

Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment

Final Report



BEDS Code	580512030021
School Name	South Middle School
School Address	785 Candlewood Road, Brentwood, NY 11717
District Name	Brentwood Union Free School District
Principal	Dr. Bergre Escorbores
Dates of Visit	May 14-16, 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:

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

South Middle School serves 1,058 students in grades six through 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 64 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited 13 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 curriculum maps, lesson plans, schoolwide data, teacher feedback, and student work.
- In advance of the visit, 65 staff members (86.6 percent) completed a DTSDE pre-visit survey conducted by NYSED.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. For the 2018-19 school year, the school is continuing to prioritize the development of a positive school culture that focuses on mutual dignity and respect for all members of the school community. School and teacher leaders shared that the school has been focusing on the individual needs of students. This was done by talking

to students either one to one or in groups to respond to needs that might have surfaced. Teachers were asked to consider the individual needs of each student as they provided student support and intervention. The principal shared that he modeled the behaviors and supports that he wanted all staff and students to replicate. During the visit, the IIT observed a generally inclusive and supportive environment. Students reported that the guidance support staff have been helpful when they needed to talk and work out their concerns. In addition, the IIT found that the library has been a place of constant activity of students studying, meeting, and completing projects assigned by their teachers. School and teacher leaders reported that the emphasis on a mutually supportive environment has led to a reduction in student altercations and discipline referrals and has allowed the school to provide a variety of activities during the school day and afterschool.

2. This school year, school and teacher leaders reported that they have been focusing on the implementation of the school's instructional priorities. School and teacher leaders noted that the school's instructional priorities include the implementation of Reciprocal Reading, Collins Writing, and teachers' development of common formative assessments. Reciprocal Reading, which is a cooperative learning methodology, requires students to work cooperatively in groups of four and five. Each student has a role within the group, as students discuss and unpack reading strategies that their teacher facilitates. Collins Writing is a strategy that incorporates five levels of writing for students to learn and master. Teachers noted that they are in the initial stages of creating common formative assessments to provide regular and timely feedback to students, foster consistent expectations regarding student achievement, and help teachers diagnose student learning needs. School and teacher leaders stated that since the school has been focusing on implementing the instructional priorities, teachers are using their reading inventory data to inform their instructional practices, and teachers are beginning to have more discussions about what kinds of interventions and strategies they can utilize to improve student learning outcomes.
3. During the 2018-19 school year, the school created a shared decision-making process that encourages school leaders, teachers, parents, and students to have a voice in the daily life of the school. School and teacher leaders shared that team members participate on sub-committees with a specific organizational emphasis that centers on school improvement. For example, the parental involvement, school beautification, and school safety committees are all ad hoc teams that were created to address the particular needs of the school. These committees have concentrated on increasing school morale and building a positive school culture while encouraging meaningful relationships between, staff, students, and parents. For example, in keeping with this initiative, students in grade six participated in a YMCA Youth and Government Mock Trial and created a bill for school safety. The library was also revamped, restored, and renamed in honor of the assistant principal who passed away and was admired by the school community. Teachers and students noted that the shared decision-making process has increased the involvement of teachers, students, and parents in the daily life of the school and led to a mutual school understanding that the voice of all participants matters.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **The principal will need to restructure the duties and responsibilities of the leadership team so they can more effectively monitor initiatives and provide instructional support to teachers.** The principal shared that he recognizes the need to re-organize the responsibilities of the leadership team so they can more readily visit

classrooms and follow-up on school initiatives. Teachers reported that school leaders observe their classes for their scheduled Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) and that they receive some instructional feedback from school leaders that is targeted and aligned to the school's instructional priorities. However, they noted that informal visits occur less frequently and that they typically have some instructional autonomy as they implement the school's instructional priorities. Teachers also shared that since they have been receiving professional development (PD) from the district in Reciprocal Reading and Collins Writing, additional feedback and support from school leaders would help them implement the instructional priorities. Additionally, the IIT observed Collins Writing and Reciprocal Reading only in English language arts (ELA), social studies, and English as a new language (ENL) classes although all teachers have received training in these methodologies and strategies.

- **School leaders should collaborate with one of the school's community partners to develop a plan and system to increase parental engagement.** The principal reported that one of the school's priorities is to increase parental engagement by getting feedback from parents about activities the school has conducted for parents and other community members. The principal reported that the school has increased the number of activities that parents can attend, including concerts and events such as paint night, an African American History celebration, and the Latino Heritage Month celebration. However, the IIT learned that a more consistent approach to collecting feedback is needed to identify parental needs and increase their involvement in the school.
- **School leadership should develop a schedule to visit classrooms more consistently and provide feedback to teachers.** The team found that the school does not have a specific schedule for school leaders to observe classes other than the APPR observations. The principal and assistant principal shared that they have conducted learning walks; however, there is a need for more consistent feedback based on instructional trends they have observed. During interviews with the IIT, the principal noted that he had been primarily engaged in various management duties, which limited his time to provide instructional support.
- **School leadership should create a referral system that delineates consequences and next steps when students misbehave or do not follow school rules.** The principal shared during the IIT interview that one of the initiatives that he is proud of is that the school has provided individualized support and intervention to students, and that this process has positively changed the culture of the school. However, the IIT learned that the school needs a written ladder of referral that clearly delineates for all school constituencies the consequences for inappropriate student actions or behavior. During interviews with the IIT, students shared that school discipline is administered to students on a case by case basis and that there could be a different consequence for students who might have misbehaved in the same way.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **School leaders should create a schedule that provides regular opportunities for departments and teachers to meet to share instructional strategies and align curriculum.** The principal acknowledged that the school does not currently have regularly scheduled departmental meetings in the school's preparatory schedule. Teachers shared that they meet when they have common periods within the program schedule and that does not happen consistently across a grade or by department, which minimizes opportunities to share strategies that can lead to elevated student outcomes.
- **School leaders will need to consistently provide follow-up to teachers to ensure that initiatives are implemented effectively.** The principal reported that the school is implementing Collins Writing and

Reciprocal Reading and that teachers are developing formative assessments. However, the IIT learned that there needs to be more consistent follow-up to ensure that these initiatives have been implemented with fidelity. Although the principal and assistant principal have conducted observations and learning walks, the information from these walkthroughs needs to be more used more consistently to inform teacher practice and to provide feedback to teachers with next steps and to elevate classroom instructional practice across the school.

Learning at the School

- **Teachers will need to provide lessons that promote increased opportunities for students to actively engage in their learning and support students' learning needs.** During classroom observations, the IIT noted that instruction was often teacher-centered, and there was little student to student conversation or engagement. For example, students were either sitting in small groups or in rows working independently. Students often only spoke to the teacher and not to the partnering student or students. In addition, the IIT observed that some teachers were not consistently differentiating student work or providing student support or scaffolds for class assignments. In some classrooms, teachers were assisting students to fill out worksheets while in another class the teacher was facilitating work and conversations with students. The IIT also observed that in some classes, students were not clear about the instructional task or the assignment that they had to complete.
- **School and teacher leaders should refine their teacher-developed formative assessments to better enable them to improve their instructional practices.** During classroom visits, the IIT found that some teachers were using their data to group and regroup students. However, this strategy was not observed in all classes visited. Teachers stated that they are creating formative assessments to drive instruction, but this practice varies from class to class. Teachers also noted that they are using Kahoot, which is a software program that teachers use to give immediate feedback to students, and provide exit tickets; however, this practice was inconsistently observed during class visits by the IIT.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Teachers and students reported that they need improved internet access and equipment.** Teachers shared that accessing the internet at the school was difficult, and logging on is a slow process. Students also stated that most of the equipment they are currently using is out of date, and when they are in class using a formative assessment program such as Kahoot or Read 180, it takes a while before they can log-on and use the software.
- **Students said they thought they could increase their grades if they had study hall periods.** Students shared that they would like a study hall period programmed into their schedules. Students felt that study halls would provide an opportunity for them to work on projects, catch-up on assignments, and collaborate with their classmates.
- **Students in grade six reported that they enjoyed sports and would like to participate in intramural activities.** Students shared that students in grades seven and eight participate in either Junior Varsity (JV) or Varsity sports, but since they were in grade six, they did not get the same opportunity due to the rules of the athletic conference. Students indicated that they would like to have other intramural activities that they could participate in as an alternative to JV or Varsity sports.
- **Students stated that they would like to see the building kept cleaner.** Students noted that the hallways and bathrooms need to be better maintained.

- **Students said they wanted their classes to be more academically challenging.** Some students noted that the State reading or mathematics exams are harder than the work that they are doing in class and that they were not always prepared for it.