



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Gary Hunt, Chief Administrator
High Road School of Wallingford

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 March 28, 2024, an evaluation team visited High Road School of Wallingford (HRS Wallingford) to conduct a program reapproval review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Dr. Judy Benson-Clarke, Former Public School Education Director; and
- Sarah Ulizio, Special Education Director, Hope Academy.

During a previous site visit on March 26, 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 March 28, 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)*.

Commendations:

Four teachers and two related services staff interviewed reported that the school administration is very supportive, accessible, knowledgeable in all aspects of the program, and is integrally involved in individual student programming, provision of curricular resources, and professional development (PD) activities. One of the teachers interviewed shared that administration is highly collaborative and consistently supportive with the provision of curricular materials and resources, PD opportunities, and input regarding individualized education program (IEP) revisions as needed.

The CSDE standards evaluation team described the program as warm, welcoming, and a positive climate is established as evidenced by respectful relationships among students and between staff and students. The team was warmly greeted and felt welcomed throughout the visit.

The team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, aligned with Connecticut Core Standards. Generally, students appeared engaged and attentive during individual instruction, reinforcement, and independent academic activities as observed during the classroom observations. The CSDE team reviewed student IEPs prior to the lesson observed and noted a connection between instruction and the goals and objectives identified in the IEP provided was evidenced in each classroom.

The program employs an academic and a curriculum instruction (ACI) specialist who plays crucial roles 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."

The program has established community-based partnerships to provide students with career exploration; work-based learning experiences; and specialized training in retail operations,

customer service, and the hospitality industry. Community partnerships include Burlington retail store, CVS, Dollar Tree, Stop & Shop, and Restaurant 99.

The program employs an academic rotational model to align curriculum and instruction with each student's readiness level. Students participate in a systematic rotational schedule that is based upon assessment data. The model includes teacher-directed instruction, assistant teacher instruction, independent seatwork, and technology-based workstations. All students have individualized daily schedules designed for them based upon their IEP goals and objectives, which reflect differentiated instructional strategies aligned with readiness levels in reading, English/language arts, and math.

Classrooms are characterized as adequately spacious, comfortable, organized, equipped with individual student workstations and round tables for the provision of small group instruction offering opportunities for peer interaction.

The program values and promotes family engagement. Families participate in various school events including, but not limited to, a Thanksgiving feast, fall open house, parent-teacher conferences, an annual arts festival, and graduation ceremonies. 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 \(ct.gov\)](#).

Standard Deficiencies:

HRS Wallingford 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 thirty (30) days of hire and on file within sixty (60) days from the date of employment. CGS 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. Evidence of those submissions was provided; however, they had not occurred within thirty (30) days from the date of employment. The date of the most recent infraction was January 3, 2020.

Issue 2: In four (4) of forty-two (42) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence of submission to DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check prior to hire. Evidence of those submissions was provided; however, they had not occurred prior to hire. The late submission of these checks for four (4) employees ranged from 1.1 to 2.1 years. It is important to note that all current personnel have had a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry check.

Corrective Action(s) - Issues 1 and 2: 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 thirty (30) days of employment and on file within sixty (60) days from the date of employment. Furthermore, the program will ensure that applicants working directly with students will submit to a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check before hire. C.G.S. Section 10-221d.

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 2024-25 school year.

Submit verification to the BSE evidencing that prior to hire, DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry checks were appropriately completed for all potential employees (involving direct student contact) for the 2024-25 school year.

On or before July 31, 2024, develop and submit to the BSE an index or organization format to utilized and ensure that the conduct of all appropriate background checks has become a part of the HRS Wallingford hiring practices in accordance with C.G.S. 10-221d.

Recommendations

The BSE offers the following recommendations to HRS Wallingford:

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.

Create a variety of clubs and activities for students' participation (subject/content area, career interest, hobbies, and community service clubs). A teacher interviewed suggested creating these varieties of clubs and activities for students' participation.

Provide PD and training with a focus on assistive technology. An occupational therapist interviewed expressed the need for this type of PD.

Move forth with the plan to evaluate and identify currently unused classroom space for an art and music room.

Continue efforts to hire additional board-certified behavior analysts (BCBAs) 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).

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Continue efforts to develop additional community-based partnerships to provide students with diverse career exploration opportunities. 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.

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.

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 the [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 and 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 School of Wallingford'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 Wallingford:

Approved Ages to Serve:	5 through 22 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	K through 12th
Approved Enrollment Capacity:	88 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2027

DP:dpp
cc: Christine Hartwich, Education Director