



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Ms. Helen Burland, Chief Administrator
Saint Catherine Academy

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

DATE: June 14, 2023

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

On May 4, 2023, an evaluation team visited Saint Catherine Academy (Saint Catherine) to conduct a program reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE/the Bureau);
- Ms. Julie Longolucco Hill, Education Director, The Light House; and
- Mr. William Roland, Supervisor of Special Education, Shelton Public Schools.

During a previous site visit on May 2, 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 May 4, 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 shared that the leadership team has “a strong sense of commitment—their whole heart is here, they take pride in their work and the program, they are very supportive of students and their needs, and create a unified school community.” Interviewees also reported that administration ensures teachers are provided with all needed resources and always available to support all staff members.

The program currently has a building expansion project occurring, which will double its square footage with an anticipated fall 2023 completion date. The new space will include a commercial kitchen, a hydroponic greenhouse, a program room, a new courtyard with outdoor classroom space, and a fully accessible playground.

Interviewees described the climate and culture as warm, caring, gentle, supporting and “a nice place to be.” The climate is positive as evidenced by respectful relationships among students and between staff and students. There is a strong schoolwide emphasis on social, emotional, and behavioral learning for all students.

Students have a variety of opportunities to express themselves through the arts, including painting, pottery, singing, and playing instruments.

Saint Catherine intentionally maintains small class sizes to ensure the implementation of individualized, unique, and student specific programs addressing goals and objectives both within the classroom and in the community. The program has community-based partnerships with Assumption School, The Watermark, Vazzy’s, Notre Dame, and Gilberties. Students develop vocational and interpersonal skills through visits to the partner worksites weekly. Staff and volunteers support the students.

Each student has an individualized schedule for activities of daily living that may include, but not limited to, hygiene/grooming, bathroom habits, routines, and general safety. Students practice independent living skills in a fully equipped life skills apartment, including kitchen routines (loading and emptying dishwasher and setting the table), making beds, folding laundry, vacuuming and sweeping, and emptying garbage.

Students contribute to their community through volunteer programs such as food prep for a nearby homeless shelter. Monthly, students participate in PB&J Friday community service. Students, staff, and volunteers prepare and deliver 300 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to a local food pantry.

Education staff has an appreciation for team collaboration. A teacher interviewee commented that the “smallness of the program enhances opportunities for communication and collaboration.” A certified occupational therapist assistant interviewee described communication and collaboration as a program strength. All related service providers participate in weekly multidisciplinary meetings with administration and teachers. Related service providers work closely with teachers and paraeducators to effectively integrate the skills learned throughout the day and throughout the building.

The evaluation team reported evidence of well-planned instruction aligned with Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared to be appropriate given the current level of performance for each student. Instruction was student-centered as evidenced in differentiation of instructional content, process, and product to meet individual student interests, readiness level, and preferential learning modalities. Paraeducators provided students with an appropriate level of monitoring and support. Students demonstrated a sense of trust, comfort, confidence and “felt safe going up to the board” during the lesson.

The program has beautiful outdoor space, including a new playground with a padded surface, a wheelchair accessible swing, and a garden area with raised beds.

Staff shared that the environment is very harmonious and “they love working here” as evidenced in the employment longevity for some personnel. Leadership shared that “the education team is highly committed to the well-being of the students.”

Students have opportunities to interact daily through various activities, including morning meetings (sharing what they brought for lunch), having lunch together in the cafeteria, and participating in gym, music, prayer service, and movement class.

The evaluation team shared that there is “just the right amount of visual displays of student work products and art within classrooms and hallways, which are decorated but not overdone or overstimulating for students.”

Saint Catherine described relationships with families as “the cornerstone of the program.” The program values and encourages family engagement through hosting an annual Christmas pageant, ice cream socials, and dinner dances for students 18 years or older (accompanied by an adult). Teachers, related service providers, and the education director have regular communication with families to collaborate and provide coaching.

Standard Deficiencies:

Saint Catherine 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 individualized education program (IEP) and any changes made in that IEP. Each private facility shall request an IEP from the placing local education agency (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 current performance levels of the student, 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 feasibly possible after placement.

Issue: In one (1) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, there was no evidence that a special education teacher attended a PPT subsequent to the placement PPT.

Corrective Action: Submit to BSE copies of the next three (3) IEPs developed by the LEA’s PPT evidencing a program’s special education teacher attended the PPT meeting.

Standard J. Health and Safety - A private facility shall conduct monthly emergency drills that include one crisis response drill other than a fire drill once every three (3) months.

Issue: In reviewing emergency drill records, Saint Catherine documented fire drills as occurring monthly. However, there was no evidence that every third drill was a crisis drill.

Corrective Action: On or before June 23, 2023, submit attestation to the BSE that Saint Catherine will maintain emergency drill documentation evidencing that every third drill will be a crisis drill.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Saint Catherine Academy:

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

Continue efforts to hire additional special education teachers. Explore and implement recruitment and retention strategies to maintain qualified staff through activities such as outreach to college teacher preparation programs, the provision of additional incentives, and a review of salaries and benefits.

Move forth with the plan to explore “Wellness in the Workplace” PD opportunities for education staff.

Consider adding a paraeducator on the school’s Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC). In accordance with Connecticut State Department of Education guidance, an effective PDEC committee is composed of, but not limited to, certified teachers, administrators, paraeducators, and other appropriate school personnel, to define a shared vision and establish collective responsibility for the development, evaluation, and update of a comprehensive professional learning plan.

Include paraeducators’ in educational and special education PD activities in preparation for participation in PPT meetings, in accordance with Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) paraeducators are required to attend PPT meetings upon parental request.

Move forth with the plan to provide training and information workshops for parents, including “probate guardianship and impact of disabilities on siblings.” Consider sending an interest survey to parents to determine topics of interest.

Provide a consistent space for related service providers to service students. A related service provider interviewee shared that “there is often a last-minute change in room availability.”

Ensure that the program obtains and maintains a record of prior work references before hiring staff who will work directly with students, in accordance with Section S: Personnel Matters (page 35, Item 108) of the *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Program*.

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.

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Reconsider adding a Connecticut licensed speech pathologist given the program's high prevalence of students enrolled with complex communication needs. The evaluation team noted that there were nonverbal students who were not utilizing alternative communication devices.

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 Saint Catherine Academy's written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, the BSE 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 Saint Catherine Academy:

- Approved Ages to Serve:** 5 through 21 years old
- Approved Grades to Serve:** K through 12th
- Approved Enrollment Capacity:** 28 students
- Approval Expiration Date:** June 30, 2028

cc: Eric Spencer, Education Director