

Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment

Final Report



BEDS Code	010100010020
School Name	North Albany Academy
School Address	570 N Pearl St, Menands, NY 12204
District Name	Albany City School District
Principal	Lesley Buff
Dates of Visit	January 15 – 17, 2019



Purpose Of The Visit

This school was identified as needing additional support by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). Because of this identification, NYSED arranged for an Integrated Intervention Team (IIT) to visit the school. The visit is intended to help the school identify areas of need that are making long-term success a challenge and provide several visible Quick Wins that can be accomplished and demonstrate the school's commitment to improvement.

The report provides a critical lens to help the school best focus its efforts.

Information About The Visit

- North Albany Academy serves 291 students in pre-kindergarten to grade five.
- The visit was led by an Outside Educational Expert (OEE) and a representative from NYSED. The team also included a district representative.
- The team visited a total of 23 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited 10 classrooms with the principal during the visit.
- Team members conducted interviews with students, staff, and parents.
- Team members examined documents provided by the school, including schoolwide data, teacher feedback, and student work.
- In advance of the visit, 26 staff members (96 percent) completed a DTSDE pre-visit survey conducted by NYSED.
- On Day 1, a fire alarm resulted in the school being evacuated for approximately fifteen minutes. As a result, morning classroom visits were cut short and occurred later that same day.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. In Fall 2018, the principal reorganized grade four classes by placing students with the highest number of behavior referrals in one class, enabling these students to receive dedicated behavior support and academic intervention that better meets their needs. While academic data is still emerging, student behavior data from this year shows a consistent decrease in referrals for grade four overall, with the most significant drop happening between October and November, when the number of referrals dropped from approximately 120 to just over 40.
2. School leaders have prioritized a program of professional development in Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) during the first half of the 2018-19 school year. This has allowed the school to build upon previous successes with AVID implementation that include the development of enhanced student organizational skills and an improved school culture. The school has now begun to support strategies to develop teachers' instructional skills and teaching strategies through AVID, offering teachers ways to use questioning to facilitate higher order student verbal and written responses. Parents, students, and educators noted that the AVID program has played a significant role in improving school culture by promoting student inquiry regarding post-secondary education, helping students develop organization skills, and increasing student ownership of and responsibility for their education.
3. The principal has managed a lack of substitute teachers this school year by developing and using a collapsed class system. In the event of a teacher absence and no coverage, the students in an affected class are distributed between various classrooms throughout the school, but primarily in classes of the same grade level

or grade band. This has allowed students to continue to receive instructional and social-emotional support when the regular teacher or a substitute is unavailable.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **The School Comprehensive Educational Plan (SCEP) should include benchmarks that can be used to monitor incremental progress toward achieving school improvement goals.** Progress on SCEP goals is monitored through Tenet Champions meetings led by the leaders responsible for the implementation and monitoring of specific tenet recommendations and monthly tenet reports created by the Tenet Champion team. However, many recommendations have a start date of September 2018 and an end date in June 2019 and include no mid-year progress monitoring checkpoints to inform the interventions and adaptations that may be needed to ensure goals are achieved. Consequently, there is little data available that leaders can use to assess the impact being made on the quality of teaching and learning as the school moves towards the completion of these goals. In the future, school leaders and teachers should create multiple tenet benchmarks between the start and end of the school year, with each benchmark scheduled and designed to measure the desired impact as the recommendation moves closer to fruition.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **Student behavior data should be thoroughly analyzed to identify behavioral trends.** While examining the concerns about behavior issues at the school, the IIT began utilizing the district dashboard to review referral data. In disaggregating the data, the team discovered there were significant improvements in the number of behavioral incidents over the course of the year. Most significantly, there was a drop from approximately 120 incidents in October 2018 to just over 40 in November of 2018, with a small continuing decline over the following few months. Even when accounting for fewer days in some months, the improvement was significant; however, data shared with school leaders and staff showed a decrease from 120 incidents to only 79 from October to November. Through further analysis and discussions with PBIS staff and school leaders, it was determined that behavior data disseminated to leaders and staff was a manual count of the number of students involved in incidents rather than the number of incidents that had occurred as reported to and by the district, skewing the data in a way that might affect stakeholder perception of the state of behavior at the school. In the future, school leaders and teachers should determine what student behavior data they want to disseminate to staff through visually appealing graphs and charts to ensure clarity and accuracy.
- **School leaders should assess the impact of professional development on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning provided across classrooms.** The principal noted the need and requirement to conduct regularly scheduled walkthroughs to monitor the quality of instruction and implementation of professional development strategies. However, teachers noted that walkthroughs were not regularly conducted and some stated that instructional strategies learned in professional development were not regularly being used in all classrooms. The AVID site coordinator stated that she would like to see AVID support and development happen outside whole-school group sessions through targeted support of grades and individual teachers. Also, teachers expressed wanting to self-assess and inform leaders of what they need to be more effective in the classroom given the variety of challenges they face throughout the year. In the future, school leaders should assess the

impact of professional development strategies on multiple fronts, utilizing not only the principal but other school leaders, such as instructional coaches, AVID site coordinators and site team members, and teacher leaders to assess where, when, and to what extent specific strategies learned in professional development are having an impact on teaching and learning.

Learning at the School

- **More time should be scheduled for math instruction in grades with departmentalized classes.** The IIT found that there is a need to maximize the time devoted to math instruction, as student achievement in the subject remains low and math is scheduled for less time than, for example, ELA instruction. Teachers shared with the IIT that because the scheduled time for math lessons is often shorter than for ELA lessons, the math class uses the time between the end of math and the transition to ELA to address some science lessons and offer recess. Though recess is a non-negotiable, coaches and teachers should consider using the science lessons to further expand on and apply core math principles. In the future, the schedule should be revised so that students receive significantly more math instruction.
- **Teachers should prepare and provide differentiated work for students at different levels of academic achievement.** While the IIT observed some differentiation of instruction within small groups or in specific stations, the practice was not common or consistent across classrooms. It was unclear from the lessons observed how students were identified and placed in groups for differentiated instruction or how the work assigned was differentiated to meet specific student needs. The principal confirmed that more differentiation was needed to reflect leaders' instructional expectations and meet student needs.
- **Students should be offered more opportunities to engage in higher order activities.** Higher order questioning was observed in only a few classrooms and was often based on questions originating from the text. School leaders and staff noted that higher order questioning and student written responses were a focus area of professional development for the school in the first half of the year. However, student written responses reviewed by the team, even those that could be considered higher order, appeared to be scaffolded from the same examples. The team noted that stronger examples of higher order responses would illustrate more independent and critical thought, even if poorly written or somewhat inaccurate. When using Cornell notes, a key strategy from the catalog of AVID strategies, much of the writing occurred after students had responded verbally to textbook questions as a whole-class activity. These responses were often discussed openly among the class, with a good deal of leading and summation, before many students wrote anything. In contrast, higher-order activities would have allowed students more time to think critically and independently, write down their responses to reflect as much, and possibly share with the class upon completion to foster more high order verbal responses.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Interviewed teachers would like more training to meet the needs of students who have suffered significant trauma.** Teachers shared that they often find it challenging to meet the social-emotional support needs of many of their students and expressed frustration with not knowing how to address some issues related to student trauma. Many teachers feel that behavior issues significantly disrupt the environment, negatively impacting teaching and learning.

- **Students would like to be offered a wider range of learning options on computers, including opportunities to create, build, and present information.** As noted previously, student interaction with the classroom computers is mostly limited to the use of Prodigy in small group math work. Interviewed students stated a desire to use computers for other educational purposes, such as engaging in projects related to design, creating presentations, or completing assignments for subjects other than math.
- **Some teachers shared with the team that they do not generally use AVID strategies as they plan instructional activities or lessons during common planning time.** Instead, these teachers said they find other strategies from outside sources that they believe will better fit their students' needs. While the IIT observed some tangible and overt evidence of AVID instructional strategies and materials in classrooms, it remained limited to elements like Cornell notes and the organized work in school binders. The school culture elements of AVID were obvious all over the building with the focus on college options, school jobs and applications, and posters promoting scholarly traits. Instructionally, however, AVID was harder to identify or see used with fidelity.