



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Dr. Michael Hoge, Chief Administrator
Cedarhurst School

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

DATE: June 15, 2022

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

On March 10, 2022, an evaluation team (the team) visited Cedarhurst School (Cedarhurst) to conduct an on-site review for reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Mr. Thomas Brant, Director of Pupil Services, Amity Public Schools; and
- Ms. Karen King, Education Director, St. Vincent's School for Special Needs.

During a previous site visit on March 8, 2022, 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 administration.

At the exit conference on March 10, 2022, the team shared its impressions and preliminary findings and reviewed the following areas of the special education program:

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 program provides a safe and supportive learning environment with the goal to integrate education and therapeutic interventions, to assist students in the emotional and social growth necessary for transitioning back to the home school district, graduate from high school, attend

college, or obtain gainful employment and become productive, caring members of the community.

The program is designed to recognize the needs of a very specific group of students who may experience a high degree of anxiety and/or depression and/or demonstrate other internalizing behaviors, which have impacted their ability to benefit from the challenges of a typical academic setting. Cedarhurst affords students therapeutic programming and support. Four full-time clinical social workers provide intensive and skillful clinical supports and interventions for students. Students meet with their social workers individually and participate in diverse group therapy four to five times per week. There is a diverse array of group offerings, including Dialectical Behavioral Therapy Skills group, Yoga Therapy, Creative Expressions, Hope and Healing (focused on grief work), and Healthy Relationships and Therapeutic Activity group. The education director shared that the program “operates from a trauma-informed perspective at the core of which is a belief in the importance of unconditional positive regards for our students.”

The team described the climate and culture of the program as a harmonious and fostering learning environment. The education director shared that the environment is “very family like.” An excellent rapport was evident between staff, and staff and students.

A program strength is communication and collaboration. School social workers, teachers, and behavioral staff collaborate and communicate frequently and intensively to consistently, implement plans across settings. The program supports its teachers in working with students who have intensive complex psychiatric needs. The interdisciplinary team works collaboratively to develop proposed individualized education program (IEP) goals and objectives and to monitor student progress.

The staff demonstrates a strong commitment to the well-being of each student. Interviewees described administration, specifically the program’s education director, as highly, supportive and equally committed to implementing individual programs that result in the highest level of benefit for each student. The program has a very low staff turnover—most staff employed for ten or more years.

Classroom observations evidenced that teachers had identified goals and objectives clearly stated and posted during the course of the lesson. The program aligns lesson content with the Connecticut Core Standards. Teachers differentiate instructional content, process, and product in accordance with individual student interests, readiness level, and preferential learning modalities.

Cedarhurst offers students in the high school program the opportunity to participate in college preparation courses with a full range of classes, including higher math and sciences (such as Algebra I & II, Advanced Math, Statistics, SAT/ACT Preparation, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics). Electives, such as Psychology, French, Spanish, History through Film, and Art and Creative Writing, round out course offerings. High School seniors may be eligible to attend a college course at Albertus Magnus College, Gateway Community College, and Southern Connecticut State University in the spring semester with support from Cedarhurst staff.

The small class sizes promote student engagement and individualized academic support. Overall, the school provides a safe, intimate learning environment in which all staff are committed to high academic and behavioral expectations for students. The team reported that “the lesson content was rigorous and felt like a regular high school English class.” Classroom observations also evidenced that “teachers enjoy teaching, enjoy their students, and enjoy being at Cedarhurst in general.”

The program employs school-wide rationale and motivational strategies, which result in a high level of student engagement and noted throughout the classroom observations. The program has a very well-developed positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) system in place that functions with fidelity across all three tiers. By invitation, the program has presented several times at the PBIS National Leader Forum in Chicago as an exemplar of PBIS in alternative school settings.

The program promotes family engagement through the provision of school-based activities, including a potluck dinner at open house in the fall for the whole family (allows a meet and greet opportunity for parents), teacher and parent conferences two times per year, and parent information sessions focused on various current topics. The program continues to explore strategies to increase parent participation.

Standard Deficiencies:

Cedarhurst School must rectify the following standard deficiencies:

Standard F: Program Requirements - The local school district is responsible for the development and appropriateness of a student’s IEP and any changes made in that IEP. The IEP shall serve as the basis for instruction for each student. The IEP presented by the local education agency (LEA) serves as the basis for admission and should identify the student’s current performance levels, 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. Each private facility shall request an IEP from the placing LEA prior to student enrollment and at least annually thereafter. 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 1: In three of five IEPs reviewed, related services were not appropriately reflected on page eleven—counseling services were not clearly, identified as being provided individually or within a small group.

Issue 2: In five of five IEPs reviewed, Cedarhurst staff was not accurately or appropriately identified on page one according to their roles and/or as Cedarhurst representatives attending the PPT meeting.

Corrective Action: Implement a procedure to utilize prior to finalization of an IEP after participating in a PPT meeting. Said procedure shall ensure that all the information in the IEP is complete and accurate; allows the ability to document a process, ensuring the IEP accurately reflects PPT consensus; and Cedarhurst School can implement the supports and services outlined in the document as written (i.e., require clarification of all related service whether it is provided individually or within a group setting).

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. Illustrate written notification to the district, to request necessary changes.

Standard I: Qualifications and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel - Each private facility shall ensure the following:

The private facility shall maintain a permanent individual personnel file for each employee and ensure said file is confidential. The private facility shall require that prior work references be on record for all applicants. In addition, the private facility shall ensure the applicants submit to a Department of Children and Families (DCF) Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records 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 an applicant if such employer was a local or regional board of education, an approved private special education program (APSEP), 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, the APSEP shall submit state and national criminal history record checks (fingerprinting) within thirty days of hire and on be on file within sixty days from the date of employment of staff who work directly with students. Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) Section 10-221d.

Issue 1: In two of five personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that a fingerprinting check was submitted within the required time. The fingerprinting checks were submitted but not within the required thirty days of hire.

Corrective Action: On or before, June 30, 2022, submit to the BSE attestation that a DCF fingerprinting check will be submitted within thirty days of hire and be on file within sixty days from the date of employment in accordance with CGS Section 10-221d.

Develop an index or organizational format to consistently, use for personnel files. Said format is to ensure that all required components are contained in each file including, but not limited to, pre-employment work references, criminal records check, fingerprinting check, DCF background check, annual performance evaluations, and a *State of Connecticut Educational Employment Verification* form for personnel hired after July 1, 2016 in accordance with Public Act 16-67.

Issue 2: In one of five personnel files reviewed, there was no documentation evidencing completion of a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form prior to employment (employees hired after July 1, 2016).

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2022, submit to the BSE attestation that Cedarhurst will obtain a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form 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.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Cedarhurst School:

Consider hiring a full-time, on-site school psychologist.

Revise the existing suspension policy to reflect the current regulations governing “in-school” and “out-of-school” suspensions. Refer to the [Connecticut State Department of Education Office of Student Supports and Organizational Effectiveness](#).

Move forth with the plan to expand upon community partnerships to increase students’ vocational exploration opportunities. During interviews, staff expressed there is a need to expand vocational experiences out in the community for students. During interviews, all teachers and related service providers expressed the need to expand programming in the arts as well as create vocational programs, including shop, culinary, technology, and hairdressing.

Revise the existing professional development and training participation tracking list in each employee personnel file. In accordance with the principles, procedures, and standards for Connecticut APSEPs, include in each file the activity topic/title, duration, and attendee signature, to evidence education staff receives a minimum eighteen hours of professional development and training annually at no cost.

Refine the program’s existing protocol for obtaining student’s educational records from LEAs and other agencies, to ensure timely receipt (prior to student’s enrollment) of current health records.

Contact the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) Talent Office to arrange for the program’s education director to participate in the [Teacher Educator And Mentoring District Facilitator](#) training and teacher mentor training as needed.

Contact the CSDE Talent Office for the program’s education director to attend the [CSDE System for Educator Evaluation and Development](#) (SEED) training.

Develop and circulate a survey for education and related service personnel to solicit professional development and training topics of interest specific to their discipline. Align professional development and training topics to teacher and related service personnel’s SEED evaluation result, particularly those identified as areas of continued growth.

Move forth with the plan to invest in additional technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Greater access to technology is essential given the academic/cognitive strengths of students enrolled. Greater access to technology will ensure adequate preparation for postsecondary education and career experiences and could provide expanded coursework and elective opportunities. Continue to explore and consider purchasing a digital device for formal academic and behavioral progress monitoring data collection.

Provide opportunities for paraeducators to participate in educational trainings with teachers and related service personnel. In accordance with Every Student Succeeds Act 2015, parents/guardians may request that their child’s paraeducator attend PPT meetings.

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Invite colleges and/or universities into the school to provide parents and students with presentations and trainings focused on the financial aid application process and on the college application process in general as planned. Move forth with plans to hold an annual college career fair and invite the Connecticut Department of Rehabilitation Services to attend.

Consider providing 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 PPT recommendation. A clear understanding of the expectations, (academic and social/emotional) instructional models, and level of expected independence and self-advocacy will assist in preparing students for this transition.

Interviewees expressed an overdue need to reassess the lighting throughout the school as it is “challenging” for students with visual sensitivity. Consider replacing the fluorescent lighting to accommodate students with visual sensitivity.

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 Cedarhurst School’s written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, the BSE will submit a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2027, to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to Cedarhurst School:

Approved Ages to Serve: ages 11 to 22 years old
Approved Grades to Serve: grades 6 through 12
Approved Student Capacity: 75 students
Approval Expiration Date: June 30, 2027

cc: Katherine Clemens, Education Director