




STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Lynne Guilmette, Chief Administrator
Meliora Academy

FROM: Colleen Hayles, Education Consultant 
Bureau of Special Education

DATE: December 16, 2020

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

Please note: This Approved Private Special Education Program approval review was conducted remotely due to the current public health and safety requirements resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. All required activities and components, as defined in the *Policies, Procedures and Standards for Approved Private Special Education Programs*, were conducted remotely and in accordance with the approval process.

On November 20, 2020, an evaluation team conducted a virtual site visit review for re-approval of the Meliora Academy special education program. The team consisted of:

- Colleen Hayles, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Paul Lovoi, Education Director, Gengras Center; and
- Yvette Goorevitch, Chief, Specialized Learning and Student Support Services, Norwalk Public Schools.

During a previous virtual site visit on October 30, 2020, Ms. Hayles reviewed the education files of five (5) students and personnel files. In addition, Ms. Hayles has reviewed the application materials submitted to the BSE by your administration.

At the exit conference on November 20, 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 program provides students on the autism spectrum with an intensive data-based instructional curriculum implementing evidence based interventions. A variety of research-based interventions are employed that include, but are not limited to, applied behavior analysis, antecedent and naturalistic interventions, social skills training, augmented communication, scripting, video modeling, functional communication training and relatedness and visual supports.
- Focus is placed on data-based instruction designed to reduce fragmented learning and increase generalization of skills across people, environments, and activities—fostering cognitive flexibility while minimizing rigidity.
- The program employs a “Safety Care” program in an effort to address student behavior. The Safety Care program is also provided as a support to parents and families in an effort to afford students consistency in response to behaviors demonstrated outside the school setting. Additional supports to families includes in home applied behavioral analysis programming, other home supports/services and consultation, if needed, and as dictated by the planning and placement team (PPT) and the student’s individualized education program (IEP). The program implements an open communication philosophy with parents. Parent training is driven from data collected through a parent survey.
- Student’s IEPs are implemented by a highly qualified professional staff that is well trained and well versed in current instructional practices.
- Staff characterize program administrators as highly accessible, supportive and involved with each student’s individual program. Necessary instructional resources are accessible to staff.
- The program supports a staffing pattern that integrates the services of seven full-time special education teachers, six full-time board certified behavior analysts as well as interns, seven behavioral assistants/technicians, five full-time speech and language pathologists (SLPs), five full-time SLP assistants, as well as, 3.5 full-time physical therapists, and two part-time and two full-time occupational therapists. Each student is also assigned a 1:1 teacher assistant.
- Thorough, complete, and ongoing student assessments and extensive narrative components are included in each student’s report of student progress.
- Internal documents such as the goals and objectives matrix document, are well designed and effectively illustrate the specific learning objectives, their alignment with the Connecticut State Standards and how they are reinforced throughout the child’s day.
- The program utilizes Catalyst, a flexible data collection tool designed for applied behavior analysis, to track and document student growth and support progress monitoring.
- A unique sense of teamwork among the staff is evident on all levels. Expectations of staff performance are high. There are numerous professional development (PD) activities that target

the unique needs of each staff member, based on their current caseload—yielding immediate benefit to the staff members and the student(s) they serve.

- The design and implementation of students’ individual programs demonstrates an appropriate level of flexibility within a structured framework of instruction.
- The intimate nature of the program, the collaborative culture and climate, and focus on the needs of the individual student, create a unique placement option for students on the autism spectrum who may require 1:1 programming.
- The program has identified over 20 community sites available to students to address transition planning, as well as, the provision of community-based activities in which all students can participate.
- The program employs a full-time transition coordinator to assist in the development of transition programs and to initiate and maintain community connections.
- The program and its staff promote a philosophy of instructing and supporting students within the least restrictive educational environment, and providing support and consultation to students and district personnel in the transition of enrolled students back to a less restrictive school setting.
- The program makes available to students an extended day and extended school year program and the opportunity for students to receive a part-time program in the home—based on a recommendation by the PPT.
- The program supports a registered behavior technician internship program.
- The program boasts a newly completed outdoor playground/activity area providing students with access to recreation activities outside of the classroom.

2. Standard Deficiencies:

There are no identified standards deficiencies requiring corrective actions.

3. Recommendations:

The following recommendations are offered to Meliora Academy:

- Consider developing an informational document that is available to parents and local education agencies, to share at the time of referral, which defines the process and general criteria to reduce the level of individual supports to students in anticipation of consideration for placement within a less restrictive setting.
- Consider expanding PD activities to include opportunities for instructional staff to observe and connect with general and special education teachers in public school settings to provide a frame of reference around expectations and academic rigor.

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- Consider connecting with other private and public school providers to offer the expertise of Meliora Academy staff in employing evidence-based practices, data collection systems, and an integrated and functional curriculum for students on the Autism Spectrum.

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. Upon receipt of your written acceptance, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2025, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

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

Approved Ages to Serve:	3–22 years old (Grades PK–12)
Approved Student Capacity:	50 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2025

cc: Sandra Sutyla, Education Director