



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



**TO:** Michelle Lestrud, Chief Administrator  
Gengras Center-University of Saint Joseph

**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 January 11, 2024, an evaluation team visited Gengras Center-University of Saint Joseph (Gengras-USJ) to conduct a program reapproval review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Becky Lopes, Director of Student Services, Putnam Public Schools; and
- Patricia Sobraske, Education Director, Manchester Memorial Clinical Day School.

During a previous site visit on January 9, 2024, 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 January 11, 2024, 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:**

The program's overall climate and culture were described as inviting, positive, harmonious, friendly, supportive, engaging, academically challenging, and structured. Staff interviewed reported, "administration has a regular presence in classrooms and the provision of ongoing feedback is very helpful."

The program benefits from the unique opportunities afforded by their location and affiliation with the Gengras-USJ. A variety of volunteer and work experiences within the school, the USJ campus, and the community, are available for students based on their readiness and individual needs.

The professional staff's longevity (20 years+) at Gengras-USJ is positively impacted by the support administration provides, the collaboration among staff, and the supervision available at all levels.

The climate and culture were described as caring, peaceful, calm, and friendly. Staff is best characterized as skilled, passionate, engaging, and professional. The observation team shared they observed "lots of smiling among staff and students and the care for students is seamless in the way staff work harmoniously together."

Collaboration is described as a program strength. A staff interviewed shared, "the program has a well-run, strong system of collaboration." Individualized education program (IEP) development, implementation, and monitoring is a highly collaborative, multidisciplinary process. A related service provider interviewed reported that related service providers are very involved in the educational process. The speech language therapist and social workers are regularly in classrooms providing push-in services and providing teachers with consultation support.

Classrooms were described as spacious, clean, quiet, and organized with large windows and natural lighting. There was an abundance of visuals displayed on classroom bulletin boards, including student art and work products, sequencing of hygiene activities in student bathrooms, and times for breaks and transitions. The hallways are spacious and clearly well designed for the purpose of meeting student needs.

Family engagement is described as a program strength. Families are invited to many program events, including an annual holiday show directed by the music teacher; a variety show; talent shows in which students tell jokes, play an instrument, or sing a song; and the program also holds a career day. Gengras-USJ conducts regular parent information sessions that address a variety of topics, including, but not limited to, transition, communication, outside agency services, and other resources to support students and their families. Teachers and social workers maintain daily communication with families through two-way communication books.

Lessons observed were aligned with Connecticut Core Standards, developmentally appropriate, and utilized implementation of low- and high-tech accommodations to address the unique needs of the individual student. Well organized, multi-modal instruction highly engages students. IEPs reviewed indicate that the goals and objectives proposed by program staff, for consideration by the planning and placement team, are well articulated and measurable.

Teacher assistants assigned to individual students accompany them to related service sessions optimizing opportunities to implement specific strategies, accommodations, and expectations within, and across, all settings.

The program has invested in technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. The observation team described the program's technology as "amazing and very well outfitted, including new Smart Boards, iPads, desktop computers, and a variety of augmentative and alternative communication devices to support the individual needs of students.

#### **Standard Deficiencies:**

No standard deficiencies were cited.

**Recommendations:**

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Gengras-USJ:

Consider having the program's Professional Development and Evaluation Committee circulate a survey to align professional development (PD) opportunities with specific topics of interest. A teacher interviewed expressed interest in attending the Connecticut State Department of Education IEP Quality Training, to develop more skill in developing IEP goals and objectives.

Review the current format utilized to report student progress toward achieving goals and objectives in the IEP with the goal of streamlining the process. Currently, the program manually collects academic and behavioral data to track individual students' growth. Consider exploring electronic progress monitoring tools.

Move forth with the plan to replace the existing playground with sensory equipment and play areas to accommodate all ages and abilities, and to provide a gathering space that offers an inclusive playground experience.

Increase opportunities for teachers to conduct peer-to-peer observations within the program, as well as observations in other facilities (public and private) as a means of broadening teacher perspective and providing a unique PD experience.

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 Gengras Center-USJ's written acceptance of the 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 Gengras Center-USJ:

|                                      |                        |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Approved Ages to Serve:</b>       | 3 through 22 years old |
| <b>Approved Grades to Serve:</b>     | PreK through 12th      |
| <b>Approved Enrollment Capacity:</b> | 150 students           |
| <b>Approval Expiration Date:</b>     | June 30, 2029          |