

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

District: Old Bridge

County: Middlesex

Monitoring Dates: January 29, 2001 - February 2, 2001

Monitoring Team: C. Carthew, P. Fair, A. Popovici, B. Tkatch and K. Richards

Background Information

During the 1999-2000 school year, the Old Bridge School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Old Bridge 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 Old Bridge 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 the Carl Sandburg Middle School on January 23, 2001. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site visit, the NJDOE monitoring 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.

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District Strengths

During on-site monitoring, several unique programs were identified that provided opportunities for students with disabilities to gain valuable experiences that supported their personal growth and development. The Outward Bound Experience, a motivational program conducted at Turkey Swamp Park, is a pilot program designed to teach students survival skills in the wilderness, respect for their peers and adults, and sharing responsibility. Students indicated that as a result of the program, they have learned how to communicate more effectively, how to listen to the ideas of others to arrive at consensus, and how to respect each other's opinions. Students also indicated that their problem solving skills and self-esteem have been significantly enhanced as a result of their participation in this program.

The Lollipop Shop is a small business operated by students. The goals of the program are to develop trust, honesty and independence while working as a group to achieve stated goals. This business produces, packages, and sells holiday chocolates. Students also participate in business related activities that include advertising, selling, and record keeping. Through the program, students gain independence while acquiring academic, money management, and occupational skills.

The Image Makers program is a five-part personal development course that utilizes community-based experiences and after school sessions to emphasize self-image, self-confidence, self-esteem, and attitudes that will enable students to be successful in their schoolwork and daily life.

The district has also created a special education parent group that is quite active and involved. This group assists with the dissemination of information to other parents and serves as a support to parents and students.

Sections Demonstrating Compliance in All Standards

Statewide Assessment was determined to be an area of compliance by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the on-site visit.

I. GENERAL PROVISIONS

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of Policies and Procedures, the provision of public information relating to the eligibility of the district under Part B of IDEA, and maintaining a Procedure Manual.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need with regard to staff development. An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding staff development.

Areas of Need:

Staff Development – During self-assessment, the district identified ongoing staff development needs in the areas of effective transition practices, positive behavioral supports and interventions, effective instructional strategies and adaptations for students with disabilities and inclusive practices. Input obtained from regular education staff during on-site monitoring identified staff development needs in the areas of in-class support and the impact of various disabilities on learning styles.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the staff development needs of staff are identified. The plan must also include a component to ensure the district can determine the effectiveness of the staff development training.

II. FREE, APPROPRIATE, PUBLIC EDUCATION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of length of school day and year, transfer students, facilities, and related services (with regard to the beginning and ending of services).

Areas of need were identified during on-site monitoring regarding extended school year, adaptive physical education and counseling.

AREAS OF NEED:

Extended School Year- During on-site monitoring, review of documentation provided by the district, student records and interviews with staff and parents indicated that extended school year is not consistently considered and discussed for all students. It was also determined that extended school year is provided primarily to students attending out-of-district placements. A municipal summer recreation camp is often discussed in place of extended school year services for in-district students.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure extended school year programs are discussed and considered for all students. The plan must also ensure that when an extended school year program is determined to be necessary, the student receives a program that meets the individual needs of that student.

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Adaptive Physical Education (APE) - Interviews conducted during on-site monitoring identified a need for additional APE programs at the middle school level. A review of IEPs indicated APE is neither considered nor identified as a need in IEPs for all students who would benefit from APE due to the limited number of staff in this program area.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to identify the procedures that will be implemented to ensure adaptive physical education is considered, provided and documented based on the individual needs of the students.

Counseling – On-site monitoring determined that the level of counseling provided to students is not based on individual student need. Instead, services are determined by a number of factors including time limitations and availability of staff.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure counseling is provided to students in accordance with the individual needs of students and not on the availability of staff, etc. The plan must include a mechanism to ensure the district has the ability to determine whether it has sufficient staff to provide this service. If it does not, the plan must also include a component to address this staffing need.

III. PROCEDURAL SAFEGUARDS

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of the provision of surrogate parents, notification of transfer of rights at the age of majority, written notice, timelines, independent evaluations, provision of due process procedures to parents and native language.

An area of need was identified during on-site monitoring regarding meeting participants.

Area of Need:

Meeting Participants – As a result of record reviews and interviews with staff, on-site monitoring determined that at the preschool program level, regular education teachers do not attend IEP and identification meetings.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to identify the procedures that will be implemented to ensure that all required participants including regular education teachers attend preschool identification and IEP meetings.

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IV. LOCATION, REFERRAL AND IDENTIFICATION

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of referral and the direct referral process.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding Child Find activities, vision and hearing screenings, preschool identification meeting timelines and summer referrals.

Areas of Need:

Child Find Activities – On-site monitoring determined that Child Find activities are not conducted at the middle and high school levels. Though the parent group shares information on a district-wide basis, the district does not conduct Child Find activities beyond the elementary level.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure Child Find activities are conducted at all grade levels on a district-wide basis.

Vision and Hearing Screenings - Review of student records during on-site monitoring determined that though vision and hearing screenings are conducted, they are not consistently documented in student files.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure it maintains documentation of vision and hearing screenings for all students referred to the child study team.

Preschool Identification Meeting Timelines – Record review and interviews conducted during on-site monitoring identified that preschool identification meetings are not consistently conducted within 20 days of receiving a request for a referral. Additional record review determined that the date of referral is not consistently documented on the referral forms.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure timelines for identification meetings for preschool referrals are met. The plan must include a component to ensure the referral form identifies the date of referral. The district must also include an oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of these procedures.

Summer Referrals – Review of student records and interviews with staff during on-site monitoring indicated that regular and special education teachers do not consistently participate in identification meetings during the summer.

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- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure all required participants attend and participate in identification meetings conducted during the summer.

V. EVALUATION

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of informed consent, conducting multi-disciplinary assessments, the use of standardized assessments, documenting acceptance and rejection of reports and written reports prepared by the child study team.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified an area of need regarding the provision of evaluation reports in the native language of the parent/student. The district's improvement plan is not sufficient to address this area of need.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site regarding documentation issues and reports.

Areas of Need:

Native Language – The district determined during the self-assessment process that they do not consistently provide written copies of evaluation reports to parents in their native language, even when feasible.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the provision of copies of evaluation reports to parents in their native language, when feasible.

Speech documentation and reports – During on-site monitoring, a review of student records determined that parental consent for evaluation and the determination of eligibility were not consistently documented in student records. Record review also determined that functional assessments are not consistently documented when conducted.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure written parental consent is obtained and documented prior to conducting speech evaluations. The plan must also include a component to ensure the reasons for determining eligibility are clearly documented and maintained in students' records.

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- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure documentation of functional assessments is maintained in the students' records.

VI. REEVALUATION

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant regarding reevaluation planning meetings, reevaluation of students turning age five, providing notice of reevaluation, and obtaining consent for reevaluation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified an area of need regarding timelines. The district's improvement plan is not sufficient to address this area of need.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding required participants at preschool meetings. This issue was addressed in Section III.

Areas of Need:

Timelines – During self-assessment, the district indicated that timelines for reevaluations, including summer reevaluations, are not consistently met.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure reevaluations are conducted within three years of the previous determination of eligibility or sooner if warranted. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of these procedures.

VII. Eligibility

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant with eligibility meetings, providing the evaluation report to parents, providing notice of meetings to parents in a timely manner, eligibility criteria, and documentation of eligibility.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding meeting participants. This issue was addressed in Section III.

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VIII. IEP

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant with notices, components, annual review timelines, and implementation dates.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site regarding signatures of participants and goals and objectives.

Areas of Need:

IEP Meeting Participant Signatures - On-site record review determined that meeting participants are not consistently documented on the IEP for meetings for students determined eligible for speech and language services.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure signatures of meeting participants for students determined eligible for speech and language services are maintained in the student record.

IEP Goals and Objectives - On site record review determined that goals and objectives for students in self-contained classes do not consistently reflect the Core Curriculum Content Standards.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to identify the procedures that will be implemented to ensure goals and objectives reflect the core curriculum content standards.

IX. LRE

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of the provision of supplemental aides and services and participation in non-academic and extracurricular activities.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site regarding access to regular education (school age and preschool), individual decision-making, and IEP documentation of student programs.

Areas of Need:

IEP Documentation – On-site record review determined that some students were not receiving the programs identified in their IEPs.

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- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure students receive the programs identified in their IEPs. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure implementation of these procedures.

Regular Education Access – Interviews with staff and class visits during on-site monitoring determined that students with disabilities do not have full access to honors or college prep courses because in-class support programs are not available in these courses. Furthermore, it was determined that in-class support programs are not available in elective courses. Additionally, it was determined that placement in the alternative high school program is not an option for classified students since only nonclassified students may attend this program. Furthermore, it was determined that Industrial Arts courses and Health courses are available through replacement resource programs only.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to identify the procedures to be implemented to ensure students with disabilities have full access to regular education programming options if they are otherwise qualified.

Preschool Programs - On-site monitoring and district data indicated preschool students with disabilities are provided few opportunities to be educated with nondisabled preschool students. The district houses a Head Start Program in a facility separate from that site that houses preschool disabled classes. Though the district utilizes the Head Start Program on occasion as a potential placement option, they do not describe a typical preschool environment as the first consideration for individual children. Additionally, the manner in which the disability affects the participation of a preschooler in age appropriate activities with typical peers is not always addressed in the preschool IEP.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to identify the procedures that will be implemented to ensure that preschool students with disabilities are educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate

Individual Decision-Making – Interviews with staff and a review of IEPs indicated that though the district currently provides a variety of in-district program options for students, individual programming decisions are often based on the availability of programs with each building.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to identify the procedures that will be implemented to ensure that decision making for placement in the least restrictive environment is based on individual student need and not on building level program availability. It is recommended the district include staff development activities to address the decision-making process with team members and instructional staff members.

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X. Transition

School-to-Post Secondary

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant regarding the documentation of transition service needs, needed transition services, and student invitations to meetings.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site monitoring regarding student interests and preferences, and vocational training.

Areas of Need:

Student Interests and Preferences - During the on-site monitoring, interviews indicated that discussions are held with students prior to IEP meetings regarding their interests and preferences. In a review of student IEPs, however, there is no documentation of these discussions. In addition, interviews indicated that students are not adequately prepared to participate in IEP meetings, resulting in limited input regarding their career goals and aspirations. Interviews indicated that a self-advocacy program has been proposed, but has not been implemented due to high caseloads of team members.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure documentation is maintained regarding how student interests and preferences are obtained. The plan must include a component to ensure students are more effectively prepared to self-advocate at their IEP meetings.

Vocational Training - During the on-site monitoring, interviews with parents and staff members indicated that vocational training opportunities for cognitively impaired students in self-contained programs are limited because the district has not developed sufficient vocational training programs in this area. As a result, programs and activities that are provided are frequently a direct result of teacher innovation and are not memorialized in student IEPs. Staff and parents indicated that these students need more functional vocational training programs.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include the procedures that will be implemented to ensure that transition plans for cognitively impaired students in self-contained programs are appropriate and afford those students the opportunity to participate in functional vocational training activities, when determined appropriate by the IEP team.

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Transition to Preschool:

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of transition from early intervention by age three.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding participation at preschool special education meetings. This issue was addressed in Section III.

XI. DISCIPLINE

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant regarding the provision of FAPE beyond the tenth day of removal and uniform application of discipline procedures for disabled and non-disabled students.

Areas of need were identified during on-site monitoring regarding documentation of notification to case managers, suspension tracking, and manifestation determination meetings.

Areas of Need:

Notification to Case Managers - During the on-site monitoring, interviews with staff members and a review of the district's procedures manual indicated that when disabled students are disciplined, a form is to be sent to the case manager identifying the behavioral incident, number of days suspended, and a total number of removals for the year. Though case managers indicated that they receive the notification forms, these forms were not consistently maintained in student files.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the case manager notification letters are consistently documented and maintained in student files.

Suspension Tracking - During the on-site monitoring, a review of records indicated discrepancies between the actual number of days students were removed and the numbers identified in student records.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure days of removals are accurately reported and maintained in student records.

Manifestation Determination Meetings - During the on-site monitoring, files of students removed for more than ten consecutive days were reviewed. These files did not document that a manifestation determination meeting was conducted as required. In

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addition, administrators and instructional staff were unable to identify when a manifestation determination meeting was to be conducted or what the purpose of that meeting was.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure manifestation determination meetings are conducted when a student's removal constitutes a change in placement. The plan must also include a staff development component to ensure the appropriate implementation of these procedures.

XIII. Graduation

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant with participation in graduation, inviting out-of-district students to participate in graduation activities and providing diplomas.

Areas of need were identified during on-site monitoring regarding written notice and IEPs of 14 and 15 year old students.

Areas of Need:

Written Notice – A review of student records and interviews with staff members indicated the district does not consistently provide written notice of graduation.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure parents/adult students receive written notice of graduation.

Graduation Requirements - A review of student records and interviews with staff members indicate that the IEPs of students ages 14 and 15 do not identify graduation requirements.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure IEPs of students 14 and older identify graduation requirements.

XIV. Programs and Services

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of home instruction approvals, certifications, group size for speech and class sizes.

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Areas of need were identified during on-site monitoring regarding collaborative planning time and provision of substitute teachers.

Areas of Need:

Collaborative Planning – On-site monitoring determined that resource teachers and regular education teachers do not have collaborative planning time.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure resource program teachers and regular education teachers have collaborative planning time.

Substitute Teachers – Interviews with district staff during the on-site monitoring indicated that substitute teachers for in-class support teachers are not consistently obtained when staff members are absent. It was further determined that in-class support teachers are utilized to cover other classes when substitute teachers cannot be obtained for absent teachers.

- The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the continuous provision of services to students receiving in-class support. The district is further directed to cease the practice of using in-class support teachers to cover other classes during periods when they are scheduled to provide in-class services.

XV. STUDENT RECORDS

Summary of Findings:

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

An area of need was identified during the on-site regarding documentation of the location of other student files.

Area of Need:

Location of Student Files – During on-site monitoring, review of student records determined that central files do not identify the location of other student records.

- The district is directed to revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the location of student records is documented in central files.

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Summary

An on-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Old Bridge School District on January 29,30,31 and February 1, 2, 2001. The purpose of the monitoring was to verify the district's report of findings resulting from 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 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 visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. In addition, many of the concerns raised by the parents were identified by the district during the self-assessment process.

The on-site visit and self-assessment determined that the district is consistently compliant in the areas of statewide assessment, policies and procedures, public information, length of school day and year, transfer students, facilities, , surrogate parents, a variety of notice issues, independent evaluations, native language, the referral process, reevaluation issues, eligibility issues, annual review timelines and implementation dates, supplemental aides and services, participation in non-academic and extracurricular activities, transition from early intervention programs by age three, discipline standards, participation in graduation, group sizes, and pupil records issue.

During the self-assessment process the district identified areas of need regarding staff development, the provision of evaluations in native language and reevaluation timelines.

The on-site visit further identified areas of need within the various standards regarding the provision of extended school year services, meeting participants, and documentation issues regarding vision and hearing screenings and student interests and preferences, notification of disciplinary infractions to the case manager, graduation notice, and the location of student records. Issues regarding the decision-making process included counseling services and access to a full continuum of program options. Procedural issues included summer referrals, child find, timelines, suspension tracking, use of staff, and manifestation determination meetings.

Within forty-five days of receipt of the monitoring report, the district will resubmit the improvement plan to address the additional areas of need and the required revisions to the improvement plan identified during the on-site monitoring.