

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

District: Hopatcong Borough **County:** Sussex
Monitoring Dates: May 3 and 4, 2004
Monitoring Team: Susan Wilson, Zola Mills, Tracey Pettiford-Bugg, Carol Raff

Background Information:

During the 2002 - 2003 school years, the Hopatcong Borough School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Hopatcong Borough 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 Hopatcong Borough 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 Hopatcong Borough Middle School on April 28, 2004. 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:

Hopatcong Borough has an extensive system of staff development which includes in-house resources, professional consultants and collegial planning to assist their teachers in the acquisition of skills regarding the implementation of new and innovative strategies and programs. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals are included in these

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staff development activities in all curricular areas and meet regularly with their regular education peers to share their knowledge and expertise regarding strategies to instruct disabled students.

The Hopatcong School District and Special Olympics of New Jersey teamed together to institute an alternate physical education program at Hopatcong High School. Cognitively impaired students with multiple disabilities are enrolled in the program. Each special education student is paired with a non-disabled general education student who assists with various activities. The physical education teacher adapts the curriculum to meet the needs of each pair of students.

The pull out resource program rooms were refurbished during the summer of 2002 and turned into technology-rich classrooms. Each classroom has twelve computer stations. Two teachers work together in integrated subject areas. The teachers created thematic units, integrating the curricula for the students. Students learn power point presentations and independent research while meeting their IEP needs. Additionally, as a result of the district's commitment to the use of technology, they were able to accommodate the needs of a severely impaired student within the general education setting.

Data Summary:

Based on review of district data it was identified that 42.6% of special education students are educated with their non-disabled peers more than 80% of the school day. This is close to the state average of 41.6%. Only 7% of the special education students are educated in out-of-district settings as compared to the state average of 9.1%. The district is recognized for its efforts to continually increase the number of pre-school disabled students educated with their non-disabled peers. The district has developed a district-wide goal to increase the opportunity for disabled pre-schoolers to be placed in the general education setting. In the 2002-2003 school year, Hopatcong had a classification rate of 13.8%, which is slightly higher than the state average of 13.4%. The district has initiated the Focus Reading Program in an effort to improve the reading skills of its general education population.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

Reevaluation, Statewide Assessment, Graduation Requirements 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 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 areas of staff and parent training. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews

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indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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 extended school year, provision of programs and related services, length of school day, facilities and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of transfer students and hearing aids. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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

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 notice, notices in native language and interpreters at meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents, independent evaluations and meetings. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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, referral process, direct referrals and vision and hearing screenings, identification meeting timelines and participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of pre-referral interventions and health summary. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding referral forms and identification meeting timelines.

Area(s) of Need:

Referral Forms/Identification Meeting Timelines - During the on-site monitoring, record review indicated that referrals for students potentially eligible for speech and language services were not maintained in the files. As a result, it was not possible to determine whether identification meetings were conducted in a timely manner

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure each speech referral is maintained in the student's file and contains the date it was submitted to school staff. Implementation of these activities will ensure referrals are monitored for compliance with the required twenty-day timeline. The plan must include an administration oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

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 and bilingual evaluation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of standardized assessments, functional assessments written reports and acceptance or rejection of reports. 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, participants, criteria, and statement of eligibility.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of signatures of agreement or disagreement and the provision of a copy of evaluation reports to parents. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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

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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 goals and objectives aligned with core curriculum content standards, age of majority implementation dates, annual review timelines and teacher access and responsibility.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of meeting participants, required statements, Present Levels of Educational Performance, IEPs to parents and ninety-day timelines. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific 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 area of individualized decision-making process, Oberti questions, consideration of supplemental aids and services, notification and participation of student in Out-Of-District nonacademic and extracurricular activities and continuum of programs.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of regular education access in district. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in this area.

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 and student and agency invitations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of courses of study, preferences and interests and age sixteen needed transition services. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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

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Section XI: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of suspension tracking, functional behavior assessment, behavior improvement plan, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting and procedural safeguards for short term removals.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of documentation to case manager. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific activities to bring about correction in this area.

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/requests, access sheets and documentation of other locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of maintenance and destruction of records. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has appropriately implemented specific 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 Hopatcong Borough School District on May 3 and 4, 2004. 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. As a result of the self-assessment review conducted by the school district, some areas of need were identified and an improvement plan was developed. 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 and for the prompt implementation of activities that have resulted in the correction of some of those areas identified in the self-assessment document.

A review of district data indicated the district is providing services to a number of students age 6-21 in the regular education setting for more than 80% of the school day. Hopatcong had a classification rate of 13.8%, which is slightly higher than the state average of 13.4%. The district has initiated the Focus Reading Program to address this area.

At a meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. A number of parents praised the district's programs and staff. Some parents expressed concerns regarding the rotation of case managers, discontinuance of the after school counseling program, transition into Sussex Vo-Tech and transportation outside the town limits. Many of the concerns identified by the parents were identified by the district during the self-assessment process.

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, extended school year, provisions of programs and related services, length of day/year, facilities, certifications, four areas of consent, notices of meetings content and provision, written notices, native language, interpreters at meetings, Child Find, referral process, direct referrals, vision and hearing screenings, identification meetings, participants, timelines, multidisciplinary evaluations, bilingual evaluations, three year timelines, planning meeting participants, reevaluations completed by June 30th of students' last year in preschool, eligibility meetings and participants, statement of eligibility, goals and objectives aligned to core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review timelines, teacher access and responsibility, decision-making process. Oberti questions, consideration of supplemental aides and services, nonacademic and extracurricular participation, continuum of programs, age 14 transition, student agency invite, pre-school transition planning conference and transition from early intervention to pre-school disabled by age three, discipline procedures, suspension tracking, functional behavior assessment, behavior intervention plan, manifestation determination, interim alternate educational setting, procedural safeguards, participation in statewide assessments, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternate assessment, IEP graduation requirements, choice of diploma, out of district participation, written notice of graduation, class size waivers, age range waivers, group sizes for speech, home instruction, consultation time, access and request of student records, access sheets and documentation of other locations.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff and parent training, transfer students, hearing aides, surrogate parents, independent evaluations, meetings, pre-referral interventions, health summary, standardized assessments, functional assessments, written reports, acceptance and rejection of reports, signature of agreement/disagreement-rationale, copy of evaluation reports to parents, IEP participants, consideration of required statements, Present Level Education Performance, IEPs to parents, ninety day timelines, regular education access, courses and preferences, age sixteen transition services, documentation to case manager, and maintenance and destruction of records.

The on-site visit identified an additional area of need within the various standards regarding referral forms and identification meeting timelines, specifically in the area of students eligible for speech language.

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