

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

District: Watchung Hills School District

County: Somerset

Monitoring Dates: October 15, 2003

Monitoring Team: Barbara J. Tucker, Dorothenia Boyd-Jackson

Background Information:

During the 2002–2003 school year, the Watchung Hills Regional High 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 Hills Regional 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 Watchung Hills Regional High School District developed an improvement plan to address identified areas of need.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) conducted a comprehensive desk audit, held a public focus group meeting for parents and community members at the Watchung Hills Regional School on September 18, 2003 and conducted parent interviews to verify the self-assessment findings, to assess the appropriateness of the improvement plan, and to determine the progress in implementing the plan. Based on these activities, a determination was made by staff from the Office of Special Education Programs that the district had conducted a thorough review during the self-assessment process and had developed a plan that will appropriately address all areas of identified need.

District Strengths:

The district is commended for its “Peer Outreach” Program which is designed to assist students in setting goals, making decisions and improving self-management skills in a wide range of settings, including school and the community. Mainstream and special needs students are able to enroll in this course where they are provided with strategies that enable them to successfully manage a variety of difficult social, emotional, and academic situations. This is achieved through participation in training seminars that help students develop a stronger sense of awareness of community, diversity and tolerance.

The district is further commended for its Career Academics Resource Experience (CARE) program that was instituted five years ago to educate more severely impaired students within the district. Students participate in educational activities that focus on life skills, career clusters of employment opportunities and field experiences.

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Data Summary:

The Watchung Hills Regional High School District is commended for maintaining a classification rate over the last three years which has consistently been below the state average. Additionally, the district is commended for steadily increasing the number of students with disabilities who participate in general education. During 2002-2003, more than 52% of the district's special needs students (41.6% is the state average) were educated in general education settings for at least 80% of the school day.

The district is also commended for providing training in the core curriculum content standards for all general and special education staff. These professional development seminars, workshops and activities have contributed towards a successful inclusive environment for students with special needs. A review of data indicates that 65.4% of the special needs students who took the HSPA during the 2002-2003 school year scored proficient in Language Arts Literacy, compared with only 61.9% of their non-disabled peers who scored proficient in the same area.

The district is further commended for developing an in-district program to address the needs of students with severe language and learning disabilities. District data indicates that 83% of students with unique or profound language and learning disabilities who once would have been considered for out-of-district placement, now receive services within the district and are able to receive some of their educational experiences with their non-disabled peers.

Data submitted by the district also indicated that of all the students with disabilities who graduated in June 2003, 84% have gone on to post-secondary education or have secured full-time employment. The district is commended for successfully achieving a 100% graduation rate during the last two years.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

General Provisions, Free Appropriate Public Education, Location, Referral and Identification, Individualized Education Program, Least Restrictive Environment, Transition, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation, Programs and Services and Student Records were all 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 III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of surrogate parents, consent, written notices, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations, 20-day timelines and provision of procedural safeguards.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of notices of meetings. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the

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district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about correction in these areas.

No additional areas of need were identified during the desk audit, focus group and/or parent interviews.

Section V: Protection in Evaluation and Evaluation Procedures

Summary of Findings

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of bilingual assessments, multidisciplinary standardized assessments, functional assessments and written reports signed and dated.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of acceptance/rejection of evaluation reports. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to bring about correction in this area.

No additional areas of need were identified during the desk audit, focus group and/or parent interviews.

Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

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

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.

No additional areas of need were identified during desk audit, focus group and/or parent interviews.

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the district accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of copies of evaluation reports to parents, meeting/participants, statement of severe learning discrepancy (SLD), signatures of agreement/ disagreement, copy of evaluation reports to parents/ adult student 10 days prior to meeting.

During the self-assessment process, the district identified a concern in the area of eligibility criteria. Although the district initially identified this as an area of need, the district was able to demonstrate that it has already begun to appropriately implement specific activities to bring about correction in this area.

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No additional areas of need were identified during desk audit, focus group and/or parent interviews.

Section X: Transition to Preschool is not applicable for this regional high school district.

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Summary

The Watchung Hills Regional High School District is to be commended for the exceptionally comprehensive review conducted during the self-assessment process. As a result of their review, the district was able to identify all areas of need and develop an improvement plan that has already resulted in systemic change in most areas. The district is further commended for the many areas determined by the district as compliant with federal and state statutes and regulations and verified by the Office of Special Education Programs through a desk audit, a focus group meeting and parent interviews.

A review of the data indicated several excellent trends over the last three years. The district has maintained a classification rate below the state average, they have steadily increased the percentage of disabled students in the least restrictive environment for more than 80% of the day and the district has maintained a graduation rate of 100% for the last two years. Information gathered by the district indicated that 84% of the special needs students who graduated in June 2003 are either attending a post-secondary institution or have sought full time employment. Additionally, the district provides exceptional training for general and special education teachers in the core curriculum content standards. As a result of this training, students with disabilities are benefiting from participation through differentiated instruction in general education classes. During the 2002-2003 school year, special needs students outscored their non-disabled peers in Language Arts Literacy by a margin of 3.5%.

General Provisions, Free Appropriate Public Education, Location, Referral and Identification, Individualized Education Program, Least Restrictive Environment, Transition, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation, Programs and Services and Student Records were areas demonstrating compliance with all standards.

At a focus group meeting, parents expressed their general satisfaction with many of the district's programs and services. Many parents praised district staff for their genuine concern, their ability to be open to new ideas and new suggestions. They also commended district staff for their welcomed consideration of parental input. Positive comments were also expressed by parents regarding the district's "Peer Outreach Program." Parents are particularly pleased that the district offers a fifth year program related to post-high school transition needs. Several parents expressed a desire to see the program further develop to include life-skills preparedness, job training and job development. Parents who could not attend the meeting submitted written comments. In general, many of those written comments indicated that parents and students felt that their experiences with district staff and programs were both positive and satisfying. In summary, they felt that "this is a district that does everything right."

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the district during self-assessment and verified through desk audits, the parent focus group meeting and parent interviews included, surrogate parents, consent, written notice, notices in native language, interpreters at meetings, independent evaluations, bilingual assessments, multidisciplinary standardized assessments, functional assessments, written reports signed and dated, reevaluation planning meetings, copies of evaluation reports to parents, meeting/participants, statement of severe learning discrepancy and signatures of agreement/disagreement.

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During the self-assessment process, the district identified areas of need regarding notices of meetings, acceptance/rejection of evaluation reports, required components of a functional assessment, three year timelines and eligibility criteria.

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