 and 17, 2003

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Background Information:

During the 2001–2002 school year, the Elmwood Park School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Elmwood Park 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 Elmwood Park 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 Elmwood Park High School on April 8, 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 its use of video conferencing technology that allows high school classes to be televised to students in the middle and elementary schools.

The district provides a variety of educational technology designed to extend learning via literacy and skill building computer programs. Cornerstone Reading Program, Skills Bank Program and the school building computer laboratories are examples of Elmwood Park's use of technology.

The district also provides an after school teacher assisted support program for all students at the middle school level to address all subject areas. The middle school teachers collaborate as a team and coordinate as needed.

Section I: General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of professional and parent development. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks provisions for transitioning in newly hired special education teachers and paraprofessional staff.** The plan needs to be revised to include this information.

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

Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of related services for occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy and transportation, length of school day and year, transfer students and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of related services for counseling and facilities. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. The district further identified concerns in the area of provision of adaptive physical education. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks in-service training, a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.** The plan needs to be revised to include this component.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding extended school year services and related service locations.

Area(s) of Need:

Extended School Year – During the on-site monitoring, though record review indicated that extended school year discussions are documented in IEPs, staff members and parents reported that it is never provided because of financial constraints. Both groups, staff and parents, further reported that there are, in fact, a number of students who would benefit from an ESY program.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that extended school year services are considered for all students and provided when necessary. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Related Services Location – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that the location for related services is documented as “school” and not in the classroom or in a separate location.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that the location for the provision of related services is specified in IEPs.**

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of consent, notices of meetings, meetings and native language.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents, written notices and independent evaluations. The district’s improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. In addition, the district identified all timelines as an area of need. **The district’s improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks procedures to ensure sufficient staffing to meet the projected timelines identified in the plan.** The plan needs to be revised to include these components.

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

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of identification meeting participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of Child Find 3-21, referral process and pre-referral interventions, summer referrals, health summary and vision and hearing screenings. The district’s improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding direct referrals by staff.

Area(s) of Need:

Direct Referrals - During the on-site visit interviews and record review indicated that there is no mechanism for teachers to directly refer a student to the child study team for evaluation.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure that staffs have the ability to directly refer a student to the child study team and to participate in a meeting when they believe the nature of the student’s problem is such that an evaluation is warranted without delay. At that meeting, a decision may be made that an evaluation is not warranted and that the student needs to be referred to the I & RST. The improvement plan must include a mechanism to establish criteria that identifies the type of documentation that would support a staff request for a direct referral. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations and acceptance and rejection of reports.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of functional assessments. **The district’s improvement plan is insufficient to address this area as it lacks procedures for conducting functional assessments when independent evaluators are used.** The district will revise its improvement plan to include these procedures.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding written reports.

Area(s) of Need:

Written Reports - During the on-site monitoring visit, record review indicated that reports developed by contracted speech, occupational and physical therapists included eligibility determinations.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure reports developed by contracted service providers do not include eligibility determinations. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of participants at planning meeting.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of planning meetings and reevaluations completed by June 30th. The district’s improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 themselves compliant in the areas of meetings, criteria and statement of eligibility.

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

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding signatures of agreement and disagreement and copy of evaluation reports to parents.

Area(s) of Need:

Signatures of Agreement or Disagreement – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated the district does not document agreement and/or disagreement with eligibility determinations.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the district documents agreement and/or disagreement with eligibility determinations. The plan must also ensure that any dissenting opinion includes a statement regarding that conclusion. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Copy of evaluation reports to parents – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that copies of evaluation reports are not provided to parents ten days prior to the eligibility meetings.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that evaluation reports are provided to parents ten days prior to the eligibility meeting. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedure.**

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of considerations and required statements and age of majority.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of participants, goals and objectives aligned with core curriculum content standards and provision of copies of IEPs to parents. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. Implementation dates for IEPs was also identified. However, the district did not submit a plan to address this area. **The district will submit procedures to address this area.** The district further identified teacher access and responsibility for IEPs. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area**

because it lacks in-service training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures. The plan needs to be revised to include these components.

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 regular education access and nonacademic and extracurricular participation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of individualized decision-making and continuum at the school age level and at the preschool level. The district indicated it does not have offer a continuum of placements at all grade levels because of staff shortages and fiscal constraints. At the preschool level they identified a lack of links to community based settings. **The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address the area of preschool LRE but is insufficient to address the school age issue because it lacks appropriate activities to address staffing and training needs.** The plan needs to be revised to include these activities. The district further identified concerns in the areas of Oberti factors, considerations and required statements and supplemental aids and services. **The district did not submit an improvement plan to address these areas of need. The district will submit procedures to address these areas.**

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 themselves compliant in the areas of age fourteen transition service needs, courses of study, age sixteen needed transition services and student and agency invitations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of preferences and interests and agency involvement. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

Section X: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of pre-school transition planning conference and transition from early intervention to pre-school disabled by age three. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

Section XI: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of procedures, documentation to the case manager, suspension tracking, functional behavioral assessment, behavior intervention plan, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting and procedural safeguards. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address 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 themselves compliant in the areas of participation, approved accommodations and modifications and IEP documentation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of alternative assessment. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks procedures, in-service for all appropriate staff, a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.** The plan needs to be revised to include these elements.

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 themselves compliant in the areas of graduation requirements and choice of diploma.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding out-of-district participation and written notice of graduation.

Area(s) of Need:

Out of District Participation – During the on-site visit, record review and interviews indicated that there are no procedures in place to include students in out-of-district placements in graduation activities and ceremonies.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure students in out-of-district placements have the opportunity to participate in graduation activities.**

Written Notice of Graduation – During the on-site monitoring visit, interviews and record review indicated that the district does not provide written notice of graduation.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that students are provided with written notice of graduation. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Section XIV: Programs and Services

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of class size waivers, age range waivers, group sizes, home instruction, staffing, supplemental instruction and team teaching. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 themselves compliant in the areas of access and requests.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of access sheets and destruction of records. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding maintenance of records and documentation of other locations.

Area(s) of Need:

Documentation of Other Locations – During the on-site monitoring visit, record review indicated that central files do not identify the location of other records maintained by the district.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that central files identify the locations of other student records**

Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Elmwood Park Public School District on April 14, 15, 16 and 17, 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 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 implementing activities to address some of the areas of need identified during the self-assessment process. Additionally, the district is 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 and through parent interviews, parents expressed their concerns with many of the district's programs and services. Parents expressed their concern with the lack of sufficient staff within the Special Education Department. In addition, parents are discouraged by the inadequate classroom space and materials for resource programs. One parent identified a concern about the post secondary outcomes for her child and is displeased with the inadequate transition program. Also, parents feel that there are administrative barriers which prevent their children from receiving appropriate educational services. However, one parent felt that her child has done well in the educational system thus far.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA, related services of OT, PT, speech and transportation, length of school day and year, transfer students, certifications, consent, notices of meetings, meetings, native language, ID meeting participants, multi-disciplinary, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations, accept and rejection of reports, reevaluation meeting participants, eligibility meetings, criteria, statement of eligibility, IEP consideration and required statements, age of majority, nonacademic and extracurricular participation, age fourteen transition service needs, courses of study, age sixteen needed transition services, student and agency invite, participation in statewide assessments, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, IEP graduation requirements, choice of diploma, access to student records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding professional and parent development, related services of counseling, facilities, adaptive physical education, surrogate parents, written notices, independent evaluations, Child Find, referral process and pre-referral interventions, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, summer referrals, ID meeting timelines, functional assessments, reevaluation timelines, planning meetings, reevaluations completed by June 30th of students' last year in preschool, eligibility meeting participants, IEP participants, goals and objectives aligned to core curriculum content standards, implementation dates, annual review timelines, ninety day timelines, teacher access and responsibility, individualized decision-making, Oberti factors, considerations and required statements, supplemental aids and services, continuum, preferences and interests, agency involvement, pre-school transition planning conference and transition from early intervention to pre-school disabled by age three, discipline procedures, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, functional behavior analysis, behavior intervention plan, manifestation determination, interim alternate educational setting, discipline

procedures and safeguard, alternate assessment, class size and waivers, age range and waivers, group sizes, home instruction, staffing, team teaching, supplemental instruction, access sheets and maintenance and destruction of records.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding extended school year, related services locations, direct referrals, written reports, signature of agreement or disagreement, copy of evaluation reports to parents, out-of-district participation in graduation, written notice of graduation and documentation of other locations.

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