

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

District: Merchantville School District

County: Camden

Monitoring Dates: February 2 and 3, 2006

Monitoring Team: Caryl Carthew and Cheryl Merical

Background Information:

During the 2004-2005 school year, the Merchantville School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Merchantville 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 Merchantville 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.

During the on-site visit, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) monitoring team reviewed district documents, including district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, and related service personnel and other relevant information. A representative sample of student records was also reviewed. Interviews were conducted with the district's chief school administrator, special education coordinator, building principal, general education and special education teachers, the speech-language specialist and child study team members. Parents of students with disabilities were interviewed by telephone.

Data Summary:

A review of the data submitted by the Merchantville School District as a result of the self-assessment process indicates that the school district's classification rate for 2004 was 18.7%. This rate has increased by approximately 2.5% from 2002 and was above the state average for that year. District personnel attribute this rate, in part, to the number of students who transfer into the district with IEPs; however, they also stated that the pre-referral process is not effective, resulting in child study team referrals prior to the implementation of interventions in general education classrooms. Data from 2004 also indicates that approximately 41.6% of students with disabilities were placed in general education settings for more than 80% of the school day. This rate is commensurate with the state average and has remained fairly stable over the last three years. The district

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has identified this as an area of need, specifically a need for additional in-class support options, and has developed improvement plan activities to address the need.

At the preschool level, the district reports that for the 2004-2005 school year, 60% of students with disabilities received services in a general education setting. This is significantly above the state average for that year. The district has established an in-district general education preschool program and students with disabilities have the opportunity to participate in this program.

Sections Demonstrating Compliance with All Standards

The self-assessment process required the district to review implementation of federal and state regulations categorized into 15 sections. Within each section, a number of areas were reviewed. The on-site monitoring visit involved verification that the sections and areas identified as compliant by the district in their self-assessment were compliant with regulations. These sections were identified by the district during self-assessment and the NJDOE during the monitoring process as compliant: General Provisions, Evaluation, Reevaluation, Transition to Preschool, Discipline, Statewide Assessments and Programs and Services.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance

The following areas, within the 15 sections reviewed, were identified by the district's self-assessment committee and by the NJDOE as compliant. These areas were reviewed for students eligible for special education and related services (ESERS) and students eligible for speech and language services (ESLS). Areas compliant for only one group of students are noted.

Section	Areas Demonstrating Compliance
Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Oversight of individualized education program (IEP) implementation ▪ Extended school year ▪ Provision of programs ▪ Transfer procedures
Procedural Safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consent ▪ Implementation without undue delay ▪ Provision of notice of a meeting ▪ Content of notice of a meeting ▪ Provision of written notice (ESERS) ▪ Notices in native language ▪ Interpreters at meeting ▪ Independent evaluations
Location, Referral and Identification (LRI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child Find Ages 3-21 ▪ Direct Referrals ▪ Health summary ▪ Vision and hearing screenings (ESLS) ▪ Identification meeting timelines ▪ Identification meeting participants

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Section	Areas Demonstrating Compliance
Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meeting participants ▪ Eligibility Criteria ▪ Statement of eligibility (Specific Learning Disability) ▪ Copy of evaluation reports to parents
Individualized Education Program (IEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meeting participants ▪ IEP required considerations and components ▪ Implementation dates ▪ IEP provided to parent prior to implementation ▪ Meetings held annually, or more often if necessary, to review and/or revise the IEP ▪ Annual reviews completed by June 30 ▪ 90-day timelines
Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Documentation of LRE decisions
Transition to Adult Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Beginning at age 16, IEP statement of “needed transition services” ▪ Identification of post-secondary liaison ▪ Activities, annual goals and benchmarks related to the student’s desired outcomes
Graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Out-of-district student participation ▪ Written notice of graduation

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Areas of Noncompliance – Improvement Plan Review

The following areas were identified by the district’s self-assessment committee as noncompliant. The district must revise the improvement plan for any area where there is an ‘X’ in the ‘Needs Revision’ column.

Section	Area	Plan Is Sufficient	Plan Needs Revision	Implemented and the district has demonstrated compliance
Procedural Safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meetings—Attempts to obtain parental participation are not consistently documented 			X
IEP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers informed of their responsibilities (knowledge of and/or access to IEPs)—General education teachers do not consistently review or have access to IEPs 			X
LRE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Notification of and participation in non-academic and extracurricular activities for students educated outside of the district—Activity offerings are not communicated to parents of out-of-district students 			X
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continuum of programs and placement decisions based on students’ individual needs—The district lacks sufficient offerings for in-class support due to funding issues and lack of adequate staff. The improvement plan must be revised to include activities to ensure that decisions regarding the provision of in-class support are made on an individual basis for all students across all subjects and grade levels. 		X	

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Additional Areas of Need

The following areas were originally identified by the district’s self-assessment committee as compliant, but were found to be noncompliant by the NJDOE during the on-site monitoring.

Section	Area	Activity
FAPE	Provision of related services—the location of related services is not consistently identified in IEPs.	The district is directed to develop an improvement plan that includes activities to ensure that IEPs identify the location of related services. These activities must include procedures and oversight to ensure that the location of related services is identified by the IEP team.
Procedural Safeguards	Provision of written notice (ESLS)—Written notice of eligibility is not provided for students eligible for speech-language services.	The district is directed to develop an improvement plan that includes activities to ensure that written notice of eligibility is provided for students evaluated for speech-language services. These activities must include procedures and oversight to ensure that parents are fully informed regarding speech-language eligibility determinations.
	Content of written notice—(ESERS) Written notice when revising the IEP does not include all the required components.	The district is directed to develop an improvement plan that includes activities to ensure that written notice of a revised IEP includes all the required components. These activities must include procedures, in-service training and oversight to ensure that parents are fully informed regarding proposals to revise the IEP.
	Content of written notice—(ESLS) When conducting a reevaluation and no additional assessments are recommended, written notice does not inform parents of their right to request an assessment.	The district is directed to develop an improvement plan that includes activities to ensure that written notice of reevaluation when no additional assessments are required includes a statement informing parents of their right to request an assessment. These activities must include procedures, in-service training and oversight to ensure that parents are fully informed regarding their rights.

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Section	Area	Activity
Transition to Adult Life	Beginning at age 14, IEP statement of “transition service needs”— Transition planning is not conducted for students who will be turning 14 during the timeframe of the IEP.	The district is directed to develop an improvement plan that includes activities to ensure that transition planning is conducted for students if they will be turning 14 during the implementation period of the IEP. These activities must include procedures, in-service training and oversight to ensure that transition planning is conducted when required.
	Student and agency invitation to IEP meetings— Students who will turn 14 during the implementation period of the IEP are not consistently invited to IEP meetings.	The district is directed to develop an improvement plan that includes activities to ensure that students are invited to IEP meetings if they will be turning 14 during the implementation period of the IEP. These activities must include procedures, in-service training and oversight to ensure that students are afforded the opportunity to participate in transition planning.
Graduation	IEP requirements—IEPs do not address graduation requirements when the students will turn 14 during the implementation period of the IEP.	The district is directed to develop an improvement plan that includes activities to ensure that IEPs include graduation requirements if the student will turn 14 during the implementation period of the IEP. These activities must include procedures, in-service training and oversight to ensure that graduation requirements are considered when required.

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Merchantville School District on February 2 and 3, 2006. 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 acknowledged for the 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 will appropriately address areas of noncompliance. The district is further acknowledged for the many areas determined by the district and verified by the OSEP as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

A review of the data submitted by the Merchantville School District as a result of the self-assessment process indicates that the school district's classification rate for 2004 was 18.7%. This rate has increased by approximately 2.5% from 2002 and was above the state average for that year. District personnel attribute this rate, in part, to the number of students who transfer into the district with IEPs; however, they also stated that the pre-referral process is not effective, resulting in child study team referrals prior to the implementation of interventions in general education classrooms. Data from 2004 also indicates that approximately 41.6% of students with disabilities were placed in general education settings for more than 80% of the school day. This rate was commensurate with the state average and has remained fairly stable over the last three years. The district has identified this as an area of need, specifically a need for additional in-class support options, and has developed improvement plan activities to address the need.

At the preschool level, the district reports that for the 2004 school year, 60% of students with disabilities received services in a general education setting. This is significantly above the state average for that year. The district has established an in-district general education preschool program and students with disabilities have the opportunity to participate in this program.

During interviews conducted with parents by phone, parents expressed their satisfaction with the district's programs and services and staff. Overall, parents are pleased with the level of services offered.

Standards identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included General Provisions, Evaluation, Reevaluation, Transition to Preschool, Discipline, Statewide Assessments and Programs and Services.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included oversight of individualized education program (IEP) implementation, extended school year, provision of programs, transfer procedures, consent, implementation without undue delay, provision of notice of a meeting, content of notice of a meeting, provision of written notice for students eligible for special education and related services (ESERS), notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations, Child Find ages 3-21, direct referrals, health summary, vision and hearing screenings for students eligible for speech-language services (ESLS), identification meeting timelines and participants, eligibility meeting participants, eligibility criteria, statement of eligibility (Specific Learning Disability), copies of evaluation reports to parents, IEP meeting participants, IEP required considerations and components, IEP implementation dates, IEP provided to parent prior to

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implementation, meetings held annually, or more often if necessary, to review and/or revise the IEP, annual reviews completed by June 30, 90-day timelines, documentation of least restrictive environment (LRE) decisions, beginning at age 16, IEP statement of needed transition services, identification of post-secondary liaison, activities, annual goals and benchmarks related to the student's desired outcomes, out-of-district student participation in graduation exercises and written notice of graduation.

Areas of need originally identified by the district, but determined to have been corrected prior to the on-site monitoring visit by the NJDOE, are meetings, teachers informed of their responsibilities (knowledge of and/or access to IEPs) and notification of and participation in non-academic and extracurricular activities for students educated outside of the district.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding continuum of programs and placement decisions based on students' individual needs.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding provision of related services, provision of written notice (ESLS), content of written notice, referral process and pre-referral interventions, vision and hearing screenings (ESERS), signatures of agreement and/or disagreement and rationale, IEP statement of transition service needs, student and agency invitation to IEP meetings and IEP requirements for graduation.

Within 45 days of receipt of the monitoring report, the Merchantville School District will revise and resubmit the improvement plan to the OSEP to address those areas that require revisions.