



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Ms. Donna Swanson, Chief Administrator
FOCUS Center for Autism - The Fresh Start School

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

DATE: September 15, 2021

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

On August 27, 2021, an evaluation team visited FOCUS Center for Autism - The Fresh Start School (Fresh Start School) to conduct an on-site review for reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Dr. Judy Benson-Clarke, Director of Special Education, Scotland Public Schools; and
- Mr. Mark Hedrick, Senior Special Education Director, Oak Hill Schools.

During a previous virtual site visit on July 28, 2021, 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 August 27, 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
- termination of enrollment

Commendations:

- Staff described leadership, specifically the education director, as supportive, responsive, and integrally involved in the individualized educational, transitional, and behavioral programming of all students. There is low personnel turnover and staff longevity is attributed to high-quality leadership.

- The overall climate of the program is positive and reinforcing. Staff interviewed reported they share an appreciation of the need for collaboration and teamwork and “feel very connected.” This connectivity is due to the strong culture of collaboration and clear communication set by leadership. Staff interviewed also shared that students feel safe, education staff feels at ease, and stated, “We love coming to work every day.”
- The team observed a mutually respectful atmosphere between all individuals involved within the school, including administrators, teachers, staff members, students, and visitors.
- The program provides highly individualized instruction and support within a structured milieu using evidence-based, naturalistic interventions, to address communication and social learning. The school focuses on social thinking methodology throughout the day and in social thinking groups twice per week—facilitated by a licensed clinical social worker.
- The observation team described the learning environment as trusting and supportive. Students were “not afraid to make mistakes, felt safe, and confident taking the lead reading and when responding to questions” during lessons observed.
- Implementation of the principles of positive behavior interventions and supports are evident through visual rules and routines posted on classroom walls.
- Staff asserts that their work begins in relationship building. Staff affirms that building trust with students through understanding their needs and by recognizing behaviors as a form of communication, such behaviors can be addressed in an effective manner. The program’s naturalistic interventions that use the milieu as a learning environment, as well as, the use of Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, helps students to manage their behaviors in the moment and learn positive ways of coping with strong feelings.
- Fresh Start School employs a multidisciplinary team, which includes advanced practice registered nurses, a licensed practical nurse, licensed clinical social workers, special education teachers, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist, a part-time art teacher, a board-certified behavior analyst consultant, and a part-time school psychologist. The multidisciplinary team meets weekly to discuss students’ challenges and progress.
- The observation team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, which appeared to be aligned with the current level of performance for each student. Teachers had identified lesson plan goals and the Connecticut Core Standard(s) were addressed during the lessons.
- Staff articulated a depth of knowledge related to the Gradual Release of Responsibility Instructional Framework in which cognitive work shifts slowly and intentionally from teacher modeling, to joint responsibility between teachers and students, and to independent practice and application by the learner.
- The Fresh Start School team places great emphasis on strengthening the home-school partnership and is “open to different forms of communication to meet the parents where they are at.” Teachers communicate weekly with parents in the form of a check-in and two parent-teacher conferences

occur each year. Parents are encouraged to be involved in the individualized education program (IEP) development process for their child.

- Fresh Start School has a budding transition program with a strong emphasis on building community partnerships. The location is perfectly suited for the expansion of individualized community integration and independent skill building—ideally located near a myriad of community resources (including parks, ball fields, coffee shops, restaurants, bus line, and various types of business entities). Some of the existing community partnerships include Shephard Meadows Therapeutic Horse Farm, Canton Public Library, Roaring Brook Nature Center, Mack and Molly Pet Parlor, Audette Motorcycle Company, Faith and Fire Forge, and the Thomaston Opera House.
- In addition to the provision of the required 18 hours of professional development (PD) annually, staff may participate in off-site or online PD training activities of their individual interest at no cost with the approval of the program’s education director.

Standard Deficiencies:

The following standard deficiencies must be rectified:

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 LEA prior to student enrollment. 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.

Issue(s): In three (3) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, the related services identified on page 11 of the IEP were not reflected appropriately—services were not clearly identified as being provided 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 Fresh Start 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). The review and any subsequent communication with the responsible district must be done in a timely manner and must then be reflected in the student file. It is strongly recommended that written documentation of requested changes in the IEP be attached to the current IEP to ensure that the IEP can be implemented with fidelity. 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.

Standard H: Qualifications and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel

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. 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, 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. CGS Section 10-221d

Issue: In three (3) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no documentation evidencing that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form was completed.

Corrective Action: On or before September 30, 2021, submit to the BSE attestation that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form will be 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.

Issue: In one (1) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check was not submitted before hiring a staff who works directly with students. The employee was hired on May 26, 2021, and the submission for a DCF background check was not submitted until July 2, 2021.

Corrective Action: For the next three (3) new hires, provide the BSE with documentation that a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check was submitted prior to hiring staff who will work directly with children.

Standard J: Health and Safety

A private facility shall conduct monthly emergency drills that shall include one crisis response drill other than a fire drill once every three (3) months.

Issue: In reviewing emergency drill records, fire drills were documented to occur monthly. However, there was no evidence that every third drill was a crisis drill.

Corrective Action: On or before September 30, 2021, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will maintain emergency drill documentation evidencing that every third drill will be a crisis drill.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations are offered to Fresh Start School:

- Continue seeking an alternate site for the program to address concern over instructional space as recommended in Fresh Start School's preliminary evaluation report of December 11, 2018. Staff interviewed during this site visit reported that the school facilities are too small and separated—limiting opportunities for students to interact. An alternate site for the program is recommended to address concern over instructional space. Increased space would ensure access to, and effective use of, technology and other instructional tools, which continue to be somewhat limited in the current instructional spaces/classrooms within the program.

Preliminary Evaluation Report: FOCUS Center for Autism - The Fresh Start School
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September 15, 2021

- Move forth with the plan to expand opportunities for students to participate in community-based transition activities and focus on increasing student's individual level of independence. Provide students with experiences based on their specific area(s) of interest resulting from career interest inventories, thereby fostering increased levels of independence and varied opportunities as young adults.
- Develop an annual compilation of the PD and training activities in which each staff member has participated in addition to maintaining an administrative PD and training binder. Ensure participation in the PD and training activities are well documented and available in each staff file.
- Move forth with the plan for the education director to participate in the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) Training for Administrator's Foundational Skills for Evaluators of Teachers. Education director participation is beneficial in order to develop the capacity to observe and analyze teacher performance through the lens of the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching and to provide supportive, high-quality feedback to teachers.
- Continue communicating with the CSDE Talent Office in order to participate in the CSDE Teacher Education And Mentoring Program District Facilitator and Administrator's orientation to gain an understanding of administrator roles and responsibilities in the program.
- Continue providing PD for education staff focused on wellness and self-care and how to practice self-care in a school.
- Continue providing and exploring vocational and transitional opportunities within the program and the community, which focus on the development of independent living skills. Move forth with the plan for developing additional community partnerships to provide students with community engagement through relationships with local businesses and other community agencies and resources.
- 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 to 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 transition.

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, if applicable. 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 Commissioner of Education.

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

Approved Ages to Serve: 10–22 years old (Grades 5–12)
Approved Student Capacity: 20 students
Approval Expiration Date: June 30, 2026

cc: Ms. Maeghen Plourde Harris, LCSW, Education Director