

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

District: Pohatcong Township School District

County: Warren

Monitoring Dates: October 19, 2004

Monitoring Team: Zola Mills and Gladys Miller

Background Information:

During the 2003–2004 school years, the **Pohatcong Township School District** conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the **Pohatcong Township School District** with an opportunity to evaluate its strengths and areas of need with regard to:

- The provision of a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment;
- The protection of procedural safeguards for students and their families;
- The development and implementation of policies and procedures resulting in procedural compliance; and,
- The organization and delivery of programs and services resulting in positive student outcomes.

The self-assessment was designed to identify areas of strength, promising practices, areas that need improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The **Pohatcong Township School District** developed an improvement plan to address identified areas of need.

As the first step to verifying the self-assessment findings, to assessing the appropriateness of the improvement plan and to determining any progress in implementing this plan, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) held a focus group meeting for parents and community members, at the **Pohatcong Public School** on October 4, 2004. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the subsequent monitoring activities. Additionally, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) completed a comprehensive desk audit, including a review of a representative sample of student records, as well as reviews of district policies and procedures, student count information, master student lists, class lists, schedules of students, teachers, related services personnel, and other relevant information. Additional interviews with parents were conducted by telephone. Based on these sources, OSEP staff determined that the district had conducted a thorough review during the self-assessment process and had developed a plan which will appropriately address all areas of identified need.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for its peer mediation program that trains and utilizes peer mediators to resolve student conflicts and ameliorate behavior problems. General and special education students serve as peer mediators and in the process learn good ways of handling problems common to the elementary school student.

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Data Summary: A review of three years of district data shows total classification rates of 9% in 2001, 9% in 2002 and 10% in 2003. These figures are several points below the state percentages of 13.4%, 14.1% and 14.35 respectively. The latest reported figures for the preschool placement show that 66.7% are placed in a preschool disabled class this is higher than the state average of 50.3%. The remaining third of the students are placed in a combination of special and general education (22.2%) or are in general education (11.1%). These figures compare favorably with the state combined figure of 32.3%. Of students ages six through twenty-one, 48.5% are placed in general education for more than 80% of the school day compared to only 41.3% statewide for the same placement. 1.5% of students with disabilities in the district are educated in out-of-district placements.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance with All Standards:

General Provisions, Reevaluation, Eligibility, Least Restrictive Environment, Transition to Preschool, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation Requirements, Programs & Services and Student Records were determined to be areas of compliance by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the comprehensive desk audit.

Section II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of related services and transfer students. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these concerns. The district had implemented activities to correct these areas prior to the comprehensive desk audit and these areas were found to be compliant.

No additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit.

Section III. Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of consent, content and provision of notices of meetings, content and provision of written notice, meetings, notices in native language, and independent evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents, notices of transition meetings to students and providing interpreters at meetings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these concerns.

No additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit.

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Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of referral process and pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, vision and hearing screenings, summer referrals and identification meeting timelines and participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of Child Find and health summary. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern.

No additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit.

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of acceptance or rejections of reports and independent evaluations. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. The district had implemented activities prior to the comprehensive desk audit to address the concern regarding the acceptance or rejections of reports and this area was found to be compliant.

No additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit.

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of meetings and participants, present level of educational performance, alignment of goals and objectives with the Core Curriculum Content Standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review and ninety-day timelines, provision of the IEP to parents and teacher access and knowledge.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of considerations and required statements and opportunity to observe programs before placement. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of concern. The district had implemented activities prior to the comprehensive desk audit to address the concern regarding the considerations and required statements and this area was found to be compliant.

No additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit.

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Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of age 14 preferences and interests, agency involvement, student and agency invitation and age 16 needed transition services.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of age 14 transition service needs. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of concern.

No additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit.

Section XIV: Programs & Services

Summary of Findings:

During the self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of class size and waivers, age ranges and waivers, group sizes for speech, home instruction, consultation time and case management time.

Although not an area of current noncompliance, during the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of sufficient staff to implement the improvement plan activities. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of concern.

No additional areas of need were identified during the comprehensive desk audit.

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Summary

Special education monitoring was completed in the Pohatcong Public School on October 19, 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 its exceptionally comprehensive review conducted as part of the self-assessment activities. As a result of that review the district was able to identify all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that will bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for initiating activities that have brought many areas into compliance prior to the comprehensive desk audit as well as the many areas determined by the school and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations.

A review of the district data indicated that the district classification rate has remained below the state classification rate for the last three reported years. In the preschool age group, although the 11% of the students placed in general education is lower than the state average, this percentage combined with the students placed in a combination of both general and special education is equivalent to the combined state averages for the two groups. This provides an opportunity for students in this age group to interact with their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive environment for all or part of the school day. The district's commitment to placement in the least restrictive environment is evidenced by the placement of nearly half of students ages 6 through 21 in the general education setting for more than 80% of the school day.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their extreme satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services and with the district's responsiveness to the needs of their children. Although she had not spoken with the district, one parent expressed a concern regarding inappropriate behaviors on the school bus. After the meeting, she addressed her concern with the special education director.

Additional phone interviews with randomly selected parents also indicated satisfaction with the district's programs.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies and procedures, staff and parent training, dissemination of IDEA, extended school year, length of day and year, facilities, certifications, consent, content and provision of notices of meetings, content and provision of written notices, meetings, referral process and pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, vision and hearing screenings, summer referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants, multi-disciplinary evaluation, standardized assessments, functional assessments, written reports, bilingual evaluations, notices in native language, reevaluation timelines, planning meetings, participants, reevaluations completed by June 30th of students' last year in preschool, eligibility meetings and participants, criteria, statement of eligibility, agreement or disagreement and rationale, provision of a copy of evaluations to the parents ten days prior to the meeting, IEP meeting and participants, present level of educational performance, alignment of goals and objectives with the core content curriculum standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review and ninety day timelines, provision of IEP to parents, teacher access and responsibility, individualized decision making, decision making regarding least restrictive environment,

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consideration and documentation, supplemental aids and services, regular education access, nonacademic and extracurricular participation, continuum, age sixteen needed transition services, agency involvement, student and agency invitations, preschool transition planning conference, placement in program by age three, preferences and interests, procedural safeguards, documentation to case manager, suspension tracking, behavioral intervention plan, functional behavior assessment, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting, participation in statewide assessments, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternate assessment, graduation requirements, out of district participation, written notice of graduation, choice of diploma, class size and waivers, age range and waivers, group sizes for speech, home instruction, consultation time, access to student records, access sheets, maintenance and destruction and documentation of locations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified an area of need regarding related services, transfer students, surrogate parents, provision of notices of meetings for transition meetings to students, interpreters at meetings, Child Find, health summary, accept or rejection of reports, considerations and required statements, parental opportunity to observe placements, age 14 transition service needs and need to increase hours for the child study team social worker.

The comprehensive desk audit did not identify any additional areas of systemic noncompliance within the various standards.