



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Dr. Daniel Murray, Chief Administrator
Arch Bridge School at Wellspring

FROM: Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant ^{DP}
Bureau of Special Education

DATE: June 20, 2024

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

On Thursday, November 2, 2023, an evaluation team visited Arch Bridge School at Wellspring (Arch Bridge-Wellspring) to conduct a program reapproval review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Katherine Matz, Director of Special Education, Easton, Redding, and Region 9 School Districts; and
- Dr. Lisa Riggi, Education Director, Aspire Living and Learning.

During a previous site visit on October 31, 2023, Dr. Papa reviewed the education files of students as well as personnel files. In addition, Dr. Papa reviewed the application materials your administration submitted to the BSE.

At the exit conference on November 2, 2023, 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.

Commendations:

Staff interviewed reported the program’s leadership (specifically the education director) is highly supportive, very involved in individual student programming, and “listens to what staff needs.”

The beautiful campus houses excellent facilities appropriate for addressing the academic, social, emotional, and physical developmental needs of students. A secure, structured, and nurturing environment supports and stimulates the development of the whole student. The school was described by the observation team as “welcoming, warm, and cozy.”

The program serves and supports a population of students primarily with major psychiatric disorders. Support is provided throughout the program by mental health professionals, including a psychiatrist, therapists, and school clinicians.

Arch Bridge-Wellspring provides a student-centered, therapeutic program with a high staff to student ratio, which supports each student’s need for individualization and differentiation of instruction. A college preparatory curriculum is taught by highly qualified and certified general education content area teachers who work in tandem with special education teachers, to provide specialized instruction within a rigorous academic curriculum.

The educational approach is focused on the development of a supportive personal relationship with each student and the family within a clearly defined structure of services, expectations, and consequences. Planning for students has a holistic approach and engages various stakeholders in the relational model to demonstrate healthy relationships and conflict resolution skills.

Collaboration and communication are identified as a program strength. Staff interviewed shared an appreciation of the “strong collaborative model.” All teachers and related service personnel work collaboratively to provide a high degree of social, emotional, and behavioral structure and support to students throughout their day. Daily wrap-around communication exists between all programs and student teams, including therapists, teachers, and school clinicians. There are regular weekly full-staff, multi-disciplinary meetings, clinical team meetings, and teacher meetings to discuss the program and identify student needs (academic and clinical).

The program has a strong clinical component in which five school clinicians are available throughout the day to respond to students needs and help address clinical concerns that may impede a student’s ability to engage in the educational process. School clinicians continue to provide post-pandemic home visits for day school students struggling with anxiety and school attendance.

The program has expanded opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular and off-grounds activities—variety shows, Thanksgiving feast, and field trips.

Family engagement is a strength across the school and residential programs. Parent participation is an essential part of the program and a required component. Parent support groups and training opportunities provide instruction and guidance to enhance parenting skills and offer an

opportunity to share information and experiences. Clinicians provide family therapy sessions in the residential program as well as monthly parent support groups.

The program has established a positive culture and climate evidenced by positive respectful relationships among students and between staff and students. Emphasis is placed on resolving school-related issues and preparing students to return to their schools of origin with increased ability to function successfully.

Standard Deficiencies:

No standard deficiencies were cited.

Recommendations

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Arch Bridge-Wellspring:

Explore the availability of, and access to, community-based transition opportunities to broaden options for students to develop vocational and trade skills necessary for postsecondary success. Of note, this recommendation was included in the previous preliminary report dated December 11, 2018.

Consider developing a protocol for teachers to also have direct, more frequent communication with parents to share daily successes and/or challenges. Currently, teachers provide school clinicians with monthly updates on individual students and the school clinicians maintain contact with parents and outside providers.

Explore alternate means of communication within the school. An interviewee reported that “the use of walkie talkies is loud and distracting to the educational process.”

Teachers interviewed expressed the need to hire a substitute teacher or have a “substitute pool in place as there is too much pressure on colleagues to cover for each other.”

Explore opportunities to improve information technology support and connectivity/availability within the school program as Internet access is not consistent and/or unavailable to visitors.

Move forth with the plan to explore an online academic and behavioral progress monitoring system and the technology for supporting the system.

Teachers interviewed shared the need for IEP Quality and Connecticut Special Education Data System training.

Continue with plan to hire a full-time special education teacher.

Ensure the program’s Professional Development and Evaluation Committee includes at least one teacher, one administrator, and one paraeducator in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes 10-220a.

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Provide an annual program of professional development (PD) of at least eighteen (18) hours to paraeducators at no cost in accordance with statutory requirements (Public Act 23-159 Section 10 - Revisions and New Requirements). The PD may not include trainings otherwise mandated by law, such as trainings regarding Department of Children and Families policies and procedures, sexual harassment, and bloodborne pathogens.

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.

Continue to explore the menu of activities and events available through the Connecticut State Education Resource Center for teachers, paraeducators, and related service personnel. Staff shares an appreciation for diverse PD and training opportunities.

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 Arch Bridge-Wellspring's written agreement, the BSE will submit a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2029, to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following is applicable to the Arch Bridge School at Wellspring:

Approved Ages to Serve:	12 through 22 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	7th–12th
Approved Enrollment Capacity:	51 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2029

cc: Krystyna Pasquariello, Education Director