

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

District: Newton Public Schools

County: Sussex

Monitoring Dates: September 25, 26, and 28, 2001

Monitoring Team: Zola Mills, Janet Wright, and Thomas Walsh

Background Information:

During the 2001 – 2002 school year, the Newton Public Schools District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Newton Public Schools 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 Newton Public School District developed an improvement plan to address identified areas of need.

The Office of Special Education Programs conducted an on-site monitoring to verify the self-assessment findings, determine the appropriateness of the improvement plan, and determine the progress in implementing the plan.

As the first step in the on-site monitoring process, the NJDOE held a focus group meeting for parents and community members at Halsted Street School on September 10, 2001. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site, 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, and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The district has implemented a therapeutic riding program in its preschool and multiply disabled classes. This program helps students improve body flexibility, muscle strength and coordination. The students that have participated in this program have also gained an increased sense of self-confidence.

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The district has or participates in a variety of confidence building and team building programs such as Fairview Lakes Environmental Camp for middle school students, the Quest Program, and the Center for Youth Program.

The district also participates in Special Olympics and received the Ultimate Field Trip Hipp Foundation Award that allows disabled high school students to join a work program that includes activities to maintain the Fairview Lake YWCA Camp.

At the elementary school, a program has been established to provide opportunities for classified and nonclassified students in the school community, to interact with senior citizens.

I. General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of the dissemination of IDEA information.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of written procedures for alternate assessments for students exempt from statewide assessment. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue.

An additional area of need was identified during the parent focus group and the on-site monitoring regarding professional and parent development.

Areas of Need:

Professional/Parent Development – During the on-site monitoring, staff interviews indicated a need to receive additional training, especially for new staff, on differentiated instruction and inclusion. In addition, at the parent focus group meeting, parents expressed a need for additional parent training.

- **The district will revise its improvement to include procedures to identify staff and parent training needs and then to ensure the provision of staff and parent development programs. The plan must include a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training sessions.**

II. F.A.P.E.

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of related services, length of the school day and year, facilities, and certification.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of extended school year (ESY) and transfer students. The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address these issues because of the identified timeline for the completion of ESY activities. The plan also lacks procedures to address the issue of transfer

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students. The plan needs to be revised to ensure completion of the identified ESY activities before the end of the 2001-2002 school year. The plan must further be revised to include procedures to address the transfer student issue.

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

III. Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of notices of meetings, written notice, meetings, and independent evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the provision of *PRISE* to parents, obtaining consent to release records, and the provision of written notice in native languages, when feasible. The improvement plan for native language is insufficient to address this area of need. No improvement plan was submitted to address the provision of *PRISE* and obtaining consent.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding surrogate parents.

Areas of Need:

Provision of *PRISE* – During the self-assessment process, the district identified that *PRISE* was inconsistently distributed to parents.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure the consistent provision of *PRISE* to parents, when required.**

Consent – During the self-assessment process, the district identified that consent is inconsistently obtained prior to releasing student records. The district did not address this area in its improvement plan.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure that consent is obtained prior to the to release of student records.**

Native Language – During the self-assessment process, the district identified an area of need related to the provision of written notice in the native language. The district's improvement plan indicates that the district will obtain formatted written notices in native languages. That activity alone, is insufficient to ensure parents are informed of the content of the notices. The plan must ensure the provision of translation services in the event the team member who is completing the written notice form is unable to write or speak in the parent's native language.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the provision of translation services, when feasible, in the event the evaluator who is completing the written notice form is unable to write or speak in a language understood by the parent.**

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Surrogate Parents – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that the district does not have procedures for the selection and training of surrogate parents.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the selection and training of surrogate parents.**

IV. Location, Referral, Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of Child Find, direct referrals, health summaries, vision and hearing screenings, and summer referrals.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of documentation of interventions prior to referral. The district's improvement plan addresses training of staff but does not include an oversight component. The district will revise the plan to include an oversight component to determine the effectiveness of the training.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the 20-day timeline for identification meetings.

Areas of Need:

20-Day Timeline - During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that parent referrals to the child study team were not being clocked in or forwarded to the team until school-based staff obtained additional information about the student. Once this information is obtained, the referral is then sent to the special services department where it is clocked in and forwarded to the team.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that upon receipt of a parental referral, that referral is immediately clocked in and forwarded to the child study team. Once forwarded, district personnel will gather information and conduct an identification meeting within 20-days of the receipt of the referral to determine whether an evaluation is required. The plan must include an in-service component and an oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of these procedures.**

V. Evaluation

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of multi-disciplinary and standardized assessments, and in their acceptance or rejection of outside reports.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of bilingual evaluations, components of written reports for students eligible for speech and

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language services, functional assessments, and signing and dating written reports. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address all areas except functional assessments.

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

Areas of Need:

Functional Assessments – The district's self-assessment indicated functional assessments did not contain all required components. However, the improvement plan also excluded some required components. The district further identified that functional assessments were not included in reports of students determined eligible for speech and language services.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure that all required components of functional assessments are included in reports of students determined eligible for special education and related services and student determined eligible for speech and language services.**

VI. Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of planning meetings and reevaluations of preschool students turning five.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of reevaluating students in a timely manner. The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area of need.

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

Areas of Need:

Timelines – During the self-assessment process, the district identified the need to complete reevaluations in a timely manner. The improvement plan addresses providing staff with reevaluation dates and references a 90-day timeline instead of indicating the need to conduct a reevaluation within three years of the previous determination of eligibility.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures and in-service activities to ensure staff are aware of the required reevaluation timeline. The plan must include an oversight component to ensure the implementation of these procedures.**

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VII. Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of documentation of eligibility and meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns regarding specific learning disabilities (SLD) criteria, and the provision of evaluation reports to parents. The district's improvement plan for SLD criteria is insufficient to address this area of need. No improvement plan was submitted to address the provision of a copy of evaluation reports to parents.

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

Areas of Need:

SLD Criteria - Though the district's improvement plan refers to establishing a procedure for determining eligibility under the SLD criteria, that procedure does not include a discrepancy formula.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure the adoption of a severe discrepancy formula as a component of its procedures. The plan must include an in-service component and a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training.**

Provision of Evaluation Reports – The district's self-assessment identified that copies of reports are not always available to parents, especially those reports developed by related service providers. The district's improvement plan did not address this area of need.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure a copy of evaluation reports is provided to parents and adult students at least ten days before the eligibility meeting. The plan must include a mechanism to document this provision.**

VIII. IEP

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of meeting the 90-day timeline.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of considerations and required statements in the IEP, timely completion of annual reviews and teacher access. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need. The district further identified concerns in the areas of participants at meetings and the alignment of goals and objectives with the core curriculum content standards (CCCS). The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address these areas of need.

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An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding documentation of the transfer of rights when a student reaches the age of majority.

Areas of Need:

Participants – Though the district’s improvement plan addressed the inclusion of most of the required participants at IEP meetings, it did not include a procedure to ensure the identification and participation of the district representative.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure a district representative attends all IEP meetings.**

Alignment of Goals and Objectives with CCCS – The district’s improvement plan did not address the alignment of goals and objectives with the CCCS.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure that goals and objectives are aligned with the CCCSs and include modifications and adaptations, as determined appropriate by the IEP team. The plan must include an in-service component as well as a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training.**

Age of Majority – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that though the district informs parents and adult students of the transfer of rights, staff do not document this activity.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure it documents that parents and adult students are informed of the transfer of rights at least three years before the student reaches the age of majority.**

IX. Least Restrictive Environment

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment, the district accurately identified themselves compliant regarding LRE statements and access to extracurricular and nonacademic activities.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the use of supplementary aids and services. The district’s improvement plan activities are sufficient to address this area of need. The district further identified concerns in the areas of individualized decision-making, considerations and documentation pertaining to placement, and a full continuum of placement options particularly in the preschool area. However, no improvement plan activities were submitted to address these areas of need.

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

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Areas of Need:

Individualized Decision Making/Considerations and Documentation – The district's self-assessment indicates that placements are not always based on individual needs of students but instead are based on availability of programs.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure the availability of a full continuum of placement options and to further ensure placement decisions are based on the individual needs of students.**

Continuum – The district's self-assessment indicated a lack of placement options, particularly for preschoolers. As a result of facilities/space issues, the district's preschool program is located in the high school. Though the preschoolers sometimes go on field trips with students from the kindergarten class and attend their assembly programs, the district acknowledges this is not sufficient. The district has a long-range plan in place to move the preschool class to the elementary school.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure preschoolers have access to academic, extracurricular, and nonacademic activities with their peer group. The plan must include a reasonable timeline to relocate the preschool class out of the high school and into the elementary school.**

X. Transition

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of preschool transition, inclusion of transition needs at age 14, and transition services beginning at age 16.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of student and agency invitations to IEP meetings, securing agency involvement, and obtaining the student's preferences and interests. The districts improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

XI. Discipline

Summary of Findings

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of suspension tracking, manifest determination meetings, and appropriate interim alternative educational settings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of discipline procedures following the development of behavioral intervention plans and functional behavioral assessments. No improvement plan activities were submitted to address these areas of need.

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An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding notification of suspensions to the case manager.

Areas of Need:

Discipline Procedures – The self-assessment and staff interviews indicated that discipline procedures are not always consistent, especially in reconvening the IEP team when a revision to a behavioral intervention plan is needed or when it is determined a functional behavioral assessment needs to be conducted.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure IEP meetings are conducted whenever functional behavior assessments need to be conducted and whenever a BIP needs to be revised.**

Documentation to Case Manager - Interviews with staff during the on-site indicated that case managers are notified verbally, not in writing, that a classified student is being suspended.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure case managers are notified in writing whenever a classified student is suspended.**

XII. Statewide Assessment

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of providing approved accommodations and modifications, documentation of statewide assessment in the IEP, and student participation in statewide assessments.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of alternate assessments and participation in the SRA process. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

XIII. Graduation

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of IEP requirements, diploma and participation.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the provision of written notice of graduation to parents and adult students.

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Areas of Need:

Notification of Graduation – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that although the district has developed a notice of graduation, the form is not used.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that students are provided with notice of graduation. The plan must include a mechanism to ensure that provision is documented in the student's file.**

XIV. Programs And Services

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of having sufficient staff and descriptions of special classes. The improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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

XV. Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of parent and adult student access to records, maintaining access sheets for students eligible for special education and related services, and the maintenance and destruction of student records.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding access sheets in files of students eligible for speech and language services and the documentation of locations for other student records.

Areas of Need:

Access Sheets for ESLs – During the on-site, it was determined records of students eligible for speech and language services did not contain access sheets.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure that access sheets are included in files for those students determined eligible for speech/language services.**

Documentation of Locations – During the on-site it was determined central files do not identify the location of other records maintained by the district.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure central files identify the location of other records maintained by the district.**

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Newton Public School District on September 25, 26 and 28, 2001. 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 thorough and comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of this review the district was able to identify nearly all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that with some revision, will be sufficient to bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for the many areas that were determined by the district and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Many of the concerns raised by the parents during the focus group meeting had already been 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 the areas of the dissemination of IDEA information, length of school day and year, facilities, certification, meeting the 90-day timeline in developing and implementing the IEP, the provision of related services, independent evaluations, meeting participants, notice, meetings, preschool transition, transition service needs at 14, transition services at 16, discipline standards, approved accommodations and modifications when participating in statewide assessments, participating in graduation activities and diploma, class size, age range, home instruction, teachers access to and knowledge of the IEP, access to extracurricular and nonacademic activities and procedures for the maintenance and destruction of and access to student records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff development, written procedures for alternate assessments, provision of written notice in the native language, bilingual evaluations, consent, annual reviews, evaluation and reevaluation timelines, provision of evaluation reports to parents, functional assessments, signatures on written reports, reevaluation timelines, the severe discrepancy formula, referrals, goals and objectives related to the core curriculum content standards, continuum in preschool, individual decision-making, the use of supplemental aids and services, invitation and participation of both the student and the community agency in IEP transition planning and review of disciplinary procedures.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding surrogate parents, age of majority, notification of suspensions to the case manager, and written notice of graduation.

Within forty-five days of receipt of the monitoring report, the district will revise and resubmit the improvement plan to the Office of Special Education Programs to address the areas of need identified during the on-site visit and those areas that require revisions to the improvement plan.

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