

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

District: Stratford School District

County: Camden

Monitoring Dates: October 13, 2004

Monitors: Caryl Carthew, Jane Marano

Background Information:

During the 2003-2004 school year, the Stratford School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Stratford School District with an opportunity to evaluate performance, 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 permit the district the opportunity to identify its areas of strength and promising practices, as well as areas needing improvement and areas that may be noncompliant with state and federal requirements. The Stratford School District developed an improvement plan to address these 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 Yellin School on the evening of September 30, 2004. Approximately fifteen parents and staff members were in attendance. Information obtained from this meeting was used to direct the focus of the subsequent monitoring activities.

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. A representative sample of student records was also reviewed. Interviews were conducted with the district's special education administrator, building principals, general education and special education teachers, speech therapists and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The Stratford School District is to be commended for its strong commitment and dedication to educating students in the least restrictive environment. This is evidenced through the district's mission statement which is directed towards providing a "safe learning environment that fosters the pursuit of excellence and meets the education needs of every student." This commitment is also evident in the district's objectives and

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the expansion of programs and services to include more support in general education programs, as well as in-district programs for preschoolers and students with autism.

During the 2003-2004 school year, Yellin School was the recipient of the Governor's School of Excellence Award for demonstrating significant improvement in academic achievement. The areas recognized included: outstanding growth in literacy measures, meaningful improvement for parental involvement in school matters, improved student attendance and graduation rates, reduced drop out and/or retention rates, improvement in the quality of professional development and demonstrated success in providing better opportunities for students receiving special education. This recognition was the result of the collaborative efforts of staff, administration, and the Board of Education.

For the past several years, all staff members have been involved in intensive curriculum training with an emphasis on implementing a balanced literacy program and inquiry-based science in the classroom. This has resulted in the delivery of effective strategies in all classes that address diverse learning styles while simultaneously enhancing in-class support programs. Staff members have also participated in extensive training on special education-related topics. This training has even included the development of an handbook to be used as a reference tool for staff members when developing IEPs.

The district's commitment to expanding the use of computer technology has not only provided enhanced instruction and learning opportunities for students including Smart Board technology and a mobile wireless computer lab, but also in providing distance learning opportunities for staff. In addition, parents and staff members can communicate via the Power School system. This system allows parents to access information on an ongoing basis regarding student progress and facilitates direct communication with teachers. In addition, resource teachers can easily access information in order to monitor progress in mainstream classes for students receiving academic support services. Parents and staff members report that this technology has greatly enhanced student achievement.

The district provides a wide variety of extra-curricular and non-academic activities, including field trips and swimming for the preschool and autism programs. Students with disabilities have the opportunity to participate in all programs, including the Anti-Bullying, Character Education, and Peer Mediation programs.

Data Summary:

A review of the data submitted by the Stratford School District as a result of the self-assessment process indicates that there is a trend over the last few years toward placing more students in general education settings. Although the current data is roughly commensurate with the state average, the district has increased rate of students with disabilities educated in general education over the last three years by almost 15%. At the same time, fewer students are placed in self-contained (12%) or separate settings (6.4%). Both rates are lower than the state averages. The district attributes this change to strong staff development efforts and a commitment to inclusion. The district has plans to expand programs in the next few years to include additional in-class support, a behavior disabilities program and a program for middle school students with autism within the district.

The data also indicate that the district's classification rate over the last three years has been slightly above the state average. The district has identified this as an area of need

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and has included activities to address their concerns in the improvement plan. Efforts to address this issue include the development of district-wide guidelines for making accommodation and modifications plan as well as a plan for providing more support programs in the general education setting, including a tutoring program and an alternative program.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

General Provisions, Free Appropriate Public Education (F.A.P.E.), Procedural Safeguards, Evaluation, Reevaluation, Eligibility, Individual Education Program (I.E.P.), Least Restrictive Environment (L.R.E.), Transition, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation, Programs and 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 on-site visit.

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district accurately identified compliance in the areas of Child Find 3-21, referral process (including direct referrals and summer referrals) and identification meeting participants and timelines for conducting identification meetings for students referred to the child study team.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns regarding pre-referral interventions and rate of classification. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these issues. On-site monitoring determined that the district has begun to implement activities in these areas.

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding identification meeting timelines for speech referrals.

Area(s) of Need:

Identification Meeting Timelines—During the on-site monitoring, it was determined that the district does not consistently convene an identification meeting within 20 days of referral for students referred for a speech-language evaluation. A review of student records and interviews with staff members indicate that when the referral is received from a teacher, it may be sent back with recommendations for additional intervention in the classroom without a team determination regarding the need for evaluation. Following this additional period, an identification meeting is held. As a result, the meeting occurs well beyond the 20-day timeline.

- **The district will develop an improvement plan to include activities to ensure that identification meetings are conducted within 20 days of receipt of a referral for a speech-language evaluation. The implementation of these activities will ensure that the appropriate team reviews existing data to determine whether an evaluation is warranted. The team may determine that an evaluation is not warranted and provide recommendations for the classroom teacher if appropriate. These activities will result in the timely**

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and appropriate identification of potentially disabled students. The improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure implementation of the plan.

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Stratford School District on October 13, 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 virtually all areas of need and to develop an improvement plan that will bring about systemic change. The district is also commended for the prompt implementation of improvement plan activities and 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. The district is further commended for the many innovative and inclusive programs provided for students and extensive staff development opportunities for staff members.

A review of data indicated the district has increased the number of students placed in general education settings over the last few years, which is reflective of the district's commitment to inclusion. The data show a classification rate somewhat higher than the state average. The district has identified this as an area of need and has begun to address this through expansion of pre-referral interventions.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Approximately fifteen people attended the meeting, including parents, staff members, and a representative of the Board of Education. Parents gave positive input regarding the provision of special education programs and services. In addition, feedback was positive regarding the level of communication and collaboration between teaching staff, child study team members, and parents.

Standards identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included General Provisions, Free Appropriate Public Education (F.A.P.E.), Procedural Safeguards, Evaluation, Reevaluation, Eligibility, Individual Education Program (I.E.P.), Least Restrictive Environment (L.R.E.), Transition, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation, Programs and Services, and Student Records.

In addition to these standards, areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included Child Find 3-21, referral process (including direct referrals and summer referrals) and identification meeting participants and timelines for conducting identification meetings for students referred to the child study team.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding pre-referral interventions and rate of classification.

The on-site visit identified an additional area of need regarding identification meeting timelines for students referred for speech-language evaluations.

Within forty-five days of receipt of the monitoring report, the Stratford School District will revise and resubmit the improvement plan to the Office of Special Education Programs to address those areas that require revisions.