

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

**District:** Somerville School District

**County:** Somerset

**Monitoring Dates:** October 7 & 28, 2003

**Monitoring Team:** Deborah Masarsky, Barbara Tucker, Stephen Coplin, Kim Murray

***Background Information:***

During the 2002–2003 school year, the Somerville School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Somerville Borough 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 Somerville 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 Somerville School District Administration Building on October 2, 2003. 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 the special education administrator, building principals, speech therapists, child study team members and regular and special education teachers.

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### Data Summary:

The Somerville School District data indicates that 64% of its preschool handicapped population have been placed in general education settings which far exceeds the New Jersey State average of 23.2%. The district's overall classification rate of 13.1% for the 2001-2002 school year remains slightly below the New Jersey State average of 13.4%. Although the district is progressing in this area, in response to these data, the district indicated in the self-assessment the need to revise referral procedures, improve pre-referral interventions and improve their abilities to determine the effectiveness of the interventions in an effort to further lower the district's classification rate. The district's improvement plan will be sufficient to address this concern.

During the 2001-2002 school year only 39% of classified students were placed in general education settings with their non-disabled peers for more than 80% of the day. In response to these data, the district has indicated in the self-assessment the need to revise its decision-making process by considering the provision of supplementary aids and services in general education programs in an effort to increase the percentage of their classified students' involvement in regular education. The district's improvement plan will be sufficient to address this concern.

During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through data review that during the 2002-2003 school year, 29 students with disabilities participated in the HSPA, of which 66% of those students were exempt from passing all or parts of the HSPA. Of those students who were exempt from passing the HSPA, 89% received in-class and/or out of class support programs in the district. As a result of these findings, the district has hired a basic skills instructor to provide remedial instruction to students in *in-class support* and *pull-out support* programs who are participating in the HSPA during the 2003-2004 school year. In a further effort to increase the number of students with disabilities who pass the HSPA, at IEP meetings child study team members will consider additional approved accommodations/modifications that may be appropriate for these students.

### **District Strengths:**

The district is commended for the **Peer Leadership** program that includes both special education and regular education students at the middle and high school levels. Eighth grade students at the middle school are trained to mentor sixth grade students. Meetings are held monthly to discuss issues such as peer pressure and to provide transitional support to students. At the high school level, senior students are trained to be peer leaders to serve as mentors to freshman students. The purpose of the program is to provide transitional support to students entering the high school. In addition, the district has hired a career counselor who serves as the peer leadership coordinator. This counselor also visits classrooms to discuss various career options that assist students to focus on their course selections. Every high school sophomore participates in the "Discover Software" career assessment which can be used to determine students' interests and preferences.

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### ***Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:***

**Statewide Assessment and Programs and Services** were determined to be compliant 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/procedures and dissemination of IDEA information. The required Statement of Assurances and procedures have been submitted to the county office.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of staff development and parent training. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 provision of programs/related services, documentation of frequency/duration/location and goals/objectives for related services, transfer students, length of school day/year and certifications. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of extended school year and accessibility of school facilities. The improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

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 consent, provision of notices and independent evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of surrogate parents, required participants at meetings, content of notices, notices in native language and translation resources. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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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 evaluation planning meeting timelines.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the child find activities, referral process, pre-referral interventions, health/medical summaries and vision/hearing screenings. 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, written reports, bilingual evaluations and acceptance/rejection of outside reports.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site monitoring regarding functional assessments and multi-disciplinary evaluations for students eligible for speech/language services.

#### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Functional Assessments** - During the on-site monitoring it was determined child study team members and speech therapists do not consistently include the interventions attempted as a component a functional assessment in their evaluation reports.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that child study team members and the speech therapists include the required components of functional assessments in their reports. Implementation of these activities will ensure that evaluators include all assessments needed to make appropriate eligibility determinations and develop an appropriately written report as required by N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3.4(d)2. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

**Multi-Disciplinary Evaluations** - During the on-site monitoring it was determined that for students eligible for speech and language services, speech therapists do not obtain a written educational impact statement from the classroom teacher that demonstrates how the speech problem impacts the student's ability to acquire educational skills.

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- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that speech therapists obtain the written educational impact statement from the classroom teacher and include the statement in assessment reports to fulfill the requirement for multidisciplinary evaluations in accordance with N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3.4(d). Implementation of these activities will ensure that only those students who demonstrate a speech problem that impacts their ability to acquire educational skills are evaluated and/or determined eligible for speech/language services. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent implementation of the activities.**

**Section VI: Reevaluation**

**Summary of Finding:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of reevaluation planning meetings and reevaluations completed by June 30<sup>th</sup> of student's last year in preschool.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of reevaluation timelines. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

No 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 convening of eligibility meetings and statement of eligibility for specific learning disability.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of eligibility criteria for specific learning disability, documentation of agreement/disagreement with eligibility determination and documentation of provision of evaluation reports to parents. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

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 statements, goals/objectives aligned with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, the provision of IEPs to parents, 90-day timelines and teacher access/responsibility.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of considerations/required statements, documentation of goals/objectives criteria and evaluation procedures, required participants at IEP meetings and obtaining only the signatures of persons who participate in meetings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site monitoring regarding annual review timelines for students eligible for speech/language services.

### **Area(s) of Need:**

**Annual Review Timelines** - During the on-site monitoring it was determined that the district does not consistently conduct annual reviews within twelve months of the development of the previous IEP for students eligible for speech/language services.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure annual reviews are completed within required timelines. Implementation of these activities will ensure parent(s)/adult student(s) have the opportunity to review the student's progress annually and to develop an IEP that accurately reflects the current needs of the student. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.**

### ***Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of the individual decision-making process, supplementary aids and services, documentation within the least restrictive environment section, continuum of programs and access to regular education programs within district. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site monitoring regarding the notification to out-of-district students of the availability of nonacademic and extracurricular activities within district.

#### **Area(s) Need:**

**Nonacademic/Extra-curricular Activities for Out-of-District Students** - During the on-site monitoring it was determined through interviews with building principals and child study team members that the district does not have procedures to notify out-of-district students of the opportunity to participate in nonacademic and extra curricular activities in-district.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that students in out-of-district placements are notified of nonacademic and extra-curricular activities within the district. Implementation of these procedures will ensure students in out-of-district placements are provided with the opportunity to participate in**

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nonacademic and extra-curricular activities with their non-disabled peers who attend in-district programs. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.

### **Section X: Transition to Post-School**

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of post-school transition planning, statements of "Transition Service Needs" and "Needed Transition Services," students' interests/preferences, student/agency invitations and alignment of courses of study. 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 Preschool**

#### **Summary of Findings:**

Areas of need were identified during the on-site monitoring regarding preschool transition planning conferences and provision of programs for preschool disabled students by age three.

#### **Area(s) of Need:**

##### **Participation of District Personnel at Preschool Transition Planning Conference -**

During the on-site monitoring it was determined through interviews with child study team members and record review that district personnel do not consistently participate at preschool transition planning conferences.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures for preschool child study team members to provide outreach to the early intervention programs to ensure that district personnel are informed of and attend preschool transition planning meetings. Implementation of these activities will ensure that sufficient information is obtained from early intervention program staff regarding the student's strengths and needs to ensure the district has the opportunity to provide appropriate programs and services. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

**Early Intervention Program to Preschool Disabled Program by Age 3 -** During the on-site monitoring it was determined through interviews with child study team members and record review that that the district does not consistently provide programs for preschool disabled students by their third birthday.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include activities to ensure that any preschool age student who requires special education and related**

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services receives those services by age 3 or without undue delay if referred after age three. The improvement plan activities should include a review and possible update of child find activities and the employment of sufficient staff or redeployment of existing staff to consistently provide appropriate programs and services. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component ensure the consistent implementation of the activities.

### ***Section XI: Discipline***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of provision of procedural safeguard rights for potentially disabled students and interim alternative educational settings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of written notification to the case manager, suspension tracking, IEP/manifestation determination meetings, functional behavioral assessments/behavior intervention plans and provision of services when series of short-term removals is not a change in placement. 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 the area of IEP documentation of graduation requirements.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of Written Notice of Graduation. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

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

### ***Section XV: Student Records***

#### **Summary of Findings:**

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of access/requests and maintenance/destruction.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of documentation of other locations of student records. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

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 Somerville School District on 2003. 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 highly commended for the exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of that review the district was able to identify all but six areas of need and develop an improvement plan that will bring about systemic change. 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 data indicated that the district has been able to lower their classification rate by revising its referral procedures, by providing staff training and by implementing effective interventions. Additionally, the data indicated that the district has increased the number of school aged and preschool aged students with disabilities participating in general education programs. The data further indicated that a large percentage of students in *in-class support* and/or *pull-out support classes* are exempt from passing the HSPA. As a result of these findings, the district has made an effort to increase the number of students with disabilities who pass the HSPA by hiring a basic skills instructor to provide remedial instruction and by providing appropriate accommodations and/or modifications for statewide assessments.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit three parents and one student attended. The parents expressed concerns regarding placement of children in district preschool programs by the third birthday, the placement of students who were previously in self-contained settings into inclusion settings without sufficient supports and the lack of counseling as a related service. All the parents and the student indicated that classified students are not integrated into nonacademic activities with their non-disabled peers.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies/procedures, dissemination of IDEA information, provision of programs/services, documentation of frequency/duration/location and goals and objectives for related services, transfer students, length of school day/year, certifications, consent, provision of notices, independent evaluations, direct referrals, evaluation planning meeting timelines, standardized assessments, written reports, bilingual evaluations, acceptance/rejection of outside reports, reevaluation planning meetings, reevaluations completed by June 30<sup>th</sup> of a student's last year in preschool, convening of eligibility meetings, statement of eligibility for specific learning disability, present levels of educational performance statements, goals/objectives aligned with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, provision of IEPs to parents, 90-day timelines, teacher access/responsibility to implement IEPs, provision of procedural safeguard rights for potentially disabled students, interim alternative educational settings, student participation in statewide assessment, approved accommodation/modifications for statewide assessments, IEP documentation of statewide assessment, alternate proficiency assessment, IEP documentation of graduation requirements, class/group size, age range, consultation time between regular and special education teachers, access to student records and maintenance/destruction of student records.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding staff development, parent training, extended school year accessibility of school facilities, surrogate parents, required participants at meetings, content of notices, notices in native language, translation resources, child find activities, referral process, pre-referral interventions, health/medical summaries, vision/hearing screenings, reevaluation timelines, eligibility criteria for specific learning disability, documentation of agreement/disagreement with eligibility determinations, documentation of provision of evaluation reports to parents, IEP considerations/required statements, documentation of goals/objectives criteria and evaluation procedures, required participants at IEP team meetings, obtaining only the signatures of persons in attendance at meetings, individual-decision-making process, supplementary aids/services, documentation within the least restrictive environment section of the IEP, continuum of programs, access to regular education within the district, post-school transition planning, transition statements, assessing for students' interests/preferences, student/agency invitations, alignment of courses of study with student interests/preferences, written notification to the case manager of any special education student who has been suspended from school, suspension tracking, IEP/manifestation determination meetings, functional behavioral assessments, behavior intervention plans, provision of services when a series of short term removals is not a change in placement, provision of written notice of graduation and documentation of location of other student records on the central file.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding functional assessments, multidisciplinary evaluations and annual review timelines for students eligible for speech/ language services, notification to out-of-district students of the availability of nonacademic/extra-curricular activities within district, preschool transition planning conferences and provision of programs for preschool disabled students by age three.

Within forty-five days of receipt of the monitoring report, the Queen City Charter School will develop and submit the improvement plan to the Office of Special Education Programs to address all areas of need.