




STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Gary Hunt, Chief Administrator
High Road School of Hartford-High School (Hartford and Windham County)

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

DATE: July 19, 2024

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

On December 21, 2023, an evaluation team visited High Road School of Hartford-High School (HRS Hartford High) programs to conduct program reapproval review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE);
- Caroline Hargraves, Director of Pupil Services, Somers Public School District; and
- Catherine Riker, Education Director, Prism Academy.

During a previous site visit on December 19, 2023, 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 December 21, 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.

Expanded Program Approval Review Process:

In response to concerns raised by the Office of the Child Advocate and Disability Rights of Connecticut in their March 12, 2024, High Road Investigative Report, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) included in its review process additional investigations of staffing credentials, hiring practices, and restraint/seclusion procedures above and beyond the standard review process. The program review team inspected all educational and administrative staff files. The file review process included, but was not limited to, a review of data and records for certification credentials and evidence that the program has consistently conducted state and national required criminal records and fingerprinting checks, and a

Department of Children and Families (DCF) background check, in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) Section 10-221d. The personnel file review process also included a review of all special education program administrators, instructional, and related services personnel files in accordance with Standard I: Qualification and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel of the Connecticut State Department of Education, *Principles, Procedures and Standards for the Approval of Private Special Education Programs (February 2021)*..

Commendations:

Four teachers and two related services staff interviewed reported the school's administration is very involved and knowledgeable in all aspects of the program, responsive to staff and student needs, and "have their heart and soul into the program." One of the teachers interviewed reported that administration is "highly collaborative and very much a part of the multidisciplinary team partaking in the individualized education program (IEP) development and progress monitoring process.

The overall climate of the program is described as warm and welcoming by the CSDE Standards Evaluation Team. The team was warmly welcomed upon arrival by staff and students. The students were socially appropriate, friendly, and introduced themselves to the team appropriately. An excellent rapport was observed between teachers and students. The observation team shared that overall, there is a sense of positivity in the classroom environment as evidenced by respectful communication between staff, and social and warm smile exchanges between staff and students.

The team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, aligned with Connecticut Core Standards as evidenced by the lesson plans provided to the CSDE team prior to the four classroom observations. A teacher interviewed shared that "individualized weekly lesson plans for promoting a student-centered approach to education recognizing and accommodating the unique qualities of each learner, fostering a more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning experience." Students observed demonstrated a high level of engagement, particularly during a science lesson. Each student was provided with a graphic organizer in which they worked together collaboratively to identify cell parts on the model. The teacher threw a ping pong ball to students when it was their turn to answer a question.

The program employs an academic and curriculum instruction (ACI) specialist who plays crucial roles in education, focusing on specific subjects to ensure that content and teaching methods meet educational standards. The ACI is responsible for developing curriculum materials, providing teachers with professional development (PD), and assessing instructional strategies in collaboration with teachers and administrators. Additionally, the ACI specialist contributes to the design of comprehensive educational programs, conducts reviews, and guides the creation of effective curricula. The ACI collaborates with teachers to enhance teaching practices, modeling effective techniques, and supports the implementation of innovative instructional methods. The program's education director shared that, "the strategic addition of an ACI aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, foster continuous improvement in teaching quality, and positively impact student achievement."

Classrooms are characterized as spacious, neat, organized with individual student workstations and instructional space for small group instruction and opportunities for peer interaction.

Students enrolled benefit from community-based career exploration opportunities, including Burlington retail store, CVS, Dollar Tree, and the YMCA. An interviewee shared, "students also participate in school-based job site experiences in the coffee shop, café, and animal center—fostering skills contribute to a positive school culture, career preparation, encourage a sense of responsibility, and contribute to a well-rounded education."

Students are afforded opportunities to engage in sport activities with other students in approved private special education programs and Connecticut Regional Educational Service Centers, including, but not limited to, cross country and basketball.

The program has invested in technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their communication and learning. Each classroom is equipped with an interactive Smart Board.

Students have augmentative and alternative communication devices as needed (Proloquo), individual student Chromebooks, and desktop computers.

Standard Deficiencies:

HRS Hartford High must rectify the following standard deficiencies:

Standard I: Qualification and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support

Personnel - Each private facility shall require that prior work references be on record for all applicants. Furthermore, before hiring staff who will work directly with students, the private facility shall ensure that the applicants submit to a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check. The private facility shall obtain the information listed on the *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form from ALL the applicant's current or former employer(s) 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. Applicants are required under the law to provide a prospective employer with the name, address, and telephone number of all current or former employers that meet the above criteria. Information may be collected either through written communication or telephonically. In addition, state and national criminal history records check (fingerprinting) of staff who work directly with students, shall be submitted within thirty (30) days of hire and on file within sixty (60) days from the date of employment. C.G.S. Section 10-221d.

The private facility shall maintain a permanent individual personnel file for each employee and shall ensure said file is held confidential. A private facility shall have a written plan(s) for ongoing personnel development, including a PD policy. Such policy shall include:

- the provision of a minimum of eighteen (18) hours of PD to staff each year at no cost;
- PD opportunities that are aligned to individual educator evaluation in support areas of identified need; and
- the proper documentation of PD activities.

Issue 1: In four (4) of thirty-five (35) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that a state and national criminal (fingerprinting) history records check was submitted within thirty (30) days from the date of employment. Evidence of those submissions was provided; however, they had not occurred within thirty (30) days from the date of employment.

Issue 2: In eight (8) of thirty-five (35) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence of submission to a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check prior to hire. Evidence of those submissions was provided; however, they had not occurred prior to hire. The date of the most recent infraction was August 31, 2022. It is important to note that all current personnel have had a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry check. The late submission of these checks for eight (8) employees ranged from 1 day to 1.5 years after the date of hire.

Corrective Action(s) - Issues 1 and 2: On or before July 31, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will ensure that state and national criminal history records check (fingerprinting) of staff who work directly with students will be submitted within thirty (30) days of employment and on file within sixty (60)

days from the date of employment. Furthermore, the program will ensure that applicants working directly with students will submit to a DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check before hire. CGS Section 10-221d.

Submit verification to the BSE evidencing that the national criminal database background checks (fingerprinting) were submitted within thirty (30) days of employment and on file within sixty (60) days from the date of employment for all new employees hired (involving direct student contact) during the 2024-25 school year.

Submit verification to the BSE evidencing that prior to hire, DCF Child Abuse and Neglect Registry checks were appropriately completed for all potential employees (involving direct student contact) for the 2023-24 school year and the 2024-25 school year.

On or before July 31, 2024, develop and submit to the BSE an index or documentation to ensure that the appropriate background checks are a part of the HRS Hartford High hiring practices in accordance with CGS 10-221d.

Issue 3: In five (5) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that the education staff participated in a minimum of eighteen (18) hours of annual PD activities.

Corrective Action: On or before July 31, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that moving forward the program will include in each staff file the annual summary or transcript that indicates PD activities in addition to maintaining an administrative PD and training record identifying the date, topic, duration, presenter, and participant signatures (wet for in-person training and electronic if virtual) to document that each education staff member has received a minimum of eighteen (18) hours of PD and training at no cost.

Standard J: Health and Safety - A private facility shall substitute a crisis response drill for a fire drill every three (3) months. CGS 10-231.

Issue(s): In reviewing emergency drill records, there was no evidence of substituting a crisis response drill for a fire drill once every three (3) months.

Corrective Action: On or before July 31, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will substitute a crisis response drill for a fire drill once every three (3) months. Submit to the BSE emergency drill records for the full 2023-24 academic year.

On or before June 30, 2025, submit to the BSE emergency drill records for the full 2024-25 academic year.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to HRS Hartford High:

Consider exploring real-time, ongoing digital academic and behavioral data collection systems. The program currently has a paper-based data collection system. IEP goals and objectives appear on the back of each student's individualized weekly lesson plan and progress monitoring data is tracked manually.

Move forth with the plan to develop additional community-based partnerships to expand upon student's career exploration opportunities aligned with interests, particularly at the HRS Hartford High School-Windham County location. The CSDE is in the process of developing asynchronous and synchronous secondary transition professional development opportunities for the secondary transition coordinators. Please contact Alycia Trakas, CSDE/BSE Education Consultant for additional information at Alycia.Trakas@ct.gov.

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Continue efforts to hire additional board-certified behavior analysts (BCBA) to work under the program's lead, doctoral-level BCBA to provide supports for staff and students throughout the program.

Move forth with the plan to expand upon parent training topics offered "to include a robust parent training and interagency involvement plan in collaboration with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, Connecticut Parent Advocacy, and adult-living facilities to open more doors for parents."

Maintain a balance of internal and external PD opportunities. Consider exploring the menu of activities and events available through the Connecticut State Education Resource Center for teachers, paraeducators, and related service personnel. Circulate a Professional Development and Evaluation Committee developed survey to all staff for the purpose of soliciting interests specific to their roles. Align PD and training activities to the performance evaluation outcomes and areas of continued growth.

Provide more off-grounds work-site opportunities and more funding for cooking. A teacher interviewed suggested there should be more opportunities to "go off-grounds with students to work sites and more funding for cooking."

Consider hiring a full-time school psychologist to support the academic behavioral and mental health student needs through frequent collaboration with parents, teachers, administrators, and others to best meet the diverse needs of students. Currently the program contracts with a consulting clinical psychologist.

Familiarize program administration and professional staff with the [Connecticut Guidelines for Educator and Leader Evaluation and Support 2023](#) for implementation in the 2024-25 academic year. Refer to scheduled training dates on the CSDE Talent Office website. [Talent Office \(ct.gov\)](#).

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 planning placement team (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 fifteen (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 High Road School of Hartford-High School's written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2027, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to High Road School of Hartford-High School:

Approved Ages to Serve:	13 through 22 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	8th through 12th
Approved Enrollment Capacity:	77 students (2 sites) Hartford: 55 students Windham County: 22 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2027

DP:rg
cc: Jennifer Johnson, Education Director