




STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



**TO:** Laura Carroll, Chief Administrator  
Hope Academy

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

**DATE:** May 31, 2023

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

On February 9, 2023, an evaluation team visited Hope Academy to conduct a program reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE/the Bureau);
- Linda Zunda, Education Director, Elizabeth Ives School; and
- Dr. Judy Benson Clarke, Former Education Director, Scotland Public Schools.

During a previous site visit on February 7, 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 February 9, 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, expedient with responses and support, and seeks and values staff input. Interviewees reported they “feel very comfortable with going to administration with whatever they need.” The education staff employment longevity reflects effective leadership.

The program site is bright, spacious, clean, and organized. Classrooms are large and colorful with student work and art products displayed. Hope Academy equips classrooms with individual student stations, which provide students with opportunities to work independently. The overall design of the environment is to allow conduciveness to the variable needs of the students, including the availability and location of therapeutic supports and variety of lighting in each instructional setting.

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

Hope Academy delivers highly individualized rigorous instruction aligned with the Connecticut Core Standards and the individualized education programs (IEPs) of students enrolled. The program has a 6:1 student to staff ratio. 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.

Students enrolled benefit from three full-time literacy intervention teachers who provide individualized instruction using methodologies, including Orton Gillingham, Wilson Language System, and Linda Mood Bell programs. The program also employs a full-time math intervention teacher who provides individualized instruction using the programs Aleks and On Cloud Nine.

The program provides differentiated coursework aligned with Connecticut graduation requirements. Course offerings meet the needs of learners requiring a rigorous academic pace as well as a learner requiring highly specialized instruction to access general education standards.

The program provides a high level of integrated therapeutic support and accessibility to clinical interventions with a 12:1 student to clinician ratio. Social workers and psychologists provide counseling services identified within IEPs and are present and accessible throughout the school day across all settings.

Hope Academy provides a variety of school activities and events involving parents, including, but not limited to, fall open house, ice cream socials, family board game night, a harvest moon dance, and field day.

Hope Academy provides students with explicit and integrated social emotional learning opportunities. Students participate in the social emotional learning curriculum RULER. All staff integrate social emotional shared practices when working with students throughout the school day.

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A review of personnel files indicates maintenance of an individual professional development log for each Hope Academy staff member. Hope Academy encourages staff 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.

The program implements a schoolwide system of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). The system includes the CORE 4 (citizenship, optimism, respect, and engagement). The PBIS system includes explicit instruction of schoolwide expectations grounded in shared language and a universal check-in/check-out intervention. Students have opportunities to earn tangible and nontangible rewards (geared toward various ages) such as purchasing items from the school store, accessing technology during free time, and participating in community-based field trips.

Hope Academy affords students access to school and community-based transition experiences and opportunities, including college level classes and life skills activities. The program has developed community partnerships with Goodwill, Palm and Able, Homewood Suites, Ocean State Job Lot, Safari Stan's, CappuGino's, Burlington, Pez, Walgreens, Connecticut Food Bank, High Plains Community Center, Sodexo, and Chili's. Students have access to college-level courses at Gateway Community College or through the Post University Partnership Program. The community-based experiences enable students to build independent living skills such as money management, culinary skills, and public transportation navigation.

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 classrooms, iPads available for student use, and a Chromebook for each student.

Teachers interviewed shared that the IEP development and progress monitoring process is a highly collaborative multidisciplinary approach. The program's clinical director shared that the level of collaboration here is "what it should look like in all schools."

**Standard Deficiencies:**

Hope Academy has no standard deficiencies.

**Recommendations:**

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Hope Academy:

Consider expanding the diversity of the Professional Development and Evaluation Committee by adding a paraeducator.

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 and placement team 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.

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Continue to explore and implement strategies to assist in recruiting and maintaining qualified staff. Hope Academy may achieve this through activities such as outreach to college teacher preparation programs, the provision of additional employee incentives, and a review of salaries and benefits.

Move forth with the plan to provide professional development activities focused on “balancing staff and well-being.”

Teachers interviewed shared the need for increased time to collaborate with each other. Consider revising the “master teacher schedule” to allow for more opportunities for teacher-to-teacher collaboration.

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 Hope 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 Hope Academy:

<b>Approved Ages to Serve:</b>	6 to 22 years old
<b>Approved Grades to Serve:</b>	1st through 12th
<b>Approved Enrollment Capacity:</b>	85 students
<b>Approval Expiration Date:</b>	June 30, 2028

cc: Sarah Ulizio, Education Director