



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Gary Hunt, Chief Administrator
High Road School of Hartford-Primary/Middle School (Hartford and Windham County)

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

DATE: July 19, 2024

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

On January 4, 2024, an evaluation team visited High Road School of Hartford Primary/Middle (HRS Hartford Primary/Middle) to conduct a program reapproval review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Dr. Beth Giller, Director of Pupil Services, Coventry Public Schools; and
- Maehgen Plourde, Education Director, Fresh Start School Focus Center for Autism.

During a previous site visit on January 3, 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 4, 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.

Expanded Program Approval Review Process:

In response to concerns raised by the Office of the Child Advocate and Disability Rights of Connecticut in their March 12, 2024, High Roads Investigative Report, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) included in its review process additional investigations of staffing credentials, hiring practices, and restraint/seclusion procedures above and beyond the standard review process. The program review team inspected all educational and administrative staff files. The file review process included, but was not

limited to, a review of data and records for certification credentials and evidence that the program has consistently conducted state and national required criminal records and fingerprinting checks, and a Department of Children and Families (DCF) background check, in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) Section 10-221d. The personnel file review process also included a review of all special education program administrators, instructional, and related services personnel files in accordance with Standard I: Qualification and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel of the Connecticut State Department of Education, *Principles, Procedures and Standards for the Approval of Private Special Education Programs (February 2021)*. The CSDE also conducted administrator and staff interviews and conducted an unannounced onsite visit to review restraint/seclusion procedures.

Commendations:

Four teachers and two related services staff interviewed reported that the school administration is very supportive, approachable, knowledgeable in all aspects of the program, and highly collaborative. One of the teachers interviewed shared being very comfortable in approaching administration because they are very receptive and maintain an open-door policy. A related service staff interviewed expressed appreciation for the administration's participation in the weekly multidisciplinary meetings.

The program is described as welcoming, positive, and caring. A positive culture and climate are established and is evidenced by respectful relationships among students and between staff and students. Staff are characterized as caring, dedicated, encouraging, and positive in their interactions with students. Staff appear to function as a supportive community as even part-time service providers interviewed indicated a unique level of inclusiveness as members of the multidisciplinary team.

The CSDE Standards Evaluation Team reviewed student's individualized education programs (IEPs) and lesson plans prior to conducting the classroom observations. In referencing the lesson plans provided, the team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, aligned with Connecticut Core Standards. A connection between instruction and the goals and objectives identified in the IEP provided was evidenced in each classroom. The observation team noted that students appeared engaged and attentive during individual instruction, reinforcement, and independent academic activities. Students observed in a math lesson were very engaged in a discussion about why math is important in real world applications such as in the fields of accounting and architecture. Students were eager to provide responses.

The program employs an academic and curriculum instruction (ACI) specialist who plays a crucial role in education, focusing on specific subjects to ensure that content and teaching methods meet educational standards. The ACI is responsible for developing curriculum materials, providing teachers with professional development (PD), and assessing instructional strategies in collaboration with teachers and administrators. Additionally, the ACI specialist contributes to the design of comprehensive educational programs, conducts reviews, and guides the creation of effective curricula. The ACI collaborates with teachers to enhance teaching practices, model effective techniques, and supports the implementation of innovative instructional methods. The program's education director shared that, "the strategic addition of an ACI aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, foster continuous improvement in teaching quality, and positively impacts student achievement."

An assessment, curriculum, and instruction model are supported by the availability of a variety of tools for teachers to utilize, including Wilson, Edmark, SPIRE, Foundations, Read Naturally, TouchMath, Strategies to Achieve Math Success, On Cloud Nine, Visualizing and verbalizing, and multiple novel studies along with classic shorts.

The program employs a systemic, academic rotational model that is based upon individualized assessment data and is designed to align curriculum and instruction with each student's readiness level. The model includes teacher-directed instruction, assistant teacher instruction, independent seatwork, and technology-based workstations. Individualized daily schedules reflect differentiated instruction aligned with readiness levels in reading, English/language arts, and math.

Classrooms are characterized as spacious, bright, tidy, organized, with individual student workstations. Classrooms also have tables to provide small group instruction offering opportunities for peer interaction. An "IEP binder" is maintained in each classroom for each student. Data on progress toward the attainment of academic and behavioral goals and objectives is documented throughout the week.

The program values and promotes family engagement. Families are invited to various school events, including, but not limited to, a Thanksgiving feast, Fall Open House, and 8th grade graduation for fostering community and cultural connection. These events provide opportunities for parents to celebrate their child's milestones and achievements. For additional information related to school-family-community partnerships and research based strategies, please access the [School-Family-Community Partnerships \(ct.gov\)](http://ct.gov).

Spaces within the facility are student friendly and highly motivating for young students such as a pet center with various wildlife, including an African grey parrot used for speech language therapy, a bearded dragon, guinea pigs, turtles, and a rabbit. The space is often used, and reported as being effective, for students to take sensory break times throughout the day to help emotionally regulate and learn empathy for others through assisting in the animals' daily care.

The program has offered a health clinic this year to families who do not readily access primary care physicians for their child. A partnership with Charter Oak has been in place for four (4) years to provide school-based mental health counseling and continues to expand each year, allowing families ease of access for mental health supports for their child.

The program has invested in technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning which has created an interactive, engaging, and personalized learning environment. Classrooms are equipped with Smart Boards, projectors, laptops for teachers and students, Chromebooks, and desktop computers. Students also engage in additional project-based learning with the use of technology.

Standard Deficiencies:

HRS Hartford Primary/Middle School must rectify the following standard deficiencies:

Standard I: Qualification and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support

Personnel - Each private facility shall require that prior work references be on record for all applicants. Furthermore, before hiring staff who will work directly with students, the private facility shall ensure that the applicants submit to a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check. 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. 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 written communication or telephonically. In addition, state and national criminal history records check (fingerprinting) of staff who work directly with students, shall be submitted within 30 days of hire and on file within 60 days from the date of employment. C.G.S. Section 10-221d.

Issue 1: In two (2) of forty-two (42) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that a state and national criminal (fingerprinting) history records check was submitted within thirty (30) days from the date of employment. The date of the most recent infraction of this issue was May 19, 2022. Evidence of those submissions was provided; however, they had not occurred within thirty (30) days from the date of employment.

Corrective Action(s): On or before July 31, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will ensure that state and national criminal history records check (fingerprinting) of staff who work directly with students, will be submitted within 30 days of employment and on file within 60 days from the date of employment. Submit verification to the BSE evidencing that the national criminal database background checks (fingerprinting) were submitted within thirty (30) days of employment and on file within sixty (60) from the date of employment for all employees hired (involving direct student contact) during the remainder of the 2023-24 school year and the 2024-25 school year.

On or before July 31, 2024, develop and submit to the BSE an index or documentation to ensure that the conduct of all appropriate background checks are a part of the HRS Hartford Primary/Middle hiring practices in accordance with CGS 10-221d.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to HRS Hartford Primary/Middle:

Consider exploring real-time, ongoing digital academic and behavioral data collection systems. The program currently has a paper-based data collection system. IEP goals and objectives appear on the back of each student's individualized weekly lesson plan and progress monitoring data is tracked manually.

Move forward with the plan to create an outdoor playground with adaptive and sensory equipment and picnic tables.

Continue efforts to develop additional community-based partnerships to provide students with diverse career exploration opportunities, particularly for the HRS Hartford Primary/Middle School-Windham County location. Administration shared that the organization recently purchased two vans to transport students to/from activities during the day now enabling access to community-based sites beyond the immediate location of the facility. The CSDE is in the process of developing asynchronous and synchronous secondary transition professional development opportunities for the secondary transition coordinators. Please contact Alycia Trakas, CSDE/BSE Education Consultant for additional information at Alycia.Trakas@ct.gov.

Consider exploring the possibility of contracting with a community-based exercise center to expand upon physical education opportunities and activities. The program does not have a gymnasium.

Move forward with the plan to evaluate and identify space within the facility for an art and music room.

Continue efforts to hire additional board-certified behavior analysts (BCBA) to work under the program's lead, doctoral-level BCBA to provide supports for staff and students throughout the program. As shared by program administration, the program is seeking to hire additional board-certified behavioral analysts (BCBAs).

Maintain a balance of internal and external PD opportunities. Consider exploring the menu of activities and events available through the Connecticut State Education Resource Center for teachers, paraeducators, and related service personnel ([SERC Home page](#)) ([SERC PD Events Calendar](#)). Identified PD should be based on data obtained by the Professional Development and Evaluation Committee and

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align with performance evaluation outcomes and educational staff's areas of continued growth within their evaluation plans.

Consider hiring a full-time school psychologist to support the academic behavioral and mental health student needs through frequent collaboration with parents, teachers, administrators, and others to best meet the diverse needs of students. Currently the program contracts with a consulting clinical psychologist.

Familiarize program administration and professional staff with [Connecticut Guidelines for Educator and Leader Evaluation and Support 2023](#) for implementation in the 2024-25 academic year. Refer to scheduled training dates on the CSDE Talent Office website. [Talent Office \(ct.gov\)](#).

Provide 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 planning placement team 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.

Within fifteen (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 High Road of Hartford-Primary/Middle School's written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2027, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to High Road School of Hartford Primary/Middle School:

- Approved Ages to Serve:** 5 through 15 years old
- Approved Grades to Serve:** K through 8th
- Approved Enrollment Capacity:** 55 students total
Hartford: 44 students
Windham County: 11 students
- Approval Expiration Date:** June 30, 2027

DP:dpp
cc: Jennifer Johnson, Education Director