



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Tara Scanlon, Chief Administrator
The Learning Clinic

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 March 21, 2024, an evaluation team visited The Learning Clinic (TLC) to conduct an on-site program reapproval review. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE); and
- Julie Longolucco Hill, Education Director, The Light House.

During a previous site visit on March 19, 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 March 21, 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:

The beautiful, 300-acre campus houses excellent facilities (six school buildings) appropriate for addressing the academic, social, emotional, and physical development needs of the students. A secure, structured, and nurturing environment supports and stimulates the development of the whole child. The campus includes a farm, animals, barns, a horseback-riding ring, an indoor pool, and a large greenhouse.

The Learning Clinic provides a safe, intimate learning environment in which all staff are committed to high academic and behavioral expectations for students. A focus on collaborative problem solving and relationship building are the foundation of successful outcomes for students. The program offers a range of services to meet the mission of preparing all students to be independent, live, and work within their communities.

Staff interviewed expressed that administration is “wonderful to work with, dedicated, enthusiastic, and has a great vision for the future of the school.” Teachers and clinicians interviewed indicated that administration fosters a close-knit, very connected school community. Teachers and clinicians noted ongoing support from the administration related to individual student needs as well as responsiveness to staff.

Class sizes are small (four to six students) and the classrooms present as less traditional environments that provide a calm, warm, and welcoming climate for students and staff.

The team reported evidence of well-planned instruction, aligned with Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared to be appropriate to the current level of performance for each student. Teachers had an identified goal and objectives that were clearly stated. Students demonstrated an appropriate degree of engagement in the learning process.

The program provides strong collaboration, consistency, and carryover to the residential component for those students requiring a residential milieu or treatment setting. There is an effective system of collaboration in place between the educational, clinical, and residential teams to improve academic, behavioral, and treatment outcomes for students.

Students benefit from a variety of experiential learning activities and opportunities, including a robotics and engineering workshop in which students learn the primary functions of mechanics of robotics and engineering; how to troubleshoot and solve mechanical problems; and work independently enabling them to take on the role of maker, explorer, inventor, and design as demonstrated by the projects they build.

The program has an Applied Arts and Technology Program in which students learn about graphic design, augmented reality, drone and digital video production, digital photography, digital illustration and animation, virtual reality, 3D design and printing, and robotics. Access to these resources is available to all teachers/students. The arts and technology program allows opportunities for students to integrate newly acquired academic real-world skills through a variety of theme-based projects across grade levels and content areas.

Student engagement is enhanced by a focus on student interest and preference. In addition to activity centers, the program provides a unique variety of engaging activities such as art, drama, music, a farm program, equestrian program, wooded campus trails, canoeing, and fly fishing. Additionally, the agency runs a nature center in Maine that provides a wilderness campus for environmental studies.

The staff demonstrate a strong commitment to the well-being of each student. 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.

Each student benefits from an individualized treatment plan that describes behavior interventions that are well articulated and enhance the efficacy of the schoolwide point system. Student progress toward achievement of treatment goals is monitored, well documented, and data driven. The schoolwide point system allows students to recognize and self-assess their individual growth related to personalized goals.

The program employs two full-time clinicians who offer group and family therapies for all students. The program aims to help students maintain/improve their relationships with their parents, siblings, social interactions, and relationships within the larger community. Clinicians also collaborate with parents and teachers in the individualized education program (IEP) development process to identify academic, treatment goals, and monitor progress.

Family engagement is a program strength. Events are held regularly throughout the school year including, but not limited to, fall open house, winter concert (skits, singing, garage band, rock; and band), school play, family day, a Christmas event, talent show, parent day, and individual graduation ceremonies.

Students develop independence while enrolled in the program through the opportunity to participate in college courses earning credit toward a degree or certificate. The Learning Clinic has a long-term working relationship (since 1980) with Quinebaug Valley Community College academic and certificate programs.

Certified staff are properly trained to have access to appropriately secured medication as well as required documentation tools to administer medications. A full-time nurse is available to support students and staff in the various school buildings and classroom settings.

Standard Deficiencies:

The Learning Clinic must rectify the following standard deficiencies:

Standard I: Qualification and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel - Each private facility shall ensure that:

The private facility shall maintain a permanent individual personnel file for each employee and shall ensure said file is confidentially held. The 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 the applicants submit to a Department of Children and Families 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. In addition, state and national criminal history records check (fingerprinting) of staff who work directly with students shall be submitted within 30 days of hire and on file within 60 days from the date of employment. Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-221d.

A private facility shall have a written plan(s) for ongoing personnel development, including a professional development (PD) policy. Such policy shall include a provision of a minimum of 18 hours of PD to staff each year at no cost; PD opportunities which are aligned to individual educator evaluation in support of areas of identified need; and the proper documentation of PD activities.

Issue 1: In two (2) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no documentation evidencing that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form was completed prior to employment for an employee hired after July 1, 2016.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that a *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* form will be obtained for each new employee. Upon obtaining completed forms, the program's chief administrator or education director will make appropriate contact with previous or current employers.

Submit *State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification* forms to the BSE for all new staff hired during the 2024-25 school year.

Issue 2: In five (5) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that the education staff participated in a minimum of 18 hours of annual PD activities. Currently, PD activity participation is only recorded and maintained through sign-in sheets.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that moving forward the program will include in each staff file the annual summary or transcript that indicates the employee's PD activities in addition. Additionally, an administrative PD and training record that identifies the date, topic, duration, presenter, and participant signatures (an electronic signature for virtual PD) should also be maintained within the file—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 conduct monthly emergency drills that include one crisis response drill, other than a fire drill, once every three (3) months. The special education program, at least monthly, conducts emergency/crisis drills at each program location while school is in session and include actual evacuation of students to safe areas to:

- ensure that each staff member on each shift is trained to perform assigned tasks;
- assure that each staff member on each shift is familiar with the use of the firefighting equipment in each location of the special education program to which the staff member is assigned;
- evaluate the effectiveness of emergency plans and procedures; and
- ensure the program maintains a signed record of each emergency drill.

Issue(s): In reviewing emergency drill records, fire drills were documented to occur monthly. However, there was no evidence that the program conducted monthly emergency drills that included one crisis response drill, other than a fire drill, once every three (3) months.

Corrective Action: On or before June 30, 2024, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will maintain emergency drill records evidencing it is conducting monthly emergency drills that include one crisis response drill, other than a fire drill, once every three months.

On or before June 30, 2024, 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 The Learning Clinic:

Ensure that all area teachers are familiar with, and well versed in, the IEP document and have a clear understanding of their role in implementing goals and objectives developed for the students in their classrooms. A teacher interviewed expressed the need for training in Connecticut's Special Education Data System and IEP Quality Training.

Identify a paraeducator to participate on the program's Professional Development and Evaluation Committee, in accordance with Public Act 23-159, Section 11. The committee shall consist of (1) at least one teacher, (2) at least one administrator, (3) at least one paraeducator and (4) such other school personnel as the board deems appropriate.

Consider reviewing and enhancing the existing employee benefit structure. Staff interviewed shared the need for increasing paid time off as they are only eligible for five hours per year which includes the 5-week summer program.

Consider expanding access to technology in classrooms to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Currently, students have access to a variety of technology through the Applied Arts and Technology Program.

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Maintain a balance of internal and external professional development opportunities. Consider exploring 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 professional development and training opportunities.

Consider increasing opportunities for teachers to conduct peer-to-peer observations within TLC, as well as observations in other facilities (public and private) as a means of broadening teacher perspective and providing a unique professional development 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 and accepts the delineated corrective action plan. Upon receipt of The Learning Clinic's written agreement and acceptance of the entire report, 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 The Learning Clinic:

Approved Ages to Serve:	5 through 22 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	K–12th
Approved Enrollment Capacity:	48 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2029

cc: Ann Perzan, Education Director