



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Peter Chorney, Chief Administrator
Grove School

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

DATE: June 17, 2024

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

On January 25, 2024, an evaluation team visited Grove School to conduct an on-site initial program review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Dr. Elizabeth Battaglia, Director of Special Education, Madison Public Schools; and
- Laurie Cherrick, Education Director, Bradley School New London.

During a previous site visit on January 24, 2024, Dr. Papa reviewed the education files of students as well as personnel files. In addition, Dr. Papa has reviewed the application materials submitted to the BSE by your administration.

At the exit conference on January 25, 2024, the evaluation team shared its impressions and preliminary findings. The approval process included a review of the program's:

- governance;
- 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; and
- termination of enrollment.

Commendations:

The large, beautiful campus houses excellent facilities appropriate for addressing the academic, social, emotional, and physical development needs of the students. A secure, structured, and nurturing environment supports and stimulates the development of the whole child.

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Staff views administration as highly supportive, knowledgeable, approachable, and equally committed to implementing individual student-centered programs that result in the highest level of benefit to each student.

Grove School is designed to meet the academic and therapeutic needs of students through a supportive, psychoeducational approach to student services. Programming is delivered through a combination of academics, therapy, inclusive social activities, and dorm life structured into a holistic milieu approach. Students enrolled can benefit from a variety of enrichment opportunities that are interest driven, community based (Madison and other communities), involve service learning, and provide a least restrictive community setting to practice learned social skills.

The philosophical cornerstone of the program lies in the development of relationships between the staff and students. To that end, new teachers are generally expected to live on campus, engage with students, and provide support to students within the residential community in addition to their teaching duties.

The overall climate and culture of the program was described as “close knit, accepting (open to differences), supportive, engaging, and academically challenging.” The team observed a mutually respectful atmosphere between all individuals involved within the school, including administrators, teachers, staff members, students, and visitors.

The school provides a safe, intimate learning environment in which all staff are committed to high academic and behavioral expectations for students. Grove School provides rigorous and diverse academic course offerings delivered by an appropriate mix of content area general education teachers and special education teachers—a combination necessary to address the academic levels of the students enrolled. Staff demonstrates a strong commitment to the well-being of each student.

Classrooms were described as spacious, clean, bright, and welcoming. The program has specialized campus instructional and athletic spaces, including a science lab, rehearsal hall, art room, craft/maker space, gymnasium, exercise room, and a baseball and soccer field.

Communication and collaboration are program strengths. Staff shared, “the complete Grove student team participates in planning and placement team meetings, including the student’s advisor, special education teacher, clinician, other related service providers, mental health provider, and school administration.” An outstanding level of collaboration, communication, and consistency relative to the development and implementation of appropriate social, emotional, behavioral, and academic programming for each student enrolled was noted by all staff interviewed.

The program has invested in technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Classrooms are well equipped to meet the requirements of the subjects taught and provide current technology opportunities to meet the preferential learning modalities of students.

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The team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, aligned with Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared to be appropriate to the current level of performance for each student. Teachers had an identified goal and objectives, which were clearly stated. The classroom observations confirmed the implementation of appropriately differentiated instruction and access to necessary accommodation(s). Students observed were characterized as highly engaged, active learners.

Standard Deficiencies:

Grove School must rectify the following standard deficiencies:

Standard I: Qualifications and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel - The private facility shall maintain a permanent individual personnel file for each employee and shall ensure said file is confidentially held. The private facility shall require that prior work references be on record for all applicants. Furthermore, applicants who will work directly with students shall submit to a Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check before hire. The private facility shall obtain the information listed on the *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form from ALL the applicant's current or former employer(s) if such employer was a local or regional board of education, an approved private special education program, a governing council of a state or local charter school, an interdistrict magnet school operator, or if the employment caused the applicant to have contact with children. Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-221d.

A private facility shall have a written plan(s) for ongoing personnel development, including a professional development (PD) policy. Such policy shall include: a provision of a minimum of 18 hours of PD to staff each year at no cost; PD opportunities which are aligned to individual educator evaluation in support of areas of identified need; and the proper documentation of PD activities.

Issue 1: In three (3) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no documentation evidencing that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form was completed for five (5) employee(s) hired after July 1, 2016.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form will be appropriately completed and obtained for each new employee and that upon obtaining completed forms, the program's chief administrator or education director will make appropriate contact with previous or current employers.

Submit a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form to the BSE for all new staff hired during the 2024-25 school year.

Issue 2: In five (5) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that the education staff participated in a minimum of 18 hours of annual PD activities.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30 , 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that moving forward the program will include in each staff file the annual summary or transcript that indicates the employee's PD activities. Additionally, an administrative PD and training record

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that identifies the date, topic, duration, presenter, and participant signatures (an electronic signature for virtual PD) should also be maintained within the file—to document that each education staff member has received a minimum of eighteen (18) hours of PD and training at no cost.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Grove School:

Ensure that all area teachers are familiar with, and well versed in, the individualized education program (IEP) document and have a clear understanding of their role in implementing goals and objectives developed for the students in their classrooms. A teacher interviewed shared the interest to attend Connecticut Special Education Data System IEP Quality Training.

Consider scheduling additional time for teachers to collaborate with each other on curriculum and instructional strategies. Teachers interviewed reported they have adequate time to collaborate to discuss individual students but expressed that they would appreciate additional time to collaborate with each other to share differentiated instructional strategies.

Maintain a balance of internal and external PD opportunities. Increase opportunities for teachers to conduct peer-to-peer observations within Grove School, as well as observations in other facilities (public and private) as a means of broadening teacher perspective and providing a unique PD experience. Professional staff interviewed expressed appreciation for PD and training.

Within 15 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 Grove School's written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2029, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to Grove School:

Approved Ages to Serve: 12 through 22 years old

Approved Grades to Serve: 6th–12th

Approved Enrollment Capacity: 151 students

Approval Expiration Date: June 30, 2029

cc: Robert Ruggiero, Education Director