

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

District: Hackettstown School District

County: Warren

Monitoring Dates: October 21, 22 and 23, 2002

Monitoring Team: Zola Mills and Janet Wright

Background Information:

During the 2001–2002 school year, the Hackettstown School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Hackettstown 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 Hackettstown 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 Hackettstown High School on October 15, 2002. 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 Opportunity Center, a unique alternative school within the regular high school. This highly structured and supportive program enables many students to remain in district, yet be mainstreamed with their contemporaries in selected classes.

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The district also provides Jumpstart I which institutes a three week remedial reading program in August for general education students entering second grade and Jumpstart II which provides additional English language opportunities for ESL students from grades two to five. Funding is provided by a grant from the Rutherford-Stuyvesant Fund and the Hackettstown Kiwanis Club.

The district also provides five ninety-minute kindergarten orientation sessions. The children are introduced not only to the building but also to the art, music, and physical education teachers. While the children are in orientation, there is a parallel program called "Kindergarteners are Special, Handle With Care" for parents. This program is run by Rutgers Cooperative Extension.

An additional program that has been well received by students and staff is the unit lunch at the high school. This extra long lunch allows teachers to participate in common planning and affords students the opportunity to seek extra help.

The district also initiated a preschool disabled program (H.E.L.P.). This program utilizes a total communication system to provide and reinforce the use of dual modalities and to enhance learning styles. Parent activities and training are conducted in both daytime and evening hours.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

General Provisions, Location Referral and Identification, Reevaluation, Eligibility, Statewide Assessment, Graduation 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.

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, length of day/year and certifications.

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.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding extended school year (ESY) and facilities. The county office has been notified of the facilities issues.

Area(s) of Need:

Extended School Year- During the on-site monitoring, a review of records indicated that ESY was documented but found unnecessary for all students except preschool disabled and out-of-district students. Interviews with general education and special education teachers, as well as parents, indicated that ESY is not considered for any other group of students.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that extended school year services are considered for every**

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classified student and provided when appropriate. The district's plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

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

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

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

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, functional assessments and bilingual evaluations.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding written reports and acceptance and rejection of outside reports.

Area(s) of Need:

Written reports - During the on-site monitoring, a review of records indicated that eligibility determinations are not being made by an appropriately configured IEP team. Instead, speech and language therapists are individually making these determinations and are including eligibility statements in their assessment reports.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that eligibility statements are not included in speech and language assessment reports. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Acceptance and rejection of outside reports - During the on-site monitoring, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that although there is a procedure for acceptance of reports, there is no procedure for rejection of outside reports.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the rejection of all or parts of an outside report is documented in the file and that the rationale for the rejection is provided to the parent. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

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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, goals and objectives aligned with core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates and annual and ninety-day timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of participants, teacher access and responsibility and progress reporting on the IEP goals and objectives. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. During the on-site monitoring, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has implemented specific activities to bring about correction in the areas of participants and teacher access and responsibility

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 factors, considerations and required statements, supplemental aids and services and nonacademic and extracurricular participation.

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

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding regular education access for preschool disabled students.

Area(s) of Need:

Regular education access - During the on-site monitoring, classroom observation, IEP review and staff interviews indicated that the district does not ensure preschool disabled students with access to age appropriate non-disabled peers.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the district affords preschool disabled students the opportunity to participate with their non-disabled peers in nonacademic and extracurricular activities. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

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During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of agency involvement and student/agency invitation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of age fourteen transition services needs, courses of study, preferences and interests and age sixteen needed transition services. 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: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of pre-school transition planning conference and transition from early intervention to pre-school disabled by age three.

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

Section X: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of functional behavioral assessment, behavior intervention plan, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, and procedural safeguards.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of procedures, documentation to case manager, and suspension tracking. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. During the on-site monitoring, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has implemented specific activities to bring about correction in 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 to student records, access sheets, maintenance and destruction, documentation of other locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of staff knowledge of the student records policy. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address 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 Hackettstown School District on October 21, 22 and 23, 2002. 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 nearly all 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 district and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations as well as the implementation of activities to correct some of the areas identified during the self-assessment process.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Several concerns were voiced by the parents regarding the need for more challenging curricula for special education students, the need for more opportunities for inclusion in general education, broader transition services, more opportunities for employment and more communication between staff and parents. An additional concern regarding the consideration and provision of extended year services was raised in parent interviews.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included general provisions, related services, length of day/year, certifications, consent, notices of meetings, written notices, meetings, native language, independent evaluations, location, referral and identification, multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, functional assessments, bilingual evaluations, reevaluation processes, eligibility processes, consideration/required statements, goals and objectives aligned to core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review timelines, ninety day timelines, individualized decision-making, Oberti factors, considerations and required statements, supplemental aids and services, nonacademic and extracurricular participation, agency involvement, student/agency invite, pre-school transition planning conference and transition from early intervention to pre-school disabled by age three, functional behavior assessments, behavior intervention plan, manifestation determination, interim alternate educational setting, procedural safeguards, statewide assessments, graduation requirements, program and services, access to student records, access sheets, maintenance and destruction of records, documentation of other locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding transfer students, surrogate parents, IEP participants, teacher access/responsibility, reporting on IEP goals and objectives, continuum, age fourteen transition service needs, courses and preferences, age sixteen needed transition services, discipline procedures, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking and staff knowledge of the student records policy.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding extended school year, facilities, written reports, and regular education access.

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