New York State
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
Knowledge › Skill › Opportunity

Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment
Final Report

Leadership and Systems

Curriculum

Instruction

Social-Emotional Learning

Family Engagement
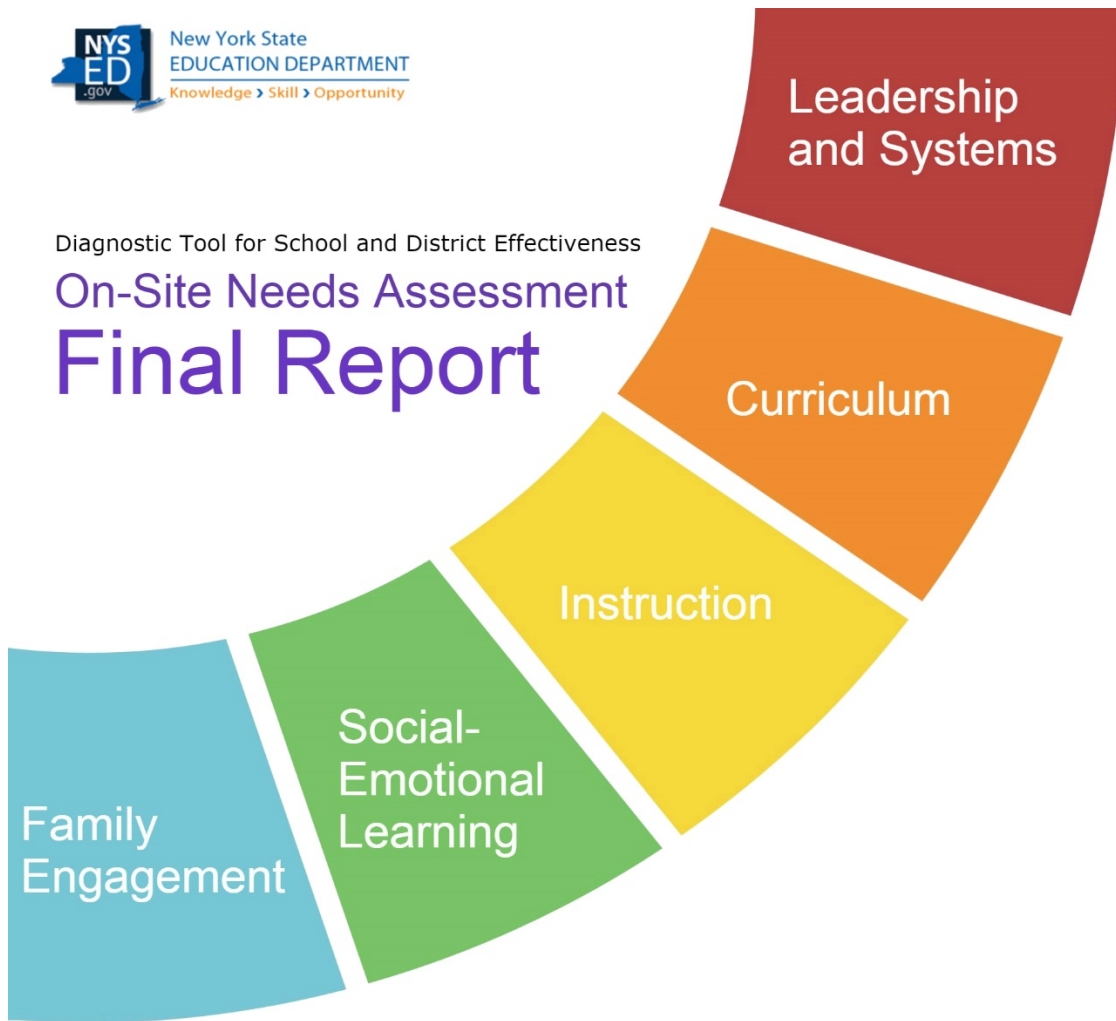
BEDS Code	010100010045
School Name	Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School
School Address	100 Elbel Court, Albany, NY 12209
District Name	Albany City School District
Principal	Malik Jones
Dates of Visit	February 12-13, 2019

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.

School Performance

New York State uses multiple indicators to determine the identification status of schools across the state. For each of these indicators, schools receive a number of 1 (lowest), 2, 3, or 4 (highest) that corresponds with how the school performed in relation to either other schools and/or performance targets. More information about how these levels are determined can be found at: http://www.nysed.gov/accountability/essa-accountability-designation-materials.

The most recent results for the "All Students" group at the school are as follows:

Elementary/Middle School Performance Indicators

Composite Performance Achievement Level	Student Growth Level	Combined Composite and Student Growth Level	English Language Proficiency Level	Average ELA and Math Academic Progress Level	Chronic Absenteeism Level
1	1	1	2	1	4

Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School serves 670 students in grades six to eight.

Information About The Visit

- The visit was led by an Outside Educational Expert (OEE) and a representative from NYSED. The team also included a district representative and a representative from the Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network (RBERN).
- The team visited a total of 32 lessons during the visit.
- The OEE visited four 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, the school provided results of a staff survey that 40 staff members (68 percent) completed.
- An impending snowstorm on the afternoon of the first day of the visit required the team to rearrange the visit schedule, which limited the time available for classroom observations. On the second day of the visit, the district conducted a two-hour delay due to weather conditions and because of this the OEE and the principal visited fewer classrooms than originally planned.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. In mid-January 2019, recognizing the need to decrease the number of behavioral incidents among grade seven students, leaders reconfigured the arrival process so that the amount of wait time these students have between breakfast and their first period class was reduced from 25 to 10 minutes. As a result, within three weeks the district data dashboard showed a decrease in incidents among grade seven students during the 8 a.m. hour. While there were 27 recorded incidents in January 2019, at the time of the visit there had only been nine incidences reported thus far in February 2019.

2. Recognizing the need to build relationships with staff, school leaders recently restructured monthly staff meetings so that instead of unstructured grade-level or content meetings, staff gather to hear the leaders' vision on school improvement, to analyze student performance data, and to receive professional development (PD) on the positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) program. As a result, leaders now meet one-on-one with individual and groups of teachers to build relationships and share ideas as a professional learning community.

3. In January 2019, recognizing the need to improve home-school communications and in response to parent concerns, school leaders instituted a quarterly *Snack and Chat* session in which parents can meet grade and content-area leaders, learn about the proper channels for communication, and develop more positive relationships with the school staff. School leaders also use these gatherings to reiterate expectations to teachers about email response times for family communication and deadlines for entering grades into PowerSchool, the school's student information system.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **The principal should focus school improvement efforts on areas of need identified in the School Comprehensive Education Plan (SCEP).** The school leader has been in place since November 2018 and has begun to identify the school's strengths and areas for improvement. The team learned that work toward the areas of need and school improvement goals outlined in the School Comprehensive Education Plan (SCEP) have been largely overlooked due to inconsistent leadership in the building. For example, staff shared with the IIT that academic achievement in the school is low for a number of reasons but consider one of the main causes is that the school has had three leaders in three years. The SCEP goals have not yet been prioritized, and instead the school is focusing on student behavioral systems, relationship building, and direction setting with the leadership team and some staff. According to the principal, school culture, including adult culture, is the school's immediate need. As a result of this, no significant positive change has yet taken place, staff morale remains low, and the academic achievement of the students in the school continues to be adversely impacted.
- **The principal should explore ways to provide teachers with supports and improve teacher attendance.** The IIT learned that the absenteeism rate of the staff is high. Teachers explained to the IIT that, in their opinion, teachers are experiencing trauma and emotional strain because of the constant behavioral issues and take days off from school as a result. The principal acknowledged that teacher morale is low, and some parents commented that teachers in the building are drained, adding that leaders need to find a way to rejuvenate and support them. The

current absenteeism rate for teachers in the school is 46 percent, which is disruptive to learning and, according to the students, is limiting their future opportunities.

- **The principal should develop systems to ensure that all staff are following clear and consistent positive behavior management protocols.** When asked by the IIT, most teachers agreed that they had received the PBIS Handbook at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year. However, these teachers said that the handbook is rarely used as a reference tool because, until now, adherence to the handbook has not been a definitive priority and, as a result, the policies are not consistently upheld. For example, guidance in the PBIS Handbook detailing which behavior violations are classroom or staff-managed and which are office-managed are not typically adhered to and decisions to refer a student to the office or to in-school suspension (ISS) are often subjective. Additionally, the team learned that some school staff, such as hall monitors and ISS staff, have not yet received PBIS training.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **School leaders need to develop a shared academic and organizational vision.** The school leadership team includes a principal and two assistant principals. The principal has been in place since November 2018 and both assistant principals are new to the role, with one new to the building. These leaders shared that most of their time is spent responding to student and parent concerns, which leaves little time to proactively drive needed improvements in teaching and learning. Observations of the school leaders at work confirmed this to be true. The principal shared with the team that the leadership team has not had time during the school day to do the foundational building work they would ordinarily have done during summer planning. The principal said that a clear school improvement vision has not been shared with staff because he is still in the listening and learning phase. According to the principal, he will then follow up by acting on what he has heard and seen. The leadership team should create a plan to establish a shared vision that supports effective school climate improvement efforts. The plan should speak to schoolwide policies and practices that promote the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to re-engage disengaged students, staff, and families through meaningful and engaging practices, activities, celebrations, and norms.

- **Leaders should establish meeting structures, standards, and protocols, known by all stakeholders, to guide collaborative discussions.** While the school schedule has time built in for regular and frequent collaborations to improve implementation of the curriculum, instructional practices, and student social-emotional developmental health issues, meetings are often unproductive. School leaders attend grade-level team meetings, but their role is not clear. The IIT learned that while most staff groups meet weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, it is not clear who serves on some committees or who leads them. In most cases, an agenda is not created, notes are not routinely taken or shared, and data is not typically used to drive mission-specific discussions or goals. Staff shared that conversations about behavior dominate discussions at grade-level meetings and that, as a result, not enough time and consideration is given to discussing strategies for improving the quality of teaching and learning and raising student achievement. Student support staff shared that classroom modifications and accommodations required by the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) process are not routinely documented. This sometimes leads to frustration at MTSS meetings because required documentation is not always completed for students referred for services. While some teams use Google Docs to manage the flow of meeting information, this practice is not frequent or consistent. The IIT found that information or updates, when they are communicated, are usually achieved informally through incidental contact or on-the-spot meetings between staff in the hallway. The IIT found that committees' mission, vision, roles, and responsibilities have not been clearly established and are often not known by the staff serving on committees.

Learning at the School

- **The quality and use of teacher planning materials should be more consistent.** While the IIT observed some evidence of teacher planning in the form of posted "I can" statements, agendas, and schedules, the quality and use of these materials was inconsistent across visited classrooms. The team noted that plans were seldom referred to during lessons and, when asked, students were often not aware of the lesson purpose or the concepts and skills they were expected to acquire. For example, in most classrooms, "I can" statements were posted so that students could easily see them, but the learning objectives were not used as a tool to reinforce the lesson purpose or highlight skill attainment. When asked to explain what they were working on, only a few students referred to an "I can" statement and the majority of students pointed to the worksheet they were completing. The team observed that the content and quality of "I can" statements varied considerably. In one class, the statement posed a question, while in another class, the statement described a process. The quality of agendas varied as well and, in one class, for instance, students were working on an assignment that laid out a series of tasks to be completed rather than the content to be learned. In the focus groups, students said that an "I can" statement and agenda are almost always visible during lessons, but schedules are usually available in only a few classes. School leaders should revisit learning from past PD sessions and require teachers to write learning objectives that not only describe the task but also identify a specific skill or content that students are expected to acquire.
- **Teachers should provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of new concepts and skills and allow students to solve problems together in small groups.** Team members observed that independent and whole-group instruction were the primary instructional strategies used across the school. Students typically worked independently to complete worksheets or sat passively listening to the teacher talk. When asked, students could not recall a recent group project they had completed or a presentation they had made. Additionally, class visits showed that typically only students who volunteered to share their thinking were called on to answer questions. As a result, the team found that students' ability to discuss and debate ideas or concepts that promote higher order thinking is largely undeveloped.
- **Teachers need to plan and deliver learning activities that require students to think deeply about the content.** In observed lessons, the IIT found that in most classrooms students' engagement with the content was primarily passive and learning consisted of mostly facts or procedures. When asked, a student in one class who had completed a worksheet was not able to explain the purpose behind the assignment or what had been learned; students in this class were not provided with extension activities when they finished the assignment early and therefore, students simply waited for the end of class. IIT members observed lessons primarily centered on getting the worksheet or assignment completed, and as a result, most students adopted the same focus. The team found that the importance of the content and high expectations for students' abilities was not often communicated, limiting students' ability to fully understand the concepts and gain mastery of the content.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Students and parents would like students to have more input in, and understanding of, school decisions.** For example, students and parents stated that they would like to expand the student council to include delegates from grades six and seven so that these students have more direct involvement in school decisions that impact them. Grade eight students shared that they would like to earn Falcon dollars to spend at the school store, as do students in other grade levels. Other students shared their frustration with behavioral policies and expectations, explaining

that the policies are sometimes unclear and inconsistently applied. For example, students said that they did not understand why some students can return to school after getting into repeated fights, while others cannot.

- **Parents would like the school to clearly communicate the new cell phone policy and implement it consistently.** The school leader explained that students are not allowed to have their cell phones out in school, but the IIT observed, and students confirmed, that some teachers are not enforcing the policy and permit students to use their phones. Parents stated that they would like a parent representative on the PBIS committee, so that their input is considered when leaders make decisions about how the policy will be enacted in the future.

- **Some staff would like restorative practices applied consistently to build and repair relationships with students**. Interviewed staff expressed the view that some teachers personalize student behavior and use punitive, rather than restorative, practices when addressing student behavior issues. Some staff also shared concern that not all staff are supportive of other's efforts to use preventative or restorative justice strategies, such as rewarding students assigned to in-school suspension or lunch detention with Falcon dollars if they can complete their work or go an hour without cursing, for example.