

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

District: Sterling High School District **County:** Camden

Monitoring Dates: April 9,12,15 and 16, 2002

Monitoring Team: Arlene Popovici and Caryl Carthew

Background Information:

During the 2000–2001 school year, the Sterling High School District conducted a self-assessment of special education policies, procedures, programs, services and student outcomes. The self-assessment process provided the Sterling 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 Sterling 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 a first step in the on-site monitoring process, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) held a focus group meeting on March 26, 2002. Information from the meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site, 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, and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The Sterling High School District is commended for its continued commitment to establishing and maintaining programs that address the individual needs of students with disabilities and for its level of commitment to the support of inclusive programs.

The district's transition-to-work program for classified students is a co-op program for "at-risk" students who may have difficulty being successful in the regular co-op program.

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The district provides an after-school counseling program as a mandatory alternative to detention for classified students. The staff work with students to develop goals and positive choices.

The district's Career Awareness Program for Individual Education Students (CAPIE) program provides career awareness, interest inventories, job site visits, and trips for classified juniors and seniors.

The district operates the Renaissance program, which acknowledges good attendance, academic achievement, and exemplary behavior for all students, both disabled and non-disabled. The program provides a number of incentive activities for students who meet the program criteria.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance In All Standards:

General Provisions, Least Restrictive Environment, Transition, Graduation, and Programs and Services were determined to be areas of compliance by the Sterling High School District during the self-assessment process and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs 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 the provision of related services, length of school day/year, transfer students, facilities, and certification.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns regarding documentation of provision of related services. The district developed an improvement plan that does not sufficiently address this issue because it lacks procedures and an administrative oversight component to bring about the required changes. The plan needs to be revised to include these elements.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding extended school year.

Areas of Need:

Extended School Year (ESY) – During the on-site monitoring, though a review of records indicated that IEPs address ESY, interviews with staff and parents indicated that this discussion does not consistently occur at meetings.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that a discussion of the need for extended school year occurs for all students. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure implementation of the procedures.**

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Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of surrogate parents, consent, written notice, meetings, native language, and independent evaluations.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the provision of due process hearing rules.

Areas of Need:

Due Process Hearing Rules – During the on-site monitoring, interviews with staff indicated that a copy of the due process hearing rules is not provided at the time of an initial evaluation even though the notice of the nature and scope of the evaluation indicates that a copy is provided.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that parents are provided with a copy of the due process hearing rules. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure implementation of the procedures.**

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of Child Find 3-21, referral process, direct referrals (parent/staff), health summary, summer referrals, and identification meeting timelines and participants.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding vision and hearing screenings.

Areas of Need:

Vision and Hearing Screenings – During the on-site monitoring, a review of student records and interviews with school personnel indicated that vision and hearing screenings are obtained for students referred to the child study team for initial evaluation. However, this information is not available at the time of the identification meeting.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that vision and hearing screening information is available at the time of the identification meeting for students referred for initial evaluations. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure implementation of the procedures.**

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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 standardized assessments and bilingual evaluations.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of maintenance of testing protocols and documentation of the acceptance and/or rejection of reports. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas. During the on-site visit, it was determined the district has implemented activities that have brought about correction of these areas. The district further identified concerns regarding conducting teacher interviews as part of the evaluation process and components of speech and language evaluations. The district's improvement plan is not sufficient to address these issues because it lacks an administrative oversight component. The plan needs to be revised to include this component.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding written reports.

Areas of Need:

Written Reports – During the on-site monitoring, a review of student records indicated that evaluation reports include the signature of the evaluator and the date the assessment was conducted; not the date the report was developed.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that evaluation reports include the date the report is developed. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure implementation of the procedures.**

Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Findings:

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

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

No additional area of need was 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, criteria, and providing a copy of the evaluations to parents.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of participants at meetings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this issue.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding written notice of eligibility.

Areas of Need:

Written Notice of Eligibility – During the on-site monitoring, a review of student records indicated that at the time of the eligibility meeting, although an eligibility report is prepared which summarizes the eligibility decision, notice of eligibility is not provided to parents. The only time a parent receives notice of eligibility is when the IEP is developed immediately after the eligibility meeting.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure written notice of eligibility is provided to parents subsequent to the determination of eligibility. The plan must include in-service and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of goals and objectives being linked to the core curriculum content standards (CCCS), age of majority, annual review timelines, and implementation dates.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of meeting participants, IEP components, 90-day timelines, and teacher knowledge and access to the IEP. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues. During the on-site visit, it was determined the district has already implemented activities that have resulted in the correction of the issue of teacher knowledge and access to the IEP.

No additional area of need was 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 procedures, suspension tracking, behavior intervention plans, functional behavioral assessments, and manifestation determination meetings.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of providing suspension documentation to the case manager. During the on-site visit, it was determined the district has implemented activities that have resulted in the correction of this issue.

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No additional area of need was 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, appropriate accommodations and modifications, and IEP documentation.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the area of alternate assessments. The district developed an improvement plan that sufficiently addresses this area of need.

No additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit.

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

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

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

Areas of Need:

Documentation of Location – During the on-site visit, interviews and record review indicated that central files do not identify the locations of other records maintained by the district.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that central files identify the locations of other records maintained by the district.**

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Sterling High School District on April 9,12,15 and 16, 2002. 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 nearly all 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 determined compliant by the district and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs during the on-site monitoring visit. Additionally, the district is commended for the implementation of activities that have resulted in the correction of some areas of need identified during the self-assessment process.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services but did identify concerns in the areas of communication with the district, notification to parents of out-of-district students, and individualized selection of transition courses. The parents were very pleased with the assistance that they receive from the Youth Service Team.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during the self-assessment process and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included general provisions, the provision of related services (including occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech/language therapy and counseling), length of day and year, transfer students, facilities, certification, surrogate parents, consent, written notice, meetings, native language, independent evaluations, Child Find ages 3-21, referral process including summer referrals and direct referrals from parents and staff, identification meetings including timelines and participants, standardized assessments, bilingual evaluations, planning meetings including participants, eligibility meetings, criteria, copy of evaluation reports to the parents, IEP goals and objectives linked to the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, least restrictive environment, post-school transition, discipline procedures, suspension tracking, behavioral intervention plans, functional behavioral assessments, manifestation determination meetings, participation in statewide assessments, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, graduation requirements, programs and services, parent and adult student access to records, and maintenance and destruction of student records.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding multidisciplinary evaluations, functional assessments, written reports, acceptance and rejection of reports, reevaluation timelines, eligibility and IEP meeting participants, considerations and required statements, annual review and 90-day timelines, teacher knowledge and access to IEP documents, documentation of discipline to the case manager, interim alternative education settings, and alternate assessments.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding notice of meetings, vision and hearing screenings, notice of eligibility, and documentation of location of student records.

Within forty-five days of receipt of the monitoring report, the Sterling High School District will revise and resubmit the improvement plan to the Office of Special Education

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Programs to address the areas of need identified during the on-site visit and those areas that require revisions to the improvement plan.