



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Scott Wells, Chief Administrator
Options Educational Services

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 February 29, 2024, an evaluation team visited Options Educational Services (Options) to conduct an on-site initial program review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE); and
- Christen Papallo, Director of Pupil Services, Regional School District 4 (Chester, Deep River, Essex).

During a previous site visit on February 27, 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 February 29, 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:

Options is a twelve-month program serving students ages 11 through 22 years old. The program provides postsecondary related curriculum, community involvement, life skills training, and vocational skill development as practiced on site and at a variety of community-based vocational sites.

Staff interviewed described administration as “the strength of the program.” Administration is viewed as highly supportive, team focused, and maintaining an open-door policy in which staff feels cared for, comfortable, and valued in sharing and collaborating. The education director was described as very knowledgeable and involved in all aspects of the program, and equally committed to implementing individual student-centered programs that result in the highest level of benefit to each student.

The beautiful program site is welcoming, spacious, organized, quiet, private, and comfortable. The intentional choice of soft lighting and wall colors bring the ambiance of a calming state. There are areas to support a variety of student interest-based activities, including music, art, an exercise room, physical education, and a kitchen.

The overall climate and culture of the program was described as “very positive.” The team observed a mutually respectful atmosphere between all individuals involved within the school, including administrators, teachers, staff members, students, and visitors. It was shared that administration fosters a strong sense of caring among all staff and students.

Students develop independence while enrolled in the program and have opportunities to take college-level, credit bearing courses through the High School Partnership Program offered by the Connecticut Community College system. The program collaborates with college accessibility offices to plan for students’ access to the accommodations needed. The program also provides students with transportation to college sites. Students are supported by program staff that remain with them as needed.

Collaboration and communication were described as program strengths. All staff interviewed reported the program has a collaborative, cohesive, team approach to supporting all students. A related service provider interviewed described the level of communication as “incredible, cohesive and welcoming, and all staff want the best for students.” Effective communication systems are in place for ensuring a multidisciplinary approach that ensures optimal academic, social emotional outcomes for all students.

Staff share an appreciation of the need for collaboration and teamwork. The strong culture of collaboration with a student-centered multidisciplinary team approach provides students with academic and behavioral support. A related service provider interviewed described the staff as “exceptionally caring and collaborative.”

Students enrolled benefit from a variety of highly individualized enrichment and vocational opportunities that are interest driven, community based, involve service learning, and provide a less restrictive community setting to practice learned social skills. The program has developed over twenty-five community-based partnerships that provide students with diverse work site career exploration experiences of which some result in permanent employment positions.

An annual compilation of the professional development (PD) activities in which each staff member has participated is well documented and available in each staff file reviewed evidencing staff is provided with a minimum of eighteen (18) hours of PD annually.

Related service staff interviewed shared they are “very invested in the program and appreciate the strong supports and system of collaboration that are in place.” A contracted speech language pathologist interviewed expressed, “Options is the best place I ever worked and have never had such a positive, collaborative relationship with staff in a school.” Staff interviewed shared that “they love that the program partners with a psychiatrist for evaluations, consultations, and the provision of family wrap-around services.”

The team reported evidence of well-planned instruction aligned with the Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared to be appropriate to the current level of performance for each student. Teachers had identified goals and objectives, which were clearly stated. The classroom observations confirmed the implementation of appropriately differentiated instruction and access to necessary accommodation(s). The use of technology, both high and low level, was evident during lesson observations. Students observed were characterized as highly engaged, active learners.

Standard Deficiencies:

No standard deficiencies were cited.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Options:

Consider incorporating small group social skills to support social and emotional learning and generalization of strategies learned. A licensed clinical social worker interviewed suggested opportunities for students to participate in group social skill activities/sessions to allow increased peer interactions.

Include additional time in the daily schedule for teacher collaboration. A common suggestion from staff interviewed is to build time into the daily schedule to allow teacher collaboration focused on curriculum and instructional strategies.

Maintain a balance of internal and external PD opportunities. Explore the menu of activities and events available through the Connecticut State Education Resource Center for teachers, paraeducators, and related service personnel. Staff shares an appreciation for diverse PD and training opportunities.

Consider increasing opportunities for teachers to conduct peer-to-peer observations within Options, 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 Options Educational Service's written agreement, a recommendation for program approval through June 30, 2029, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education.

Upon such approval, the following is applicable to Options Educational Services:

Approved Ages to Serve:	11 through 22 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	5th–12th
Approved Enrollment Capacity:	22 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2029

cc: Linda Carlson, Education Director