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
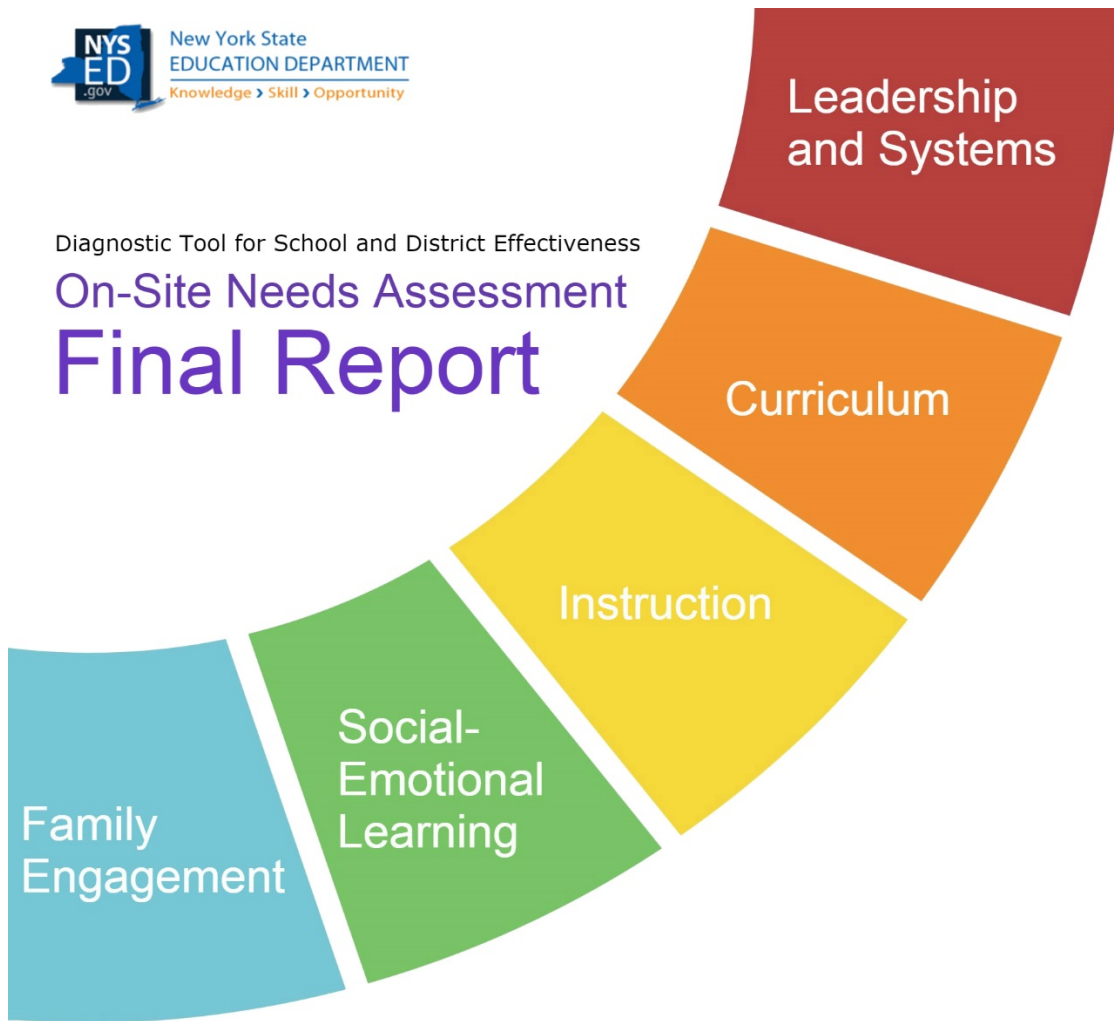
BEDS Code	580602040006
School Name	Riverhead Middle School
School Address	600 Harrison Avenue, Riverhead, NY 11901
District Name	Riverhead Central School District
Principal	Andrea Pekar
Dates of Visit	December 11 – 13, 2018

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

- Riverhead Middle School serves 846 students in grades seven and eight.
- The visit was led by an Outside Educational Expert (OEE) and a representative from NYSED. The team also included a district representative, a Special Education School Improvement Specialist (SESIS) representative, a representative from the Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network (RBERN), and an OEE shadow.
- The team made 79 visits to 45 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited 12 classrooms with the principal and assistant principal during the visit.
- Team members conducted interviews with students, staff, and parents.
- Team members examined documents provided by the school, including lesson plans, schoolwide data, teacher feedback, and student work.
- In advance of the visit, 23 staff members (50 percent) completed a DTSDE pre-visit survey conducted by NYSED.
- The principal's last day at the school is December 21, 2018, the week following the DTSDE visit. The district representative indicated that a new principal will be appointed in late January 2019.
- The principal was absent on the second day of the DTSDE visit. Thus, the OEE visited classrooms and debriefed with the assistant principal. Further, the assistant principal was interviewed on the second day instead of the principal.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. The principal shared that turning around the school's environment was her greatest accomplishment. Teachers and parents credited the principal with creating a safe and orderly school for students, and the IIT observed a quiet, safe, and structured school with typically respectful interactions between students and between students and staff. Students said that they feel their teachers care about them and described positive relationships with the adults in the school. The school leaders and teachers shared that the principal hired an assistant principal whose primary purpose was to manage student discipline. Teachers and students stated that school leaders held students accountable for their behavior to a greater degree than in the past. Disciplinary infractions declined from 292 in the 2015–16 school year to 226 in the 2017–18 school year, and thus far in the 2018–19 school year there have been 33 infractions, which is on schedule for 115 for the entire school year. The school's physical environment also reflects the students' respect for the building and its physical resources. The school's facilities are well-maintained, clean, and attractive.

2. The school staff, parents and students cited the many enrichment activities in which students can participate as an important feature of the school, and school leaders were proud that they expanded these offerings for students in the 2018-19 school year. There are more than 50 clubs, performance groups, and athletic activities that students can engage in. Clubs range from the environmental club and robotics to peer mediation and the student government. Student council members stated that they were proud to represent the student body as part of this group, and other students said taking part in the various performing groups was an especially meaningful experience.

3. During the 2018-19 school year, the music department staff have won numerous awards and many student musicians perform with county and state bands and orchestras. The grade seven winter concert, which was attended by two IIT members, had a standing-room-only crowd and featured high caliber performances by over 200 students. In addition to its packed music performances, students and staff cited the music department staff as an especially innovative and creative group of teachers. Music classes feature students using Garage Band software in computer labs, and the department purchased a set of iPads for students to use to compose original music. The department has a significant social media presence, which is unique to the school. Students, staff, and parents all lauded the music department for its level of instruction, creativity, and the high quality of the student performances.

4. During the 2017-18 school year, about 44 percent of all students were enrolled in accelerated coursework that includes Algebra and Living Environment Regents classes in grade eight, a trend that continues into the 2018-19 school year. In June 2018, over 95 percent of these students passed the Regents exams. School leaders shared that there is some movement in and out of the accelerated classes, but typically these students are scheduled for accelerated coursework in grades seven and eight.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **School leaders need to develop effective systems to implement school priorities and drive school improvement.** The School Comprehensive Education Plan (SCEP) included timelines to implement goals that were written as "September 2018 – June 2019," without identifying benchmarks to evaluate the progress toward achieving those goals. Additionally, the recommendations from the May 2017 DTSDE visit became the goals for the 2017-18 SCEP and were similar to those in the 2018-19 SCEP. School leaders and teachers shared that some initiatives, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), were begun and then discontinued. As a result, school priorities are often unclear to staff. Going forward, school leaders should identify goals, develop action plans with benchmarks, evaluate practices based on progress along the benchmarks, and make adjustments when progress is too slow or not being made.

- **School leaders should consider restructuring teachers' common planning period.** Teachers shared that the daily common planning period is not currently structured to provide a productive use of time for teachers. They stated that they would prefer teaming to the current structure in which teachers are scheduled for common planning periods without regard for content area or grade level. For example, teachers who teach some of the same students or subjects do not have the same common planning period. Further, participation in common planning is voluntary; so, many teachers choose not to meet. School leaders shared that the work completed during common planning is not directed, monitored, or evaluated. The superintendent stated at that funding is available to create teacher teams with team leaders selected to empower professional staff to take more ownership for their professional growth and school improvement.

- **School leaders need to create a sense of urgency among staff and students for school improvement.** The assignment of a new principal in late January 2019 brings an opportunity to energize the staff and students and to create a shared understanding of the vision and core values of the school.

- **The school needs to develop a system to monitor and evaluate the school's social-emotional programs and services**. Although the school introduced the Project Wisdom character education curriculum and Suite 360 for social-emotional learning activities during study hall, the implementation of these initiatives are seldom monitored or evaluated. As a result, the impact of these programs on the social and emotional health of the students is not known. Further, guidance counselors shared that their work is not typically coordinated with the work of service providers from community-based organizations such as the Family Service League and the Community Awareness Program. Thus, services may be duplicated for some students, while other students go unserved. Student attendance is above 90 percent; however, a school leader shared that there is currently no system in place to address chronic absentees. The principal stated that the school has insufficient resources to address students' social-emotional needs; however, the IIT learned that programs have not yet been evaluated to ascertain whether current staff are being deployed efficiently and effectively.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **The school leaders need to provide teachers with timely, actionable feedback to improve their practice and follow-up to determine if feedback was successfully implemented.** The IIT learned that classroom walk-throughs occur infrequently, and teachers confirmed that school leaders rarely visit their classrooms. Teachers stated that they do not solely look to the school leaders for strategies to improve their teaching and learning.

The IIT noted that school leaders provided useful feedback and recommendations in observation reports but did not return to the classrooms to determine if their suggestions were attempted or if they were being implemented effectively.

- **School leaders need to develop and communicate shared values and a common vision for the school.** The IIT found that school leaders have not clearly communicated a vision for the school that has been understood by stakeholders. For example, school leaders, teachers, students, and parents all identified different core values that they believed informed and drove the work of the school. Additionally, the school staff, students, and parents were proud of the school's music program, but did not see that as part of the school's overall emphasis on the arts or a goal to develop students' creativity. Teachers, students, and parents shared with the team that they were unclear about the school leaders' expectations for them and their different roles in improving student achievement.

- **School leaders need to routinely analyze student achievement data and provide continuous instructional support to teachers concerning the use of data to improve teaching and learning.** The use of data to drive instruction has been a goal since May 2017; however, schoolwide data provided by the district had not yet been analyzed at the time of the visit. Reasons for the declining trend in student achievement had not been explored and were instead attributed to changing demographics and other perceived obstacles to school improvement. The school leaders' lack of analysis and planning with benchmarks was reflected in the teachers' and students' non-analytical approach to improving teaching and learning.

Learning at the School

- **Teachers should use strategies that make learning relevant to students, promote high levels of engagement and thinking, and routinely use formative assessment to determine students' acquisition of content taught during the lesson.** During lessons, students were not generally presented with content connected to their lives, and most students could not explain why they were learning specific content. Most classrooms were teacher-centered with too few opportunities provided for students to problem solve and build on each other's answers. Questions generally required one-word answers, and even when teachers asked more thought-provoking questions, they moved on after accepting the first correct answer offered. Students participated in minimal groupwork and discussion as most classroom activities were of a low cognitive level. During classroom visits, the IIT noted that most teachers did not use formative assessment to evaluate student learning and guide lesson content before proceeding with the lesson. The team did, however, see evidence of teachers using exit tickets in a few classrooms.

- **Teachers need to routinely provide students with specific written feedback that includes suggestions for improvement and identifies high quality work to help students take greater ownership of their work and improve their learning based on teacher suggestions.** The IIT found that students are provided with minimal feedback about their work. Student work reviewed by the IIT typically lacked student-specific feedback, and rubrics and exemplars were not used to show students what excellent work looked like.

- **School leaders should communicate a sense of urgency in improving teaching and learning.** The IIT learned that strategies to motivate and hold to account individual teachers and encourage students to develop ownership and a sense of urgency to improve achievement levels have not yet been identified. School leaders and some teachers shared that there was a general sense of complacency regarding school improvement, the development of learning skills, and raising the standards of student achievement. For example, although many

teachers stated that their students are capable of more challenging work, few observed lessons incorporated challenging tasks.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Students and parents would like the school does to provide organized transitions for students and their families who are entering or exiting the school.** Other than a self-directed tour of the building, there is no orientation for entering students and their families. Parents suggested that the school develop an orientation process where they share all the clubs, teams, and performance groups available for students during and after school. One parent wanted to know more about the school's English as a new language program but had been unable to secure additional information from the school. Parents added that students should receive better preparation for transitioning to high school and preparing for college and the world of work. Guidance counselors suggested that they could provide this instruction during the students' study halls.

- **Students and teachers would like the lunch period extended to provide more time for students to eat and enjoy recess.** The 30-minute lunch period is supposed to be split evenly between eating and recess. However, due to long lines, many students do not begin eating until midway through the lunch period. Students said that although there are four cashier stations for students to enter passwords to access their accounts, only two are in use at a time. They added that there is one server on the boys' line and two on the girls' line, with no reason to separate lines by gender. Students and teachers shared that a full-period lunch session would allow more time for students to decompress, eat, and enjoy recess.

- **Students and teachers would like clear grading policies established.** Teachers stated they have latitude to implement their own grading criteria but would prefer that each subject area be allowed to set uniform departmental grading criteria with school leaders' approval. In some cases, students said that they did not know how or why they received their subject grades.

- **Teachers would like school leaders to create a clear action plan to increase parent engagement.** Teachers reported that student performances draw large audiences, but the school has not capitalized on these successful events. For example, there was a standing-room-only crowd at the grade seven concert on December 12, 2018. Teachers suggested that the school should incorporate an educational component into the well-attended events and schedule more student performances to draw more parents to the school. They added that school leaders need to regularly meet with parent leaders to collaboratively develop an action plan for increasing parent engagement that builds on successful school events.

- **Teachers would like follow-up communication on the results of student referrals.** After referring a student for discipline or to receive support services, frequently, no one communicates what actions were or will be taken. For example, one teacher shared that she recently referred a student but was never informed what action, if any, was taken. Teachers asked that student support staff or the assistant principal inform them of the results of their referrals. Otherwise, teachers stated that the lack of communication fosters a feeling among teachers of unresponsiveness that makes them less inclined to get involved by making referrals in the future.