

Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment

Final Report



BEDS Code	412300010022
School Name	John F. Kennedy Middle School
School Address	500 Deerfield Drive East, Utica, NY 13502
District Name	Utica City School District
Principal	Ms. Mary Belden
Dates of Visit	January 15-17, 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.

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 38 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited six 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, schoolwide data, teacher feedback, and student work.
- In advance of the visit, 44 staff members (83 percent) completed a DTSDE pre-visit survey conducted by NYSED.
- John F. Kennedy Middle School serves 721 students in grades seven and eight.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. Teachers and school leaders stated that they are determined to work together this school year to improve student achievement. Teachers shared that they feel like a family and are generally quick to share ideas informally that are successful in their classrooms and in working with students. Teachers said they feel that their ability to work together and share has helped the students to improve their achievement this year.
2. The school has a full-time parent liaison who is willing and able to work with parents to increase their engagement at the school. In addition, the school has access to academic coaches who serve as interpreters to ensure that all parents feel welcome and comfortable at the school. Parents shared that having the coaches readily available to help arrange meetings with school staff and to translate when necessary helps them be more connected with the school and learn how they can help support their children.
3. The school is well-equipped with resources, such as technology and a full-time librarian and library aide, and is a clean, welcoming facility. The technology lab allows students to use modern equipment such as a 3-D printer. The librarian explained to the team how she is supporting the students as they research projects for their classes and is teaching them effective research techniques to support their learning.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **Students need more support for social and emotional health.** The IIT found that the school lacks a schoolwide program to support student social and emotional developmental health. The school leaders and teachers should consider implementing a schoolwide social and emotional support program, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), that includes strategies to be used by all teachers and staff to address students' social issues and support positive behaviors and emotional health.
- **Academic Intervention Services (AIS) labs for ELA and math should be taught by the student's classroom teacher.** The communication between the classroom teacher and the lab teacher is not sufficient enough to allow for an effective intervention plan to be developed so that instruction is focused on individual student needs. Instruction should be less whole group and should target the particular needs of specific students.
- **School Comprehensive Education Plan (SCEP) goals developed by the previous administration should be re-written to link more closely with student outcomes and growth.** In order to ensure a strong connection between outcomes and growth, gaps in achievement need to be met universally across the school. Timelines attached to the activities listed in the SCEP should be conducive to meeting the goals. In the future, the principal should consider adjusting current goals to meet ongoing needs and ensure they are addressed and achieved.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **School leader's feedback to teachers on their instructional practices should be targeted and followed up to ensure that feedback is implemented.** The IIT reviewed feedback to teachers in which the principal used the district's look-fors document along with some of her own specific notes. However, during classroom visits, evidence of the impact of school leader feedback on instruction was not clear.
- **The principal is committed to school improvement and has ideas about ways to improve the school and needs to clearly communicate her vision for learning to all staff.** School leaders must outline the non-negotiable instructional expectations for improving student achievement, such as higher-level questions and providing challenging work for students in interesting ways that increase their engagement. The staff stated that the school leader could strengthen communication around instructional expectations.

Learning at the School

- **Teachers need to ask higher-order questions that require students to think more deeply about the content they are learning.** During classroom visits, teachers asked literal questions that did not require students to interact and build on each other's thoughts and ideas. In the future, teachers should pose questions to students that are more challenging, that require students to explain their thinking, make connections, and give evidence that they understand the material they are learning.
- **All teachers should use formative assessments that are reflective of grade level expectations and standards to rigorously monitor what students are learning.** During classroom visits, the IIT found that many teachers did not leverage the use of formative assessments to monitor student learning. Teachers need to use these

data to provide intervention strategies that are targeted to small groups and/or individual students' specific needs.

- **Students need to be given opportunities to take control of their own learning.** The IIT observed that most instruction was teacher-centered and teacher-directed. Lessons should be more student-centered and provide opportunities for student choice.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Students say they want more challenging work.** Students explained that their favorite classes where they learn the most are those where they can engage in hands-on activities that include more interactive work with their peers. Students stated there would be fewer discipline issues in class if their fellow students were more interested and engaged in what they were learning.
- **Teachers and students say the master schedule is limiting and problematic.** Students said they often lose interest towards the end of the second block and just scribble anything on their papers just to say they are finished. They stated, further, that they would appreciate a short break halfway through the period.
- **Teachers say they are frustrated with the lack of a designated time to plan with their colleagues.** They say the block schedule prevents them from regularly collaborating with colleagues on lesson planning and curriculum work.
- **The attendance teacher, parent liaison, and counselors say they would appreciate more opportunities to communicate with each other.** Staff say routine meetings or other ways to share information face-to-face would allow them to provide input to each other from their unique perspectives and better support students overall.