

FINAL REPORT: FOCUSED MONITORING VERIFICATION
OF EXCEPTIONAL STUDENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

MARION COUNTY

OCTOBER 5 - 7, 2005



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
BUREAU OF EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATION AND STUDENT SERVICES

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December 8, 2005

Ms. Wylene Cayasso, Director
Exceptional Student Education
Marion County School District
1517 SE 30th Avenue, Suite 2
Ocala, FL 34471

Dear Ms. Cayasso:

Thank you for your hospitality during our recent verification monitoring visit, October 5-7, 2005. During the visit, the district provided a comprehensive and well-prepared presentation in response to the final monitoring report from the September 2003 focused monitoring visit. Visits to selected sites were conducted to verify information presented by the district. Bureau staff has reviewed the additional information collected during the visit and a report of this visit is attached.

The district has completed the strategies of the system improvement plan resulting from the 2003 monitoring visit. However, based on additional concerns regarding the development of educational plans (EPs) for gifted students, the district is required to incorporate this area into its continuous improvement plan for gifted students. A revised plan that includes strategies to address EPs must be included in the district's next semi-annual continuous improvement status report submission in May 2006.

We appreciate your ongoing efforts on behalf of exceptional students. Please contact Ms. Eileen L. Amy, Administrator, ESE Program Administration and Quality Assurance or Dr. Kim C. Komisar, Program Director, at (850) 245-0476, or via electronic mail at Eileen.Amy@fldoe.org or Kim.Komisar@fldoe.org, if we can be of any further assistance to your district.

Sincerely,

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

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

BJL/ark

cc: James Yancey, Jr.
Eileen Amy
Kim Komisar

BAMBI J. LOCKMAN
Chief

Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services

**Final Report: Focused Monitoring Verification
Exceptional Student Education Programs
Marion County**

October 5 - October 7, 2005

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Marion County School District Focused Monitoring Verification October 5-7, 2005

On October 5-7, 2005, the Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, conducted an on-site verification review of the exceptional student education (ESE) programs in Marion County Public Schools. The primary purpose for conducting verification visits to districts previously monitored is to afford school districts an opportunity to offer validation of the activities they have undertaken through their system improvement plans. These visits provide an assurance to the Bureau that the strategies agreed to in the improvement plans are being implemented. They also give districts an opportunity to demonstrate progress, as well as for districts to request additional technical assistance regarding the implementation of their system improvement plans.

Marion County was selected for monitoring in 2003 on the basis of the percentage of students with disabilities in regular class placement (i.e., removed from the general education classroom for <21% of the day). The results of the verification visit are reported under the following categories or related areas that were included in the final monitoring report of the focused monitoring visit conducted September 8-11, 2003:

- general information
- decision-making
- access to the general curriculum/resources
- staff development
- parental involvement
- stakeholders opinions
- gifted services
- additional compliance
- record reviews
- forms reviews

Site Visit

The primary on-site activity conducted as part of the verification monitoring visit was a demonstration by the district of the strategies implemented thus far through the system improvement plan developed as a result of the 2003 focused monitoring process. The components of the demonstration were determined by the district based on the areas targeted for improvement, and the types of activities conducted by the district.

The demonstration by Marion County district staff included presentations related to the implementation of strategies identified in the system improvement plan based on categories from the final monitoring report. Wylene Cayasso, Director, Exceptional Student Education, served as the facilitator and point of contact for the district during the monitoring visit. In addition, the following district staff participated in the presentation: Rose Rice, Coordinator, and Brenda Snellings, Staffing Specialist for Gifted. These participants should be commended for a presentation that was thorough, well prepared, and well executed; the written documentation verified the information presented orally.

In addition to the district presentation, the verification visit included visits to Maplewood Elementary School, Howard Middle School, Dunnellon Middle School and Bellevue High School for the purpose of validating information provided during the district presentation. The visit also included compliance monitoring in the areas of individual educational plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities, educational plans (EPs) for students identified as gifted, and the provision of counseling as a related service and speech and language services. The monitoring visit included the following:

- interviews with 24 selected school staff
- two classroom observations
- reviews of 38 IEPs for students with disabilities
- reviews of 12 EPs for students who are gifted

Results

General Information

Findings from the 2003 monitoring report in the area of general information related to the district not consistently implementing consistent or accurate reporting of time with nondisabled students. The district has developed an inclusion determination form that is intended to make it easier for both teachers and administrators to accurately document time with nondisabled peers. The district has met the requirements of its system improvement plan in this area.

Decision-Making

Findings from the 2003 monitoring report in the area of decision-making were related to the manner in which IEP teams made decisions regarding student placement and participation in assessment and the planning process for articulation from elementary to middle and middle to high school. At the time of the initial visit IEP teams often based placement on perceived needs and characteristics of students with disabilities that were not accurate. During the verification visit school staff reported participating in training for both general education teachers and their ESE inclusion partner; teachers reported that the workshops that these pairs attended had the greatest impact on inclusive practices. Interviews with school staff and record reviews revealed that IEP teams addressed specific individual student needs when making placement decisions.

Staff development has been provided regarding the application of Rule 6A-1.0943, FAC, *Statewide Assessment of Students with Disabilities*, and participation in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Teacher interviews and record reviews conducted at the four schools visited in 2005 revealed that the FCAT exemption criteria are being applied by IEP teams.

At the time of the initial visit staff reported that there was often lack of communication between schools for students articulating from elementary to middle or middle to high school, which hindered the decision-making process. District and school staff reported that articulation meetings are held in the spring of each school year to assist students in transitioning from elementary to middle or middle to high school. Written documentation verified the use of these planning meetings. The district has fulfilled the requirements of its system improvement plan in this area.

Access to the General Curriculum/Resources

Findings from the 2003 monitoring report were related to the use of a parallel curriculum model in which instruction in ESE classes mirrored the instruction in general education classes. This model provided access to the general curriculum but limited the amount of time students with disabilities spent with their nondisabled peers. Administration and staff at three out of four schools visited in 2005 reported that a co-teaching model is now implemented. At Howard Middle School teachers have been trained in co-teaching but have not yet implemented the model. Implementation is planned for the 2006-07 school year. All schools visited had a range of services that included consultation, support facilitation, resource or pull-out ESE classes for part of the day, and ESE or self-contained classes for the majority of the school day.

When teachers and administrators were asked what had changed at their school over the past two years the majority indicated the implementation of inclusive practices to be the greatest positive change. At Howard Middle School teachers expressed pride in their efforts to move with significant disabilities into mainstream classrooms. School staff indicated that in-service trainings included general education teachers and their exceptional education inclusion partner. Both ESE and general education teachers alike reported the workshops where these pairs attended together had the greatest impact on successful inclusion practices in the classroom.

Data submitted annually to the Bureau through Survey 5 and reported in the district's LEA profile indicates that the proportion of students with disabilities who receive the majority of their instruction in general education classrooms has increased each of the past four school years. During the same period of time the proportion of students with disabilities served at the resource level (removed from the general education setting for 21-60% of the day) or separate class level (removed from the general education setting for >60% of the day) have decreased. The table below reflects these trends:

	Regular Class Placement	Resource Level Placement	Separate Class Placement
2001-02	36%	32%	23%
2002-03	39%	29%	22%
2003-04	46%	22%	23%
2004-05	52%	18%	19%

The district has fulfilled the requirements of its system improvement plan regarding access to the general curriculum, and is to be commended for its progress in this area.

Staff Development

During the 2003 focused monitoring visit staff across the district requested additional training and in-service activities related to inclusive practices. Staff development addressing regular class placement of students with disabilities include the following:

- staff development related to
 - use of instructional accommodations
 - Scott Foresman *Supplementals to Support Diverse Learners*
 - Inclusion 101
- development of the "ESE Inclusive Practices School Planning Form"
- development of the "Marion County Exceptional Student Needs Survey"

- staff development for staffing specialist related to decision-making process as it relates to the least restrictive environment

A three-part inclusion training was held for district administrators. The first, “Inclusion 101 for Administrators” was for any principal or assistant principal in order to learn about the districts plan for inclusion. The next two workshops were broken into groups of administrators who either already had implemented inclusion or who had not yet implemented inclusion in their schools. Both of these latter workshops focused on implementing the district’s action plan/checklist as needed and how to use data to initiate/expand the schools’ inclusion models.

The district has fulfilled the requirements of its system improvement plan regarding staff training and knowledge. Marion County Schools is encouraged to continue incorporating its provision of staff development activities for new and veteran staff into its continuous improvement plan for students with disabilities to ensure that the positive effects of recent initiatives are expanded and maintained.

Stakeholder Opinion

A concern was noted in the 2003 monitoring report that an underlying climate or culture within the district strongly encourages “ownership” of ESE students by ESE teachers. Through ESE and general education teacher interviews it was determined that a significant shift in thinking has taken place in the past two years. Exceptional student education teachers reported that going to co-teaching training with their general education partner was very effective and enabled both groups to feel committed to all students in the class. The district has fulfilled the requirements of its system improvement plan in this area.

Gifted Services

The finding of noncompliance related to gifted services in the 2003 monitoring visit involved high school students being served through a consultative model provided by guidance counselors who were neither certified nor endorsed in gifted education.

During the 2005 verification monitoring visit the gifted teachers were not available to be interviewed at the school when the monitoring team was on-site, therefore telephone interviews were conducted subsequent to the on-site visit. At three of four schools visited the gifted teachers held appropriate certification or endorsement, and the teacher at the fourth school is in the process of completing the endorsement process. At Maplewood Elementary gifted services are provided as pull-out services one time per week. At Howard Middle School and Dunnellon Middle School students are scheduled into one period a day of gifted education. At Bellevue High School the gifted teacher does consultation with each student at least once a month and sometimes more, depending on individual student needs.

A concern noted at all schools visited, with the exception of Maplewood Elementary, was the lack of individualized educational plan (EP) meetings. Teacher interviews and record reviews indicated that individual meetings are held with parents to address initial eligibility, but that group meetings are held to develop subsequent EPs. Parents, general education teachers and students provide written input and the teacher of the gifted writes the EP. At the group EP meetings the parents sign the EPs and indicate if they desire an individual meeting to discuss concerns. Four of 12 EPs reviewed did not include general education teacher input.

The district has completed the requirements of its system improvement plan. However, concerns regarding the manner in which EP meetings are conducted must be addressed in its continuous improvement plan for gifted students.

Additional Compliance

In addition to monitoring categories related to the 2003 final report, the Bureau also conducted interviews related to the provision of speech and language services and counseling as a related service. Interviews and record reviews revealed no findings of noncompliance regarding the speech and language needs of students not being met. There was evidence of classroom teachers addressing students' communication needs if the students were not eligible under the programs for students who are speech or language impaired.

Referrals to outside agencies for counseling services are provided to students with disabilities who are in need of such services through a counseling service agreement with The Heart Center of Gainesville. In addition, school counselors routinely provide group and individual counseling, which may or may not be reflected on the IEP. Teachers and staff reported that the staffing specialist is at all IEP meetings and would be the one to contact the district office to set up the outside counseling. Counseling was documented on some of the IEPs reviewed; however there were two severely emotionally disturbed students who were not receiving counseling at the time of our visit. Upon notification of this, a district staff member contacted the therapist and arranged for these two students to begin receiving counseling services immediately, with compensatory services provided from the beginning of the 2005-06 school year.

Student Record Reviews

The findings of noncompliance related to record reviews in the 2003 monitoring report included the following areas:

- inadequate present level of educational performance statements
- inadequate statements indicating how the student's disability affects the student's involvement and progress in the general curriculum
- annual goals not measurable
- lack of evidence that the results of state or district assessment were considered

Thirty-eight IEP records were reviewed on-site and revealed all areas of systemic noncompliance from the 2003 monitoring report have been addressed. There were individual findings of noncompliance related to IEPs that were conveyed to the ESE director in a letter dated October 27, 2005.

Additional findings of noncompliance from the initial focused monitoring visit were related to the district's reporting of students for weighted funding through the Florida Educational Finance Program (FEFP). Self-assessments and staff training on the completion of matrix of services documents were conducted as part of the district's system improvement plan. Four matrix of services documents for students reported at the 254-255 level were reviewed. There were errors in the matrix documents for two students who had recently moved from one program to another and whose reporting levels had not been adjusted accordingly. The district will be required to correct the data for these students through the Automated Student Information System database

for survey 3 and 4 for the 2004-05 school year and survey 1 for the 2005-06 school year. The names and student numbers of these students also were provided in the aforementioned letter.

Due to the nature of the findings and the extent of improvement since the initial monitoring visit in 2003, it is considered that the district has met the requirements of its system improvement plan in this area. Marion County School District is encouraged to continue to provide comprehensive IEP training, including matrix training, as part of its staff development activities.

District Forms Review

Findings from the 2003 monitoring report indicated that there were eight forms that required revision. These forms were revised and the revisions were approved in October 2005.

Summary

The Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services conducted a verification monitoring visit to Marion County School District on October 5-7, 2005. The visit served to verify that the district had met all requirements of the system improvement plan developed as a result of the focused monitoring visit in September 2003, with the exception of gifted services, IEP compliance, and matrix of services compliance. Through presentations and on-site visits, the district demonstrated improvement in all areas, and is to be commended for its efforts and success in increasing the percentage of students with disabilities who receive the majority of their instruction in the general education setting. All requirements of the system improvement plan have been met. However, based on additional concerns regarding the development of educational plans for gifted students, the district is required to incorporate this area into its continuous improvement plan for gifted students. Strategies to address EP meetings must be included in the district's next semi-annual continuous improvement status report.