



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Katie Cyr, Chief Administrator
Aspire Living and Learning Academy

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

DATE: June 17, 2024

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

On November 9, 2023, an evaluation team visited Aspire Living and Learning Academy to conduct an on-site initial program review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Kitty Clemens, Education Director, Cedarhurst School; and
- Katherine Matz, Director of Special Education, Easton, Redding, and Regional School District 9.

During a previous site visit on November 7, 2023, 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 November 9, 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 expressed that administration (specifically the education director) is “very supportive, responsive to staff and students, knowledgeable in all aspects of the program, and they learn a lot from her.”

The overall climate of the program is described as supportive, welcoming, and cheerful. The staff demonstrate a strong commitment to the well-being of each student. An excellent rapport was observed between teachers and students. The observation team shared that overall, there is a sense of positivity in the classroom environment.

An outstanding level of collaboration and communication relative to the development and implementation of appropriate social, emotional, behavioral, and academic programming for each student enrolled was noted by all staff interviewed. The team observed evidence of effective “in-the-moment” communications between teachers and paraeducator behavioral staff.

The team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, aligned with the Connecticut Core Standards. Instructional tasks had clearly defined success criteria, appropriate level of challenge, individualized per students’ individualized education programs (IEPs), and incorporated sensory breaks as identified in IEP accommodations. Students demonstrated a high level of engagement in all lessons observed.

A teacher interviewed cited opportunities for career advancement and growth as a program strength. All employed board-certified behavior analysts, most teachers, and the leadership team were initially hired as paraeducators (instructional and/or behavioral support). The program also provides instructional and related service staff with tuition assistance.

Classrooms were described as spacious; neat; organized with individual student workstations and instructional space for small group instruction, and opportunities for peer interaction.

Students enrolled benefit from community-based career exploration opportunities. The program has developed community-based partnerships with Burlington Coat Factory, Beardsley Zoo, Hudson Paper, and Bee’s Nest in-house café. Additional community connections include Art and Community Service co-op with Christian Heritage School for the high school level students and socialization opportunities with Greens Farms Academy and Unified Sports for the elementary level students.

The program has invested in technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their communication and learning. Students have augmentative and alternative communication devices as needed, laptop computers, and all classrooms are equipped with interactive Smart Boards.

A full-time nurse is available to support students and staff in the school buildings (all program locations) and classroom settings. In the absence of the school nurse, certified staff are properly trained and certified to have access to appropriately secured medication, as well as required documentation tools, and to administer medications.

Standard Deficiencies:

Aspire Living and Learning Academy must rectify the following standard deficiencies:

Standard I: Qualification and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel - Each private facility shall ensure that:

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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. Furthermore, applicants who will work directly with students shall submit to a Department of Children and Families Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check before hire. 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. 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 1: In five (5) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that Department of Children and Families (DCF) background checks were conducted within 30 days of hire and on file within 60 days from the date of employment.

Note: Documentation evidence was provided that the DCF background checks were conducted, however, were not within 30 days of hire in accordance with CGS Section 10-221d.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that the private facility shall ensure the applicants submit to a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check before hiring staff who will work directly with students.

Develop a policy and procedure to ensure the program is adhering to the 30-day timeline.

Submit documentation to the BSE for any new staff hired during the 2024-25 school year evidencing the program is meeting the 30-day timeline.

Issue 2: In three (3) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no documentation evidence that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form was completed for employees hired after July 1, 2016.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form will be appropriately completed and 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.

Submit *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* forms to the BSE for all new staff hired during the 2024-25 school year.

Standard J: Health and Safety - A private facility shall conduct monthly emergency drills that include one crisis response drill, other than a fire drill, once every three (3) months. The special education program, at least monthly, conducts emergency/crisis drills at each program location while school is in session and include actual evacuation of students to safe areas to:

- ensure that each staff member on each shift is trained to perform assigned tasks;

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- assure that each staff member on each shift is familiar with the use of the firefighting equipment in each location of the special education program to which the staff member is assigned;
- evaluate the effectiveness of emergency plans and procedures; and
- ensure the program maintains a signed record of each emergency drill.

Issue(s): In reviewing emergency drill records, fire drills were documented to occur monthly. However, there was no evidence that that the program conducted monthly emergency drills that included one crisis response drill, other than a fire drill, once every three (3) months.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will maintain emergency drill records evidencing it is conducting monthly emergency drills that include one crisis response drill, other than a fire drill, once every three months.

On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE emergency drill records for the full 2023-24 academic year.

On or before June 30, 2025, submit to the BSE emergency drill records for the full 2024-25 academic year.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Aspire Living and Learning Academy:

Maintain a balance of internal and external professional development (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. Staff expressed an appreciation for PD and training. However, a teacher interviewed shared that the program provides “a lot of in-house training but is interested in more outside opportunities such as attending conferences and the opportunity to network with special education teachers from other organizations.”

Update the Aspire Living and Learning website to remove the term “emotional disturbance” and replace with “emotional disability” in accordance with Connecticut Public Act No. 22-47, House Bill 5001, Section 67 (Connecticut’s modified language). Also revise the program’s website from “Transitional services are available for young adults, 18–21” to 18 through 22.

Invest in additional transition resources. A staff interviewed suggested the program invest in acquiring additional transition related curriculum and resources to better prepare students to live, work, and play in the community as fully and independently as possible.

Identify a paraeducator to participate on the program’s Professional Development and Evaluation Committee. In accordance with Public Act 23-159, Section 11, the committee shall consist of (1) at least one teacher, (2) at least one administrator, (3) at least one paraeducator and (4) such other school personnel as the board deems appropriate.

Continue efforts to hire additional special education teachers. Staff interviewed reported “staffing shortages are having an impact on their teaching because they keep getting pulled to provide coverage.”

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Revise the program’s academic calendar to include the provision of extended school year services.

Familiarize program administration and professional staff with *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 Connecticut State Department of Education Talent Office website. [Talent Office \(ct.gov\)](https://talent.ct.gov).

Consider developing additional community-based partnerships, job sites, and work-based experiences to meet the diverse interests of students based on an expressed need identified in a transition teacher/coordinator interview.

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 placement team 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.

Consider exploring avenues for students to develop independence while enrolled in the program through opportunities to participate in college courses earning credit toward a degree or certificate.

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 and accepts the delineated corrective action plan. Upon receipt of Aspire Living and Learning Academy’s written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2029, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to Aspire Living and Learning Academy:

- Approved Ages to Serve:** 5 through 22 years old
- Approved Grades to Serve:** K–12th
- Approved Enrollment Capacity:** 160 students (3 sites)
 - Trumbull – 90 students
 - Naugatuck – 35 students
 - Stamford – 35 students
- Approval Expiration Date:** June 30, 2029

cc: Dr. Lisa Riggi, Education Director