

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

District: Northern Highlands Regional School District **County:** Bergen

Monitoring Dates: April 12 and 13, 2004

Monitoring Team: Carol Raff and Gladys Miller

Background Information:

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

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

As the first step in the on-site monitoring process, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) held a focus group meeting for parents and community members at the Northern Highlands Regional High School on April 7, 2004. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site visit, the NJDOE team reviewed district documents, including district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related service personnel, and other relevant information, including a representative sample of student records. Interviews were conducted with the district's special education administrators, building principals, general education and special education teachers, speech therapists and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for its ability to bring together on a regular basis parents of both special education and regular education students to discuss issues of adolescent concerns. The district has an active membership with Recordings for the Blind thus allowing students to receive books on tape. Additionally, special education students are

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included in counseling groups for children of single and step-parent families, children of alcoholics, as well as other groups of need.

The district provides an opportunity for special education students to interact with recent graduates who are currently enrolled in college. This event which is held the day before Thanksgiving vacation, affords the students an opportunity to learn about college life.

The district also provides an opportunity for special education students, who are upper-classmen, to participate in a buddy program with incoming (freshmen) special education students. Every student is assigned a buddy who will serve as a mentor and/or friend. Special Education students also hold leadership positions such as officers of clubs and captains and co-captains of sports teams.

The district is commended for its inclusive practices that have resulted in the placement of 73.5% of its special needs population in general education for more than 80% of the school day.

The district is further commended for the academic successes its special needs students have achieved as evidenced by the percentage of those students who scored proficient on statewide assessments.

Data Summary

The Northern Highlands Regional High School District reported a classification rate of 14.9%. The district developed an improvement plan to revise the Discrepancy Formula and to address the referral process including Intervention and Referral Procedures which may change the classification rate. The district also reports that 73.5% of students with disabilities are included in general education more than 80% of the school day.

Data from the 2002 HSPA report indicates that 68.8% of Special Education students scored proficient in Language Arts Literacy as compared to 64% in General Education and 50% of Special Education students scored proficient in Mathematics as compared to 53.1% in General Education.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards

Statewide Assessment and Programs & Services were determined to be areas of compliance by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the on-site visit.

Section I: General Provisions

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of policies and procedures and dissemination of IDEA information.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of staff training. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of concern. During the on-site visit, a review of records and staff interviews indicated that the district has initiated activities to bring about correction in this area.

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

Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of extended school year, length of day and year, transfer students, facilities and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of the provision of goals and objectives for related services and hearing aid procedures. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern.

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

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of notices of native language, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations and meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents and written notices. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. The district further identified a concern regarding the content and provision of notices of meetings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area. During the on-site visit a review of records indicated that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in this area.

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

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of direct referrals and appropriate participants at identification meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of Child Find, referral process, pre-referral interventions and identification meeting timelines. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. The district further identified concerns regarding health summaries and vision and hearing screenings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. During the on-site visit, a review of records indicated that the district has initiated activities to bring about correction in these latter two areas.

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

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Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of multi-disciplinary, standardized assessments, written reports signed and dated, bilingual evaluations and acceptance or rejection of reports.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding functional assessments.

Area(s) of Need:

Functional Assessment - A review of records indicated that a structured observation of the student in other than a testing situation was not documented within the evaluative report.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities that ensure that all required components of the functional assessments are addressed in the student's evaluations. Implementation of these activities will ensure that student functioning is assessed by standardized and informal measures. The plan must include an administrative oversight to ensure implementation of activities.**

Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of planning meetings and participants and three year timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of conducting evaluations for graduating seniors. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of concern.

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

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of criteria, statement of eligibility and signatures of agreement or disagreement rationale. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. During the on-site visit a review of records and staff interview indicated that the district has implemented activities to bring about correction in these areas. The district further

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identified concerns regarding providing a copy of evaluation reports to parents and adult students 10 days prior to a meeting. The district's improvement is sufficient to address this area of concern.

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

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of present levels of educational performance, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review timelines, IEPs to parents, 90-day timelines and teacher access and responsibility.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of meeting participants, required statements for students eligible for speech and language services, goals and objectives related to core curriculum content standards and participants from vocational settings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern.

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

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of the decision-making process, least restrictive environment documentation, regular education access in district, notification and participation of out-of-district in nonacademic and extracurricular activities and continuum of programs.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the documentation of supplemental aids and services considered and rejected for placement of students in the least restrictive environment.

Area(s) of Need:

Consideration of supplemental aids and services – During the on-site monitoring record review indicated that the district does not document the specific supplemental aids and services considered and rejected.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include activities to ensure that supplemental aids and services are considered and documented. Implementation of these activities will ensure that the students are provided with necessary supports in order to access the general education curriculum. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

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Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of student and agency invite.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of age fourteen transition service needs, preferences and interests and age sixteen needed transition services. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. During the on-site visit a review of records indicated that the district has initiated activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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

Section XI: Discipline

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of functional behavioral assessment and the behavioral intervention plan, the interim alternative educational setting and procedural safeguards.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation to case manager and suspension tracking. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. During the on-site visit a review of records and staff interview indicated that the district has initiated activities to bring about correction.

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

Section XIII: Graduation

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of written notice of graduation. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this concern.

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

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Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of access and requests, access sheets, maintenance and destruction of records.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding documentation of other locations of student records.

Area(s) of Need:

Documentation of other locations – During the on-site visit a review of records indicated that central files do not identify where other student records are located.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that central office files contain information as to other locations of student records. Implementation of these activities will ensure that parents and adult students are aware of and can access these files.

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Northern Highlands Regional High School District on April 12 and 13, 2004. The purpose of the monitoring visit was to verify the district's report of findings resulting from their self-assessment and to review the district's improvement plan. The district is commended for the exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of that review the district was able to identify nearly all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that with some revision will bring about systemic change as well as the implementation of activities to bring about change in many of the identified areas. The district is further commended for the many areas determined by the district and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

A review of district data indicated that the district has a classification rate of 14.9%. The district developed an improvement plan to decrease this rate. Additionally, the district reports that 73.5% of students with disabilities are included in general education more than 80% of the school day and that a significant number of special needs students are scoring in the proficient range on statewide assessments.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, two parents praised the efforts of the special services department and follow up telephone contacts to parents indicated that they are very satisfied with their child's special education program. Some parents stated that they needed to hire private tutors in order to have their children succeed academically. Other parents expressed their dissatisfaction with many of the district's programs and services, particularly the 'Practical Studies Class' which they believe was ineffective in preparing their children for the general education curriculum. Further, the parents reported frustration with the high turnover of staff in the position of special education director and with the child study team. Parents did feel that a guidance counselor was an 'advocate' for their child and overall the general education curriculum was of high caliber.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, extended school year, length of day and year, transfer students, facilities, certifications, consent, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations, meetings, direct referrals, multi-disciplinary, functional assessments, written reports signed and dated, bilingual evaluations, acceptance and rejection of reports, reevaluation planning meeting, eligibility meeting and participants, IEP meetings, present levels of educational performance, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review timelines, IEPs to parents, 90-day timelines, teacher access and responsibility, decision-making process, least restrictive environment determination, consideration of supplemental aids and services, regular education access, notification and out of district participation, continuum of programs, student and agency invite, functional behavioral assessment, behavioral intervention plan, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, procedural safeguards, participation in statewide assessment, approved accommodation and modifications, IEP documentation, alternate assessment, IEP graduation requirements, out of district participation, diploma, class size and age range waivers, group sizes, home instruction, consultation time, access requests, access sheets, maintenance and destruction and documentation of other locations.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff training, provision of programs and goals and objectives for related services, surrogate parents, notices of meetings, written notices, child find, referral process, pre-referral interventions, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, identification meeting timelines, three year reevaluation timelines, eligibility criteria regarding SLD, signatures of agreements and disagreements, copy of evaluation to parents, IEP participants, required statement for ESLS, goals and objectives, ages fourteen and sixteen transition services, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking and written notice of graduation.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding functional assessments, supplementary aids and services and documentation of other locations.

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