



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Ms. Angela Foley Powers, Chief Administrator
Connecticut Education Center

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

DATE: June 14, 2023

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

On April 27, 2023, an evaluation team visited the Connecticut Education Center (CEC) to conduct a program reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE/the Bureau);
- Dr. Beth Giller, Director of Pupil and Support Services, Coventry Public Schools; and
- Ms. Maeghen Plourde, Director of Educational Services, Fresh Start School.

During a previous site visit on April 25, 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 April 27, 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:

Connecticut Education Center is part of a larger organization, Positive Regard Network, which supports and operates on the premise that “all families and students deserve unconditional positive regard and respect.”

Staff shared that the leadership team is highly supportive, collaborative, and maintains open dialogue with all staff. Administration seeks and values input from staff. Interviewees reported, “their voices are heard and appreciated.”

A student-centered philosophy that focuses on understanding students, supporting families, and maintaining active collaboration with partnering school districts and outside community providers is shared among all staff.

The evaluation team reported evidence of well-planned instruction aligned with Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared to be appropriate given the current level of performance for each student. Students were highly engaged in the lesson and eager to respond to the teacher’s questions.

Interviewees described the positive climate as a program strength as evidenced by respectful relationships among students and between staff and students.

Staff has an appreciation for team collaboration. An occupational therapist interviewee described communication and collaboration as a program strength. The multidisciplinary education team meets two times per day (morning and afternoon) to conduct a debriefing for each student. There is a multidisciplinary team approach to individualized education program (IEP) progress monitoring and IEP development.

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. 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 from the district having educational jurisdiction as soon as feasibly possible after placement.

Issue(s):

- In one (1) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, there was no evidence that a special education teacher attended a PPT subsequent to the placement PPT.
- In one (1) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, the school counseling related service was not clearly identified as delivered individually or within a small group.

Corrective Action: 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 CEC can implement the supports and services outlined in the document as written (i.e., require clarification of whether the program will provide any related service individually or within a group setting). Submit to the BSE copies of the next three (3) 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. On or before June 23, 2023, submit to the BSE a copy of the process/procedures developed to review IEPs and how CEC will notify/inform districts.

Standard H. Positive Behavioral Supports, Prevention, and Intervention Strategies - Each private facility shall have written policies and procedures describing the positive behavioral supports and services as well as the prevention and intervention strategies employed by the program. In accordance with Section K: Positive Behavioral Supports and Intervention of the *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Program* (page 20, Item 56), the program maintains policies and procedures of the special education program that includes a policy regarding exclusionary time out. At least, one school employee remains with the student or is immediately available to the student such that the space used for an exclusionary time out is clean, safe, sanitary, and appropriate for the purpose of calming such student or de-escalating such student's behavior. In accordance with the *Facility Checklist* criteria, behavior intervention/crisis management/seclusion rooms must meet the following criteria:

- properly ventilated
- free of objects likely to cause harm
- properly lighted and designed to allow visual monitoring
- not lockable from within
- students have visual access from inside the room

Issue: At the time of the facility check conducted on April 27, 2023, the windows in the doors of the program's two exclusionary time out rooms were not positioned low enough for students to have visual access from within.

Corrective Action: Immediately modify the door windows to the program's two rooms utilized for exclusionary time out to have a window low enough to enable student visual access from within. Provide the BSE with a photograph of both modified doors.

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

All special education program administrators, instruction, and related services personnel providing special education and related services who were hired after September 1, 1980, hold proper state certification for the position held and be on file with the CSBE. This information shall be provided and certified through the staff report in the Educator Data Systems to representatives of the CSBE in a timely manner. RCSA, Section (10-145d-610(c)).

Issue: Submitted with the program's *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Program* was "a list of each individual (including substitute teachers) who provides instructional services to students within the special education program" (page 10, Item 29a, insert 7-B). As of March 21, 2023, the Connecticut Educator Certification System (CECS) shows that the certification status for three (3) instructional providers remains either under review or cannot be determined at this time, or there is no educator record in the CECS. Individuals have not taken appropriate steps to pursue/acquire Connecticut certification.

Corrective Action: On or before July 14, 2023, provide the BSE with a statement of assurance that students placed by districts are instructed by appropriately Connecticut certified staff. Provide the BSE with a master teaching schedule, including all subject areas provided as identified in Section I: Description of Program Services (page 15, Item 43a) of the *Application Approval of a Private Special Education Program*. The master teaching schedule is to identify the name of the teacher of record, instructional subject assignment, and Connecticut certification in the respective area of instruction provided. Thereafter, annually (prior to CEC's first day of each academic year up to the program's expiration date identified below) provide the BSE with the master teaching schedule, including all aforementioned schedule components.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Connecticut Education Center:

Continue efforts to hire additional special education teachers. Explore and implement recruitment and retention strategies to maintain qualified staff through activities such as outreach to college teacher preparation programs, the provision of additional incentives, and a review of salaries and benefits.

Develop community-based partnerships and activities promoting readiness for college and career. Research and acquire a career exploration inventory assessment. Given the program serves students through age 15, it is essential to explore the availability of, and access to, community-based transition opportunities. Provide job coaching support to broaden options for students to develop vocational and trade skills necessary for postsecondary success.

Provide professional development (PD) on the Connecticut System for Educator Evaluation and Development (SEED) topic. Staff expressed the need for "more support and greater oversight of the teacher evaluation process as well as PD, to gain a better understanding of the overall SEED evaluation process." Teachers expressed they are not familiar with the program's performance evaluation system.

Develop a plan to increase PD opportunities for staff. Establish an effective Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC) composed of, but not limited to, certified teachers, administrators, paraeducators, and other appropriate school personnel. An effective PDEC of diverse representatives is beneficial to define a shared vision and establish collective responsibility for the development, evaluation, and update of a comprehensive professional learning plan. Survey education and related service personnel to solicit PD and training topics of interest specific to their discipline. Align PD topics to teacher and related service personnel SEED evaluation results identifying areas of continued growth. Explore the menu of activities and events available through the Connecticut State Education Resource Center for teachers, paraeducators, and related service personnel.

Move forth with the plan to incorporate field trips during the school day, which will provide students with opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge in different places/settings, as well as build upon communication and interaction skills.

Have the education director who is readily available daily receive medication administration training.

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Move forth with the plan to increase opportunities for family engagement through school sponsored social and educational activities.

Move forth with the plan to explore and contract with Healthtrax Fitness and Wellness Center as an outside option for a physical education location. Although the program has a space for students to participate in physical education, education staff expressed the need to either relocate or find a space outside of the school for physical education. The existing space utilized for physical education is within the immediate proximity of a classroom and the related service delivery room and was reported to be highly distracting.

Consider investing in technology such as interactive whiteboards (e.g., Smartboards and Promethean Boards) to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Staff expressed the need for updated and/or new technology and training to ensure skill in its use.

Consider exploring a more efficient means and system of data collection. It was shared that the current data collection process is very time consuming. At the end of each school day, administration collects the academic and behavioral data from classroom teachers and manually records it in a self-developed program tracking system.

Have the chief administrator who has been trained in the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) System of Educator Evaluation and Support System conduct the education director's performance evaluation.

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 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.

Ensure that the program's fiscal report is annually available as it is a submission requirement by October 15th with the program's Annual Statement of Assurances and required as part of the CSDE approved private special education program reapproval process.

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 Connecticut Education Center's written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, a recommendation for program approval through July 1, 2026, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to Connecticut Education Center:

Approved Ages to Serve:	5 through 15 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	K through 8th
Approved Enrollment Capacity:	20 students
Approval Expiration Date:	July 1, 2026

cc: Sandra Donah, Education Director