

Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment

Final Report



BEDS Code	662300010056
School Name	Palisade Preparatory School
School Address	201 Palisade Avenue, Yonkers, NY 10703
District Name	Yonkers Public Schools
Principal	Michelle Yazurlo
Dates of Visit	April 23-25, 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:

Elementary/Middle School Performance Indicators

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	2	2	3	2	4

Palisade Preparatory School serves 772 students in grades seven through 12.

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 representative from the Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network (RBERN).
- The team visited a total of 46 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited 15 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, the school provided results of a staff survey that 44 staff members (88 percent) completed.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon:

1. This school year, the principal added common planning times for teachers of grades seven and eight. During weekly designated periods, the teachers meet as a group with the principal. They review student data and strategies to address student needs. The principal and teachers of these grades report that these regularly scheduled meetings have supported consistent lesson planning and the use of similar pedagogical practices for both grade levels, which was confirmed by the ITT's review of lesson plans and classroom observations.
2. The school offers an Emergency Medical Services (EMS) program for students that has been expanded during the current school year, to provide students with an opportunity to gain real life experience through working with Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) from Empress Emergency Medical Services of Westchester County, as part of the Empress Cadets program. After school and on weekends, students can shadow and work with EMTs as they make ambulance visits to provide emergency services. Students and staff stated that this program is one of the most exciting and unique offerings at the school, preparing students for the future. Both staff and students noted that students are highly motivated to do well in their classes in order to remain eligible to participate in the program. In addition, the principal indicated that the school and Empress Emergency Medical Services are planning to enter into an agreement where students who are successful in the program will be offered jobs following high school graduation.
3. The school began a mindfulness program during the 2017-2018 school year for students in a few pilot classes. School leaders indicated that the program was well received by students and staff, teaching students various strategies for increasing awareness of their thoughts and feelings and for managing their stress. During the 2018-19 school year, the program was expanded to include all grade ten students. The principal chose grade ten to implement the program based on data from previous years that indicated the majority of discipline incidents happened at this grade level. The principal reported that since the inception of the mindfulness program in grade ten, the number and frequency of discipline incidents have decreased. Some students also indicated that the program has helped to reduce their stress and that of their peers.
4. During the 2018-19 school year, school leaders and staff developed a lunchtime theater program entitled Phoenician Theater, which is open to any student who wants to participate. Students choose a theme, select, and/or write their own scenes or plays, and perform them at lunchtime. A drama teacher assumes responsibility for the program. Students and the parents of participating students expressed their appreciation for the program, which they felt was a valuable addition to the school offerings. The principal and drama teacher have decided to have the Phoenician Theater actors present performances in the evening as well, as a way to increase family engagement at the school.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **The principal will need to put in place a system for tracking and monitoring the support services the school provides for students' social and emotional needs.** The team found that the school has multiple staff members who provide students with social and emotional support, including two full-time guidance counselors, a psychologist who is on site four days a week, and the principal and three assistant principals who also support these needs. For example, teachers and students reported that teachers send students to guidance counselors or one of the members of the school leadership team if they are disruptive in class; however, the school needs

a system for tracking which students have been referred or what services they may have received. Support staff and teachers indicated that there is a need for more communication between teachers and pupil support staff about student referrals and or support services. In the future, the school leadership needs to develop and implement an individual student information system to track students who are referred and who receive social-emotional services, including monitoring what services students receive and determining the impact of these services.

- **School leaders should ensure that families whose first language is not English, receive communications in their native language.** Students and parents stated that notices and letters sent home with students are sometimes translated into Spanish, but not consistently. These materials are not translated into other languages. In addition, when calls are made to families regarding their children's attendance or academic progress, teachers and students reported that the calls are made in English. Recognizing the school telephone number, some parents and students stated that if they answer the phone in Spanish or another language, the caller often hangs up. As a result, parents are often not provided with important information about their children's progress or needs. District staff indicated translation services and resources are available to staff and families within the school and through the district, which could support reciprocal communication between families and the school. However, most staff and families reported that they needed more information about the translation resources.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **The principal will need to monitor the implementation of programs and initiatives to ensure their success.** The IIT found that most programs and initiatives need specific goals, benchmarks, or progress monitoring tools that include qualitative and quantitative data to measure the programs' impact throughout the course of the school year. School leadership acknowledged that there were a number of programs that were begun for which there was not systematic follow-up and, as a result, some projects that had merit were discontinued. Because there was no monitoring of these projects, some staff lost interest in them and stopped implementing them. The principal cited, for example, restorative circles, which had been started to address students' social-emotional needs and help students resolve conflicts. In the future, the principal should set specific goals for programs, with benchmarks that are adhered to, in order to monitor the fidelity of implementation.
- **The principal should assign duties to the leadership team and ensure that the team understands and consistently implements her expectations.** In each previous year, because of new assistant principals being hired each year, the principal noted that she has focused on building a new team with an effort to capitalize on the perceived strengths of the new assistant principals. The IIT learned that the school leaders need to conduct consistent instructional rounds or learning walks. Teachers reported that they need more consistent feedback when they are visited by different school leaders. The IIT reviewed feedback that had been provided to teachers by different school leaders. In most cases, the feedback was general and needed more specific strategies for improvement. In the future, the principal should consider moving toward a distributed leadership model, with a focus on calibrating what the leadership team will expect to see in the classroom, and how feedback will be provided, in an effort to improve teaching and learning.

Learning at the School

- **Teachers should provide students with more opportunities to engage in their own learning.** The IIT saw learning targets or objectives presented in different ways in different classrooms, or not present. During discussions with the IIT, students shared that they often need more support in understanding why they are learning what they are learning in class or how they will be able to use the information that they are learning. The IIT found that the learning targets supported student concerns, often directing them, for instance, to complete the vocabulary worksheet provided or to finish the math problems they had begun the previous day. Students indicated that they usually do not have opportunities to discuss what they were learning with their peers. The IIT observed few deep and sustained conversations among students regarding the content of what they were learning. There were a few classes that were exceptions. In one science class, for example, the learning target focused on students being able to write a simple neutralization reaction and identify salts and changes of electrolysis. The IIT observed that students in this class were engaged in doing this task in groups and discussing real-life examples where this might occur, such as in the human body or the garden.
- **Teachers will need to routinely provide feedback to students about how well they are doing in class.** In focus groups and conversations with the IIT, students reported that in many of their classes, they need more feedback from teachers regarding particular assignments or an assessment of how they are doing in class, overall. Students said that they usually have to initiate conversations with teachers to find out how well they are doing because there is a need for more conversations about their academic progress. Some students indicated that they were surprised to learn that they were failing or doing poorly in a class as the end of a marking period approached. Many teachers reported that they routinely provide students with corrections and a grade on their assignments. Other than this effort, the IIT found a need for more teacher feedback, such as strategies for improvement on student work they reviewed.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Teachers indicated that they would like more opportunities for classroom inter-visitations so that they could learn from their colleagues how best to implement particular pedagogical practices.** Teachers shared that while they had learned about practices in professional development (PD), it was often difficult to know how to implement the practice and what to expect until they had seen it in action. They noted, as an example, accountable talk, which has been a focus in the school during the current school year. A number of teachers said they were reluctant to move forward with trying this and would like to see how their colleagues are able to motivate their students to engage in accountable talk. They would also like to be able to debrief what they had seen with their colleagues.
- **Students told the IIT that they would like more after school opportunities, as well as more choices of courses they could take in school.** Students indicated that their favorite classes and activities were often those where they could learn on their own through doing the activity. They cited, for example, two programs: Empress Cadets, where students learn EMS skills in course work and gain real-life experience through working with EMTs, as well as the Youth Police Initiative, a program with the Yonkers Police department that focuses on role playing and community building.
- **Parents indicated that they would like earlier and more frequent communication from teachers if their children are struggling academically or behaviorally.** Some parents indicated that they had not heard from their child's teacher if their child was having academic or behavioral problems prior to parent teacher conferences.

- **Parents stated that teachers need to build stronger, trusting relationships with students so their children can feel safe and cared for.** They suggested that there should be opportunities for teachers to speak one-on-one with students about how they are doing academically, as well as in other non-academic, relationship-building topics.