



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Jeffrey S. Bravin, Chief Administrator
Positive Attitudes Concerning Education and Socialization

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

DATE: February 18, 2022

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

On October 21, 2021, an evaluation team visited Positive Attitudes Concerning Education and Socialization (PACES) to conduct an on-site review for reapproval. The team consisted of:

Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
Ms. Jennifer Del Conte, Director of Special Services, Easton and Redding Public Schools; and
Mr. Jeffrey Drew, Education Director, Whitney Hall, The Children's Center of Hamden.

During a previous site visit on October 19, 2021, 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 October 21, 2021, 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
termination of enrollment

Commendations:

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

intimate learning environment in which all staff are committed to high academic and behavioral expectations for students.

The program provides a barrier-free language accessible environment. Utilizing an American Sign Language (ASL)/English bilingual approach, students are provided a dual language foundation in both ASL and written and spoken English. This approach integrates ASL, speech, auditory training, reading, writing, and the use of assistive learning devices. Through this support, students improve their communication skills, minimize their frustrations, and uncover the talents that allow them to thrive.

The overall climate and culture of PACES was described as warm, inviting, supportive, and engaging.

Staff described the leadership, specifically the education director (assistant executive director), as highly collaborative, supportive of the entire educational team, and expressed appreciation for administration's frequent visits into classrooms.

Staff interviews determined that the employment longevity of the education staff ranged from eleven to twenty-three years and attributed to the chief administrator's "strong, dedicated, supportive, and effective leadership." Staff reported that they "love working here."

Classrooms were described as spacious, clean, quiet, and organized. The small class sizes (up to six students) promote student engagement and individualized academic support. Teachers effectively differentiate instructional content, process, and product, to meet the individual interests, readiness levels, and preferential learning modalities of students.

The observation team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, which appeared to be appropriate to the current level of performance for each student. Teachers had identified goals and objectives that were clearly stated and posted during the course of the lesson. Lesson content was aligned to the Connecticut Core Standards. Students observed were engaged in their instruction and demonstrated a willingness to take risks.

The program has an internal positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) coach who supports the school team. The PBIS coach sustains the framework through evidence-based practices and helps to guide a building team focused on implementing PBIS practices with fidelity. Restorative practices are also an integral component of the schoolwide behavior intervention plan.

The program has a strong culture of collaboration. During interviews, teachers expressed they share an appreciation of the need for collaboration and teamwork. During interviews, related service providers shared that there is a strong connection between the school and residential clinical director, to ensure "all pieces are in place through collaboration and looking at the whole child."

Weekly cross department meetings occur with leadership from clinical, educational, and residential life staff.

Family communication and engagement is a program strength. The program recognizes that supporting parents and caregivers is an integral part of student support. There is frequent communication through phone calls, videophone, and email contact with clinicians, educators, related service providers, residential administrators, and nursing staff. PACES hosts many family-focused activities and events, including free, family sign language classes and monthly family activities on campus (e.g., BBQs, a Thanksgiving event, informational sessions, and bingo). The program sends monthly newsletters to families, which include photos of prior events and upcoming activities.

The program has a new Independent Living Skills Center for eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-old transition students—addressing resume building, functional academics, and job skill development. The program has developed community partnerships for students to attend jobs sites (including Noodles & Col, Big Y, Burlington Coat Factory, French Cleaners, CVS, Marshalls, HomeGoods, Pet Supplies Plus, Health is Wealth Juice Bar, Max & Lily’s Closet, Foodshare, Habitat for Humanity Restore, Elizabeth Park, Shop Rite, and Bertucci’s).

The program recently developed a Bridge program, which is a fifth-year program for students who have completed academic requirements and benefit from one-year of transition. The experience is highly individualized, including job skills and the ability to take college classes at Northwestern Connecticut Community College. Support provided to students includes reading a syllabus, navigating a college campus, advocating for services, notetakers, and interpreters.

The environment is rich with state-of-the-art technology that supports teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Classrooms are equipped with ViewSonic interactive devices (replaced whiteboards), a digital modulation system accessible to all students, desk top computers with adaptive keyboards, video phone systems, announcement boards in the hallways and classrooms, and each student has a Chromebook.

The school affords teachers and related service personnel with opportunities to access off-site professional development activities of individual interest at no cost.

Standard Deficiencies:

The following standard deficiencies must be rectified:

Standard F: Program Requirements

The local school district is responsible for the development and appropriateness of a student’s individualized education program (IEP) and any changes made in that IEP. Each private facility shall request an IEP from the placing local education agency (LEA) prior to student enrollment and at least annually thereafter. The IEP shall serve as the basis for instruction for each student. The IEP presented by the LEA serves as the basis for admission and should identify the current performance levels of the student, the appropriate specialized instruction, and required related services. Each private facility should participate in the planning and placement team (PPT) meeting, which discusses and determines placement in the facility prior to student enrollment. For students placed by other agencies, the private facility should obtain an IEP after placement as soon as feasible from the district having educational jurisdiction.

Issue(s): In one of five IEPs reviewed, the related services identified on page eleven of the IEP were not reflected appropriately—the duration and frequency of school counseling services were written as “flexible schedule depending on student need.”

Corrective Action: On or before April 30, 2022, submit to the BSE attestation that PACES will implement a procedure to utilize upon receipt of an IEP after participating in a PPT meeting. Said procedure shall ensure that all the information in the IEP is complete and accurate and PACES can implement the supports and services outlined in the document as written (i.e., require clarification of all related service indicating duration and frequency of service). The review and any subsequent communication with the responsible district must be done in a timely manner and must then be reflected in the student file. It is strongly recommended that written documentation of requested changes in the IEP be attached to the current IEP, to ensure that the IEP can be implemented with fidelity. Submit to the

BSE copies of the next three IEPs developed by the LEA's PPT for students enrolled. The copies shall demonstrate careful review for accuracy and completeness, and if needed, illustrate the implementation of written notification to the district to request necessary changes.

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 held confidential. The private facility shall require that prior work references be on record for all applicants and that applicants submit to a Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Registry record check before hiring staff who will work directly with students. The private facility shall obtain the information listed on the State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification form from ALL current or former employer(s) of the applicant 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. 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. Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) Section 10-221d.

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

Corrective Action: On or before April 30, 2022, submit to the BSE attestation that a 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 J: Health and Safety

A private facility shall conduct monthly emergency drills that shall include one crisis response drill other than a fire drill once every three months.

Issue(s): A review of emergency drill records indicated that fire drills were documented to occur monthly. However, there was no evidence that every third drill was a crisis drill.

Corrective Action: On or before April 30, 2022, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will maintain emergency drill documentation evidencing that every third drill will be a crisis drill.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are offered to PACES:

Maintain a written plan for ongoing personnel development, including a professional development policy that shall include the provision for eighteen hours of professional development to staff each year at no cost, professional development opportunities aligned to individual educator evaluations in support of areas of identified need, and the proper documentation of professional development activities. In addition to maintaining an administrative professional development record, maintain documentation of all professional development and training participation in individual personnel files, to include the date, topic, and duration of each activity as well as employee signature of attendance and certificates of completion if provided.

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Circulate a survey to education and related service personnel for the purpose of soliciting professional development and training topics of interest specific to their discipline. Education staff within the autism program expressed an interest in activities focused on autism spectrum disorders.

Provide paraeducators with professional development and training on the “roles and responsibilities of paraeducators.” The observation team noted that there was a significant variance in the level of engagement and support provided for students by classroom paraeducators. Increase opportunities for paraeducators to participate in teacher and related service provider professional development and training activities. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA 2015) requires paraeducators to attend PPT meetings upon parental request, and therefore, are an integral part of the education team.

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 to upon a PPT 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 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 PACES’ written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, a recommendation for program approval through April 30, 2027, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to PACES:

- Approved Ages to Serve:** Six through twenty-two years old
- Approved Grades to Serve:** Grades one through twelve
- Approved Student Capacity:** Fifty students
- Approval Expiration Date:** April 30, 2027

cc: Paula Gladu-Morabito, Education Director