



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



**TO:** Mr. Gary Hunt, Chief Administrator  
BEST Academy

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

**DATE:** May 31, 2023

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

On January 26, 2023, an evaluation team visited BEST Academy to conduct a program reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE/the Bureau);
- Nicholas Huskes, Education Director, Foundation School; and
- Melissa Caballero, Director of Pupil Services, West Hartford Public Schools.

During a previous site visit on January 24, 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 January 26, 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 shared that the leadership, specifically the education director, is highly collaborative and maintains open dialogue with all staff, has a "good hand" on the program, "goes out of the way to listen," and is very supportive of the entire educational team.

The program site is bright, spacious, clean, and organized. Classrooms are large and colorful with student work and art products displayed. The program equips classrooms with individual student stations, which provide students with opportunities to work independently.

Staff interviewed reported that BEST Academy provides them with an “abundance of diverse” professional development opportunities. The program encourages staff members to attend trainings offered by the State Education Resource Center, Regional Educational Service Centers, and other outside professional development opportunities of interest specific to their role and funded by the program. Staff participate annually in a full week of orientations prior to the first day of school. During the school year, every other Friday is a half day for students. BEST Academy utilizes the staff-only time remaining in the day for professional development based on the program’s school improvement plan, staff interest survey responses, and areas of continued growth aligned with the System for Educator Evaluation and Development evaluation outcomes.

The program implements the BEST Rotational Model, which is comprised of seven distinctive rotations, including activities of daily living, discrete trial training, leisure, academics, computer rotations/activity schedule, social skills, and motor lab.

The program has invested in technology that supports teachers in their instruction and students in their learning and communication. Program technology includes SMART Boards in all classrooms, a data collection iPad, student reinforcement iPads for communication purposes, Unique Learning System (curriculum-based online program), and the Thread-Central Reach data collection system. An operating system transfers the individualized education program (IEP) into thread for appropriate data collection that aligns with academic and non-academic goals and objectives and i-Ready curriculum and progress monitoring tool.

The program employs a full-time social worker who provides “push-in” classroom services as an everyday practice in addition to implementing IEP services for students who have direct social work services and/or consultation.

A teacher interviewed shared that the IEP development and progress monitoring process is highly collaborative. Certified and non-certified staff are participants in the multi-disciplinary meeting. The program engages parents/guardians and outside service providers (with parental consent) in the IEP development process. The program’s behavioral technicians participate in the monthly behavior intervention program reviews for their student case load.

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

A positive culture and climate were evident by the positive respectful relationships among students and between staff and students.

The BEST Academy implements a comprehensive, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) model across settings. The program's staff-run climate committee plans spirit weeks, team building, and staff events as a group. The program ties Staff of the Month (most considerate) and Student of the Month into the PBIS model.

The program has created "nature/butterfly garden" areas, which students can access on nature walks, breaks, and outdoor science lessons. The program has recently added swings and a basketball court for students to access on the playground shared with the school next-door.

### **Standard Deficiencies:**

BEST Academy 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. Each private facility shall request an IEP from the placing 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 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. For students placed by other agencies, the private facility should obtain an IEP from the district having educational jurisdiction as soon as feasible after placement.

### **Issues:**

1. In one (1) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, the IEPs did not appropriately reflect the related services identified on page 11. Specifically, the IEP did not clearly identify speech/language therapy and occupational therapy services as provided individually or within a small group.
2. In one (1) of five (5) student files reviewed, health records were not up to date. A student health record dated November 30, 2018, was the most recent date.

**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, BEST Academy can implement the supports and services outlined in the document as written (i.e., require clarification of whether the program will provide all related service individually or within a group setting), and ensure that student health records are up to date. 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 implementation of written notification to the district requesting necessary changes (retain in student file). On or before June 23, 2023, submit to the BSE a copy of the process/procedures developed to review IEPs and the manner BEST Academy will use to 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. K:56 (1) At least, one school employee remains with the student or is immediately available to the student...school employee are able to communicate verbally throughout the exclusionary time out; and K:56 (2) 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 December 15, 2022, the door of the program's "Tier III Calming Space" utilized for exclusionary time out(s), did not have a door window low enough to allow a student visual access from within.

**Corrective Action:** Immediately modify the door window of the room utilized for exclusionary time out(s) to have a window low enough to enable a student visual access from within. Provide the BSE with a photograph as evidence.

**Note:** The program removed the door from the "Tier III Calming Space" room utilized for exclusionary time out(s) on the day of the on-site approval visit on December 15, 2022, enabling students with full visibility from within. The program has provided the BSE with a photograph as evidence. Best Academy has resolved the corrective action.

### **Recommendations:**

The BSE offers the following recommendations to BEST Academy:

Provide updated and/or new technology. All staff interviewed expressed there is a need to update some equipment, although the program has an abundance of technology to support teachers in instruction and students in learning. The occupation therapist interviewed shared that students would benefit from accessing some occupational therapy related applications on their iPads enabling carry over of skills in the home environment.

Maintain a list of professional development and training activities in each personnel file that identifies the date, topic, duration, and cumulative hours of training evidencing the provision of 18 hours of professional development and training annually and funded by the program.

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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.

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 the BEST Academy's written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, the Bureau will submit a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2028, to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to BEST Academy:

<b>Approved Ages to Serve:</b>	5 to 22 years old
<b>Approved Grades to Serve:</b>	K through 12th
<b>Approved Enrollment Capacity:</b>	55 students
<b>Approval Expiration Date:</b>	June 30, 2028

cc: Alyssa Kochiss, Education Director