

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

**District:** Montgomery Township School District

**County:** Somerset

**Monitoring Dates:** March 31, 2004

**Monitoring Team:** Deborah Masarsky and Nicole Buten

***Background Information:***

During the 2002–2003 school year, the Montgomery Township School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Montgomery Township 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 Montgomery Township School District developed an improvement plan to address identified areas of need.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) conducted a comprehensive desk audit, held a public focus group meeting for parents and community members at the Montgomery High School on May 13, 2004 and conducted parent interviews 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 all areas of identified need.

***District Strengths:***

The district is commended for developing a variety of unique programs that include students with disabilities:

The ***Social Skills Count Program*** has been honored in the 2004 Innovations in Special Education Programs sponsored by the New Jersey School Boards Association and ASAH. This program assists students with disabilities with making friends, reading social cues and body language, making correct social choices and communicating through the use of social language. This program provides students with the opportunity to role-play, practice and generalize social skills that are essential to successfully making friends, as well as being included in social situations throughout their school and

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home communities. These activities enable them to generalize and practice the skills that they are learning.

The **Autism Buddy Program** involves the district's fifth grade general education students who have been paired with students in the primary autism class. After receiving training provided by the special education teacher and guidance counselor, the fifth grade students spend one day per week in the classroom reading to students, playing games and offering opportunities for social interaction.

The district's special education students were involved in the **Dare to Dream Student Leadership Conference** at Middlesex Community College last spring. The students' presentation was so well received that this year, the students will again be presenting at the conference held at Rutgers University on May 3, 2004. In addition, this spring as part of the district's transition program, those students involved with **Dare to Dream** gave a presentation to the eighth-grade students who will be entering Montgomery High School in September 2004.

**The Kid Connection Work/Study Program** provides opportunities to high school special education students who demonstrate an interest in the pursuit of careers in the field of early childhood education. Montgomery Township High School special education students work with the district's preschool disabled students who have been placed in the integrated setting at the **Kid Connection** nursery school to assist the teachers and their students. The teachers serve as role models for the high school students and the high school students provide individual attention and social interaction to the youngsters.

### **Data Summary:**

A review of the district's data indicates a classification rate of 11.1% for the 2002-2003 school year, which is below the state average of 13.4%. Montgomery Township School District is commended for their efforts to reduce the number of classified students by providing programs to meet individual student needs. These efforts included improvements to its prereferral process. Additionally, a remediation component of basic-skills reading has been added to the kindergarten program for students who are identified as at-risk for reading failure.

A positive trend was noted in the data regarding an increasing number of preschool disabled students being placed in general education programs (from 7 out of 26 during the 2001-2002 school year to 14 out of 31 during the 2002-2003 school year). The district is commended for the establishment of a cooperative arrangement with the **Kid Connection** community nursery school program. The district provides a special education teacher for in-class support, as well as speech/language, occupational therapy and physical therapy services to the preschool disabled students in this integrated setting. Additionally, the district's special education teacher, school psychologist and learning consultant provide consultation services for students placed in this program.

The district is commended for its placement of students with disabilities, ages 6-21, who spend more than 80% of time with general education students. In contrast to the state average of 41%, during the 2002-2003 school year, the district was able to place 69% of their classified students in general education programs. The district is acknowledged for the provision of staff training regarding differentiated instruction, an inquiry-based hands-on science program, as well as providing sufficient consultation time for special

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education teachers to assist general education teachers. These activities have served to increase the district's capacity to maintain students in general education settings.

The data further indicate an increase in the number of graduating students with disabilities who have continued their education in either college or post-secondary training from 80% in June 2001 to 89% in June 2002. The district is commended for their efforts to increase positive student outcomes through the establishment of a **Post-Secondary Transition Committee** that assists students in developing better self-advocacy skills and in becoming more involved in work/study programs. To that end, the committee publishes a brochure that is used to promote business/school partnerships for work-study and internship opportunities within the community and includes information regarding other transition services that are available at the high school.

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

**Statewide Assessment, Programs/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 desk audit.

### ***Section I: General Provisions***

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of parent training and dissemination of public information.

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

An area of need was identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding the district's policies and procedures.

#### **Area of Need:**

**Policies and Procedures** - It was determined that although the district has developed policies and procedures, they have not yet been approved by their board nor have they been submitted for approval by the county office.

- **The district's board of education must approve the policies and procedures and submit them to the county office of education for review and approval.**

### ***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 and related services, documentation of frequency/duration/location and inclusion of goals/objectives for related services in students' IEPs, transfer students, length of school day/year, facilities and certifications.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of benchmarks/short-term objectives that are not sufficiently specific to guide instruction.

An additional area of need was identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding extended school year.

### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Extended School Year** - Speech therapists do not consistently consider extended school year programs for students eligible for speech/language services. In addition, child study team members do not consistently include a description of the extended school year program.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that extended school is considered for all students at meetings and when determined appropriate, the IEP will include a description of the extended school year program as well as beginning and ending dates. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component. Implementation of these activities will ensure the provision of these services to students who require extended school year services as well as ensure these decisions are based on issues related to regression/recoupment issues and/or any other pertinent factors.**

### ***Section III: Procedural Safeguards***

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of consent, content/provision of notices, notices in native language and interpreters at meeting.

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

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and/or comprehensive desk audit.

### ***Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification***

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of child find activities, direct referrals and the pre-referral process.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of 20 and 90 day timelines. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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Additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding health/medical summaries and vision/hearing screenings, referral date from the I&RS team and documentation of the effectiveness of pre-referral interventions.

### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Health Summaries and Vision/hearing Screenings** - The district does not consistently obtain health/medical summaries or the results of vision/hearing screenings for students referred to the child study team for evaluation.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that the school nurse develops health summaries and conducts audiometric and vision screenings for every student referred for evaluation. This information must be provided to the case manager prior to the identification and evaluation planning meeting. The improvement plan will include an administrative oversight component. Implementation of these activities will ensure identification team members have the necessary information to identify suspected areas of disabilities and to determine the assessments needed to make appropriate eligibility determinations.**

**Referral Date from the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS)** - It was determined that when the I&RS committee refers students to the child study team for evaluation, the records that are provided do not identify the date of referral.

- **The district will revise the I&RS referral form to ensure it identifies the date the referral was made to the child study team. Implementation of this activity will ensure the district has the ability to effectively monitor compliance with identification meeting timelines to further ensure student needs are addressed in a timely manner.**

**Documentation of the Effectiveness of Pre-referral Interventions** - It was determined that although the district's I&RST develops pre-referral interventions for their students, the effectiveness of those interventions are not documented.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that regular education teachers evaluate and document the effectiveness of the pre-referral interventions implemented in the general education setting. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component. Implementation of these activities will ensure the members of the I&RST have the necessary information to determine next steps in the intervention process.**

### ***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 for students eligible for special education and related services, standardized assessments and bilingual evaluations.

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

Additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding dated and signed evaluation reports and acceptance/rejection of outside reports.

### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Dated and Signed Evaluation Reports** - Although written reports are developed by child study team members and speech therapists, the reports are not consistently signed and dated.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that each evaluator signs and dates reports when completed. Implementation of these activities will ensure staff and parents are aware of the date the report was developed.**

**Acceptance/Rejection of Outside Reports** - It was determined that although the district reviews and documents the acceptance of outside reports, documentation of the rationale for rejection of all or parts of reports are not included.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that when all or parts of an outside report are not accepted, a rationale for the rejection is included. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight. Implementation of these activities will ensure parents are fully informed of the rationale for any rejection that may impact eligibility determinations.**

### ***Section VI:   Reevaluation***

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of reevaluation planning meetings with required participants and reevaluations completed by June 30<sup>th</sup> of student's last year in preschool.

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

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and/or comprehensive desk audit.

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### **Section VII: Eligibility**

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of eligibility meetings with required participants, eligibility criteria, statement of eligibility for specific learning disability and agreement/disagreement with eligibility.

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

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and/or comprehensive desk audit.

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

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of considerations/required statements, present levels of educational performance statements, goals/objectives aligned with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, the provision of IEPs to parents and teacher access/responsibility.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of participation of shared-time vocational staff at IEP/transition meetings and input from the secondary school staff for students who are completing the last year in an elementary school program. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding the annual review of senior high school students.

#### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Annual Reviews** - It was determined that some students at the high school do not have valid IEPs because annual review meetings are not consistently convened for them when their IEP lapses during their senior year.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that annual review meetings are convened for *all* students (including seniors) prior to the expiration of the current IEP. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component. Implementation of these activities will ensure every student has a valid IEP and receives the program and services required by that IEP.**

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### **Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of the decision-making process, regular education access within district, and continuum of programs.

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

An additional area of need was identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding notification to out-of-district students of nonacademic/extracurricular activities within district.

#### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Nonacademic/Extracurricular Activities** - It was determined that the district does not consistently notify out-of-district students of nonacademic/extracurricular activities within district.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that out-of-district students are notified of nonacademic and extracurricular activities within district. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component. Implementation of these activities will ensure out-of-district students are provided with the opportunity to participate in nonacademic and extracurricular activities with their non-disabled peers who attend in-district programs.**

### **Section X: Transition to Post-School**

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

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of provision of student invitations for post-secondary transition meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of age 14 and 16 transition needs and statements: participation of agencies; procedures to obtain agency input when a representative does not attend the transition meeting; students' interests and preferences; alignment of courses of study and development of transition plans for students transitioning from middle to high school. The district has begun to implement their improvement plan to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and/or comprehensive desk audit.

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### **Section X: Transition to Preschool**

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of preschool transition planning conferences and IEPs of preschoolers implemented by age three. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the focus group meeting, additional parent interviews and/or comprehensive desk audit.

### **Section XI: Discipline**

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

During the self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of suspension tracking, manifestation determination meetings, functional behavioral assessments, behavior intervention plans, provision of procedural safeguard rights for potentially disabled students and interim alternative educational settings.

An area of need was identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding written notification to the case manager.

#### **Area of Need:**

**Written Notification to the Case Manager** - It was determined that the district does not consistently provide written notification to the case manager when a student with disabilities is suspended from school.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that written notification is provided to the case manager prior to removing a student with disabilities. The improvement plan must include staff training and an administrative oversight component. Implementation of these activities will ensure case managers have the ability to track removals and conduct required activities in response to the number of days a student is removed.**

### **Section XIII: Graduation Requirements**

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

During the self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas IEP graduation requirements, out-of-district participation in graduation activities and written notice of graduation.

An area of need was identified during the comprehensive desk audit regarding the documentation of an alternate graduation requirement when a student is exempt from passing the HSPA.

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**Area(s) of Need:**

**Alternate Graduation Requirement** - It was determined that when a student is exempt from passing the HSPA, the district does not document an alternate graduation requirement in the student's IEP.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that when a student is exempt from passing the HSPA as a graduation requirement, the district documents an alternate graduation requirement in the IEP. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight. Implementation of these activities will ensure parents, staff and students are fully informed of the requirements necessary to graduate from high school.**

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## Summary

Special education monitoring was conducted in the **Montgomery Township School District** on March 31, 2004. 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 the exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of that review the district was able to identify most areas of need and develop an improvement plan that will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the areas that were determined by the district and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs to be compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

A review of data indicated that the district has been able to reduce their classification rate by improving their prereferral procedures, by providing staff training, by implementing more effective interventions, as well as by expanding general education resources. Additionally, the appropriate consideration of placement in the least restrictive environment is demonstrated through an increase in the number of preschool aged and school aged students with disabilities participating in general education programs. The data further indicates that a large percentage of graduating students with disabilities are continuing their education in either college or post-secondary training.

Twenty-eight parents attended a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit. Most of the parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services and communication between themselves and staff. Some parents noted an improvement in special education programs/services and greater access to general education since the new special education administration was hired. A few parents expressed concerns with scheduling of speech services where students may miss important subject classes. Some parents indicated that although they attend all team meetings and that their ideas are considered, their requests for specialized services are not always provided.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included parent training, dissemination of public information, provision of programs/services, documentation of frequency/duration/location of related services, goals/objectives for related services, transfer students, length of school day/year, facilities, certification, consent, content/provision of notices, notices in native language, interpreters, child find activities, referral process, direct referrals, multidisciplinary evaluations for students eligible for special education/related services, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations, reevaluation planning meetings with required participants, reevaluations by June 30<sup>th</sup> of a student's last year in preschool, eligibility meetings with required participants, eligibility criteria, statement of eligibility for specific learning disability, agreement/disagreement with eligibility, IEP consideration/required statements, present levels of education performance statements, goals/objectives aligned with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, provision of IEPs to parents, teacher access/responsibility, decision-making process, regular education access, continuum of programs, student invitations to transition meetings, suspension tracking, manifestation determination meetings, functional behavioral assessments, interim alternative educational setting, participation in statewide assessments, behavior intervention plans, provision of procedural safeguard rights for potentially disabled students, interim alternative educational settings, statewide assessment participation, approved

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accommodations/modifications for statewide assessment, IEP statewide assessment documentation, alternate proficiency assessments, IEP graduation requirements, out-of-district participation in graduation activities, written notice of graduation, age range, class/group size, home instruction notification, consultation time for special and regular education teachers, access/requests for student records, maintenance/destruction of student records and documentation of other locations of student records in the central file.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff development, benchmarks/short-term objectives that are not sufficiently specific to guide instruction, surrogate parents and independent evaluations, 20 and 90-day timelines, functional assessments, multidisciplinary evaluations for students eligible for speech and language services, three-year timelines for reevaluations, provision of evaluation reports to parents at least ten day prior to the eligibility conference, participation of shared-time vocational staff at IEP/transition meetings, input from the secondary school staff for students who are completing the last year in the elementary program, documentation of supplementary aids and services, post secondary transition needs and statements: (participation of agencies; procedures to obtain agency participation when a representative does not attend the transition meeting; students' interests/preferences; and alignment of courses of study), development of transition plans for students transitioning from middle to high school, preschool transition planning conferences and IEPs of preschoolers implemented by age 3.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding policies/procedures, extended school year, health summaries, vision/hearing screenings, I&RS referral dates, documentation of effectiveness of pre-referral interventions, dated/signed evaluation reports, acceptance/rejection of outside reports, annual reviews for seniors, notification of nonacademic/extracurricular activities, written notification of suspension to the case manager and the documentation of an alternate graduation requirement for those students who are exempt from passing the HSPA.

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