

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

District: Watchung School District **County:** Somerset

Monitoring Dates: February 23, 2005

Monitoring Team: Kim Murray, Nicole Buten

Background Information:

During the 2003-2004 school year, the Watchung School District conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Watchung School District with an opportunity to evaluate 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 Watchung 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 Valley View Middle School on March 21, 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. A representative sample of student records was also reviewed. Interviews were conducted with the district's special education administrators, building principals, general education and special education teachers, and child study team members.

Data Summary:

Over the last four years, the district has had a classification rate, excluding speech-only students, ranging from 9.3% to 10.95%, which is well below the state average. Providing students with programs in the least restrictive environment is the philosophy of the administration and teachers in the district. Over the last three years, 22 of the 27 students who were educated in out-of-district schools have returned to programs within

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the district. The district has consistently placed more than 75% of students with disabilities in general education classes for more than 80% of the day. I

District Strengths:

The district is commended for recognizing and addressing bullying behavior in the classroom. The district employs a psychologist who conducts lessons on sensitivity and accepting differences to the other students when the need arises. In addition, the district uses the Olweus Bullying Program in both the elementary and middle school. This program aims to empower those students who observe bullying to speak out.

Girls on the Run and Girls on the Track are two newly instituted programs for girls struggling with self-esteem issues. Once a week the girls meet to participate in lessons, activities and discussions focusing on self-esteem and healthy lifestyle choices. Following the lesson the girls run laps on the track with the focus not on competition, but on meeting individual goals.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

General Provisions, Procedural Safeguards, Discipline, Statewide Assessments, 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 II: Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the areas of provision of programs, provision of related services, length of school day and year, facilities and certifications.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of extended school 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 IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the areas of direct referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of referral process, pre-referral interventions, health summary and vision and hearing screenings. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of need.

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An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding child find materials.

Area(s) of Need:

Child Find: The materials disseminated by the district address only those students 3-5 years old. There is no information included for parents of older students who may be experiencing difficulties in school.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure child find materials target students ages three through twenty-one. This will ensure that all students who reside within the district and may be disabled are identified and referred to the district's child study team. The improvement plan must include administrative oversight to ensure the procedures are consistently implemented.**

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the areas of multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, signed and dated written reports and bilingual evaluations.

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

An additional area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding acceptance or rejection of outside reports.

Area(s) of Need:

Acceptance or rejection of outside reports: It was determined through file reviews and an interview with the director that child study team members are not consistently implementing the district policy for the review and acceptance or rejection of reports developed by outside evaluators or providing parents a written rationale when a report or parts of report are rejected.

- **The district will revise its improvement plan to ensure child study team members are implementing the district policy for review of outside evaluations. This will ensure parents are knowledgeable about what information submitted to the district has been accepted or rejected. The improvement plan must include administrative oversight to ensure the procedures are consistently implemented.**

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Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the areas of planning meeting participants and reevaluations completed by June 30th of students last year in preschool.

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

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

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the areas of eligibility meeting participants, criteria, statement of eligibility and signature of agreement or disagreement with eligibility.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of copies of evaluation reports to parents 10 days prior to the eligibility meeting and use of the severe discrepancy formula. During the on-site visit the district was able to demonstrate that the improvement plan activities have been implemented and these are no longer areas of need.

Section VIII: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the areas of IEP meeting participants, considerations and required statements, statement of present levels of education performance, goals and objectives aligned with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, annual review timelines and teacher access and responsibility.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of 90-day timelines. The improvement plan developed by the district is sufficient to address this area of need.

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

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During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the areas of decision-making process, consideration of supplementary aids and services, general education access and continuum of programs.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified concerns in the areas of documentation of consideration of the least restrictive environment and notification of nonacademic and extra-curricular activities to students who are placed out of district. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address these areas of need.

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment, the district identified compliance in the area of age 14 statement of transition services needs.

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 identified compliance in the area of early intervention program to preschool disabled program by age 3.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of preschool transition planning conferences. The district's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area of need.

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

Section XIII: Graduation

Summary of Findings:

As Watchung is K-8 district this section does not apply.

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Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Watchung School District on February 23, 2005. 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 a thorough review as part of the self-assessment process and an improvement plan that with minor revision, will address all areas of need.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, parents overall expressed satisfaction with education provided to the students and the communication and mutual respect between district personnel and themselves. One parent expressed frustration over what he felt was a lack of communication between teachers and child study team members that resulted in an inability to develop an appropriate program for his child. A lack of progress on securing admission to an out-of-district placement that served students with a specific disability was another concern voiced at the meeting. And while most of the parents agreed that the district provided a quality education for their students, there were concerns that the expectations of general education parents overshadowed the needs of students with special needs.

General Provisions, Procedural Safeguards, Discipline, Statewide Assessments, Programs and Services and Student Records were determined to be areas demonstrating compliance with all standards by the district during self-assessment and by the Office of Special Education Programs during the on-site visit.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included provision of programs, provision of related services, length of school day and year, facilities, certifications, child find, direct referrals, identification meeting timelines and participants, multi-disciplinary evaluations, standardized assessments, signed and dated written reports, bilingual evaluations, planning meeting participants, reevaluations completed by June 30th of students last year in preschool, eligibility meeting participants, criteria, statement of eligibility, signature of agreement or disagreement with eligibility, IEP meeting participants, considerations and required statements, statement of present levels of education performance, goals and objectives aligned with the core curriculum content standards, age of majority, annual review timelines, teacher access and responsibility, decision-making process, consideration of supplementary aids and services, regular education access, continuum of programs, age 14 statement of transition services needs and early intervention program to preschool disabled program by age 3.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding extended school year, transfer students, referral process, pre-referral interventions, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, functional assessments, three year timelines, copies of evaluation reports to parents 10 days prior to the eligibility meeting, use of the severe discrepancy formula, 90-day timelines, documentation of consideration of the least restrictive environment, notification of nonacademic and extra-curricular activities to students who are placed out of district and preschool transition planning conferences.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding acceptance or rejection of outside reports.

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