




STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Brooke Violante Kelly, Chief Administrator
B.E.S.T. Academy

FROM: Dori Papa, Ed.D., Education Consultant 
Bureau of Special Education

DATE: June 8, 2020

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

On February 27, 2020, an evaluation team visited the B.E.S.T. Academy special education program in Wallingford to conduct an on-site review for re-approval. The team consisted of:

- Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Linda Zunda, Education Director Elizabeth Ives School for Special Children; and
- Elizabeth Battaglia, Director of Special Education, Madison Public Schools.

During a previous on-site visit on February 24, 2020, Dori Papa (BSE lead education consultant) reviewed the education files of students as well as personnel files. In addition, Ms. Papa has reviewed the application materials submitted to the BSE by your administration.

At the exit conference on February 27, 2020, the evaluation team shared its impressions and preliminary findings. The following areas of the special education program have been reviewed:

- 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.

1. Commendations:

- The overall climate of B.E.S.T. Academy is positive and reinforcing. Staff is characterized as warm, welcoming, caring, and focused on developing positive relationships with students. Positive engagement for all students and support team members was noted by the observation team.

- The teachers interviewed reported that they are “incredibly” supported by administration and are provided with timely and positive administrative feedback. Teachers also reported that administrators are hands-on and are integrally involved in the individualized education programming for all students.
- The program site is bright, spacious, clean and organized. Classrooms are large and colorful and each student has his/her own “station” where he/she has the option of working independently.
- Academic and behavioral instruction and interventions are data driven. The program utilizes a comprehensive data collection system called Catalyst. Each staff member has an iPad where the student’s individualized education program (IEP) goals and objectives are entered into the system in a task analysis style, allowing for constant implementation of the IEP. This allows for progress to be continually monitored, targets are placed into maintenance when they are mastered so new targets can be opened to ensure that students are challenged at an appropriate level. The data can be accessed and analyzed through graphs, which are shared with all involved stakeholders.
- Staff interviewed reported that they are provided with a “great deal” of professional development (PD) and support. A variety of PD topics are provided on a bi-monthly basis to support staff in professional growth. Topics include, but are not limited to, applied behavior analysis components, communication skills, trauma-informed practice, crisis management, and self-care. External PD activities are also supported for all levels of staff who are then provided the opportunity to present the information learned to the B.E.S.T. Academy team. The program financially supports the completion of the Registered Behavior Technician coursework for paraeducators.
- Staff members have opportunities for career advancement within the program. Continued education is strongly encouraged by administration—allowing for promotion within the school, thereby minimizing the issue of a highly transient staff.
- The program has invested in technology that supports teachers in their instruction and students in their learning and communication. Each student has his/her own laptop computer enabling him/her to actively engage in lessons combined with the use of technology to enhance communication. Each teacher has a laptop computer for data collection purposes.
- A wide variety of curriculum options are available allowing for customization of student academic and social emotional learning plans. Academic resources include Woodcock Reading, Key Math, Touch Math, Spectrum, and iReady. The social emotional learning curriculum includes Zones of Regulation, Superflex, Milo, and Mindfulness.
- There is a strong belief in, and connected to, community involvement. Students go to the gymnasium at the parks and recreation center on a bi-weekly basis. The program continues to develop, provide, and explore transition opportunities in the community that focus on the development of independent living skills. Transition students go to several worksites within a week, targeting their interests identified through formal and informal assessments. Community partnerships include 99 House, Goodwill, Master’s Manna, Fosdicks, and Dollar Tree.

Additionally, students of all ages go into the community on a bi-weekly basis for small purchases, shopping trips or academic outings, and to the library, which allows students opportunities to generalize learned skills in natural environments.

- Teacher and related service provider interview responses evidenced their solid understanding of the IEP process and appreciation of the need for collaboration and teamwork.
- Overall, staff expressed that they are enthusiastic about their jobs, and excited about students' academic and behavioral progress.

2. **Standard Deficiencies:**

The following standard deficiencies must be rectified:

Standard B: Administration - As required by the Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-222c, as amended by Public Act (PA) 16-67, each approved private special education program is required to obtain the information listed on the employment verification form from all current or former employer(s) of the applicants hired on or before July 1, 2016, if such employer was a local regional board of education, 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. Applicants are required under the law to provide a prospective employer with the name, address, and telephone number of all current or former employers that meet the above criteria. Information may be collected either through a written communication or telephonically.

Issue: Of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that a State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification form was completed for one (1) employee hired after July 1, 2016.

Corrective Action: Provide an attestation to the BSE on or before June 30, 2020, that the State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification form will be 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.

Standard F: Program Requirements - A private facility shall have a written description of the IEP for each student and shall have a written curriculum and sufficient instructional materials, supplies and equipment, in accordance with the state requirements for educational programs for full implementation of the IEP.

Issue: In one (1) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, related services indicated on the IEP were not separated/broken out to specify if the delivery of service is provided on a 1:1, small group basis, or other means.

Corrective Action: While the program has initiated a process and procedure for the review of an IEP received from the local education agency (LEA) and has identified in writing the need to make corrections, there remains a need for further scrutiny of the IEP document. Submit to BSE copies of the next three (3) IEPs developed by the LEA's planning and placement team for students enrolled, demonstrating careful review for accuracy and completeness, and if needed, illustrating the implementation of written notification to the district requesting necessary changes.

3. Recommendations:

The following recommendations are offered to B.E.S.T. Academy:

- Move forth with the plan to develop a larger playground, a nature walk path, and the purchase of additional swings.
- Consider the provision of additional vans to increase community involvement opportunities for students.
- Consider making a smaller sensory lab available that is quiet and not too bright so that students may have an alternative to the large sensory lab that staff reported as overstimulating for some students.
- Consider developing a plan for fading out 1:1 support as students achieve mastery of their goals.

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 your written agreement to, and acceptance of the report, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2023, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to B.E.S.T. Academy:

Approved Ages to Serve:	5–21 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	K–12
Approved Student Capacity:	48
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2023

DP:dpp

cc: Amy Farmer, Education Director