



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



April 27, 2011

Ms. Lynda Mitchell
Acting Superintendent of Schools
Thomaston Public School District
158 Main Street, Box 166
Thomaston, CT 06787-0166

Dear Ms. Mitchell:

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), Bureau of Special Education (BSE) conducted a special education focused monitoring site visit in the Thomaston Public School District in February 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.

Ms. Lynda Mitchell

April 27, 2011

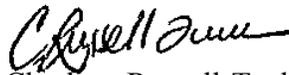
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An improvement planning session will be held to assist the district in prioritizing the recommended actions and in developing an improvement plan responsive to those recommendations. This session will be arranged and held at a mutually convenient time in the district facilitated by the BSE. A team consisting of at least the following personnel needs 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 is recommended that union leadership and board of education representatives be present in the collaborative planning process. The district may invite any additional members it deems necessary and is 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. Perri Murdica, 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 planning session, please contact Perri Murdica at 860-713-6942 or e-mail at Perri.murdica@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

Perri Murdica, Education Consultant

Nancy Schnyer, Pupil Services Director

Attachment

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

Thomaston Public School District

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 Act (IDEA), and students with disabilities' participation and performance on statewide assessments.

Dates of Site Visit: February 7, 8, 9, 2011

Date of Report: April 27, 2011

Team Members: Perri Murdica, Bureau of Special Education
Jocelyn Mackey, Bureau of Health, Nutrition, and Adult Education
Wendy Simmons, State Education Resource Center (SERC)
Sherri Edgar, Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC)

Activities:

- educational benefit review process and student file review;
- staff interviews;
- parent survey;
- student interviews;
- classroom observations;
- data team observations;
- review of district policies and procedures; and
- review of district data & professional development listing 2009-10, 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 as well as compliance with the IDEA. In August 2010, the Associate Commissioner of the Division of Family and Student Support Services (DFSSS) notified the Thomaston Public School District (TPSD) of concerns regarding data around the achievement of students with disabilities. Based on this data, the Department conducted a focused monitoring visit to determine the causes of the concerning data and to identify strategies to support the district in making improvements and requirements of IDEA for correction.

Section 2: Common themes

a. Parental Involvement and Communication

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- Based on the parent survey and staff interviews parental involvement and engagement is satisfactory across all grade levels. Parents indicated they were generally satisfied with communication from their child's teachers. Various forms of communication outside of a planning and placement team (PPT) were identified, including phone calls, e-mail and formal and informal conferences. Educators and administrators indicated that their schools, particularly at the elementary levels, provided many opportunities for families of students with and without disabilities to volunteer and to participate in family programs such as literacy and math nights. High participation rates were described for both groups.
- Parents surveyed through CPAC indicated a need for more support from the schools to know how to support their children at home (e.g., materials sent home for parents to reinforce content and skills with their children).
- A few parents indicated their concerns about an unexpected change in the high school policy, regarding homework and grading, that substantially changed current homework and grading practices. This policy takes the emphasis off homework as part of a grade and onto its relevance for practice, and offers students the opportunity to retake quizzes. While the new policy seems to be a move in the right direction, the swift change and dissemination across the district may have left some families of students with disabilities feeling they were not part of the decision-making process in the district.

b. Use of Data

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- During the IEP and special education file reviews, the focused monitoring team noted that some IEPs did not contain relevant data on the present levels of academic and functional performance and the impact that data has on writing goals and objectives based on student needs. The Thomaston school district team came to the same conclusion during the educational benefit review process. This team self-reported the limited use of student performance data and a need to better connect data to goals and objectives for students with disabilities. The district team also came to the conclusion that there was a need for general education and special education staff to work together to identify the academic performance data necessary to provide students with disabilities the instruction they need to make better progress.
- Based on staff reports, the use of data is variable across the district and there is an understanding that better gathering and use of data is needed. The elementary and middle school staff are beginning to use data such as pre- and post-assessments, checklists, observation, unit tests and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) 2. End of year math benchmark assessments were developed for use this year. At the high school, teachers are working on improving final tests to improve the assessment of higher order and critical thinking skills. General and special education teachers use assessment data for students with disabilities in various ways. There are also differences in their use of assessment data within each discipline. These inconsistent uses of assessment data may result in incomplete data sources to appropriately inform instruction through a student's IEP.

- The district began work four years ago with an independent consultant trained in the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI), starting with a review of the district's curriculum. Staff reported that the review of curriculum is ongoing. Assessments aligned to the curriculum to measure student progress in the curriculum are not consistently developed. Staff reported they have limited use of quality assessments to gauge student progress and their understanding of course content, or to inform their instruction at this time.
- The district conducts a data team/early intervention process at each school level, once a week, which they now call their Scientific Research-Based Intervention (SRBI) team. Observations of these teams suggested that the limited data available on student performance presented during these meetings might result in delayed decisions about student progress for those students who need intervention. Some staff interviews suggested that this team process is where students are "referred" to when they are having trouble or if staff suspects a disability.

c. Staff Development

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- The district comprehensive plan for professional development does not seem to include options for professional development that meet the varying needs of general and special education staff. In most cases, two or three times per year staff receive district designed professional development focused at the school level. Most sessions had mandatory attendance requirements.
- Some staff reported that they received the professional development necessary to perform their job outside of the district professional development opportunities (e.g., graduate coursework, workshops).
- Staff reported that it is challenging to align the professional development to meet the diverse needs of both general and special education teachers, as they currently exist. General education teachers reported a need for training in understanding and implementing the IEP and writing IEPs that are designed for students with disabilities to make progress.

d. Access to General Education and Student Engagement

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- The district includes students with disabilities in their least restrictive environment (LRE) at a level greater than the statewide target for LRE.
- Each of the three schools in the district employs a co-teaching model of instruction. This model of a general and special education teacher teaching together is in place to support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Implementation of the model is inconsistent across the district.
- Staff reported that students with disabilities in the district are included in all of the same activities available to their non-disabled peers. Some of the students interviewed reported that they felt accepted and had excellent opportunities for extra-curricular activities. Some students also reported their concern over not being part of the decision-making process for their own education and wanting to understand their specific disability better.

- Staff consistently reported that more paraprofessionals to support students in the general education classroom were necessary. Classroom observations revealed class sizes under 20 at the elementary and middle levels and the needs of all students appeared to be met.

e. Additional Information

The following themes emerged throughout the site visit:

- Staff overwhelmingly reported that they worked collaboratively to address the needs of students with disabilities, but not provided with time in their schedules to design appropriate lessons for students with disabilities. Staff reported they had times set aside for grade level teams to meet, but that those times are not always formally structured. Therefore, they indicated the need for additional time to meet about whatever they need for that day whenever they find time, which is not nearly often enough or long enough.
- Staff interviews were mixed about the substantial shifts to current educational practices and policies being made at the high school, specifically, around setting high expectations for and improved performance of students with disabilities. Some of those interviewed supported the changes noting the importance of high expectations for all students and some were concerned about ensuring that the needs of students with disabilities were addressed sufficiently. These mixed reviews seemed to be reported equally between general education and special education staff.

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 staff 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 individual student, SASID # 7717293185, file did not include a confidential file access form
Regulatory citation: Regulation of Connecticut State Agencies (RCSA) Section 10-76d-18a(6)
Evidence: Review of IEPs and student files
Corrective Action (s): Submit a copy of the confidential access file that has been added to this file. Provide a district attestation that all special education files include a copy of the confidential access form.
Evidence of correction: Submit a copy of the individual confidential access file and district attestation to the BSE by May 30, 2011.
2. **Statement of finding:** For individual student, SASID # 7717293185, reevaluation report did not include information from the parent
Regulatory citation: 34 C.F.R. Section 300.304
Evidence: Review of IEPs and student special education files

Corrective action(s): Conduct a conversation via telephone with parent to ask if there is information that should have been shared at the reevaluation PPT.

Evidence of correction: Follow phone conversation with a letter to the family summarizing the phone conversation and submit a copy of the letter to the BSE by June 30, 2011.

3. **Statement of finding:** For individual students, SASID #9679161938 and SASID #7560041996, goals not connected to need identified in present levels of performance

Regulatory citation: 34 C.F.R. Section 300.320

Evidence: Review of IEPs and student special education files

Corrective action(s): Hold a PPT meeting for the first student, SASID #967161938, to write goals that are aligned with the present levels of performance. Conduct district training on writing goals and objectives that are aligned with present levels of performance. For SASID # 7560041996, who was exited from special education, conduct a review of the student's current classroom performance.

Evidence of correction: Submit the corrected IEP and documentation of the student performance review to the BSE by June 30, 2011. Send five additional IEPs that reflect goals aligned with the present levels of performance to the BSE by January 30, 2012. Submit the district's plan for training on writing goals and objectives aligned with present levels of performance to the BSE by September 1, 2011. Submit agendas and attendance list from training sessions to the BSE by January 30, 2012.

4. **Statement of finding:** For individual student, SASID #3495384563, IEP did not include results of the most recent evaluation or concerns of the parent for enhancing the education of their child

Regulatory citation: 34 C.F.R. Section 300.324

Evidence: Review of IEPs and student special education files

Corrective action(s): Hold a PPT to develop an IEP that includes the most recent evaluation information and information from the parents for enhancing their child's education.

Evidence of correction: Document this information in the corrected IEP and submit to the BSE by June 30, 2011.

Section 4: Strengths

1. Parent communication in the district appears strong. The district communicates using e-mail, phone calls, good news postcards, newsletters and online access to grades and assignments. Families are also engaged in school activities such as volunteering in a classroom, literacy and mathematics nights, Parent and Teacher Association (PTA) and formal and informal teacher conferences. A parent representative took part in the district educational benefit review process and will also participate in the improvement planning process.
2. Students with disabilities are mostly included in general education classrooms for the majority of the school day and are included as part of the school community. Special education staff teaches with general education teachers using a co-teaching model. While the model of co-teaching currently employed is not consistent across schools or representative of best practices at this point, students are engaged and a clear, positive

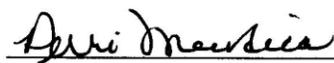
effort in that direction is noted. This school year an increased focus on student and school level data and improvements to curriculum and instructional practices were highlighted. Each of the three school administrators is relatively new and has worked to target changes in assessment and instructional practices in order to better inform instruction for all students.

Section 5: Recommendations

1. Conduct a needs assessment around the use of assessments that guide the development of instruction. Determine the assessments currently in place, which ones should be kept and which ones have no relevant purpose at this time. From the results, determine if there is a need for additional assessments, develop a common framework of assessments at each level, a calendar of when each will be administered and how the results will be shared with school staff. Ensure that there are assessments in place that provide opportunities to monitor students' progress across all areas of service delivery.
2. Create building level team structures that will provide general and special education staff with common planning times ensuring there is opportunity to review class and student level data to design appropriate lessons for all students based on these data. These team structures will support the alignment between general and special education practices with the emphasis on improving student achievement for all students.
3. Design a staff development framework to ensure all staff are trained in the curriculum and instructional practices that best meet the needs of students with a variety of needs, including students with disabilities.
4. Review the current process for determining how paraprofessionals are used as supports for teachers. Use the Examining Impact Grid (p. 55) in the *Guidelines for Training and Support of Paraprofessionals Birth through 21* during the PPT process to help guide in the decision-making process for the appropriate use of a paraprofessional. Adjust the allocation of paraprofessionals and their schedules based on information gained from this review.
5. Reexamine the current school-based team process (called SRBI) to ensure the outcome is to use student data to make improvements to instruction and intervention for all students who are not benefitting from their primary instruction. Further, ensure that the school-based team process does not prohibit or delay the special education evaluation process.

An improvement planning session will take place on May 9, 2011, in the conference room at Thomaston Center School. The district should bring any currently existing improvement plans, frameworks and/or goals.

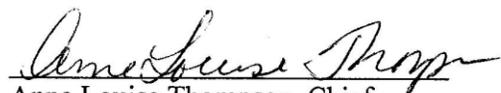
Report Prepared By:



Perri Murdica, Education Consultant
Bureau of Special Education

6/9/11
Date

Report Reviewed By:



Anne Louise Thompson, Chief
Bureau of Special Education

6/8/11
Date