

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

District: Vernon Township School District

County: Sussex

Monitoring Dates: May 27, 28, 29 and 30, 2003

Monitoring Team: Zola Mills, Gladys Miller, Jenifer Tucci, and Tracey Pettiford-Bugg

Background Information:

During the 2001– 2002 school year, the Vernon 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 Vernon 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 Vernon Township 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 Lounsberry Hollow Middle School on May 19, 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 special education administrators, building principals, general education and special education teachers, speech therapists and child study team members.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for expanding their continuum to keep more students in district through the addition of an autistic class that programmatically provides applied behavioral analysis in consultation with Rutgers and Montclair Universities.

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The district is further expanding services by organizing a year-long Orton-Gillingham training for next school year. In addition, the district has developed a middle school and high school program focusing on daily living skills and interaction in the community. The district is committed to providing these programs as the students progress through the grade levels.

The district, in conjunction with a nearby therapeutic horse riding center, has developed a riding program for elementary and middle school special education students.

The district's fine arts, choral music, instrumental music and other performing arts programs have garnered state acclaim. Students, including students with disabilities, have won positions in state bands, choruses, orchestras and thespian programs. The district's athletic teams have also won state recognition.

The district supports their special needs parent organization by providing a meeting room and office space within the special services building.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

Reevaluation, Eligibility, Transition, Statewide Assessment and Programs and Services 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 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 area of professional and parent development. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks an on going plan for in-service training and a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training to ensure the compliant implementation of the procedures. The plan needs to be revised to include these components.**

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 extended school year, related services, length of school day and year, transfer students and certifications.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the dual use of instructional space. Rooms 103 and 104 at Cedar Mountain Primary School house both a self-contained class and a resource program during the same periods. This information has been provided to the county office.

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Section III: Procedural Safeguards

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

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding surrogate parents.

Area(s) of Need:

Surrogate Parents – During the on-site monitoring, interviews indicated that the district does not have a procedure to select and train surrogate parents in the event one is needed.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include a procedure for the selection and training of a surrogate parent in the event one is needed**

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of Child Find, referral process and pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, health summary, vision and hearing screenings and summer referrals for students eligible for special education and related services and participants.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding identification meetings.

Area(s) of Need:

Identification Meetings – During the on-site monitoring, it was not possible to determine whether identification meetings were held within twenty days of the receipt of referral because referrals were either not maintained in the file or, where a referral was maintained, it was not dated.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure each referral for an evaluation is maintained in the student's file. The plan must include a mechanism to ensure each referral is dated upon receipt. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, functional

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assessments, bilingual evaluations, acceptance or rejections of reports and independent evaluations.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding inclusion of eligibility determinations in written reports and lack of consistent dating of reports

Area(s) of Need:

Eligibility in Written Reports – During the on-site monitoring, staff interviews and record review indicated that related service providers are including eligibility determinations in their assessment reports.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that related services reports do not include eligibility statements since those determinations may only be made by an appropriately configured IEP team. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Dating of Written Reports – During the on-site monitoring, staff interviews and record review indicated that evaluators' reports were not consistently dated. As a result it was not possible to determine when these reports were developed.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that all evaluators' reports are consistently dated. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent 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 participants, considerations and required statements, goals and objectives aligned with core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, and teacher access and responsibility. Although teacher access and responsibility for knowing the contents of the IEP was compliant, the district submitted a plan to strengthen the area. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding ninety-day timelines and annual review of IEPs.

Area(s) of Need:

Ninety-day timelines - During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that ninety-day timelines were not consistently being met.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that ninety-day timelines are met to further ensure the timely provision of programs and services. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

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Annual Review of IEPs – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that nearly all annual reviews are conducted during the last two months of the school year. Though the IEP includes the program that will be implemented in September, it does not include a program that will be implemented from the date of the annual review to the end of the current school year. As a result, these students do not have a valid IEP in place for the last two months of the school year.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure annual reviews of IEPs include the program and services the students will receive through the end of the school year as well as the program and services for the coming school year. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of individualized decision-making, supplemental aids and services, regular education access and nonacademic and extracurricular participation.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding continuum for preschool students and least restrictive environment documentation.

Area(s) of Need:

Least Restrictive Environment - During the on-site monitoring, record review indicated that the district's IEP does not include all four statements required when considering the least restrictive environment.

- **The district will revise its IEP format to include the four least restrictive environment questions. It is recommended that the district adopt the IEP format developed by the Office of Special Education Programs.**

Continuum – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that the district does not consider general education placement options for preschool disabled students. Instead, preschool students with disabilities are placed in the district's preschool disabled self-contained program with no access to age appropriate non-disabled peers.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure preschool students with disabilities have the opportunity to receive educational services with their nondisabled peers when appropriate. The plan must include a mechanism for the district to establish links to community preschool settings to ensure a continuum of options. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures.**

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Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of agency involvement, student and agency invitation, age fourteen transition service needs, courses of study, preferences and interests, and age sixteen needed transition services.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a desire to strengthen the area of transition. The district has contracted with Project Hire to provide additional transition services for work or work 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 X: Transition to Preschool

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of pre-school transition planning conference and transition from early intervention to pre-school disabled by age three.

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 discipline procedures, documentation to case manager, functional behavioral analysis, behavior intervention plan, manifestation determination, interim alternative educational setting and procedural safeguards for students attending classes within the district.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of out-of-district schools applying inappropriate and inconsistent discipline policies. **The district's improvement plan is insufficient to address this area because it lacks an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedures. The plan needs to be revised to include this component**

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

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Section XIII: Graduation

Summary of Findings:

During self assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of IEP requirements and out-of-district participation.

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

Area(s) of Need:

Written Notice of Graduation – During the on-site monitoring, staff interviews and record review indicated that written notice of graduation is not provided to graduating seniors.

- **The district will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that notice of graduation is provided to all graduating seniors. It is recommended that the district adopt the form developed by the Office of Special Education Programs.**

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of access and requests, access sheets and maintenance and destruction of records.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding the documentation of other locations.

Area(s) of Need:

Documentation of Other Locations – During the on-site monitoring, it was determined through interviews and record review that central files do not identify the location of other records maintained by the district.

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

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Vernon Township School District on May 27, 28, 29 and 30, 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 commended for the exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of that review the district was able to identify almost all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that with some revision 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.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents expressed their satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services and with the district's responsiveness to the needs of their children. Concerns were expressed by several parents regarding a lack of sensitivity toward them and a lack of training for them that would enable them to work more comfortably as a full member of the IEP team. Another parent was concerned about a lack of in class-support classes at the high school. Transition planning services and contact with outside transition service agencies was also voiced as a concern. Social skills training as well as opportunities to mingle with non-disabled peers needs to be broadened and offered more consistently according to some parents. Parents felt that some improvement could be made in general education teachers' willingness to work with special needs students. One parent expressed her belief that the IEP team did not use the general education program as the starting point for placement considerations. Parents were concerned that the state freeze on aid to the schools would impact adversely on special education.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included policies and procedures, dissemination of IDEA, extended school year, related services, length of school day and year, transfer students, certifications, consent, notices of meetings, written notices, meetings, native language, independent evaluations, Child Find, referral process and pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, summer referrals, participants, multi-disciplinary evaluation, standardized assessments, functional assessments, accept or rejection of reports, independent evaluations, reevaluation timelines, planning meetings, participants, reevaluations completed by June 30th of students' last year in preschool, eligibility meetings and participants, criteria, statement of eligibility, copy of evaluation reports to parents, IEP meeting participants, goals and objectives aligned to core curriculum content standards, age of majority, implementation dates, annual review timelines, ninety day timelines, teacher access and responsibility, individualized decision-making, supplemental aids and services, regular education access, nonacademic and extracurricular participation, age fourteen transition service needs, courses, preference and interests, age sixteen needed transition services, agency involvement, student and agency invitation, pre-school transition planning conference and transition from early intervention to pre-school disabled by age three, all discipline procedures for in district students, participation in statewide assessments, approved accommodations and modifications, IEP documentation, alternate assessment, class size and waivers, age range and waivers, group sizes for speech, home instruction, access to student records and access sheets.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need including professional and parent development, teacher access and responsibility, age sixteen needed transition services, discipline procedures for out-of-district students, documentation to the case manager and suspension tracking for out-of-district students, functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans for out-of-district students, interim alternative educational settings and procedural safeguards for out-of-district students, and transition activities as students age out to another school within the district.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding surrogate parents, identification meeting timelines, written reports, annual review timelines, ninety-day timelines, Oberti factors, preschool continuum and documentation of other locations.

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