

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

District: Highlands School District

County: Monmouth

Monitoring Dates: May 4 & 11, 2005

Monitoring Team: Nicole Buten & Kim Murray

Background Information:

During the 2003–2004 school year, the Highlands School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Highlands 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 Highlands School District developed an improvement plan to address identified areas of need.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) conducted a comprehensive desk audit, including a review of representative sample of student records, as well as reviews of district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related services personnel, and other relevant information, as well as holding a focus group meeting for parents and community members at the Highlands Elementary School. Parent interviews were also conducted in order to verify the self-assessment findings, to assess the appropriateness of the improvement plan, and to determine the progress in implementing the plan. Based on these activities, a determination was made by staff from the Office of Special Education Programs that the district had conducted a thorough review during the self-assessment process and had developed a plan that will appropriately address areas of identified need.

Data Summary:

The district's classification rate of 26% for 2004 is significantly higher than the state average of 14.6%. This represents an increase from 10.5% in 2003. During the self-assessment the district recognized this as an area of need and determined that the elevated classification rate can possibly be due to the lack of staff training in differentiated instruction, pre-referral interventions and behavioral interventions. The district developed an improvement plan that targets staff training for these areas.

Data also indicated that a significantly small percentage of students with disabilities (23%) are included in the general education setting more than 80% of the school day,

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when compared to the state average of 41.9%. Again, the district recognized this as an area of need and developed an appropriate improvement plan that addressed the full continuum of placement options for all students, with a focus on in-class support for all subject areas.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for their 8 week parent training series offered in the evening during the 2004-2005 school year. This training was available to all parents with topics ranging from effective listening skills to homework help and confidence building.

Additionally, the district is commended for providing supplementary support to fully included students by offering a weekly social skills group to discuss social needs and strategies of how to appropriately interact with peers.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

Reevaluation, IEP, Preschool Transition, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, 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 and procedures, parent training and dissemination of IDEA information.

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

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 provision of programs, related services, length of day/year, transfer students and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of extended school year. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

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Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of surrogate parents, consent (excluding speech evaluations), notices of meetings, written notices, notices in native language and interpreters at meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of consent for speech evaluations and independent evaluations. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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 areas of Child Find, direct referrals, health summaries, vision and hearing screenings and identification meeting participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of pre-referral interventions, referral process and identification meeting timelines. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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 multidisciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, written reports signed and dated, bilingual evaluations and acceptance/rejection of outside evaluations.

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

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 meeting participants and criteria.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of copies of evaluation reports 10 days prior to a meeting. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of need.

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An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding signatures of agreement/disagreement rationale.

Area of Need:

During the on-site monitoring it was determined through staff interviews and document review that the district does not certify in writing whether the reports of the child study team reflects his or her conclusions.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure that upon determination of eligibility, the child study team certifies in writing whether the reports reflects his or her conclusions. Additionally, the team members must also submit a separate statement presenting his or her conclusions in the event that a team member expresses disagreement. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of these activities.**

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of general education access in district.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the decision-making process, consideration of supplementary aids and services, continuum of programs and notification of extracurricular/nonacademic activities to out-of-district students. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

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Summary

Special education monitoring was completed in the Highlands School District on May 4 & 11, 2005. The purpose of this phase of the monitoring process 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 exceptionally comprehensive review conducted as part of the self-assessment activities. As a result of that review, the district was able to identify most areas of need and to develop an improvement plan that will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the many areas identified as compliant during the self-assessment and verified as such by the Office of Special Education Programs.

Reevaluation, IEP, Preschool Transition, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Programs and Services and Student Records were areas demonstrating compliance with all standards.

At a focus group meeting held, several parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Additionally, parents indicated that the superintendent, interim director of special education and child study team have all made concerted efforts to assure that each child's individual needs are met on a daily basis.

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 information, parent training, provision of programs, related services, length of day/year, transfer students, certifications, surrogate parents, consent (excluding speech evaluations), notices of meetings, written notices, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, Child Find, direct referrals, health summaries, vision and hearing screenings, identification meeting participants, multidisciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, written reports signed and dated, bilingual evaluations, acceptance/rejection of outside evaluations, eligibility meeting participants, specific learning disability criteria and general education access in district.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding in-service training for staff, extended school year, consent for speech evaluations, independent evaluations, pre-referral interventions, referral process, identification meeting timelines, functional assessments, copies of evaluation reports 10 days prior to a meeting, the decision-making process, consideration of supplementary aids and services, continuum of programs and notification of extracurricular/nonacademic activities to out-of-district students.

The on-site visit identified an additional area of need within the standard of eligibility regarding signatures of agreement/disagreement.

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