

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

District: Ridgefield

County: Bergen

Monitoring Dates: May 10 and 11, 2004

Monitoring Team: Carol Raff, Gladys Miller

Background Information:

During the 2002–2003 school year, the Ridgefield School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Ridgefield 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 Ridgefield 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 Slocum Skewes School on May 6, 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, speech therapists, child study team members and parent interviews by phone.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for providing a Magnet School Program for Special Education. Ridgefield Public Schools offers various programs in the educational spectrum designed to meet the needs of their own students as well as those in neighboring communities. Only two of approximately 135 classified students attend an out-of-district placement. Ridgefield's programs also include a fully inclusive Kindergarten, first and second grade, in-class support in grades one through twelve and

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self-contained classes for children who are autistic, multiply disabled, behaviorally disabled and pre-school disabled. Mainstreaming is widely available for both the pre-school disabled classes as well as Kindergarten through grade twelve.

The district provides a support group to both parents and students through a "Saturday New Horizons Program." Additionally, the Ridgefield Public Schools is a vendor for the Division of Developmental Disabilities which provides a Respite and Adult Services Program for the over 21 population.

The district maintains above average PSAT and SAT scores and approximately 85% of their high school graduates, including students with disabilities, pursue post secondary education. Ridgefield 's School-To-Careers and Transition-To-Life Departments offer unique career and life skill internships, work-site experiences and other career education programs.

Data Summary:

The district's data from the 2002-03 school year indicate that 73.9% of the student's eligible for special education and related services are educated in general education settings for more than 80% of the day; this is well above the state average of 41.6%. The district has been increasing participation since the 2000-01 school year. An additional 4.2% of special education students were educated in the general education setting 40-80% of the time. Only 19% of Ridgefield's special education students spend less than 40% of the time with general education students. This is attributed to the fact that Ridgefield offers a number of self-contained programs for the autistic and multiply disabled population instead of sending these students to out-of-district programs. Further, Ridgefield's classification rate during the 2002-03 school year was 9.6%, which is below the state average. This is attributed to the varied regular education interventions such as counseling, academic support and related services that are available to general education students.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance with All Standards:

Reevaluation 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.

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 in-service training for professional and paraprofessional staff. The district has initiated activities to bring about correction in these areas.

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

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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, facilities and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of goals and objectives for related services, length of school day and year and transfer students. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 in native language, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations, and meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents, consent, notices of meetings and written notices. During the on-site visit, record review and interviews 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 IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of direct referrals, health summary, vision and hearing screenings and identification meeting timelines and participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of Child Find activities, referral process and pre-referral interventions. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of standardized assessments and bilingual evaluations.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of multi-disciplinary evaluations, functional assessments, written reports signed and dated and acceptance or rejection of reports. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 participants and criteria.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of meetings, statement of eligibility for specific learning disabilities, signatures of agreement or disagreement and the provision of a copy of evaluation reports to parent ten days prior to eligibility meetings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient in these areas. During the on-site visit record review and interviews indicated that the district has initiated activities to bring about correction in the areas of meetings, eligibility for specific learning disabilities and signatures of agreement and disagreement.

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 implementation dates, annual review timelines and ninety day timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of meetings and participants, considerations and required statements, present levels of educational performance, goals and objectives aligned with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, IEPs to parents and teacher access and responsibility. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. During the on-site visit, record review and interviews indicated that the district has initiated activities to bring about correction in the areas of considerations and required statements, present levels of educational performance, age of majority and IEPs to parents.

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

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Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of regular education access, notification to out-of-district students of nonacademic and extracurricular activities and continuum of programs.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the documentation of the decision-making process, least restrictive environment documentation and consideration of supplemental aids and services. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

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

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation 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.

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

Section X: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of preschool disabled by age three and participation in EIP transition planning meetings.

No 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 suspension tracking, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting and procedural safeguards.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation to case manager, functional behavioral assessment and the behavioral intervention plan. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

Section XII: Statewide Assessment

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of participation, alternate assessment and process for exemption from passing.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of approved accommodations and modifications and IEP documentation. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 areas of out- of- district participation and written notice of graduation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation of IEP requirements including age fourteen attendance, credit hours, HSPA and local requirements. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

Section XIV: Programs and Services

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of age range waivers and home instruction.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of class size waivers, group size waivers and consultation time. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 maintenance and destruction of records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of access and requests, access sheets and documentation of other locations. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Ridgefield School District on May 10 and 11, 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 this review the district was able to identify all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that will be sufficient to bring about systemic change. The district is further commended for initiating corrective action to address most of the areas of need identified during the self-assessment process. Additionally, the district is 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.

The district's data from the school years 2000 to 2002, indicate that a high percentage, well above the state average, of the student's eligible for special education and related services were educated in general education settings for more than 80% of the day. This reflects the district's emphasis on having students mainstreamed with support services. An additional 4.2% of the special education students were educated in the general education setting 40-80% of the time. Further, Ridgefield's classification rate during 2002 was 9.6%, which is also below the state average. This is attributed to the fact that various interventions such as academic support and related services are available to general education students.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit and additional parent interviews, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Many parents feel that they are absolutely involved in the educational process of their children and have the ability to easily communicate with teachers. Parents of high school age students expressed satisfaction with "school to work" transition program. Other parents felt that the special education curriculum was not as challenging as general education's and therefore not offering their children higher level skills. Some parents expressed a desire to have district staff assist their children in generalizing to the home the skills learned in the life-skills program. In general, parents expressed a positive experience with their district's staff and programs.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included dissemination of IDEA information, facilities and certifications, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations, meetings, direct referrals, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, identification meeting timelines and participants, bilingual evaluations, three year timelines, planning meeting participants, reevaluations completed by June 30th of student's last year in preschool, criteria, implementation dates, annual review timelines, ninety day timelines, regular education access in district, out-of-district participation, nonacademic and extra curriculum participation, continuum of programs, preschool transition planning conference, early intervention to preschool disabled by age three, student and agency invite, suspension tracking, manifest determination, interim alternative educational settings, procedural safeguards for potentially disabled students, participation in statewide assessments, alternate assessments, process for exemption from passing, out of district participation, written notice of graduation, age range waivers, home instruction and maintenance and destruction of records.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff training, related services, length of school day, transfer students, surrogate parents, consent, content and provision of notices of meetings, content and provision of written notices, child find, referral process, pre-referral interventions, multi-disciplinary, standardized assessments, functional assessments, written reports signed and dated, acceptance or rejection of reports, eligibility meeting, statement of eligibility, signatures of agreement or disagreement, copy of evaluation reports to parents ten days prior to meeting, meeting and participants, considerations and required statements, present levels of educational performance, age of majority, IEPs to parents, teacher access and responsibility, the decision-making process, least restrictive environment documentation, supplemental aids and services, age fourteen transition service needs, preferences and interests survey, age sixteen transition services documentation to case manager, functional behavioral assessment, behavioral intervention plan, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, IEP requirements for graduation class size waivers, group sizes, consultation time, access and requests, access sheets and documentation of other locations. The district's plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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