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Leadership and Systems

Curriculum

Instruction

Social-Emotional Learning

Family Engagement

Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment
Final Report
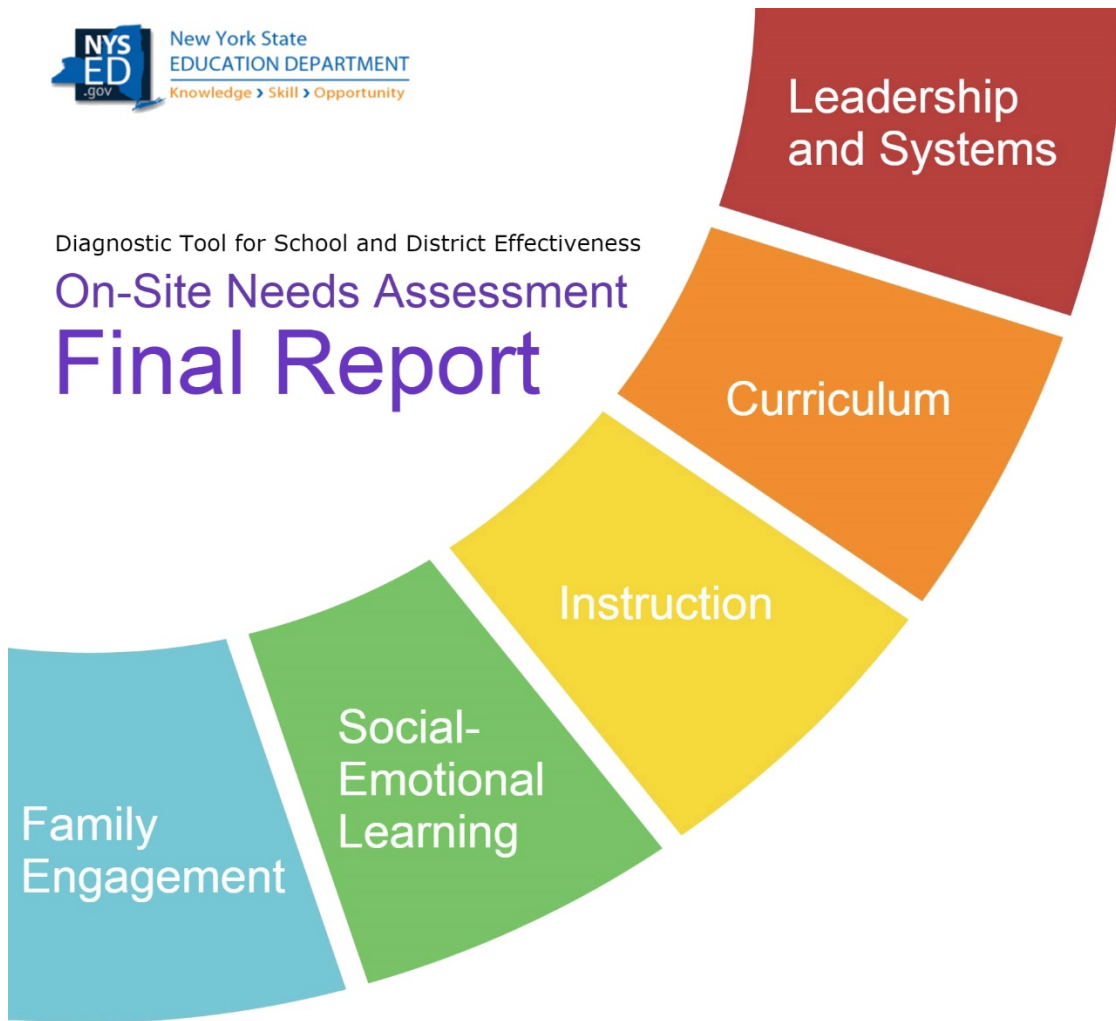
BEDS Code	070600010016
School Name	Thomas K. Beecher School
School Address	310 Sullivan Street, Elmira, NY 14901
District Name	Elmira City School District
Principal	Diane Tymoski
Dates of Visit	December 4 – 6, 2018

Purpose Of The Visit

A team organized by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) visited the school to help the school identify areas of need that are making long-term success a challenge and provide actionable recommendations to direct the school's work in the immediate future.

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

Information About The Visit

- Thomas K. Beecher School serves 396 students in grades three through six.
- The visit was led by an Outside Educational Expert (OEE) and a representative from NYSED. The team also included a district representative, a district consultant, and a Special Education School Improvement Specialist (SESIS) representative.
- The team visited a total of 27 classrooms during the visit, approximately a third of them twice.
- The OEE visited three classrooms with the principal during the visit, and IIT members visited classrooms with the assistant principal as well.
- Team members conducted two group interviews with 20 different students, two group interviews with 13 staff, and one on one interviews with an additional seven staff.
- Team members interviewed six parents in a series of one-on-one interviews.
- Team members examined documents provided by the school, including student outcome data, curriculum maps, schoolwide data, student work, and a tool developed by the school through its participation in a communications professional development (PD) program.
- In advance of the visit, 16 of 29 staff members (55 percent) completed a DTSDE pre-visit survey conducted by NYSED.
- The acting principal was appointed in July 2018 after the former principal abruptly departed from this role. Because the current principal is a long-time public employee who previously retired from a neighboring school district, there are legal restrictions on the total number of days she can work in a year. This limits the amount of time she is available in the school building. By mutual agreement, and with strong support from the superintendent, the assistant principal has taken on additional leadership responsibilities, closely coordinated with the principal. The district has also supplied the school with an administrative intern, who is a master teacher and building leader in training with years of service elsewhere in the district.
- Prior to the visit, the IIT met with the district superintendent, at her request, to learn about her recent efforts to provide staff with the training and tools needed to support effective communication and collaboration.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. During the fall of 2018, staff concluded nearly a year of PD focused on improving communication, collaboration, and building trust between adults. As a result of these efforts, teachers reported improved communication across grade levels, more openness among colleagues, and increased teacher voice in schoolwide conversations.

2. In a recent move to improve the school climate and to respond more effectively to behavior difficulties, school leaders discontinued the use of the planning room, a respite and de-escalation program for students which had begun to function more as an in-school suspension program. School leaders have also emphasized the use of disciplinary practices that are least disruptive to student learning. Teachers reported that they are working closely with school leaders to help students maintain a focus on academics, either by minimizing the length of a disciplinary incident or avoiding one altogether through effective classroom practices. The assistant principal reported that these changes have led to a reduction in the length of time students are spending out of the classroom.

3. School leaders and the school counselor described recent work to improve communication with families, including the increased use of ClassDojo and the new school leaders' modeling of open, respectful, and hands-on interaction with family members.   All interviewed parents reported positive communication and constructive relationships with teachers and school leaders. Members of the IIT observed staff and school leaders engaging in positive exchanges with parents. One senior central office leader reported that calls from concerned parents had decreased from being a relatively common occurrence in 2017-18 to virtually no calls during the first months of 2018-19.

4. The school makes deliberate use of its public-address system to minimize interruptions of student learning, establish a professional culture among adults, and support student leadership. At the beginning of 2018-19, the assistant principal implemented a procedure in which students and educators briefly announce a key message for the school day and students lead both the Pledge of Allegiance and the Beecher Bengal Pledge. Following these announcements, the address system goes silent, often for the remainder of the day. Over the three days of the site visit, the only announcement other than the opening and closing announcements was a 15-second caution against going outside for recess due to weather conditions. By relying on teachers to conduct the bulk of schoolwide communication with students, school leaders demonstrate their respect for teachers as leaders of school culture and stress the importance of classroom work. By including three or four students of varying ages each day, the announcements program gives multiple students a chance to exercise leadership and contribute to school climate. The students observed performing these duties during the site visit were visibly excited to be a part of the presentation team.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **School leaders should develop a strategic plan for school improvement.** Although the school did implement the action plans from its 2017-18 SCEP, the 2018-19 SCEP has not yet been implemented. Current school

leaders were not involved in the development of the current SCEP and stated that they felt an urgent need to address significant problems of student behavior, school climate, the schedule, and the core curriculum. Going forward, school leaders will need to revise the 2018-19 SCEP to include goals, benchmarks, and action plans reflective of the school's current areas of need to guide school improvement efforts.

- **The school's instructional leaders should use student data to make strategic decisions regarding teaching and learning.** While school leaders communicate often with data and curriculum coordinators, student learning data is not analyzed to inform strategic decisions to improve teaching and learning.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **The school should develop a clearly defined leadership structure.** The principal is unable to work in the building full time due to employment constraints imposed by her retiree status from a previous role. As a result, the assistant principal manages many of the programs and logistics of the school, assisted by the administrative intern. However, the roles and responsibilities of the school leaders have not been clearly defined or communicated to staff. In addition, the district has not identified the person who will serve as principal after 2018-19 or established a timetable for the resolution of this question. Taken together, these conditions result in a focus on immediate issues and addressing high profile problems rather than work towards longer-term and more systemic goals.

- **School leaders need to provide staff with the rationale and address staff concerns regarding the shift from a more traditional approach to discipline to the implementation of restorative practices.** Some staff voiced reservations about these changes, including confusion about the loss of the planning room as a resource and about the reason for its being closed, uncertainty about the programming and resources that would replace it, and skepticism about the effectiveness of restorative practices.

- **School leaders should effectively engage the school's high performing teachers to model effective teaching practices and provide support to their peers.** The IIT observed several teachers who were struggling to maintain a classroom climate that was conducive to learning. For example, one teacher requested assistance from another educator to remove three students from the classroom. School leaders shared that sometimes students are sent to the principal's office or to another out-of-class resource person as a consequence for not completing homework or for putting their head down on the desk. In contrast, multiple staff cited the effectiveness of one teacher who is consistently able to resolve student problems with in-class discipline and support, making student referrals out of his classroom only in cases of violence or extreme distress. School leaders should utilize this teacher to model effective teaching practices or to provide support to teachers who are struggling.

- **School leaders will need to provide guidance and establish expectations for teacher use of common planning time.** Common planning time was added to the schedule for the 2018-19 school year. However, the IIT found that this time is not being used to plan collaboratively. While three staff reported that they are pleased to have this opportunity to plan together and share best practices, only one teacher spoke of using common planning time for regular meetings with his grade level peers, citing a new level of consistency across the grade level.

- **The Beecher Communication Agreement will require revision and further development as staff learn how to utilize it effectively.** Although this protocol contains many useful strategies and has been developed out of intensive work by the staff, its contents will need to be tied to specific educational or school purposes and

organized by team, grade level, and area of program or activity. To be most useful, it will need to be applied to specific contexts, meetings, teams, or projects. As staff gain experience using this tool, they will need to analyze its effectiveness in different settings, make any necessary amendments, and fold any useful elements into future processes.

- **School leaders will need to ensure that the use of the newly re-organized planning room is consistent with restorative practices.** Historically, the planning room has been used as a punitive intervention, similar to in-school suspension. The assistant principal told an IIT member that he hopes the re-opened planning room will offer a more interactive and supportive experience for students, reduce students' time out of classrooms, and increase the productive use of any out-of-class time for both students and staff.

Learning at the School

- **While Read 180, the recently adopted Tier 2 reading intervention, is being implemented schoolwide, it needs to be implemented more consistently.**   Read 180 structures lessons into three smaller groups through which students rotate. The program's data collection process allows the data and curriculum coordinators to monitor the degree to which teachers are ensuring that students get the designated amount of time in each of the three groups. The data and curriculum coordinators reported that classes that most closely follow the Read 180 implementation protocols are achieving the best student outcomes. In interviews with the IIT, the data and curriculum coordinators expressed the hope that PD and other supports will help staff achieve greater program fidelity resulting in better student outcomes.

- **Staff would benefit from ongoing support to develop skills to effectively manage and cope with challenging student behavior.** During the visit, members of the IIT observed several incidents when staff raised their voices with students, engaged in the use of sarcasm, or were disrespectful towards students in response to challenging behaviors. Conversely, the IIT observed an intervention by one school leader who exhibited strong conflict resolution and de-escalation skills when managing a student conflict. One school leader recounted an informal coaching session with a staff member experiencing distress after a confrontation with a student. During this discussion, the school leader focused on teaching skills to manage such incidents and to cope with the surge of difficult feelings that adults can experience when trying to manage difficult behaviors. As school leaders continue to implement restorative practices and focus on improving staff communication skills, it will be important for these leaders to provide staff with ongoing guidance and support regarding how they think about, react to, and support one another to cope effectively with student behavioral challenges.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Parents expressed a desire for more information regarding new initiatives and changes in school programming.** While several parents expressed that they are pleased with the level of communication from the school, at least one parent requested more communication around the school's ideas for the planning room, and other parents expressed an interest in knowing more about the school's restorative practices initiative, which is not as well-known to parents as to students.

- **Several students expressed interest in having opportunities to be more involved in the future development of the school.** One student reported that she had heard it was an option for students to join a safety patrol,

but she did not know how to get involved. Other students were interested in providing feedback regarding some of the school's discipline practices and ways to make learning more interesting.