

Okeechobee County School District

Final Report: On-Site Monitoring Exceptional Student Education Programs

October 27-29, 2010



Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services
Florida Department of Education

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BRIC website: <http://www.fldoe.org/ese/clerhome.asp>

Bureau website: <http://www.fldoe.org/ese/>

E-mail: cicbiscs@FLDOE.org

Telephone: (850) 245-0477

Fax: (850) 245-0987

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January 4, 2010

Dr. Patricia G. Cooper, Superintendent
Okeechobee County School District
700 S.W. 2nd Avenue
Okeechobee, FL 34974

Dear Superintendent Cooper:

We are pleased to provide you with the *Final Report: On-Site Monitoring Visit of Exceptional Student Education Programs* for the Okeechobee County School District. This report was developed by integrating multiple sources of information related to an on-site visit to your district October 27–29, 2010, including student record reviews, interviews with school and district staff, and classroom observations. The final report will be posted on the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services' website and may be accessed at <http://www.fldoe.org/ese/mon-home.asp>.

The Okeechobee County School District was selected for an on-site visit due to a pattern of poor performance over time as indicated in the State Performance Plan (SPP) Indicators 1 and 2: percent of youth with individual educational plans (IEPs) graduating from high school with a regular diploma and percent of youth with IEPs dropping out of high school. Ms. Cathleen Blair, Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Director, and her staff were very helpful during the Bureau's preparation for the visit and during the on-site visit.

Thank you for your commitment to improving services for exceptional education for students in Okeechobee County. If there are any questions regarding this final report, please contact Patricia Howell, Program Director, Monitoring and Compliance, at (850) 245-0476 or via electronic mail at Patricia.Howell@fldoe.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bambi J. Lockman".

Bambi J. Lockman, Chief
Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services

Enclosure

cc: Cathleen Blair
Kim C. Komisar

Patricia Howell
Brenda Fisher

BAMBI J. LOCKMAN
Chief

Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services

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Okeechobee County School District

On-Site Monitoring Exceptional Student Education Programs October 27–29, 2010

Final Report

Authority

The Florida Department of Education (FDOE), Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (Bureau), in carrying out its roles of leadership, resource allocation, technical assistance, monitoring, and evaluation, is required to oversee the performance of district school boards in the enforcement of all laws and rules (sections 1001.03(8) and 1008.32, Florida Statutes [F.S.]). One purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) is to assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities (section 300.1(d) of Title 34, Code of Federal Regulations [CFR]). In accordance with IDEA, the Bureau is responsible for ensuring that the requirements of the Act and the educational requirements of the state are implemented (34 CFR §300.149(a) (1) and (2)).

In fulfilling this requirement, the Bureau monitors exceptional student education (ESE) programs provided by district school boards in accordance with sections 1001.42 and 1003.57, F.S. Through these monitoring activities, the Bureau examines and evaluates procedures, records, and ESE services; provides information and assistance to school districts; and otherwise assists school districts in operating effectively and efficiently. The monitoring system is designed to emphasize improved educational outcomes for students while ensuring compliance with applicable federal laws and regulations and state statutes and rules.

Monitoring Process

District Selection

Districts were selected for on-site monitoring during the 2010–11 school year based on the following criteria:

- Matrix of services:
 - Districts that report students for weighted funding at >150 percent of the state rate for **at least one** of the following:
 - 254 (> 7.38 percent)
 - 255 (> 3.15 percent)
 - 254/255 combined (> 10.53 percent)
 - Districts that report students for weighted funding at >125 percent of the state rate for **two or more** of the following cost factors:
 - 254 (> 6.15 percent)
 - 255 (> 2.63 percent)
 - 254/255 combined (> 8.78 percent)

- Pattern of poor performance over time in one or more targeted SPP indicators, as evidenced by demonstrated progress below that of other targeted districts, and at least one of the following:
 - Targeted for a given SPP indicator or cluster of indicators for three consecutive years
 - Targeted for two or more SPP indicators or clusters of indicators for two consecutive years
- Problem-solving/response to intervention
 - Eligible for on-site monitoring based on matrix of services or a pattern of poor performance over time on SPP indicators
 - Status as a pilot district for PS/RtI implementation; extent of implementation thus far

In a letter dated August 17, 2010, the Okeechobee County School District superintendent was informed that the district was selected for a Level 3 on-site visit due to a pattern of poor performance over time regarding SPP Indicators 1 and 2.

SPP Indicators 1 and 2

In accordance with 34 CFR §300.157(a)(3), each state must have established goals in effect for students with disabilities that address graduation rates and dropout rates. In addition, there are established performance indicators to assess progress toward achieving the established goals. SPP Indicator 1 relates to the percent of youth with individual educational plans (IEPs) graduating from high school with a regular diploma. SPP Indicator 2 relates to the percent of youth with IEPs dropping out of high school.

On-Site Activities

Monitoring Team

The following Bureau staff members participated in the on-site visit from October 27–29, 2010:

- Brenda Fisher, Program Specialist, Monitoring and Compliance (Team Leader)
- Liz Conn, Program Specialist, Monitoring and Compliance
- Patricia Howell, Program Director, Monitoring and Compliance
- Mary Sue Camp, Consultant, Exceptional Student Education
- Sheryl Sandvoss, Program Specialist, Program Development

Schools

The following schools were selected for on-site visits:

- New Endeavor High School
- Okeechobee Freshman Campus
- Okeechobee High School
- Osceola Middle School

Student Focus Groups

Fifteen students from four schools participated in student focus groups conducted by Bureau staff. These students were selected from the group of students chosen for case studies. The students discussed their knowledge and experiences related to the following:

- Individual educational plan (IEP) team meetings
- Current ESE services, including transition services

- Extracurricular activities
- Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and diploma options
- Dropout prevention
- Suspension and expulsion
- Job training
- Postsecondary education

Data Collection

On-site activities included the following:

- District-level interviews – 8 participants
- Records reviewed – 24 students
- School-level interviews – 11 participants
- Focus groups – 15 participants
- Case studies – 15 students

Review of Records

The district was asked to provide the following documents for each student record selected for review:

- Current IEP
- Previous IEP
- Functional behavioral assessment (FBA)/behavioral intervention plan (BIP), if any
- Discipline record
- Attendance record
- Report cards
- Any other supporting documentation as needed

Information from each document was used to determine compliance with those standards most likely to impact exceptional student education services provided to students not graduating from high school with a standard diploma and the percent of youth with IEPs dropping out of high school.

Results

The following results reflect the data collected through the activities of the on-site monitoring as well as commendations, concerns, recommendations, and findings of noncompliance.

Commendations

The following commendations apply to all of the schools visited:

- Schools were pleasant, orderly, and well organized.
- School staff members displayed a high level of professionalism and commitment.
- High levels of collaboration were evident between staff members from all areas.
- Administrators demonstrated strong leadership skills.
- Highly goal-oriented student focus group participants expressed appreciation of school staff for their educational and moral support.
- Technology was used effectively in the classroom.

- Principals were very supportive of students and staff.
- School facilities were well maintained.

Concerns

The district currently has an improvement plan in place that was developed in collaboration with the Bureau's Indicators 1/2/13/14 cluster team. As part of the on-site monitoring activities, Bureau staff members met with district staff to review strategies implemented through that plan to address graduation rates and dropout rates.

District staff identified challenges they feel have impacted the district's progress in these areas, particularly as they relate to those students who "fall in the middle" between students who are successful in the general education setting with support and students with significant cognitive disabilities who receive instruction on the state standards access points. They reported that, as course requirements become more rigorous, IEP teams for those students struggle with determining the appropriate diploma option (i.e., special diploma or standard diploma) the student should pursue. They stated that these decisions have become more difficult with recent changes in course options (e.g., the introduction of new math and science access courses and the gradual phase-out of the ESE K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 academic courses), taken in combination with class size requirements and the qualifications required of teachers assigned to core content courses. Identifying supports that are sufficient to meet the significant needs of these students and enable them to progress in the general curriculum has been a challenge.

Perhaps reflective of this, some middle grades students were enrolled in ESE courses designed to cover the state standards access points but in which the instruction actually more closely reflected the general state standards. These students were pursuing a special diploma, and staff reported that the decision was based largely on their enrollment in ESE courses. It was not clear that the students would not have been successful in a general education course with ESE support. In contrast, at the Okeechobee Freshman Campus there were students pursuing a standard diploma enrolled in the same types of ESE courses (i.e., designed to cover the state standards access points but with instruction more closely aligned with the general state standards). For the purpose of earning a standard diploma, the access courses, like the other ESE 9-12 courses, will count as elective credits, but will not count toward the core course requirements. Although this does not reflect a finding of noncompliance under IDEA, the district will be required to address this concern through its Indicator 1/2/13/14 improvement plan.

Findings of Noncompliance

Record reviews and other monitoring activities focused on the compliance requirements determined to be most closely related to graduation with a standard diploma and dropout rate. Bureau staff identified one incident of noncompliance on the following standard in one of the 24 student records reviewed:

- There is alignment among the present level of academic and functional performance statement(s), the annual goals (and short-term objectives/benchmarks, if applicable), and the services identified on the IEP (34 CFR §300.320(a)).

For one student, the present level statements and annual goals did not support the amount of the student's ESE services being provided outside the general education classroom. On December 15, 2010, the district reconvened the IEP team to revise the IEP, including the student's placement and diploma option, thereby correcting the noncompliance for the student in question.

Corrective Action

In accordance with the requirement that, for any finding of noncompliance, there must be evidence that correction occurred for the individual student **and** that the district is implementing the requirement appropriately for 100 percent of a sample of students. **No later than March 4, 2011**, the Okeechobee County School District must **either** demonstrate 100 percent compliance on the identified standard alignment through review of a random sample of five student IEPs developed after December 2, 2010, **or** develop a corrective action plan (CAP) detailing the activities, resources, and timelines the district will employ to ensure that the compliance target of 100 percent will be met. The CAP **must** include a review of 2011 records for IEP alignment to be completed no later than October 31, 2011.

In addition, the district is required to amend its Indicator 1/2/13/14 improvement plan to address the extent to which students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum, including enrollment in a course of study leading to a standard diploma when appropriate. The plan must incorporate the challenges identified by the district (e.g., ensuring that students with disabilities are enrolled in courses that align with the students' need for instruction in the general state standards or the state standards access points, and are provided services and supports to meet the students' individual needs). The Bureau's Indicator 1/2/13/14 team will collaborate with the district to establish a timeline for submission.

Technical Assistance

Specific information for technical assistance, support, and guidance to school districts regarding IEP development can be found in the *Exceptional Student Education Compliance Manual 2010–11*. Technical assistance related to graduation rates and dropout prevention can be accessed through Project10: Transition Education Network at www.project10.info/ and the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) at www.nsttac.org/.

Bureau Contacts

The following is a partial list of Bureau staff available for technical assistance:

ESE Program Administration and Quality Assurance
(850) 245-0476

Kim Komisar, Ph.D., Administrator
Kim.Komisar@fldoe.org

Patricia Howell, Program Director
Monitoring and Compliance
Patricia.Howell@fldoe.org

Anne Bozik, Program Specialist
Okeechobee County ESE Compliance Liaison
Monitoring and Compliance
Anne.Bozik@fldoe.org

Liz Conn, Program Specialist
Monitoring and Compliance
Liz.Conn@fldoe.org

Vicki Eddy, Program Specialist
Monitoring and Compliance
Vicki.Eddy@fldoe.org

Brenda Fisher, Program Specialist
Monitoring and Compliance
Brenda.Fisher@fldoe.org

Jill Snelson, Program Specialist
Monitoring and Compliance
Jill.Snelson@fldoe.org

ESE Program Development and Services
(850) 245-0478

Sheila Gritz, Program Specialist
Program Development
Sheila.Gritz@fldoe.org

Sheryl Sandvoss
Program Development
Sheryl.Sandvoss@fldoe.org

BEESS Resource and Information Center
(850) 245-0477

Judith White, Supervisor
cicbiscs@FLDOE.org

**Florida Department of Education
Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services**

Glossary of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BIP	Behavioral intervention plan
Bureau	Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
ESE	Exceptional student education
FBA	Functional behavioral assessment
FDOE	Florida Department of Education
F.S.	Florida Statutes
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individual educational plan
LEA	Local education agency
OSEP	Office of Special Education Programs
SP&P	Exceptional Student Education Policies & Procedures
SPP	State Performance Plan



Florida Department of Education
Dr. Eric J. Smith, Commissioner

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