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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	421800010028
School Name	Seymour Dual Language Academy
School Address	108 Shonnard Street, Syracuse, NY 13204
District Name	Syracuse City School District
Principal	James Nieves
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

- Seymour Dual Language Academy serves 596 students in pre-kindergarten to grade five.
- 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, and a representative from the Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network (RBERN).
- The team visited a total of 24 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited eight 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 36 staff members (76.6 percent) completed.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. The new principal has made progress in improving the quality of family engagement at the school by working with parents to start a Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO), hire a family engagement specialist, and implement a postcard initiative. The principal reported that he has been meeting regularly with a group of parents since July 2018 to gain their trust in his leadership, and the school leaders and some parents are in the process of formalizing an official PTO. According to the principal, these parents indicated that they would like to take a more active role in identifying what children in the school need to succeed and ways to engage more families in school activities. The principal shared that the newly hired family engagement specialist has made some positive connections with families and would be able to support efforts to encourage more parents to join the PTO, while also supporting teachers with home-school communication. In addition, the principal reported that a postcard initiative begun in August 2018 has been instrumental in improving communication with families and tracking student attendance. Parents reported the postcard initiative has increased home and school communication, which they appreciate.

2. The school leaders have created a support system for classroom behavioral issues comprised of a dean of students, sentry officer, and the behavior intervention committee. The principal reported that this team aims to keep students in the classroom by intervening early before behavior concerns escalate. The school leaders reported that the number of classroom referrals and suspensions reported thus far in the 2018-19 school year have decreased as compared to the same time period in the previous school year.

3. The school offers an extended day schedule for student enrichment. Beginning with the 2015-16 school year, district leaders initiated an extended school day in order to provide students with daily enrichment and

additional learning time. The IIT learned that each day every classroom has a 40-minute block of time in which the Redhouse Arts Center provides students with enrichment activities and youth development instruction to enhance social and emotional learning. As a result of the additional learning time and experiences, students are provided with opportunities that they would not have access to within a regular school day schedule.

4. The school offers an extended day schedule for teachers to engage in professional development (PD) during the school day. The extended school day provides all instructional and instructional support staff with an additional hour daily to enhance math and English language arts (ELA) instruction. In addition, teachers have dedicated time each day to plan lessons, analyze student data, and receive PD.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **School leaders need to regularly monitor and evaluate the School Comprehensive Education Plan (SCEP) goals and school priorities so that the school can adjust or modify improvement practices, as needed.** The new principal established school priorities in the fall of 2018 based on school needs and stakeholder input. The SCEP goals were established in May 2018, prior to the arrival of the new principal. The principal acknowledged to the team that some goals and priorities were too ambitious and may need to be modified. The school leaders should review the current priorities and SCEP goals to set realistic expectations, including a timeline with measurable outcomes.

- **The school leader and intervention team should review the procedures for identifying students most at risk in order to determine whether students with the greatest needs are receiving the appropriate level of support.** Classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed that the instructional and non-instructional support for students could be better aligned to provide supports where they are most needed. Staff members stated that it can be difficult to determine how to select the most appropriate intervention for a student. The IIT identified that the school has a variety of instructional support staff, including academic intervention services (AIS) staff, multi-classroom leaders, social workers, and a parent engagement liaison. In addition, almost every classroom has a consultant or teacher assistant, and the school has a dean of students and a sentry officer to address behavioral issues. The school leaders should describe the interventions along with a protocol indicating how each intervention should be administered and carefully review this information with teachers.

- **The principal and vice principal should monitor teachers' practice of accessing and using data to scaffold and differentiate their lessons.** The IIT observed with school and district leaders the co-planning sessions in which teachers were learning how to review and use data to inform their instruction. During several classroom visits, the IIT observed that differentiation consisted of students working on different projects rather than students working on the same skillset in different ways. The IIT learned that the school lacks a system to ensure that teachers know each student's performance level, the supports that are being provided, and how the supports are aligned and monitored.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **The principal should use his strength in relationship-building to communicate the focus and urgency for school improvement.** The IIT learned in conversations with staff that they respect and support the new principal. Teachers reported that the staff have formed a school family, which provides an opportunity for the principal to build a sense of trust and shared urgency. The principal reported that he will need to have courageous conversations with staff to build the trust and commitment needed to move the school forward.

- **School leaders should identify their individual strengths, clarify their roles, and explicitly communicate them to school staff.** The principal, vice principal, dean of students, instructional coach, multi-classroom leader, and AIS staff all play critical roles in the leadership of the school. However, the teachers reported that they are not always sure who to bring their questions and concerns to. The school has had multiple leaders over the last seven years, which has contributed to this issue.

- **School leaders should develop a system to support teachers in implementing interventions.** For example, the IIT learned that there is no regular communication process that provides teachers with information about why specific interventions were decided upon and to provide them with strategies and support to implement the interventions. Additionally, a system has not been developed to measure the effectiveness of interventions and the consistency of implementation. The IIT observed that teachers are attempting to implement a large number of interventions. However, the impact of the interventions is not currently being measured throughout the school. Teachers reported that they are asked to implement interventions and do not always know why the intervention was chosen or how to effectively implement the intervention.

Learning at the School

- **Teachers should be provided with additional opportunities to collaborate with grade-level peers on how to implement new techniques, as well as discuss successes and challenges of implementing an intervention.** The master schedule includes time each day for instructional and non-instructional staff to plan, review data, and receive training with their grade-level peers. Teachers reported that they are required to attend training even if it does not apply to their grade level or content area. The IIT found that slight revisions to the schedule could include time for collaboration to extend a teacher's understanding of data and implementation of interventions.

- **School leaders need to regularly monitor classroom practices in the area of student engagement**. The IIT learned that expectations for student engagement have not been established and clearly communicated to teachers, and a walkthrough tool is not used to monitor and provide feedback on student engagement practices. In most observed classrooms, the IIT noted that some students raised their hands and were sometimes called on by their teacher while other students remained unengaged, and the same students were called on throughout the lesson. Leaders reported that they are in the process of developing a walkthrough tool that is designed to provide feedback to teachers on classroom environment and classroom practices, including student engagement practices.

- **Teachers should establish flexible student groups based on identified student needs and provide students with activities that prompt student-to-student discussion to increase understanding.** Class visits showed that although teachers grouped students, the students were not always grouped in accordance with their needs. During most class visits, the IIT observed that student groups did not interact or talk with one another about

the lesson. Many of the students were engaged in computer-based activities, and when asked by the team what they were learning, several students responded that they were not sure.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need

- **Teaches would like to be provided with increased curricular support.** Some teachers shared that they do not feel that the curriculum is vertically aligned across grade levels and that some students advance to the next grade without the skills necessary to meet grade-level expectations. Teachers stated that some curricular materials are not appropriate for their grade level, are no longer accessible, or have content gaps in certain areas that require additional materials. This year the school is implementing new literacy and math curricula. The teachers reported to the IIT that they would benefit from ongoing support to learn the vertical alignment of the curriculum, the alignment of the curriculum with the standards, and a means to better identify and support student needs.

- **Students would like additional adult support to address behavior issues.** Students stated that cursing, bullying, and fighting sometimes interfere with their learning. During the student focus group, students reported that some students in the school, primarily in the upper grades, bully other students. At the same time, students also reported that they feel supported and cared for by the teachers and school leaders. These students reported they are not always comfortable reporting bullying but would like to talk to an adult at the school when these situations arise. The school has hired a dean of students to work directly with students on behavior and to support their learning. The IIT recommends that the dean of students and all school leaders closely monitor student behavior and partner with the new student council to support any student who may need to or who chooses to report an instance of bullying at the school.

- **Parents would like before- and after-school programming available for their children.** School leaders reported that transportation is not available for programming before and after school, and that due to the length of the school day, students would arrive home very late. The parents suggested that the school would benefit from partnering with community organizations that may be able to support before- and after-school program opportunities.