



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



July 18, 2011

Mrs. Irene Cornish
Superintendent of Schools
Stratford Public School District
1000 East Broadway
Stratford, CT 06615

Dear Mrs. Cornish:

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), Bureau of Special Education (BSE) conducted a special education focused monitoring site visit in the Stratford Public School District in April of this year. The review focused on the following key performance indicator: *Improve the district's effectiveness of efforts to educate students with an individualized education program (IEP) as demonstrated by procedural compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), and students with disabilities' participation and performance on statewide assessments.*

The attached report reflects the BSE's conclusions regarding your district's performance in this area of focus and any additional items identified through this focused monitoring review related to compliance with special education law and regulations.

As part of the Connecticut State Performance Plan (SPP) and General Supervision System, the 2010-11 focused monitoring system ensures:

- a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) is both accessible and available to students with a disability;
- a full investigation of the targeted key performance indicator is conducted; and
- if noncompliance is identified, corrective actions are implemented, evidence-based technical assistance is recommended, deficiencies are addressed and noncompliance is verified for correction within 12 months.

Additionally, part of the CSDE's responsibility is to provide general supervision of school districts' compliance with all state and federal special education regulations. When a review generates findings of systemic practice or a single serious incident that indicates the failure of the district to comply with regulations, the CSDE must notify the district in writing with reference to the specific regulation(s) being violated. The district must respond to these findings with a specific plan of correction and must provide acceptable documentation for verification of correction within a 12 month timeframe.

The BSE requires the district to consider the identified recommendations and complete the required corrective actions in the enclosed report. Specific activities and timelines are identified to assure compliance with implementation of Part B of the IDEA and Sections 10-76a to 10-76h, inclusive, of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.), for those issues requiring action.

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An improvement planning session was held to assist the district in prioritizing the recommended actions and in developing an improvement plan responsive to those recommendations. This session was arranged and held at a mutually convenient time in the district facilitated by the BSE. A team consisting of at least the following personnel was recommended to be available to participate during this session: superintendent or administrative designee; director of special education; representatives from general education and special education; and a parent representative for children with disabilities. It was also recommended that union leadership and board of education representatives be present in the collaborative planning process. The district was allowed to invite any additional members it deemed necessary and was encouraged to bring any currently existing district improvement plans to inform this process.

Please review the findings of the report with staff and families in the district. The district is required to submit to the BSE a progress report of activities in six-month intervals to monitor implementation of the improvement plan. Patricia Anderson, lead consultant from the BSE assigned to your district, will contact you prior to the progress reporting period.

If you have any questions regarding the report or the district's improvement plan, please contact Patricia Anderson at 860-713-6923 or e-mail at patricia.anderson@ct.gov.

Sincerely,



Charlene Russell-Tucker
Associate Commissioner
Division of Family and Student Support Services

CRT:dcs

cc: George A. Coleman, Acting Commissioner
Anne Louise Thompson, Bureau Chief
Patricia Anderson, Education Consultant
Marcus Rivera, Education Consultant
Ellen Michaels, Director of Pupil Services

Attachment

**Connecticut State Department of Education
Bureau of Special Education
Focused Monitoring Report**

Stratford Public Schools

Key Performance Indicator: Improve the district's effectiveness in efforts to educate students with an individualized education program (IEP) as demonstrated by procedural compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), and students with disabilities' participation and performance on statewide assessments.

Dates of Site Visit: April 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, 2011

Date of Report: July 18, 2011

Team Members: Patricia Anderson, Bureau of Special Education
Dana Corriveau, Bureau of Special Education
Sherri Edgar, Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC)
Marcus Rivera, Bureau of Special Education
Donnah Rochester, State Education Resource Center (SERC)

Activities:

- Educational benefit review process;
- student file review;
- staff interviews;
- parent survey;
- student interviews;
- classroom observations;
- review of district policies and procedures; and
- review of district data and professional development offerings for 2009-10 and 2010-11.

Section 1: Reason for Review

The role of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is to monitor and support districts in improving results for students with disabilities and complying with IDEA. In October 2010, the Associate Commissioner of the Division of Family and Student Support Services (DFSSS) notified the Stratford Public Schools (SPS) and communicated data concerns regarding the achievement levels of students with disabilities. Based on these data, the Department conducted a focused monitoring visit whose purpose was threefold: (1) to determine the causes of the achievement concerns; (2) to support the district by identifying improvement strategies; and (3) to communicate IDEA requirements in the event that corrective action was warranted.

Section 2: Common themes

a. Parental Involvement and Communication

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- i. Stratford elementary, middle and high school administrators and personnel described a variety of parent/community engagement activities, administered throughout the academic year, to build partnerships and regular communication between schools and communities, including special education parent teacher associations (SEPTAs), e-mail and phone contacts, use of "Power School," and staff meetings.
- ii. The majority of parents surveyed through CPAC have had their children enrolled in the district for four or more years (i.e., 25 of the 29 parents surveyed). Almost 70 percent of survey respondents have children attending Stratford's elementary and middle schools. Most of the parents surveyed reported that their children (a) spend most of the day with peers in general education classrooms, and (b) participate in all the same activities other children have available to them. Most parents surveyed also affirmed that they receive progress reports that are written in a way that parents can understand.
- iii. Most parents surveyed also reported, however, that they "sometimes" or "never" are provided with information about organizations that could offer support to their child and/or family concerning their child's disability. Similarly, most parents surveyed stated that their child's school "sometimes" or "never" provides the books and other information necessary to help parents support their child's learning at home. Finally, the majority of parents surveyed reported that school personnel "sometimes" or "never" ask for their opinion about how well special education services are meeting their child's needs.

b. Use of Data

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- i. The district has been building the capacity of school administrators and personnel, through professional development offerings (e.g., Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative) and the use of new curriculum assessments, to use student data in order to make instructional decisions. School data teams meet at least monthly. School principals readily articulated current data results and improvement strategies to visiting team members. The use of Common Formative Assessments (CFAs) is a strong, foundational step in the regular collection and school/district analysis of data.
- ii. The district has begun to augment its array of curriculum-based assessments for data-driven decision making. Regular use of attendance, discipline and social/behavioral data as part of this process is starting to take place through initiatives such as the "Make Your Day" program. Central office and school leaders/personnel acknowledged the importance of considering the whole child, in order to find root causes to achievement concerns and tailor improvement strategies to students' needs. The administration is exploring effective ways to triangulate these academic and social data results in all schools.

- iii. School improvement plans do not consistently disaggregate results for students with disabilities. As a result, a data-driven, school-level focus on goals and strategies to progress monitor and improve results for students with disabilities – at each grade level, PK-12 – was absent across schools.
- iv. Concerted effort has been made across elementary schools to develop flexible reading groups, based on regular reading assessments, in order to accelerate reading gains and offer "double dose" reading interventions to all students, when needed. School personnel, including reading tutors, were deployed to offer small, student-teacher ratios during reading instruction and support. At the high school level, students who were identified as having difficulty in reading and mathematics were provided with additional interventions (i.e., "double dose" classes) as well as a student success plan.
- v. School personnel reported access to many forms of data, especially through INFORM, but expressed concern about which data elements to examine, how to analyze them, and how to use data to make instructional decisions. At the middle schools, staff members were not convinced of the value of collecting so many data elements, but noted the need to increase their ability to provide good progress monitoring.
- vi. Qualitative data concerns in several areas were noted during the visiting team review of a random sample of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of students with disabilities. Please see "Section 5: Recommendations" for further information.

c. Staff Development

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- i. Most staff members indicated a need for general and special education teachers and related-service personnel to participate in ongoing, job-embedded, professional development offerings together – with regular opportunities also to review together grade-level data and plan lessons and interventions (e.g., before school from 7-9 a.m. or half-day, once a month). Staff members reported, across schools, that they try to meet when possible, but regular collaboration was not evident to review the needs of students with disabilities, develop IEPs, progress monitor assessment results, and plan accordingly (lessons, accommodations and modifications). A number of staff members also noted the need for specialized training in autism spectrum disorders.
- ii. The lack of regular collaboration between general and special education teachers extended to educator training interactions with classroom instructional aides (CIAs)/paraprofessionals. This may have resulted in the visiting team observations and interview findings that showed a range of CIA adult behaviors – from paraprofessionals seeming to offer too many modifications and lacking in student assistive technology support to, in other cases, demonstrating high expectations for students with disabilities, which apparently, over several years, resulted in significant reading and communication gains. Staff members requested that the district permit paraprofessionals to participate in literacy and social/behavioral professional development offerings and data team discussions, alongside educators and related service personnel.

- iii. Consistent concerns regarding professional development across the secondary level included the need for additional training in collaborative teaching models, differentiation of instruction, and better use of technology for both special and general education staff members. School personnel expressed concern that there were (1) inconsistencies when the same professional development topic was presented to different staff member groups; and (2) few opportunities for professional feedback, collaboration and implementation accountability.

d. Access to General Education and Student Engagement

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- i. Stratford students with disabilities appear to be included in the same activities as nondisabled peers. However, secondary level staff members frequently expressed concern about not always being able to meet the needs of students with disabilities because of large class sizes. In one high school and one middle school, special education teachers were also pulled from collaborative classrooms, with little notice, to cover other assignments.
- ii. Although excellent examples of academic rigor and differentiation were noted in several elementary, middle and high school classrooms of disabled and nondisabled peers, overall these observations were limited, including limited evidence of co-teaching models to help students with disabilities reach grade-level expectations. During interviews, several staff members could not clearly distinguish between accommodations and modifications and their appropriate application within the general education classroom.
- iii. A culture of low expectations was evident in Grades 9-12, as a result of the visiting team's school observations and interviews of high school administrators, personnel and students:
 - o students reported that the curriculum was not challenging;
 - o observations were noted and statements were made by students that adults coddled them and/or were overprotective throughout the continuum of special education supports (e.g., resource support) and secondary transition opportunities they received;
 - o students expressed that they did not feel like their peers were there to learn;
 - o staff members expressed concern that students were not there to learn;
 - o one high school administrator expressed concern about the climate in the school and the lack of participation by students, staff and parents;
 - o little to no homework seemed to be offered;
 - o little use of technology as a learning tool was evident;
 - o no textbooks seemed available to learn content in several classrooms;
 - o little differentiation was noted in several classrooms with students with disabilities;
 - o peer-to-peer respect and teacher classroom management was an issue in some classrooms; and

- students expressed, in some cases, that they did not want to be at their school.

e. Additional Information

The following theme emerged throughout the site visit:

- i. Transportation barriers – due to the lack of public transportation and redistricting – seem to limit student and parent access to after-school activities and parent attendance at planning and placement team meetings. The lack of access to transportation seems to have also impacted the district expectation that all parents register for "Power School" at their child's school. "Power School" is a tool to help build parent-teacher communication. Upon review of the elementary and high school statistics, it seems that less than half of all Stratford parents travelled to their child's school to register for "Power School."

Section 3: Findings of Noncompliance and Corrective Actions

The first day of the visit began with an abbreviated review of IEPs through the educational benefit review process. Both district personnel and focused monitoring team members attended throughout the day. While not specifically making a determination about educational benefit, this process allowed the team members to identify areas of noncompliance. A full file review also occurred to further address areas of noncompliance. If systemic noncompliance was suspected, the team reviewed additional files to verify the systemic nature of the noncompliance.

The following are specific citations of noncompliance with IDEA that must be corrected and verified as corrected, as soon as possible, but no later than one year from the date of this report:

1. **Statement of Finding:** For students in secondary transition, there must be at least one annual goal and related objective for each Post-School Outcome Goal Statement.

Regulatory Citation(s): 34 C.F.R. Section 300.320(b).

Evidence: Review of IEPs and student special education files.

Corrective Action(s): Student SASID #4824863853 had a Post-School Outcome Goal Statement (PSOGS #5C on IEP Page 6) that did not have a corresponding annual goal and objective (IEP Page 7, Annual Goal with Independent Living box at the top of the page).

- Submit to Dr. Patricia Anderson, Bureau of Special Education consultant, any annual reviews since October 13, 2010, for this student, and, if the annual goal in Independent Living that correlates with the student's PSOGS is still not articulated, meet with the student, parent and team to amend the IEP as soon as possible. Submit an amended IEP to Dr. Anderson no later than August 30, 2011.
- Share, as soon as possible but no later than December 30, 2011, secondary transition recommendations prepared by Dr. Anderson with district staff members who write transition goals and objectives for student IEPs.

Evidence of Correction: Dr. Patricia Anderson, a consultant from the Bureau of Special Education reviewed an additional random sample of five IEPs for transition-age students on April 14, 2011. None of the files presented compliance issues but secondary transition recommendations were developed by Dr. Anderson for district officials to review with staff

members who write transition goals and objectives for student IEPs. This review must take place no later than December 30, 2011. District submission of staff training agendas must be submitted to Dr. Anderson no later than January 15, 2012, as evidence that the recommendations were reviewed and disseminated.

Section 4: Strengths

1. Central office and school administrators, educators and other personnel interviewed demonstrated a generalized district belief system that the success of students with disabilities is their responsibility: an "our students" perspective when referring to students with disabilities. Most students with disabilities receive their instruction in regular classrooms; parents surveyed confirmed their child's inclusion.
2. Ongoing training in data-driven decision making and implementing a scientific research-based intervention design was noted across schools. Additional reading instruction/intervention training resulted in "double doses" of reading instruction/intervention and the frequent assessment of reading, across schools, to accelerate gains. The visiting team observed these flexible reading groups throughout the visit and the deployment of staff to assist with reading support.

Section 5: Recommendations

1. Examine school innovations to maximize achievement and enhance engagement among all students, including:
 - a. inclusive practices that demonstrate collaborative classrooms where general and special education teachers are planning and teaching lessons together, and paraprofessionals receive explicit special education guidance to assist in providing supplementary aids and services;
 - b. an assessment of all school personnel expertise in meeting the academic and social needs of students with disabilities: (i) to better deploy staff to meet students' needs (e.g., use of "Step by Step" personnel assessment tools); (ii) to address class size issues; and (iii) to ensure that necessary special education teacher assignments are made for class periods (thereby eliminating the practice of pulling special education teachers from collaborative classrooms to offer coverage in other areas);
 - c. an advising system at the middle and high schools that connects each Stratford student with a caring adult and builds respect and rapport among students (e.g., mentor programs, Grade 9 student academies, and peer-to-peer assistance and leadership programs);
 - d. "block scheduling" of classes to offer more time for small and large group examination and discussion of curricular topics with effective teachers; and
 - e. use of appropriate accommodations and a range of assistive technology tools (e.g., books on tape) as a first approach to enhance student learning in the general classroom, instead of the primary use of curriculum modifications that may be

resulting in students' comments that their high school experience is not challenging them.

2. Conduct school administrator and teacher leader walkthroughs to identify and examine effective differentiation in reading and language arts, PK-12, in Stratford schools and programs. Provide leadership and technical assistance to maximize effective differentiation in all schools and grade-levels, using the practices found in exemplary classrooms.
3. Begin regular use of attendance, tardy, discipline and social/behavioral data across schools, as part of collaborative decision making to improve student academic and social outcomes, and to address both school climate and school culture concerns. This is starting to take place through initiatives such as the "Make Your Day" program, but a much more robust improvement strategy is needed to reverse, for example, the apparent culture of low expectations exhibited in Grades 9-12 (please see pages 4-5 of this report). As noted above, central office and school leaders/personnel acknowledged the importance of considering the whole child in order to determine the root causes of achievement concerns and to effectively lead districtwide improvement strategies that result from triangulating these data in all schools.
4. Amend district and school improvement plans, based on the review of literacy and mathematics data concerning students with disabilities. Develop measurable short- and long-term targets and goals, an accountability framework, and a clear structure for meeting expectations both at the adult and student levels. School-level plans should be aligned with the district plan where appropriate, and also address the uniqueness of each school community. All progress or slippage for students with disabilities should be monitored through the use of instructional, school- and district-level data teams. Provide consistent training to all school personnel to identify essential data elements for regular review, to analyze these data elements, and to use data to make instructional decisions.
5. Offer regular opportunities for general and special education teachers and related service personnel to participate in professional development offerings together, along with regular (at a minimum, monthly) opportunities to review grade-level data and plan lessons and interventions together (i.e., collaboration time). Staff report across schools that they try to meet together "when they can" but regular collaboration was not evident in order to review the needs of students with disabilities, develop IEPs, progress monitor and plan accordingly (lessons, accommodations and modifications). A number of staff members also noted the need for specialized training in autism spectrum disorders.
6. Offer regular collaboration between general and special education teachers and CIAs/paraprofessionals. As noted above, observations and interviews showed a range in CIA knowledge and skills: from paraprofessionals offering too many modifications and limited assistive technology support, to, in other cases, demonstrating high expectations for students with disabilities over several years – resulting in reported significant reading and communication gains. Staff requested the participation of paraprofessionals in teacher professional development offerings and data team discussions.

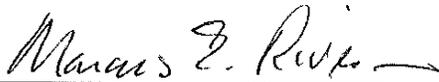
7. Ensure that the district professional development plan includes consistent, ongoing training in collaborative teaching models, differentiation of instruction, and better use of technology for both special and general education staff members – with regular opportunities for professional feedback, collaboration and implementation accountability.
8. Partner with Stratford municipal leaders to review and find solutions for the public transportation barriers that seem to limit student and parent/guardian access to after-school activities and parent attendance at planning and placement team meetings. Consider alternate ways to ensure that the majority of parents/guardians have better access to “Power School” registration, a districtwide tool to help build parent-teacher communication.
9. Review individualized education programs of students with disabilities to improve the quality of the following items that raised concerns during the student file review:
 - a. present levels of academic and functional performance, including how the child's disability affects his/her involvement and progress in the general curriculum;
 - b. results of the initial or most recent evaluation;
 - c. current classroom-based assessments and observations as components of the evaluation;
 - d. program accommodations and modifications that enable the child to be involved and make progress in the general curriculum, and participate in extracurricular and non-academic activities;
 - e. supports for school personnel;
 - f. at the annual review, the extent to which the IEP was revised (1) to address any lack of expected progress toward the annual goals and in the general education curriculum; (2) to address information about the child provided by his/her parents; and (3) to address the child's anticipated needs; and
 - g. at the secondary level, the extent to which there is at least one annual goal and related objectives for each post-school outcome goal statement.

The education benefit process initiated during the site visit can offer a vehicle across schools in which teams of central office and school leaders, general and special education teachers, related service personnel and classroom instructional aides, ensure the development and implementation of standards-based IEPs that will accelerate reading results for students receiving special education and related services.

An improvement planning session took place on June 14, 2011, at the central office of the Stratford Public Schools, 1000 East Broadway, Stratford, in the Board Room. The district reviewed current improvement plans, frameworks and/or goals in order to enhance its effectiveness in educating students with IEPs, as demonstrated by two key performance indicators: (1) procedural compliance with IDEA; and (2) the participation and performance of students with disabilities on statewide assessments.

Report Prepared By:

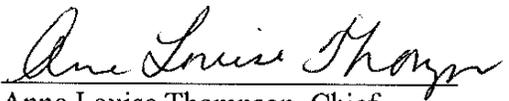
Report Reviewed By:



Marcus E. Rivera, Education Consultant
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7/18/11

Date



Anne Louise Thompson, Chief
Bureau of Special Education

7/18/11

Date