




STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



**TO:** Peter Chorney, Chief Administrator  
Grove School

**FROM:** Colleen Hayles, Education Consultant/Coordinator   
Bureau of Special Education

**DATE:** June 1, 2019

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

On May 9, 2019, an evaluation team visited Grove School special education program to conduct an on-site review for reapproval. The team consisted of:

- Colleen Hayles, Education Consultant/Coordinator, Bureau of Special Education (BSE); and
- Kevin Ryan, Director of Education, The Spire School.

During a previous on-site visit on April 25, 2019, Colleen Hayles reviewed the education files of five students as well as personnel files. In addition, Ms. Hayles has reviewed the application materials submitted to the BSE by Grove School administration.

At the exit conference on May 9, 2019, the evaluation team shared its impressions and preliminary findings. The following areas of the special education program have been reviewed:

- 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:**

- Grove school provides rigorous and diverse academic course offerings delivered by highly qualified content area teachers as well as special education teachers. The special education teachers serve as case managers as well as co-teachers at the middle school level.
- Coursework available to students ranges from highly specialized instruction, as needed, to participation in supported advance placement coursework.

- Class sizes are small, ranging from a typical class of six students to classes that do not exceed 13 students. Overall teachers are able to effectively differentiate instruction within their classrooms ensuring that each student's academic needs are met.
- A case management system is in place, ensuring effective implementation of individualized education programs (IEPs), ongoing monitoring of student progress, and effective communication among staff.
- Students observed were characterized as highly engaged, active learners. Instruction appeared varied and differentiated to address students learning styles.
- The philosophical cornerstone of the program lies in the development of relationships between the staff and the students. To that end, new teachers are generally expected to live on campus, engage with students, and provide support to students within the residential community in addition to their teaching duties.
- All students benefit from extended day schedule. All students are expected to access opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities to support self-expression, build confidence, develop relationships and social skills, and enhance coping skills. Activities include, but are not limited to, varsity/team sports, a campus farm program, and other high-interest club activities.
- In addition to the clinical supports outlined in the IEP, students have access to therapeutic supports from their clinical team throughout the day.
- The comprehensive service plan, an internal document developed for each student, includes and incorporates all elements of the IEP and further articulates the social, emotional, and clinical goals for each student. Beyond the required report of progress toward the achievement of the IEP goals and objectives, this comprehensive plan is also regularly reviewed and evaluated.
- Professional development (PD) activities provided to staff are characterized as having an appropriate balance between topics relevant to clinical issues as well as academic and curriculum initiatives.
- Communication among staff, related to a student's status, is facilitated by student advisors who appear to be the vehicle for sharing and monitoring current concerns and achievements of students.
- The agenda of regularly scheduled clinical team meetings (which include education administrators, and when appropriate, residential leaders) is made available to all staff and allows for optional participation of the teaching staff.
- The program employs highly qualified content area teachers who work closely with the special education teachers in the implementation of the IEPs. The program is highly supportive of the professional growth of teachers seeking a cross endorsement in special education from the Connecticut State Department of Education. To that end, the program has developed an on-site program of studies through Southern Connecticut State University.

- Educators shared the impact of the educator evaluation system in place that has provided them with valuable constructive criticism, is relevant to the student population, and has had a positive influence on their practice.
- The program maintains an expectation of strong family involvement and promotes a monthly conference (either face-to-face or via an electronic platform), and offers workshops for parents throughout the year.
- The recent facility additions on the campus, the acquisition of the second site for instruction located on Old Route 79, and the proposed building project provide an environment conducive to learning and one that promotes socialization and an overall sense of community.
- Administrators, clinicians, and related service personnel are highly visible and available to both staff and students—creating a caring and trusting culture where students can thrive academically, emotionally, and socially.
- The program strongly supports and integrates into the curriculum the arts, which include drama, music, and the fine arts.

#### **Standard Deficiencies:**

The following standard deficiencies must be rectified:

**Standard F: Program Requirements** - A private facility shall have a written description of the IEP for each student that should include as appropriate, a behavior intervention plan (BIP); the student success plan, the language and communication plan; transition goals and objectives that move the student toward college or career readiness, including opportunities to work and interact in the community; and shall have a written curriculum and sufficient instructional materials, supplies, and equipment in accordance with state requirements for educational programs for full implementation of the IEP.

**Issue:** A review of five IEPs indicated the following omissions or inaccuracies that would impact the program's ability to implement the IEP with fidelity:

- in one of five IEPs reviewed, the appropriate provider(s) of service was inaccurate;
- in two of five IEPs reviewed, the delivery of related services, specifically counseling services, was not properly delineated as to whether the service was provided through 1:1 or group sessions;
- in two of five IEPs reviewed, the required Special Considerations section did not characterize that there was a need to address the social/emotional or behavioral needs of the student, which had a significant impact on the student's ability to benefit from a general education setting; and
- in three of five IEPs reviewed, the students' special education teacher was not documented as being in attendance at the planning and placement team (PPT) meeting. Rather, an administrator, a general education teacher, or "appropriate staff" was listed as attending the meeting.

**Corrective Action Required:** Develop a policy and a procedure to review each IEP received from a sending school district to assure accuracy and completeness, and evidence that the impact of a student's social emotional or behavioral status has been considered and addressed (page 10 of the IEP). On or before June 30, 2019, submit an overview of the procedure for IEP review and copies of the next three IEPs developed by the LEA, illustrating the application of the review process. If necessary, include written documentation that the responsible LEA has been contacted and a request has been made to make the appropriate corrections to the IEP document.

**Issue:** In three of five files reviewed, documentation that a representative from the program participated in a PPT meeting prior to placement in the program was not found.

**Corrective Action Required:** Submit copies of the next three IEPs of students referred to, and accepted for admission, indicating that a program representative participated in the PPT meeting that determines placement of the student in the program.

**Standard F: Program Requirements** - A private facility shall provide safe and appropriate transportation required for the implementation of the IEP. The special education program ensures that whenever students are transported on behalf of the program, the vehicle utilized is in compliance with each applicable mandate disseminated by the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV).

**Issue:** The program utilizes multiple vehicles in the daily operation of the school program. While staff hold appropriate licensing to operate an activity vehicle, the program reports the use of some vans that appear to be out of compliance with the DMV requirement for an activity vehicle that transports students to and from school activities. Specifically, the program utilizes some vehicles where there is an absence of proper signage for vehicles carrying students as required by the DMV.

**Corrective Action Required:** On or before July 15, 2019, submit the appropriate documentation to the BSE that vehicles utilized to transport students to and from school activities meet all requirements of the DMV. Ensure that the only exception to this as stated in the Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) Section 14-280, is that a student transportation vehicle when engaged in the transportation of students ages 18–21, inclusive, who, as part of an IEP, are participating in community-based transition services, may versus must, display a sign or signs.

**Standard I: Qualifications and Requirements for Instructional, Administrative, and Support Personnel** - The private facility shall require prior work references be on record for all applicants and that the applicant 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. The private facility shall obtain the information listed on the State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification form from ALL current or former employer(s) of the applicant if such employer was a local or regional board of education, an approved private special education program (APSEP), 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. Applicants are required under the law to provide a prospective employer with the name, address, and telephone number of all current or former employers that meet the above criteria. Information may be collected either through a written communication or telephonically. 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 (CGS Section 10-221d).

**Issue:** In six of six staff files reviewed there was no documentation of the submission and/or review of personal or professional recommendations by the candidate prior to hire. Additionally, there is no record of the implementation of the State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification form being submitted to, and reviewed by, the program as required by CGS Section 10-222c as amended by Public Act 16-67. Each local or regional board of education, governing council of a state or local charter school, an interdistrict magnet school operator, or an APSEP is required to obtain the information listed on the State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification form. Applicants are required under the law to provide a prospective employer with the name, address, and telephone number of all current or former employers that meet the above criteria.

**Corrective Action Required:** Review and revise all policies and procedures related to the hiring of new staff to ensure that:

- the submission of references is required and that a copy of such reference is part of the staff file. In the event that references are obtained through telephone contact, the file should contain notes documenting that conversation;
- the applicant provides the required information related to previous or current employment as outlined on the State of Connecticut Educational Employer Verification form; and
- the program makes the appropriate contacts to obtain information from all current or former employers if the position has involved contact with children.

**Recommendations:**

The following recommendations are offered to Grove School:

- Maximize the use and availability of technology throughout the program for enhanced communication (i.e., Grove School email) and instructional purposes (schoolwide use of Chrome Books and access to Google Classroom), providing support to teachers in preparing and implementing instruction.
- Increase interaction among education departments to better align the courses offered.
- Increase opportunities for teachers to interface directly with staff providing direct clinical support to students.
- Examine the role of “advisor” to ensure that cooperation and coordination between teaching staff and clinical staff is enhanced and not hampered by an additional link in the communication chain when addressing student needs.
- Investigate outside opportunities for individual staff PD that is driven by, and aligned with, their educator evaluation outcomes.
- Ensure that all content 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.

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. Please be advised that a recommendation for continuous approval through June 30, 2024, will be submitted to the Commissioner of Education once written acceptance of the report in its entirety is received.

Upon such approval, the following will be applicable to Grove School:

- Approved Ages:** 12–21 years old  
**Approved Grades:** 6–12  
**Approved Capacity:** 151 students  
**Approval Expiration Date:** June 30, 2024