

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

Charter school: Unity Charter School Charter school **County:** Morris

Monitoring Dates: December 3 and 4, 2002

Monitoring Team: Janet Wright, Zola Mills and Jenifer Tucci

Background Information:

During the 2001–2002 school year, the Unity Charter School conducted a self-assessment of policies, procedures, programs, services, and student outcomes. This self-assessment component of the monitoring process provided the Unity Charter School 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 Unity Charter School 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 Unity Charter School on November 18, 2002. Information obtained from that meeting was used to direct the focus of the monitoring visit.

During the on-site visit, the NJDOE team reviewed charter school documents, including charter school 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 charter school's special education administrators, building principals, general education and special education teachers, speech therapists and child study team members.

Charter school Strengths:

The charter school is commended for its commitment to personalizing instruction by collaboratively developing a Personalized Learning Plan with staff, students and parents that recognizes each student's unique learning style. This is in addition to the IEP that is developed for special education students.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

This commitment is further demonstrated through the development of a multidisciplinary approach to learning which includes an integrated content curriculum that is used with all students, including students with disabilities.

The charter school also provides a sense of community enhanced by classroom meetings and community service opportunities for every student in the school. Kindergarteners visit a senior citizens home on a weekly basis. Students at other levels plan, prepare, cook and serve meals at a soup kitchen.

Students also observe the entire food cycle from composting lunch waste to starting seeds, preparing and planting a garden and harvesting the produce for use in the organic school lunch program.

The charter school is commended for its commitment to encouraging students to preserve and respect the earth's environment and inhabitants through a variety of specialized and targeted programs identified below that all students participate in.

The joint project with Rutgers University - This project is a scientific study on the ecological impact of suburban sprawl and its effects on our forests.

The Tracker Program – This program includes students from kindergarten to eighth grade. It teaches them survival skills, love of nature and a sense of responsibility for our earth.

Areas Demonstrating Compliance With All Standards:

General Provisions, Evaluation, Discipline, Statewide Assessment, Graduation and Programs and Services were determined to be areas of compliance by the charter school 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 charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of extended school year, related services, length of school day and year and facilities.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding transfer students and certifications.

Area(s) of Need:

Transfer Students – During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that although the charter school requires students to have a transfer card prior to enrollment, the team does not conduct an immediate review of the IEP and evaluation information from the previous district or charter school. As a result, students are placed in general education or in one of the available resource center programs. To date, the school has always been able to implement the IEPs of students who have transferred into the school once they receive the IEP from the district.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure an immediate review of reports and evaluation materials is conducted. Additionally, the plan must include procedures to ensure the charter school provides the program and services required by the IEP. In the event the parent and/or the school disagree with the current IEP, an interim IEP must be implemented that is consistent with the current IEP. The plan must include in-service training, a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Certifications/Staffing – During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that a general education teacher and a learning consultant are providing in-class support services. This instruction may only be provided by an appropriately certified teacher of the handicapped.

- **The charter school will immediately obtain an appropriately certified teacher to provide in-class support services. The plan must include procedures to ensure only appropriately certified staff provide services in the future. The plan must further include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Section III: Procedural Safeguards

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of consent.

During the self-assessment process, the charter school identified concerns in the area of surrogate parents. The charter school's improvement plan is sufficient to address this area. The charter school further identified concerns in the area of native language. **The charter school'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.

Additional areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding notices of meetings, written notices, meetings and acceptance/rejection of reports.

Area(s) of Need:

Notices of meetings – During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that notices of meetings are inconsistently sent to parents. Typically, these meetings are scheduled in an informal, often verbal manner.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include a procedure to ensure that notices of meetings are sent to parents and copies are maintained in student files. The plan must include an**

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedure.

Meetings – During the on-site monitoring, record review and interview indicated that eligibility meetings and identification meetings are inconsistently conducted.

- **The charter school will revise its improvement plan to include procedures to ensure identification meetings and eligibility meetings are conducted with all required participants. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Acceptance/Rejection – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that although the charter school considers the findings of outside evaluations the team does not document the acceptance and/or rejection of these outside assessments.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure the team appropriately documents the acceptance and/or rejection of outside assessments. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedure.**

Section IV: Location, Referral and Identification

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of referral process, pre-referral interventions, direct referrals and summer referrals.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding Child Find, health summaries, vision and hearing screenings, referral dates and meeting participants.

Area(s) of Need:

Child Find - During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that although there is a Board of Trustee policy on Child Find, the charter school does not have any written information that is available to parents and students regarding the services that are available to potentially disabled students.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that Child Find information is written and disseminated to parents and students. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Health Summary/Vision and Hearing Screenings – During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated the nurse is not summarizing health information nor is she conducting vision and hearing screenings when a student is referred for an evaluation.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that health summaries and vision and hearing screenings are completed by the nurse and provided to the child study team whenever a student is referred for an initial evaluation. The charter school's improvement plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Referral Dates – During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated referral dates are not consistently documented. As a result, it is impossible to determine whether the school is meeting the 20-day identification meeting timeline.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that referral dates are consistently documented in the files. The charter school's plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Meeting Participants – During the on-site monitoring, interviews and record review indicated that the required participants are not in attendance at meetings. Identification meetings are conducted with the director, special education teacher, general education teacher, the learning disabilities teacher-consultant and the parent. The social worker and the psychologist are not present. Reevaluation, eligibility and IEP meeting documentation does not include the participants who may have attended the meetings. As such, it was not possible to determine who actually attends these meetings when they are conducted. Interviews indicated that most meetings were very informal with inconsistent participation of regular and special education teachers and parents.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure all required participants attend all required meetings and that their participation is documented. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Section VI: Reevaluation

Summary of Finding:

During self-assessment the charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of reevaluation planning meeting.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding three year timelines and participants at planning meetings (see section IV).

Area(s) of Need:

Three Year Timelines - During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that reevaluations are not consistently conducted within the three year timeline.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that reevaluations are conducted in accordance with the three year timeline. The plan must include an**

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

administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.

Section VII: Eligibility

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the area of criteria.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding eligibility meetings and participants (see sections III and IV), statement of eligibility and copy of evaluation reports to parents.

Area(s) of Need:

Statement of Eligibility – During the on-site monitoring, record review indicated that although eligibility statements are included in the annual review IEPs, the statement and notice of eligibility is not developed or maintained for initial cases and reevaluations.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that the statement of eligibility and notice of eligibility is developed and maintained for all initials and reevaluations. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Copies of Evaluation Reports to Parents - During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that evaluation reports are not consistently sent to parents ten days prior to the meeting.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that evaluation reports are provided to parents ten days prior to the meeting and that it is documented in the files. The plan must include 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 charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of alignment of goals and objectives with the core curriculum content standards, implementation dates and teacher knowledge and access to the IEP.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding IEP participants (see section IV), considerations and required statements, annual review and ninety-day timelines.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Area(s) of Need:

Considerations and Required Statements - During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that for in-class support the amount of time and frequency that the special education teacher is in the classroom is not documented in the IEP.

- **The charter school will revise its IEP format to include the frequency and duration the special education teacher is providing in-class support. It is recommended the charter school adopt the IEP format developed by the Office of Special Education Programs.**

Annual Review - During the on-site monitoring, record review indicated that IEP meetings are not being conducted annually.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that IEPs are reviewed on an annual basis. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Ninety-Day Timelines – During the on-site monitoring, it was not possible to determine whether ninety-day timelines were being met because there was no documentation of the date consent to evaluate was provided.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that dates of consent are clearly documented. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures. It is recommended the school adopt the notice forms developed by the Office of Special Education Programs.**

Section IX: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of decision-making process, considerations of supplementary aids and services, regular education access and continuum of programs.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding least restrictive environment documentation.

Area(s) of Need:

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

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

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

Section X: Transition to Post-School

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the charter school identified no areas of need.

An area of need was identified during the on-site visit regarding age fourteen transition service needs.

Area(s) of Need:

Age Fourteen Transition Service Needs – During the on-site monitoring, record review and interviews indicated that the charter school is not developing transition plans for students who will turn age fourteen during the period of time that IEP will be in effect.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure that age fourteen transition service needs are considered and documented in the IEP for those students who will turn fourteen during the period of time that IEP will be in effect. The plan must include in-service, a mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.**

Section XV: Student Records

Summary of Findings:

During self-assessment the charter school accurately identified themselves compliant in the areas of requests for records and documentation of records.

Areas of need were identified during the on-site visit regarding access sheets and maintenance and destruction of records.

Area(s) of Need:

Access Sheets – During the on-site monitoring, record review indicated that there are no access sheets in the student files.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to ensure student files contain access sheets. The plan must include an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation.**

Maintenance and Destruction of Records – During the on-site visit, interviews indicated that the charter school does not have a procedure for the maintenance and destruction of records.

- **The charter school will revise the improvement plan to include procedures to ensure student records are appropriately maintained and destroyed when required. The plan must include in-service, a**

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

mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the training and an administrative oversight component to ensure the consistent, compliant implementation of the procedures.

New Jersey Department of Education Special Education Monitoring

Summary

On-site special education monitoring was conducted in the Unity Charter School on December 3 and 4, 2002. The purpose of the monitoring visit was to verify the charter school's report of findings resulting from their self-assessment and to review the charter school's improvement plan. As a result of the self-assessment review conducted by the charter school, some areas of need were identified and an improvement plan was developed.

At a focus group meeting held prior to the monitoring visit, the one parent in attendance expressed her satisfaction with many of the charter school's programs and services. She was especially complementary to the child study team and the concern they shared for her children's needs.

Areas identified as consistently compliant by the charter school during self-assessment and verified during the on-site monitoring visit included general provisions, extended school year, related services, length of school day and year, facilities, consent, referral process, pre-referral interventions, direct referrals, and summer referrals, multidisciplinary evaluation, standardized assessment, functional assessment, written reports and bilingual evaluations, reevaluation planning meetings, criteria, alignment of goals and objectives with the core curriculum content standards, teacher knowledge and access to IEPs, decision-making process, considerations of supplementary aids and services, regular education access, continuum, discipline, statewide assessment, graduation, programs and services, access and requests for records and documentation of other locations.

During the self-assessment process, the charter school identified areas of need regarding surrogate parents and native language.

The on-site visit identified additional areas of need within the various standards regarding transfer students, certifications, staffing, notices of meetings, written notice, meetings, independent evaluations, Child Find, health summary, vision and hearing screenings, identification meeting timelines and participants, acceptance and rejection of reports, three year timelines, reevaluation planning meeting participants, eligibility meetings and participants, statement of eligibility, copies of reports to parents, IEP meeting participants, considerations and required statements, implementation dates, annual review and ninety-day timelines, least restrictive environment documentation, age fourteen transition service needs, access sheets, maintenance of records and destruction of records.

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