



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Mr. Charles Manos, Chief Administrator
The Pinnacle School

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 April 24, 2023, an evaluation team visited The Pinnacle School (Pinnacle) to conduct a program reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE/the Bureau);
- Ms. Karen King, Education Director, St. Vincent's Special Needs School; and
- Dr. Judy Benson-Clarke, Former Education Director (public school representative).

During a previous site visit on March 21, 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 April 24, 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 is highly supportive, collaborative, maintains open dialogue with all staff, and encourages teacher autonomy. An interviewee said, "the leadership is the best the program has had in years."

The program implements the Collaborative and Proactive Solutions model of psychosocial treatment that fosters trust, mutual respect, and problem solving.

A student-centered philosophy is shared among all staff that focuses on understanding students, supporting families, and maintaining active collaboration with partnering school districts and outside community providers.

The evaluation team reported evidence of well-planned instruction aligned with the Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared to be appropriate given the current level of performance for each student. Students were highly engaged in the lesson and eager to respond to the teacher's questions.

A positive culture and climate are evidenced by positive respectful relationships among students and between staff and students. An interviewee shared they feel highly valued and respected, and stated, "the program's climate and culture are unparalleled and cannot be matched."

The program is housed in a beautiful building described as bright, spacious, clean, organized, calm, quiet, and well-supplied with educational resources and materials.

Small class sizes promote student engagement, individualized academic support, and opportunities for "in the moment" coaching to support students' social, emotional, and behavioral health.

The staff has an appreciation for team collaboration. A school counselor interviewee reported that the individualized education program (IEP) development and progress monitoring process is highly collaborative. Certified and non-certified staff are participants in the multi-disciplinary meetings.

The school provides a safe, intimate learning environment in which all staff are committed to high academic expectations for students. The evaluation team described education staff members as personable, positive in their approach with students, engageable, and knowledgeable in their subject areas.

Staff members may request to attend outside professional development (PD) and training specific to their individual interest(s). Pinnacle affords teachers and related service personnel with an annual stipend to utilize in accessing off-site PD activities.

Standard Deficiencies:

The Pinnacle School 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 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 student's current performance levels, 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(s):

- In three (3) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, the IEP did not appropriately reflect related services. Specifically, counseling, occupational therapy, and speech language services were not clearly identified as provided individually or within a small group.
- 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 meeting.

Corrective Action: Implement a procedure to utilize upon receipt of an IEP after participating in a PPT meeting. Said procedure shall ensure that all the information in the IEP is complete and accurate and Pinnacle can implement the supports and services outlined in the document as written (i.e., require clarification of whether the program will provide any related service individually or within a group setting). Submit to the BSE copies of the next three (3) IEPs developed by the LEA's PPT for students enrolled. The copies shall demonstrate careful review for accuracy and completeness, and if needed, illustrate the implementation of written notification to the district to request necessary changes (retain in student file). On or before June 23, 2023, submit to the BSE a copy of the process/procedures developed to review IEPs and how Pinnacle will notify/inform districts.

Standard H. Positive Behavioral Supports, Prevention, and Intervention Strategies - Each private facility shall have written policies and procedures describing the positive behavioral supports and services as well as the prevention and intervention strategies employed by the program. In accordance with Section K: Positive Behavioral Supports and Intervention of the *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Program* (page 20, Item 56), the program maintains policies and procedures of the special education program that includes a policy regarding exclusionary time out. At least, one school employee remains with the student or is immediately available to the student such that the space used for an exclusionary time out is clean, safe, sanitary, and appropriate for the purpose of calming such student or de-escalating such student's behavior. In accordance with the *Facility Checklist* criteria, behavior intervention/crisis management/seclusion rooms must meet the following criteria:

- properly ventilated
- free of objects likely to cause harm
- properly lighted and designed to allow visual monitoring
- not lockable from within
- students have visual access from inside the room

Issue: At the time of the facility check conducted on April 23, 2023, the windows in the doors of the program's two behavior intervention/crisis management/seclusion, exclusionary time-out rooms (referred to as the "Zen" rooms), were not positioned low enough for students to have visual access from within.

Corrective Action: Immediately modify the door windows of the rooms utilized for exclusionary time-out. Make the windows low enough to enable a student visual access from within. Provide the BSE with a side-by-side photograph of both modified doors.

Note: On May 31, 2023, Pinnacle provided the BSE with photographs evidencing required modifications to both door windows enabling visual access from within.

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

All special education program administrators, instruction, and related services personnel providing special education and related services and hired after September 1, 1980, shall hold proper state certification for the position held. The certification shall be on file with the Connecticut State Board of Education (CSBE). This information shall be provided and certified through the staff report in the Educator Data Systems to representatives of the CSBE in a timely manner. RCSA, Section (10-145d-610(c)).

The private facility shall maintain a permanent individual personnel file for each employee and ensure said file is held in confidence.

A private facility shall have a written plan(s) for ongoing personnel development, including a 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 five (5) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, there was no evidence that Pinnacle provided 18 hours of PD to education professionals.

Corrective Action: On or before June 23, 2023, provide the BSE with an attestation that moving forward the program will provide in each staff file:

- the annual summary or transcript that indicates their PD activities;
- maintain an administrative PD and training record identifying the date, topic, duration, presenter, and participant signatures; and
- maintain all information to document that each education staff member receives a minimum of eighteen (18) hours of PD and training at no cost.

Issue 2: Submitted with the program's *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Program* was "a list of each individual (including substitute teachers) who provides instructional services to students within the special education program" (page 10, Item 29a, insert 7-B). As of March 21, 2023, the Connecticut Educator Certification System (CECS) shows that the certification status of four (4) instructional providers remains either under review or cannot be determined at this time, or there is no educator record in the CECS. Individuals have not taken appropriate steps to pursue/acquire Connecticut certification. Additionally, a Connecticut certified teacher holding Endorsement #305 (elementary grades 1–6) is assigned as the teacher of record for students through grade 8.

Corrective Action: On or before June 23, 2023, provide the BSE with a statement of assurance that students placed by districts are being instructed by appropriately Connecticut certified staff. Provide the BSE with a master teaching schedule, including all subject areas provided as identified in Section I: Description of Program Services (page 15, Item 43a) of the *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Programs*. The master teaching schedule is to identify the name of the teacher of record, instructional subject assignment, and Connecticut certification in the respective area of instruction provided. Thereafter, annually (prior to Pinnacle’s first day of each academic year up to the program’s expiration date identified below) provide the BSE with the master teaching schedule, including all aforementioned schedule components.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to The Pinnacle School:

Move forth with the plan to hire a transition coordinator to address all aspects of transition, the development of community-based partnerships, and activities promoting readiness for college and career. Research and acquire a career exploration inventory assessment. Given the age of the student population served, it is essential to explore the availability of, and access to, community-based transition opportunities to broaden options for students to develop vocational and trade skills necessary for postsecondary success.

Establish PD activities that address the Connecticut System for Educator Evaluation and Development (SEED) evaluation process and afford staff the opportunity to receive written feedback of formal observations and, as appropriate, informal observations. Education staff expressed the need for “more support and greater oversight of the teacher evaluation process as well as for PD to gain a better understanding of the overall SEED evaluation process,” as included in the program’s previous preliminary evaluation report dated April 27, 2018.

Ensure that in accordance with the schedule developed by the student’s PPT for each enrolled student, the special education program completes a report of student progress (descriptive of progress toward IEP goals and objectives) and forwards the report to the student’s school district and parent(s)/guardian/surrogate parent (if appointed), as stated within the *Application for Approval of a Private Special Education Programs* (page 29, Item 93a).

Move forth with the plan to increase PD opportunities for faculty. Establish an effective Professional Development and Evaluation Committee composed of, but not limited to, certified teachers, administrators, paraeducators, and other appropriate school personnel. An effective PDEC of diverse representatives is beneficial to define a shared vision and establish collective responsibility for the development, evaluation, and update of a comprehensive professional learning plan. Continue to make available “health and wellness” PD activities for staff.

Move forth with the plan to increase opportunities to engage families through school sponsored social and educational activities.

Consider displaying student art and work products in classrooms and hallways.

Preliminary Evaluation Report: The Pinnacle School
Approval Review for a Private Special Education Program
June 14, 2023

Continue efforts to explore and implement strategies to recruit and 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.

Develop an outdoor playground area to provide students with more opportunities for physical activity. Education staff expressed the need for a playground area even though the program has a full fitness center with treadmills and a gymnasium.

Consider investing in technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning. Staff expressed the need for updated and/or new technology and training to ensure skill in its use. Greater access to current technology is essential given the academic/cognitive strengths of students enrolled and would support preparation for postsecondary education and employment.

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.

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 Pinnacle 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 The Pinnacle School:

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| Approved Ages to Serve: | 7 through 18 years old |
| Approved Grades to Serve: | 2nd through 12th |
| Approved Enrollment Capacity: | 75 students |
| Approval Expiration Date: | June 30, 2027 |