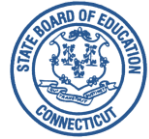




STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Ms. Katherine du Pree, Chief Administrator
Benhaven Academy

FROM: Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant *DP*
Bureau of Special Education

DATE: June 15, 2022

SUBJECT: PRELIMINARY EVALUATION REPORT
Approval Review for a Private Special Education Program

On April 28, 2022, an evaluation team (the team) visited Benhaven Academy (Benhaven) to conduct an on-site review for reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE); and
- Mr. William Roland, Supervisor of Special Education, Shelton Public Schools.

During a previous site visit on April 26, 2022, Dr. Papa reviewed the education files of students as well as personnel files. In addition, Dr. Papa reviewed the application materials submitted to the BSE by your administration.

At the exit conference on April 28, 2022, the evaluation team shared its impressions and preliminary findings and reviewed the following areas of the special education program:

administration
fiscal management
admissions
individual student records
program requirements
evaluation of student progress and reporting responsibilities
student management techniques
qualifications and requirements for instructional, administrative, and support personnel
health and safety
termination of enrollment

Commendations:

Benhaven Academy is a secure, structured, and nurturing environment that supports and stimulates the development of the whole child. The program provides educational services to students with autism spectrum disorders and developmental disabilities. Students' primary needs include social, communicative, coping, and executive functioning areas. The program has a low student-teacher ratio, which allows flexible programming to address the individual needs of students in each area.

During interviews, staff reported that administration, specifically the program's education director, "is a true leader; has a definite chemistry in the way she purposefully leads the program, constructing and connecting her team so everybody fits in; and demonstrates the same qualities she expects out of her staff." Staff expressed they respect her as a leader and appreciate that she is an integral part of the team.

The program, housed in a large, beautiful, bright, immaculate building has spacious classrooms, which are organized and have many windows and natural light. The program has walls painted with soothing colors and decorated with tasteful art and photographs specific to each academic content area in respective classrooms. Each student has an individual desk as well as an independent space within classrooms. Tables are also available in each classrooms accommodating small group instruction and promoting student interaction.

The team described the program's climate and culture as positive, reinforcing, and calming. Staff and students are very warm, personable, and welcoming. Administration shared, "this is a community of gentle people who all gravitate and support each other."

Staff exemplifies a high level of caring, compassion, and passion in their work with students evidenced in the tenure of some current staff. Staff's focus lies in engaging and inspiring students to achieve their individual potential. The team described education staff members as positive in their approach with students, engaging, and knowledgeable in their subject area. Overall, staff expressed they are enthusiastic about their job and excited about students' academic and behavioral progress.

Classroom observations evidenced well-planned instruction aligned to the Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared to be appropriate to the current level of performance for each student. Lesson content was aligned to goals, objectives, and accommodations as identified in student individualized education programs (IEPs). Lesson pacing and response wait time was appropriate.

Benhaven Academy provides staff with mandated professional development and training as well as supportive topics aligned with Connecticut's System for Educator Evaluation and Development outcomes. Staff is encouraged to seek off-site professional development and training topics (at no cost) specific to their interest/discipline and bring back content learned to the benefit the school.

In addition to a well-developed positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) plan, the program implements the Collaborative Problem Solving approach. Administration shared that for individuals who have struggled with trauma and repeated school failures, the program's use of an effective relationship model and understanding difficult behavior is the result of a problem the student is experiencing rather than a problem of student motivation is effective. Each student's team assesses their behavior through Ross Greene's Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems, which is the assessment tool for his Collaborative and Proactive Solutions Model.

Staff has an appreciation for team collaboration. Student programs, shaped through a continuous collaborative, are person-centered framework involving parents, a school district representative, Benhaven staff, and students as appropriate. The collaborative process provides input and direction in the development of IEPs.

Benhaven Academy has been successful in supporting students in returning to their public school. The Benhaven team and the student's school district collaborate and include sharing curriculum and support strategies to facilitate a seamless re-entry.

Benhaven has invested in technology that supports teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Classrooms are equipped with interactive display boards and each student has a Chromebook.

A program belief is that participation in extracurricular activities is strongly associated with positive youth development in general with particularly well-established links between extracurricular and stress reduction, lower rates of depression, better coping skills, and improved mental health overall. Therefore, Benhaven has implemented a model where clubs of high interest topics occur daily.

As noted, a strength is communication and collaboration. School social workers, teachers, and behavioral staff collaborate and communicate frequently and intensively to consistently implement plans across settings. The interdisciplinary team (including the student when appropriate) works collaboratively to develop proposed IEP goals and objectives and to monitor student progress. The school social worker provides pull-out support services and collaborates closely with teachers to plan and provide small group push-in services. Benhaven staff engages in close collaboration with local education agencies to prepare for students reintegration back into their public school.

School-to-home modes of communication are very individualized depending on family preference. Optional modes include Zoom meetings, in person meetings, email and/or phone calls and notes to home. Teachers and related service providers frequently communicate with parents/guardians to share both concerns and positive information. The program surveys families annually to gather feedback on their child's experiences for the year. Staff uses the information parents share when planning for the upcoming year to enhance the program. A program-created document used for annual reviews, provides information to the family and district in a succinct and reader friendly format. Administration reported that both parents and district administrators have shared positive comments about the document.

Standard Deficiencies:

Benhaven Academy must rectify the following standard deficiencies:

Standard F: Program Requirements - The local school district is responsible for the development and appropriateness of a student's IEP and any changes made in that IEP. Each private facility shall request an IEP from the placing local education agency (LEA) prior to

student enrollment. The IEP shall serve as the basis for instruction for each student. The IEP presented by the LEA serves as the basis for admission and should identify the current performance levels of the student, the appropriate specialized instruction, and required related services. Each private facility should participate in the planning and placement team (PPT) meeting, which discusses and determines placement in the facility prior to student enrollment. Each private facility shall request from the placing LEA an IEP prior to student enrollment and at least annually thereafter. For students placed by other agencies, the private facility should obtain an IEP after placement as soon as feasible from the district having educational jurisdiction.

In accordance with the *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Program*, Section R, Student Files, (page 33, 99b), the education file maintained by the special education program specifically for each enrolled student, shall contain, but not limited to:

- reports to parents and school districts regarding progress toward achieving IEP goals and objectives in accordance with the IEP-delineated reporting schedule; and
- dated documentation that the progress reports were appropriately forwarded.

Issue 1: In five of five IEPs reviewed, Benhaven staff was not accurately/appropriately identified according to their roles and/or as program representatives attending the PPT meeting on page one.

Issue 2: In five of five IEPs reviewed, there was no evidence that the IEP progress report was forwarded to the placing LEA.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2022, implement a procedure to utilize prior to finalization of an IEP after participating in a PPT meeting. Said procedure shall ensure that all the information in the IEP is complete and accurate; allows the ability to document a process, to ensure the IEP accurately reflects PPT consensus; and Benhaven can implement the supports and services outlined in the document as written (i.e., require clarification of all related service whether it is provided individually or within a group setting).

Submit to the BSE copies of the next three IEPs developed by the LEA's PPT for students enrolled. The copies shall demonstrate careful review for accuracy and completeness. Illustrate written notification to the district, to request necessary changes.

Develop and submit to the BSE a checklist that will be maintained in each student's educational file, to ensure all required components are maintained in the file (*Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Program*, Section R, Student Files, (page 33, 99b)).

Standard J: Health and Safety - A private facility shall conduct monthly emergency drills that include one crisis response drill other than a fire drill once every three months.

Issue: In reviewing emergency drill records, documented fire drills occurred monthly. However, there was no evidence that every third drill was a crisis drill.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2022, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will maintain emergency drill documentation evidencing that every third drill will be a crisis drill.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers following recommendations to Benhaven Academy:

Consider implementing a special education and general education co-teaching model. Teachers interviewed expressed the desire for special education and general education teacher 1:1 collaboration and co-teaching opportunities. Currently, students receive specialized instruction with a special education teacher during the morning and subject/content area instruction with a general education teacher during the afternoon. As a valuable resource, access the State Education Resource Center website for co-teaching professional development and training opportunities.

Consider posting the PBIS principles, visuals, and routines throughout the school. Staff reported that the school-wide PBIS plan has positively impacted students' behavior and the overall climate of the school but expressed it would be beneficial to post expected behaviors and routines.

Consider displaying student art and academic work products in classrooms and hallways.

Provide opportunities for paraeducators to participate in educational trainings with teachers and related service personnel.

Consider providing opportunities for teachers and related service personnel to visit and observe public school classrooms as well as other nonpublic school settings where students may transition upon a PPT recommendation. A clear understanding of the expectations, (academic and social/emotional) instructional models, and level of expected self-advocacy will assist in preparing students for this transition.

Move forth with the plan to explore staff retention strategies such as restructuring employee salaries and benefits in order to attract and retain education staff. A veteran teacher reported that it is difficult for both staff and students to become acclimated to the new dynamics when "people come and go."

Consider hosting a career fair and invite representatives from colleges, universities, and the Department of Rehabilitation Services. Engage families through providing a school career night to allow students the opportunity to share their individual career project presentations. Research and acquire a career exploration program.

Move forth with developing a plan for documenting informal classroom System for Educator Evaluation and Development evaluations and retain formal education staff evaluations in individual personnel files.

Continue with the plan to develop a parent and student handbook during the summer for availability the 2022-23 school year.

Preliminary Evaluation Report: Benhaven School
Approval Review for a Private Special Education Program
June 15, 2022

Replace the term “behavior management” contained in the program’s PBIS plan to “behavior intervention(s).”

Within fifteen working days from the date of this preliminary evaluation report, please indicate in writing to the BSE whether your program agrees with the report and accepts the delineated corrective action plan. Upon receipt of Benhaven Academy’s written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, the BSE will submit a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2027, to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to Benhaven Academy:

Approved Ages to Serve: 5 to 22 years old
Approved Grades to Serve: grades K through 12
Approved Capacity: 30 students
Approval Expiration Date: June 30, 2027

cc: Linda Grimm, Education Director