

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

**District:** Lower Township Elementary School District      **County:** Cape May

**Monitoring Dates:** November 12 and 13, 2003

**Monitoring Team:** Jane Marano, Caryl Carthew, and Michael Lee

### ***Background Information:***

During the 2002–2003 school year, the Lower Township Elementary School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Lower Township Elementary 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 Lower Township Elementary 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 Carl T. Mitnick School on October 22, 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, parents, and child study team members.

### **District Strengths:**

The district is commended for its early childhood program for students who are age four. As a result, most of the district's preschool children with disabilities are included in the general education program with appropriate peers.

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The district provides an after-school Orton-Gillingham Reading program for all students who are in need of this intensive intervention and as an extended school year program for those students with disabilities (as determined in their IEP).

The district also provides an outside consultant to assist staff and parents regarding autistic students. Services include monthly professional development before school, consultation with teachers, and development of appropriate strategies and/or interventions. The district is also commended for its Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Group Counseling. This is a six-week program designed to help ADD/ADHD students learn the skills of self-monitoring, impulse control, attention focusing, effort sustaining, friendship building and resiliency building skills.

### **Part One Data Summary:**

The data submitted by Lower Township Elementary School District as a result of the self-assessment process has identified an area of concern regarding placement in the least restrictive environment for school aged students with disabilities. The data submitted by the district indicated that placement of classified students age 6-21 in general education settings is below the state average. During the 2002-2003 school year, 29.2% of classified students age 6-21 were placed in general education settings for more than 80% of the school day. This is below the state average of 41.6%. In addition, the number of classified students age 6-21 placed in general education more than 80% of the school day has decreased since the 2001-2002 school year by 10.3%. The district has identified access to general education as an area of concern for school-aged classified students through the self-assessment process and has addressed these concerns through their improvement plan. The Lower Township School District reported a classification rate of 23.4% for the 2002-2003 school year, which is above the state average of 16%. The district's classification rate has consistently remained above the New Jersey State average for the past three years. In response to these data, the district indicated in the self-assessment the need to revise referral procedures, improve pre-referral interventions, evaluate the effectiveness of the pre-referral interventions, and review discrepancy formula for students identified as specific learning disability in an effort to lower the district's classification rate. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this concern.

### ***Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:***

**Transition to Pre-School (Transition to Post-School is not applicable for this elementary school district), Statewide Assessment, 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 themselves compliant in the areas of policies and procedures, and dissemination of public information.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of professional and parent development. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues.

No 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 related services, goals and objectives for occupational therapy and physical therapy, documentation of frequency/duration/location of related services, provision of adaptive PE, length of school day/year, oversight of IEP implementation, facilities, and staff certification.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation of the need for extended school year programs, provision of extended school year programs, goals/objectives for speech and counseling, procedures for maintaining hearing aids, and procedures for transfer students. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues.

No 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 for initial evaluation/initial implementation of IEP/ release of student records, provision of notice of a meeting, conducting required meetings, provision of written notice, and conducting independent evaluations when required.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of procedures for locating and training surrogate parents, obtaining consent for reevaluation, procedures to document attempts to secure parent participation at meetings, content of notice of a meeting, participants at meetings (speech therapists at required meetings, general education teachers at all meetings, and teachers at teleconference meetings), native language. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues.

No 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 summer referrals.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of Child Find, referral process, direct referrals, health summary, vision/hearing screenings, and identification meetings (timelines and participants). The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues.

The district further identified concerns regarding the district's special education classification rate. The district identified issues with interventions in general education as insufficient in scope to affect student educational performance and timelines are not established to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. These issues appear to negatively impact on the classification rate. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue.

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 assessments for students eligible for special education and related services, standardized assessments, development of written reports, provision of bilingual evaluations when required, and documentation of acceptance and/or rejection of outside reports.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of multi-disciplinary assessments for students eligible for speech/language services, and functional assessments. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues.

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

### ***Section VI: Reevaluation***

#### **Summary of Finding:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of, procedures for conducting reevaluation planning meetings, and reevaluations for classified students turning age five.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of reevaluations within three years or sooner if warranted. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues.

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

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### ***Section VII: Eligibility***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of procedures for conducting eligibility meetings, appropriate application of eligibility criteria, certification of agreement/disagreement with eligibility determination, and documentation of eligibility determinations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of provision of evaluation reports to parents at least 10 days prior to the eligibility meeting. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues.

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

### ***Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of IEP implementation dates.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of IEP meeting participants, considerations/required statements, goals and objectives, procedures for revising IEPs, annual review and 90-day timelines, procedures for informing teachers of their responsibilities for implementing IEPs. The district improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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, continuum of services, and access to regular education programs.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation of the Oberti considerations, provision of supplemental aids and services, participation in nonacademic and extracurricular activities. The district's placement rate in the least restrictive environment has remained below the state average for students ages 6-21. The actual number of students in general education settings for more than 80% of the day has decreased within the district by 10.3% since the 2001-2002 school year, however, during that same time period the number of students placed in general education between 40% and 80% of the day has increased by 5%. The district 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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**Section XI: Discipline**

**Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of discipline procedures, procedures for tracking suspensions, development of behavior intervention plans, conducting functional behavior assessments and manifestation determinations, and procedures for placing students in interim alternative education settings when required.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of notification of removals to case managers. The district improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of need.

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

**Section XIV: Programs and Services**

**Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of class size and age range, group size for speech therapy, and provision of homebound instruction.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of common planning time for resource teachers and general education teachers and sufficient staff (speech therapists). The district improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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 procedures for granting parents access to records, documentation of access to confidential records, and procedures for destruction of records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of procedures for maintenance of records, and documentation of locations of pupil records. The district 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**

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Lower Township Elementary School District on November 12 and 13, 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 exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of that review the district was able to identify all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that 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.

A review of data indicated areas of concern regarding placement in the least restrictive environment for school age students and classification rate. Data submitted by the district indicated that placement of students age 6-21 in general education settings is below the state average. As a result of the self-assessment process, the district is revising its referral procedures, improving pre-referral interventions, evaluating the effectiveness of the interventions, and reviewing their discrepancy formula for students identified as specific learning disability in an effort to lower the district's classification rate.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Fifteen parents attended this meeting along with several teachers and the director of special services. Many of the parents expressed satisfaction with the programs and services, especially the integrated preschool program. Some concerns were expressed by parents regarding teacher knowledge of IEPs, participation in nonacademic and extracurricular activities for students in out of district programs, and a need for parent workshops/support groups. The majority of the issues brought up 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 special education policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, provision of related services, documentation of frequency/duration/location of related services, provision of adaptive PE, length of school day/year, facilities, certification, oversight of IEP implementation, consent for initial evaluation/initial implementation of IEP/release of records, provision of notice of a meeting and written notice, conducting required meetings, independent evaluations, summer referrals, multi-disciplinary assessments for students eligible for special education and related services, development of written reports, provision of bilingual evaluations when required, documentation of acceptance/rejection of outside reports, conducting reevaluations for classified students turning age 5, eligibility determination, individualized decision-making, access to regular education, continuum of services, preschool transition, discipline, statewide assessments, graduation, class size, age range, group size for speech, home instruction, and procedures for granting access to records, documentation of access to confidential records, and procedure for destruction of pupil records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding professional and parent development, provision of extended school year, goals/objectives for related services, maintenance of hearing aids, transfer procedures,

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surrogate parents, consent for reevaluation, content of notice of meeting, participants at meetings, identification meetings timelines and participants, native language, Child Find, referral process, direct referrals, health summary, conducting vision/hearing screenings, classification rates, multi-disciplinary assessments for speech/language students, functional assessments, provision of evaluation reports to parents, IEP components, procedures for revising IEPs, timelines for initial evaluations, annual reviews, and reevaluations, procedures for informing teachers of their responsibilities regarding IEP implementation, provision of supplemental aids/services, participation in nonacademic and extracurricular activities, notification of discipline removal to case manager, common planning time for resource teachers and general education teachers, sufficient speech therapists, and procedures for maintenance of pupil records, and documentation of location of pupil records.

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