



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Gwen Killheffer, Ed.D., Chief Administrator
Solterra Academy

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

DATE: May 25, 2021

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 *Principles, Procedures and Standards for the Approval of Private Special Education Programs*, were conducted remotely and in accordance with the approval process.

On March 25, 2021, an evaluation team conducted a virtual site visit review for re-approval of Solterra Academy special education program. The team consisted of:

- Dori Papa, Ed.D., Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Laura Olson, Director of Special Services, New Milford Public Schools; and
- Gerilyn Durnin, Education Director, St. Vincent's Special Needs Services School.

During previous virtual site visits on March 23, 2021, Dr. Papa reviewed the education files of students, as well as personnel files. In addition, Dr. Papa reviewed the application materials submitted to the BSE by your staff.

At the exit conference on March 25, 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; and
- Termination of enrollment.

1. Commendations:

- Staff interviewed described the program’s executive director and assistant principals as very supportive, professional, intelligent, and integrally involved in the educational planning of all students. The observation team reported that the longevity of staff employment evidences the program’s high quality leadership.
- The overall climate and culture of the program is very positive and reinforcing. A safe and positive climate for students is provided through the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports and therapeutic crisis interventions.
- Students and staff benefit from the support of a variety of services, including counseling, occupational, physical, and speech therapies, board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) support, and a part-time psychiatrist readily available on the premises.
- The teacher-student ratio and small class sizes promote student engagement, individualized academic, social emotional, and behavioral support for students.
- The school has invested in technology that supports teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Emphasis is placed on the integration of technology in the instructional approach and—each student has his/her own laptop or iPad device.
- The observation team described the classroom environment as highly conducive to learning and productive with a “good use of space, visuals on walls, plenty of instructional materials, and classroom paraeducator support.
- A positive climate for staff is brought about by a strong focus on support and collaboration amongst team members. Morning “huddles” take place daily among paraprofessionals, support staff, related services providers, and teachers prior to students arriving. An observation team member described this practice as “an excellent structure for building and maintaining constant communication in the best social, emotional, and academic interest of students.”
- Staff works effectively with students and families. A clinician interviewed reported that she always reaches out to families prior to a planning and placement team meeting for their input, and to share information in advance to be presented. Evening family events provide opportunities for socialization (in person or virtual) such as Halloween night, family fun night, as well as, a schoolwide transition ceremony on the last day of school with families and local education agencies invited to celebrate student accomplishments and graduation.
- Staff interviewed reported that they are “very satisfied” with the amount of professional development and training opportunities they are provided and expressed an appreciation for the diverse topics provided, such as culturally competent curriculum, executive functioning, and the Wilson Reading System. External professional development activities are also supported for all levels of staff who are then provided with an opportunity to present information learned to the Solterra Academy team. Additionally, the program provides opportunities for career growth supported by tuition reimbursement and internal promotions.

2. Standard Deficiencies:

There are no identified standard deficiencies requiring corrective action.

3. Recommendations:

It is recommended that your program consider taking the following action:

- Continue to conduct emergency drills and maintain documentation that emergency drills were conducted monthly evidencing that the practice is in place to conduct monthly drills.
- Move forth with the plan to develop a process for improving the program’s behavioral data collection.
- Consider increasing opportunities for student interaction and discourse during instructional time.
- Move forth with the plan to further invest in classroom technology through initiatives such as the purchase of updated Smart Boards.
- As planned, expand upon the provision of professional development and training for BCBA’s, clinicians, and social workers, to continue skill building in the area of functional behavioral assessments.
- Move forth with planning additional professional development and training on the topic of executive functioning.
- Consider increasing opportunities for teacher-to-teacher collaboration particularly for program teachers new to the profession even though there is a practice in place for all staff to collaborate daily in the morning “huddles.”

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 agreement and acceptance of the entire report, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2026, will be submitted to the Acting Commissioner of Education.

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

Approved Ages to Serve:	5–22 years old (Grades K–12)
Approved Student Capacity:	210 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2026

cc: Sharon Edricks, Education Director