



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



TO: Samantha Cook, Chief Administrator
Westport Day School

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

DATE: May 31, 2023

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

On April 20, 2023, an evaluation team visited the Westport Day School (Westport Day) to conduct a program reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Dr. Dori Papa, Education Consultant, Bureau of Special Education (BSE/the Bureau);
- Mary Acquarulo, Consulting Director of Education, Chapel Haven Schleifer Center; and
- William Roland, Supervisor of Special Education, Shelton Public Schools.

During a previous site visit on April 18, 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 20, 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 leadership is personable, approachable, accommodating, integrally involved in all aspects of the program, highly supportive, and equally committed to implementing individual programs at the highest level of benefit to each student.

Preliminary Evaluation Report: Westport Day School
Approval Review for a Private Special Education Program
May 31, 2023

The program, housed in a beautiful facility, is clean and organized with an abundance of windows and natural light. Classrooms are large and colorful with “amazing student work and art products displayed.” Attention to the use of space, lighting, color scheme, sound, and air quality for students contributes to the overall learning environment.

The program addresses the needs of a very specific group of students who may experience a high degree of anxiety and/or depression and/or demonstrate other internalizing behaviors, which have an impact on their ability to access and benefit from the challenges of a typical academic setting. Westport Day applies in depth evaluation and consideration to each referral ensuring that the program can address the individual student needs within the program as outlined in the individualized education program (IEP).

A description used during the visit was that the program’s environment is calm, peaceful, welcoming, relaxed, and supportive. Positive, respectful relationships among students and between staff and students were evident. Teachers were also described as passionate and knowledgeable of lesson content.

Teachers and related service provider interviewees shared they are “very happy working at the program” as evidenced in the employment longevity. The staff demonstrates a strong commitment to the well-being of each student.

Small class sizes (three to four students) promote individualized instruction as well as emotional well-being and provide close monitoring of each student’s emotional status.

Collaboration and communication were described as a program strength. Staff interviewed shared that there is frequent communication among administration, teachers, and related services personnel. Daily “debriefs” with staff foster collaboration and consistency in addressing each student’s emotional, behavioral, and academic needs.

The evaluation team reported evidence of well-planned instruction aligned with the Connecticut Core Standards, which appeared appropriate given the current level of performance for each student. Teachers differentiated instructional content, process, and work products evidencing high student participation and engagement. Each day, students participate in four academic classes as well as an EdLab period for extra academic support. Westport Day School affords students opportunities to access online classes available through Educere Virtual Education. Three daily support periods include Therapeutic Art, Yoga, and Mindfulness for physical education credit with a mental health and wellness focus.

The program communicates with families through the provision of weekly student progress reports, a monthly newsletter, and frequent social worker outreach. Parents are engaged through the monthly Parents as Partners Support group and parent-teacher conferences held annually following the first semester report card. Westport Day School sponsors and provides opportunities for families to engage in monthly off-campus community building activities on Saturdays (i.e., museums, galleries, farms, etc.) Teachers also attend the activities with their families resulting in “a nice sense of community” among program staff and families.

The program employs two licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) who implement counseling and therapeutic support as identified in IEPs. Additionally, the LCSWs are available to all students on an as needed basis throughout the school day. LCSWs could also develop weekly or daily social work schedules.

Standard Deficiencies:

Westport Day 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 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 feasible after placement.

Issue(s): In two (2) of five (5) IEPs reviewed, the IEP did not appropriately reflect the related services identified on page 11. Specifically, counseling services were not clearly identified as provided individually or within a small group.

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 Westport Day School can implement the supports and services outlined in the document as written (i.e., require clarification of whether the program will provide all 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 implementation of written notification to the district requesting 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 the manner Westport Day School will use to notify/inform districts.

Standard I: Qualifications and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel - The private facility shall maintain a permanent individual personnel file for each employee and shall ensure it holds said file in confidence. The private facility shall require that prior work references be on record for all applicants. The private facility shall ensure the applicants submit to a Department of Children and Families (DCF) Child Abuse and Neglect Registry records check before hiring staff who will work directly with students. In addition, the program shall ensure submission of state and national criminal history records check (fingerprinting) for staff who work directly with students within 30 days of hire and on file within 60 days from the date of employment. CGS Section 10-22d.

Issue: In two (2) of five (5) personnel files reviewed, submission dates for fingerprinting checks were not available to evidence a submission request within 30 days of hire.

Corrective Action: Immediately submit a fingerprinting request for the two employees in accordance with CGS Section 10-22d. On or before June 23, 2023, submit to the BSE attestation that the program will document submission date requests of criminal, fingerprinting, and DCF background checks in individual personnel files to evidence submission requests were within 30 days of hire and on file within 60 days from the date of employment in accordance with CGS Section 10-22d.

Recommendations:

The BSE offers the following recommendations to Westport Day School:

Develop protocol to allow teachers to have direct communication with parents. Teachers interviewed shared that the program does not allow them to contact families directly and expressed a need to share both positive and concerning information.

Identify a room within the program where students needing medical attention are evaluated in privacy. Currently, the initial student evaluations take place in the front lobby of the school.

Move forth with the plan to incorporate field trips during the school day, to provide students with opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge in different places/settings as well as building upon communication and interaction skills.

Move forth with the plan to hire a part-time or full-time 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.

Move forth with the plan to hire a full-time school psychologist.

Expand elective offerings to include foreign languages.

Consider including a paraeducator representative to participate collaboratively in the design of a comprehensive plan that clearly describes how to develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate professional learning within the program. Currently, the program's Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC) is comprised of certified teachers, administrators, and a related service provider (social worker). An effective PDEC is comprised of diverse representatives. Include paraeducator participation in educational staff trainings with teachers. Develop and circulate an interest survey to all education staff to solicit specific interests in professional development and training.

Consider further investing in technology to support teachers in their instruction and students in their learning through acquiring interactive SMART or Promethean Boards for classrooms, even though laptops are available for teachers, Chromebooks for students, and classrooms are equipped with white boards and projectors. Staff interviewed expressed the need for updated and/or new technology and training to ensure skill in its use. Greater access to technology is essential given the academic/cognitive strengths of students enrolled and would further support preparation for postsecondary education and employment.

Preliminary Evaluation Report: Westport Day School
Approval Review for a Private Special Education Program
May 31, 2023

Move forth with developing a music room and hiring a full-time music teacher.

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.

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 Westport Day School'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 Westport Day School:

Approved Ages to Serve:	10 through 21 years old
Approved Grades to Serve:	6th through 12th
Approved Enrollment Capacity:	50 students
Approval Expiration Date:	June 30, 2028