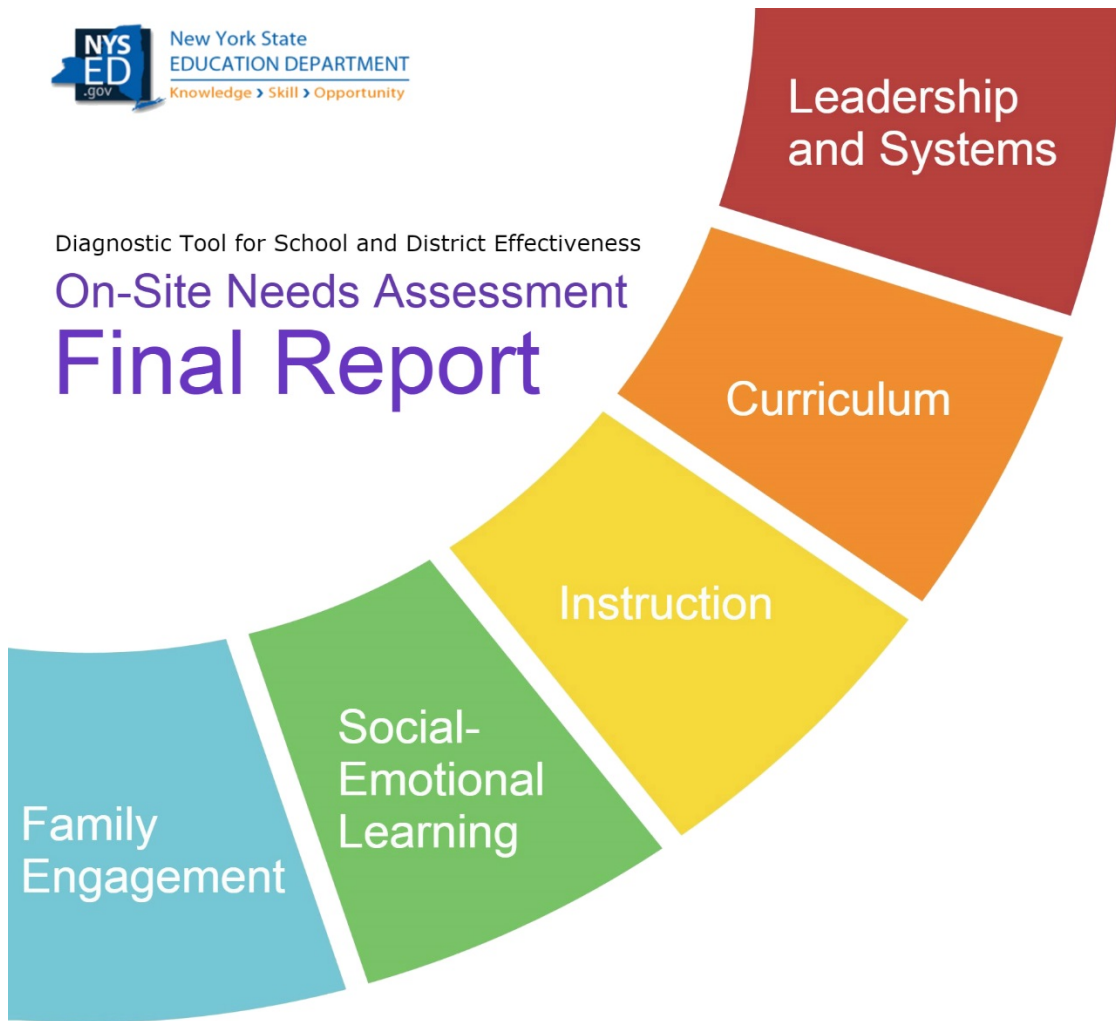


Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment

Final Report



BEDS Code	491200010006
School Name	Van Rensselaer Elementary School
School Address	25 Van Rensselaer Drive, Rensselaer, NY 12144
District Name	Rensselaer City School District
Principal	Jeffrey Palmer
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
2	1	1	2	2	1

Van Rensselaer Elementary School serves 666 students in grades pre-kindergarten through six.

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 district consultant.
- The team visited a total of 31 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited nine 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, lesson plans, school-wide data, teacher feedback, and student work.
- In advance of the visit, 38 staff members (69 percent) completed a DTSDE pre-visit survey conducted by NYSED.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. During the 2018-19 school year, the school developed community-based partnerships with Badische Anilin und Soda-Fabrik (BASF) and Kodak. Together the companies sponsored the school’s SNAP Project that uses photography to support integrated science, literacy, and the arts curriculum. Over five hundred and fifty students across all grades received cameras from Kodak and attended programs at the BASF environmental education center and wildlife habitat. Students reported that the trips were fun and informative and made science easier to understand. Several students shared their photographs with the team and reported that

Kodak developed and printed the pictures for free. During classroom visits, the IIT observed students writing poems and stories about their photos in preparation for the up-coming culminating event where all students' writing and photographs will be displayed throughout the school corridors.

2. The principal and staff reported that the school has historically struggled to provide students with social and emotional health supports. There has been no guidance counselor for the 666 students in pre-kindergarten through grade six and only one social worker to support all students from the elementary, middle, and high schools. During the 2018-19 school year, the school obtained an Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education (AWARE) grant to support the development of a school-based mental health program. As a result of this initiative, the school hired an additional social worker and behavioral therapist to provide early interventions to students in the elementary grades. The principal is beginning to work with a committee of district, community, and school-based representatives to design a program to be implemented in the fall that will increase and improve access to culturally competent and developmentally appropriate school and community-based mental health services for students and their families.
3. To improve the quality of monthly staff meetings and strengthen professional development (PD), beginning in February 2019, the principal began to revise the way monthly staff meeting time was being used. An examination of meeting agendas showed that during the fall semester, fifty-minute meetings were primarily devoted to various organizational and administrative topics such as the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR), important dates from the school calendar, and updates from the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). In the spring, in consultation with the new superintendent, the principal began to devote meetings to a single instructional focus, such as student engagement. Agendas showed that the principal clearly articulated meeting objectives, tied the objectives to standards, and designed collaborative group activities to model engagement strategies that could be used in classrooms. Interviewed teachers reported that the new format has been well received and provided them with additional instructional strategies. While the principal stated that the initiative is still a work in progress, the IIT observed some teachers beginning to use these strategies in their lessons

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **The principal needs to develop measurable goals, action plans, and benchmarks for all school initiatives, and create systems to monitor and assess their impact.** In discussions with the school leader, the IIT learned there was a need to develop specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based (SMART) annual goals for school improvement. In January, when goals were requested by the new superintendent, the principal developed five:
 - Work with teachers to propose a redesign of elementary support services.
 - Work with teachers to redesign the Instructional Support Team.
 - Model instructional practices in faculty meetings so that meetings resemble effective classroom practices.

- Work with the superintendent to design professional development (PD) for faculty that addresses content knowledge, standards, effective instructional practices, mental health needs, and behavioral strategies.
- Work with the superintendent to develop an action plan to address the Comprehensive School Improvement status of the school.

However, the IIT found that the goals needed clear, quantifiable measures of success, action plans identifying the steps to be taken to support the goal's attainment, or benchmarks delineating incremental checkpoints for monitoring the completion and impact of the components of each goal. In addition, none of the five goals focused explicitly on high priority areas for student academic improvement such as math or literacy nor did they address struggling sub-groups such as students with disabilities.

- **School leaders should develop evidence-based systems and structures to ensure effective implementation of the math, literacy, and character education programs.** The school adopted *Envisions* as the school-wide math program and *Reading Streets* as the literacy series for grades three through six. Classroom visits and teacher and student interviews conducted by the IIT indicated that neither curriculum is being used with fidelity across all classrooms. Some teachers reported that they no longer used the literacy curriculum after New York State assessments were administered. Other teachers noted that they decided not to implement the *Envisions* math program with their classes. While the principal indicated that some teachers feel that the math curriculum is not working well with their students, the IIT observed few math lessons that implemented the program's concrete to representational to abstract sequence of instruction. In addition, few lessons were adjusted based on students' learning. To provide individualized support for students in reading and math, the school purchased i-Ready, but teachers and students reported that utilization varies from class to class. While teachers have access to i-Ready benchmark data, the IIT saw little evidence of data informed instruction based on the program's reports. To support social-emotional learning, the school adopted a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program that rewards students who exhibit positive behaviors; but students and teachers report inconsistent use of the rewards system. Behavioral traits featured at monthly character development assemblies or providing equitable recognition of rewardable behaviors for all students are not reinforced consistently. Some teachers create their own point systems, apart from PBIS, such as one grade three class where students reported having to amass 80 points to participate in a class trip to the zoo.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **The principal needs to strategically maximize the use of time and human resources to increase student success and school improvement efforts.** The principal has created a schedule that includes common planning time, every-day, for most grade level teams. However, the IIT learned that first grade teachers, Academic Intervention Services (AIS) providers, and English as New Language (ENL) teachers need regularly scheduled planning time to meet with colleagues. Grade level teams stated to the IIT that while planning time is provided, there is a need for directives indicating how meeting times should be used. Teachers noted that meeting time, sometimes as little as twice a month, is often spent discussing housekeeping items as opposed to student data, curriculum adjustments, or lesson modifications. While the IIT also learned that the school has four teacher leaders, the IIT was not provided with information about their specific roles in the improvement process.

- **The principal needs to conduct regularly scheduled, targeted walk-throughs to monitor the implementation and impact of PD and support the development of instructional practices.** The IIT learned in discussions with the principal and teachers that daily visits to observe and support teachers' instructional practices have not been scheduled. The principal told the IIT that he has provided PD to the staff to support the school's instructional focus on student engagement. However, the IIT found that targeted walk-throughs to monitor the implementation of the strategies he presented and to assess the overall impact of PD on improving the quality of student engagement throughout the school need to be provided. During classroom visits, the IIT observed some teachers using engagement strategies such as turn and talk, group table talks, and a number of different call and response techniques, but teachers reported that they have not received targeted feedback on their use of these engagement practices.

Learning at the School

- **Teachers should plan and deliver data informed lessons that include multiple entry points to meet the learning needs of all students.** While some teachers stated that they group students by New York State assessment levels and provide students with independent reading books based on their Fountas and Pinnell levels, the team found that most lesson activities, materials, and assessments are typically not differentiated. Classes include students with complex disabilities and English language learners (ELLs); however, most lessons the team observed were in need of individualized scaffolds, specialized instructional strategies, or adjusted wait time. When scaffolds were provided, they were often the same for the entire class. Although teachers reported that student's Fountas and Pinnell scores show they are progressing, data reviewed by the IIT indicated that students need to make more progress to close achievement gaps. In the future, the principal should ensure that teachers devote common planning time to examining and assessing all available standards-aligned student performance data to identify the gaps in student learning and develop differentiated scaffolds to support the achievement of all students.
- **All teachers should develop and use systems to check for understanding and monitor student progress towards mastery of learning objectives.** Lessons observed by the IIT were rarely adjusted based on student responses. While some teachers asked probing questions, typically the team observed limited use of strategies such as thumbs-up/thumbs down indicators, trackers to record student responses, or exit tickets. Several students reported that their work is not always graded. A review of student notebooks, work-folders, and journals showed few examples of teacher feedback to students. In the future, the principal should consider making in-the-moment monitoring of student learning a primary focus for a cycle of walk-throughs and should concentrate feedback on improving the teachers' professional practice in this key area.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Teachers reported that additional technology is needed to support the implementation of the new i-Ready program.** The school has one computer lab that all classes use for 45 minutes each week; however, teachers reported that lab time is typically used to conduct research, complete class projects, or teach computer skills, not for independent i-Ready lessons. The school purchased laptop carts for each grade to share. Early grade teachers divided the computers up and use them during center time. This year, all grade six students received Chromebooks that enable them to access i-Ready lessons both in school and at home. Teachers stated that

to meet the principal's goal of 45 minutes of differentiated math and literacy instruction for each child, additional resources are necessary.

- **Teachers reported that there should to be a school-wide curriculum in literacy for students in the early grades.** Currently, early grade teachers create their own curriculum. As a result, there is no consistency in the way phonics or writing is taught. Teachers also noted that AIS teachers use the Sidewalks intervention program with kindergarten through grade three students. However, that program aligns to the Reading Streets curriculum that is only used in the upper grades. Teachers stated that the lack of alignment impacts the effectiveness of the interventions.
- **Students reported that there is insufficient supervision in common areas shared by elementary and secondary school students.** Elementary students stated that they are exposed to inappropriate language and actions on buses, in corridors, and in bathrooms during the common lunch periods. They noted that there are many incidents that occur in the morning holding area, at recess, and in the hallways. Several students interviewed reported incidents of bullying.
- **Students reported that it would be helpful if teachers gave weekly rather than daily homework assignments.** Students stated that they frequently have appointments or activities after school that impact the time they have to complete daily assignments. Students stated that if homework assignments for the week were provided on Monday, they could budget their time and not lose points from their grades for incomplete assignments.
- **Parents would like the use of text-based communication platforms to become a school-wide practice.** While teachers can be reached via email and telephone, parents reported that texting applications simplifies the communication process and expands their access to teachers. Some teachers use Class Dojo, Boomz, or Seesaw to provide academic and behavioral information to families. Parents reported that teachers use the apps to send home pictures of their child's work and in-the -messages about their child's needs. Parents reported that some applications translate messages for non-English speaking parents and that access to the applications gives them peace of mind because they can always contact the teacher if there is an emergency.