

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

District: Mountainside School District

County: Union

Monitoring Dates: May 19, 2005

Monitoring Team: Barbara J. Tucker

Background Information:

During the 2003–2004 school year, the Mountainside School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the on-site visit provided the Mountainside 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 Mountainside 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 visit, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) held a focus group meeting for parents and community members, at the Deerfield School, on May 19, 2005. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site visit, the NJDOE monitor reviewed district documents, including district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related service personnel logs, and other relevant information. A representative sample of student records was also reviewed. Interviews were conducted with the district's special education administrators, building principal, and child study team members. Phone interviews were also conducted with a number of the district's parents.

Data Summary:

A three year review of the district data indicated that the Mountainside School District's classification rate has risen from 7.6% in 2000-2001 school year to 9.6% in 2002-2003 school year although the rate remains far below the state average. Additionally, data submitted by the district indicated that during the 2002-2003 school year, more than 63% of the district's school-aged special needs students (41.6% is the state average) were

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

educated in a general education setting for at least 80% of the school day with their non-disabled peers. In contrast to the state average of 9%, 22% of the district's preschool disabled population is educated in a general education, early childhood setting with their non-disabled peers.

Section I: General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of policies, procedures and dissemination of IDEA information.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of staff/parent training. The district has developed an improvement plan which 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 the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of length of day/year, facilities and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of extended school year, provision of related services, transfer procedures, goals and objectives documented in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and hearing aid checks. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the documentation of the provision of related services. The district will develop an improvement plan to address this area of need.

Area(s) of Need:

Documentation of the Provision of Related Services- During the on-site visit, it was determined that the district does not document the provision of related services to students with disabilities.

- **The improvement plan will be revised to ensure that the district has a mechanism in place to document the provision of related services to students with disabilities. This activity will ensure that the district provides related services as required by the IEP for students with disabilities.**

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of provision of notices of meetings/written notices, provided for translators and interpreters at meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of consent for release of records, notices in native language and parental requests for independent evaluations. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding identification timelines, content of notices of meetings/content of written notices and surrogate parents. The district will develop an improvement plan to address these areas of need.

Area(s) of Need:

Identification Timelines- During the on-site visit, it was determined that identification meetings are not held within 20 days of the receipt of the Intervention and Referral Services (I & RS), teacher or parent referral.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that identification meetings are held within twenty days of the receipt of the I & RS, teacher or parent referral. Implementation of these activities will ensure that parents have the opportunity to discuss available information to consider the need for a child study team evaluation. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

Content of Notices of Meetings and Written Notices - During the on-site visit, it was determined that the district's notices of a meeting and written notices do not contain all of the required components. Also, when the district uses the IEP as written notice, the document is frequently not completed in a timely manner and is, therefore, not provided to the parent prior to implementation.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that notice of a meeting and written notice includes all of the required components. It is recommended that the district adopt the forms developed by the New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Implementation of these activities will ensure not only that parents and members of the IEP team are provided with the opportunity to fully participate in the decision-making process, but that parents are also informed of the actions the child study team is proposing so that they will have the right to agree or disagree with the proposals. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of referral process, documentation of pre-referral interventions, direct referrals from parents/staff and identification meetings/ timelines/participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of child find and vision/hearing screenings for preschoolers. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

Additionally, during the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of health summaries for preschoolers. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of multi-disciplinary, standardized assessments, written reports signed/dated and bilingual evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of functional assessment, educational impact statements in speech/language reports and acceptance and rejection of reports. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of re-evaluation planning meetings/participants and re-evaluations completed by June 30th for preschoolers.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding re-evaluation timelines.

Area(s) of Need:

Reevaluation Timelines- During the on-site visit, it was determined, through record review and interviews, that three-year re-evaluation timelines are not being consistently met. Barriers include insufficient staff and lack of a tracking mechanism to ensure that administrators and case managers are aware of evaluation due dates.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

- **The improvement plan will be revised to ensure re-evaluations are conducted within three years of the previous determination of eligibility unless conditions warrant one sooner. The plan must include a mechanism to ensure the district has the ability to identify due dates and monitor compliance with those dates on a consistent basis. Implementation of these activities will ensure that each student with a disability is provided an appropriate program and services on a consistent basis. Implementation of these activities will ensure that an appropriate evaluation of a student's current program and services is conducted to determine continued eligibility, as well as, the need for any revisions to the program or services.**

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of eligibility meetings/participants, statement of eligibility, criteria for severe learning discrepancy and signatures of eligibility agreement/disagreement.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of providing evaluation reports to parents 10 days prior to eligibility meetings. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

Additionally, during the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of eligibility statements. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of required statements/considerations, present levels of educational performance (PLEPs), age of majority and implementation dates.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of IEP meetings/participants, goals and objectives to address student's needs, IEPs to parents/teachers, teacher responsibility in implementing IEPs and IEP meeting participants. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding annual review timelines, 90-day timelines and implementation dates.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Area(s) of Need: PSH

IEP Meeting Participants- During the on-site visit, it was determined through record review that general education and/or special education teachers are frequently not in attendance at IEP meetings.

- **The improvement plan will be revised to ensure that all participants attend required IEP meetings. Implementation of these activities will ensure that teachers are participants in the decision-making process during all required meetings and that the decision-making process includes input from each participant. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

Annual Review Timelines- During the on-site visit, it was determined that annual reviews are not consistently conducted within required timelines.

- **The improvement plan will be revised to ensure that annual reviews are conducted according to required timelines. Implementation of these activities will ensure that students' programs reflect current needs. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

90-Day Timelines- During the on-site visit, it was determined that for an initial evaluation, the district does not consistently meet the required 90-day timelines following parental consent.

- **The improvement plan will be revised to ensure that within 90 days of parental consent for an initial evaluation, determination of eligibility for services, and if eligible, development of an IEP is completed. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of the decision-making process, regular education access for school-aged students and notification/participation of out-of-district students in nonacademic and extracurricular activities.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation of least restrictive environment, regular education access for preschool students and consideration of supplementary aids/services. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the continuum of programs, specifically, the provision of in-class support for students in grades kindergarten through four.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Area(s) of Need:

Continuum of Programs-During the on-site visit, it was determined through interviews with staff and record review that the district does not provide in-class support for its students in grades kindergarten through four. Additionally, although the district provides an integrated program to students who attend the morning sessions, the district does not provided the same opportunity to students who attend the afternoon kindergarten session.

- **The improvement plan will be revised to ensure that the district develops programs or expands existing programs along the continuum over a period of time to meet the needs of all students with disabilities. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities. Implementation of these activities will help the district to increase the number of students with disabilities who are educated in general education programs with appropriate supports and services.**

Section X: Transition to Pre-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of early intervention program to preschool disabled program by age 3.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of attendance at the preschool transition planning conference. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance 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 the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of student/agency invitation to meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of Statements of Transition Service Needs and Needed Transition Services, student preferences/interests survey/assessment. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

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

Section XI: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of suspension tracking, functional behavioral assessment, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, 45-day return and procedural safeguards.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of documentation to case manager. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about compliance in this area.

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

Section XII: Statewide Assessment

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of student participation, approved accommodations/modifications, IEP documentation and alternate assessment.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of staff knowledge regarding statewide assessments. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address this area of need.

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

Section XIII: Graduation-The Mountainside School District services students from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade and it is not required to address issues of graduation.

Section XIV: Programs and Services

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of group sizes for speech/language services and home instruction.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of class sizes, consultation time and program description to the county office. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

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

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment process, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of access/requests, access sheets, maintenance/destruction and documentation of other record locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of parental rights. The district has developed an improvement plan which is sufficient to address this area of need.

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

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Mountainside School District on May 19, 2005. 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.

A three year review of the district data indicated that the Mountainside School District's classification rate (although far below the state average), rose from 7.6% in 2000 to 9.6% in 2003 school year. Additionally, data indicated that during the 2002-2003 school year, more than 63% of the district's school-aged special needs students were educated in a general education setting for at least 80% of the school day with their non-disabled peers. Data also showed that 22% of the district's preschool students with disabilities are educated in a general education, early childhood setting with their non-disabled peers, in contrast to the state average of 9%.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit and parent phone interviews conducted as part of the on-site visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with the district's programs and services. Parents stated that they were generally pleased with the level of communication and cooperation provided by the district's child study team.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies, procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, length of day/year, facilities, certifications, provision of notices of meetings/written notices, providing for translators and interpreters at meetings, referral process, documentation of pre-referral interventions, direct referrals from parents/staff, identification meetings, timelines/participants, multi-disciplinary, standardized assessments, written reports signed/dated, bilingual evaluations, eligibility meetings/participants, statement of eligibility, criteria for severe learning discrepancy, signatures of eligibility agreement/disagreement, re-evaluation planning meetings, re-evaluations completed by June 30th for preschoolers, eligibility planning meetings/participants, required statements/considerations, present levels of educational performance (PLEPs), age of majority, implementation dates, decision-making process, regular education access for school-aged students, notification/participation of out-of-district students in nonacademic/extracurricular activities, early intervention to preschool disabled program by age 3, student/agency invitation to meetings, suspension tracking, functional behavioral assessment, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, 45-day return, procedural safeguards, student participation, approved accommodations/modifications, IEP documentation, alternate assessment, group sizes for speech/language services, home instruction, access/requests, access sheets, maintenance/destruction and documentation of other record locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff/parent training, extended school year, provision of related services, transfer procedures, goals and objectives documented in the IEP, hearing aid checks, consent for release of records, notices in native language and parental requests for independent evaluations, vision/hearing screenings for preschoolers, health summaries for preschoolers, functional assessment, educational impact statements in speech/language reports, acceptance and rejection of reports, evaluations reports to parents 10 days prior to meetings, eligibility statements, IEP meetings/participants, goals and objectives, IEPs to parents/teachers, teacher responsibility in implementing IEPs, IEP meeting

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

participants, goals and objectives to address students' needs, documentation of least restrictive environment, regular education access for preschool students, consideration of supplementary aids/services, attendance at preschool transition planning conference, Statements of Transition Service Needs and Needed Transition Services, student preferences/interests survey/assessment, suspension tracking, functional behavioral assessment, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, 45-day return, procedural safeguards, documentation to the case manager, staff knowledge regarding statewide assessments, class sizes, consultation time, program description to the county office and parental rights.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding documentation of the provision of related services, identification timelines, content of notices of meetings and written notices, re-evaluation timelines, IEP meeting participants, annual review timelines, 90-day timelines, implementation dates and continuum of programs for kindergarten through grade four.

Within 45 days of receipt of the monitoring report, the Mountainside School District will revise and resubmit the improvement plan to the Office of Special Education Programs to address those areas that require revisions.