Partnering to Develop and Retain Effective Teachers and Leaders

Case Study: District 9, South Bronx
New York City Department of Education’s Community School District 9, situated in the country’s poorest congressional district, serves 51 elementary and middle schools. This case study follows the successful partnership between a parent group, District 9, and New Teacher Center (NTC). When parents called for a comprehensive new teacher mentoring program to stem the tide of teachers leaving their schools, NTC and the district responded. A district-wide initiative was launched to help retain teachers by giving them the instructional supports they need to be effective and to ensure every student has a chance at success.

**THE URGENCY IN DISTRICT 9**

- A third of new teachers leave within five years
- Half of elementary and middle schools in District 9 are on state improvement lists
- In 2013, when more rigorous learning standards were implemented, nine out of ten District 9 students in grades 3–8 failed the English Language Arts exam
- 87% failed to meet the grade-level standard in math

**PARENT GROUP IDENTIFIES NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE MENTORING PROGRAM IN DISTRICT 9**

Teacher turnover in the South Bronx has human consequences that Esperanza Vazquez understands only too well. Her son had three teachers in less than a month in middle school. His test results at the end of sixth grade showed he was reading at a third-grade level.

Vazquez, a member of the New Settlement Parent Action Committee (PAC), knew many more of the 35,000 students of New York City’s Community School District 9 (D9) were affected by a revolving door of teachers, year after year, who didn’t stay long enough to become more effective or invested in the schools, the children, and the community.

She understood both the urgency and the human toll: “It will take a big struggle to change the classroom-to-prison pipeline,” Vazquez observed.

“There are real consequences for kids over time, emotionally and in terms of learning, of not having a committed, qualified teacher in the classroom,” said Emma Hulse, lead organizer for PAC. “Parents were tired of feeling their kids are experiments.”

When Mayor Bill de Blasio took office in January 2014, PAC presented him with a report titled “Persistent Educational Failure.” It described a system that consistently underserved its neediest students.

“We looked at the lack of progress in closing the achievement gap in District 9,” Hulse explained. “There was little to no progress in closing the gap in test scores and college readiness compared with the rest of the city. One thing we talked about in detail was the lack of progress in teacher retention. We saw high numbers of early career teachers and higher rates of teacher turnover, and an increasing number of principals who had very few years of instructional experience.”

One specific recommendation of the report was that New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) establish a comprehensive system for mentoring new teachers, one-third of whom leave within five years, according to city teachers union data.

“One of our biggest problems is (teacher) retention. Mentoring is one of the best solutions,” said parent Alonda Myers. “Sitting with an experienced teacher is nothing less than a blessing. It lessens the opportunity for the teacher to say, ‘I give up.’ We’ve been waiting a long time for this effort to build school communities.”

The report did not escape the notice of Thandi Center, New Teacher Center’s Director in New York City. She recognized in District 9 the very needs that NTC has addressed in districts across the nation for 20 years toward the commitment that every child, regardless of where they live or what their background, is taught by a highly effective teacher. Center and her team have partnered with NYCDOE schools and networks for four years, reaching more than 40,000 children through their work developing mentors, coaches and leaders who can skillfully advance teacher practice, cultivating more effective teachers who can reach every child and remain committed to teaching. She was exploring ways to leverage NTC’s model on behalf of schools and communities that need it most.
P.S. 42 Claremont has long enjoyed a reputation as a great school with great teachers. But when students were tested last year, only 8% met the rigorous new grade-level standards. “It was disheartening. It’s hard to get a good night’s sleep when we are responsible for students and adults reaching their fullest capacity,” said Principal Lucia Orduz-Castillo. “I see teachers working very hard, teachers who care about the kids, understand their needs in school and outside, and how that influences their ability to learn. I wondered what are we not doing? What should we be doing?”

This year, P.S. 42 Claremont has two instructional mentors. The principal says it’s a first step toward establishing a professional learning community that prioritizes student outcomes. She herself had a New Teacher Center-trained mentor as a first-year teacher in 2005. “Mentoring builds teachers who have the ability to lead,” she says.

Mentor Tierra Donaldson, a P.S. 42 Claremont special education teacher, co-plans lessons with her two assigned teachers, observes their instruction, and debriefs with them. Recently, she collected data on student engagement with third-grade teacher Irma Gonzalez.

“How do you think it went with the ‘turn and talk’?” Donaldson asks. Her observation data show “7 of 13 students were talking about non-related topics during the turn-and-talk.”

“I think I need to provide more practice and explicit modeling so it is more purposeful,” Gonzalez reflects.

“How would it look if you modeled it, then continue the guided practice in differentiated groups—let the higher students work independently while you continue modeling with the challenged students?” Donaldson probes. “Maybe you could assign partners to avoid off-task talking, wasted time, arguments about who goes first, and help make sure they understand it’s an academic conversation.”

Gonzalez scours the data once more, thinking about partnerships. “As a teacher I need to see all the possibilities of instruction.” They set next steps: continue co-planning instruction with an eye on timing, strategic partners, modeling turn-and-talk procedures.

“I’ll bring a timer,” offers Donaldson.

Donaldson mentored informally for several years before attending NTC’s Professional Learning Series. “The tools and protocols transformed my practice,” she says. “This work pushes teachers’ thinking about high-leverage practices to engage students. These are specific moves that translate to student impact.”

MENTOR TIERRA DONALDSON DEBRIEFS A CLASSROOM OBSERVATION WITH TEACHER IRMA GONZALEZ
Thandi came to an evening meeting in the Bronx to talk about the New Teacher Center,” Hulse recalls. That was the start of what she describes as a partnership of “thoughtful and coordinated advocacy.”

THE VISION: A PARTNERSHIP TO DEVELOP AND RETAIN TALENT

Center and her team crafted a proposal and engaged stakeholders at all levels of the NYCDOE, including central leadership, network leaders, principals, the superintendent and parent leaders. She worked with then-District 9 superintendent Dolores Esposito, representative principals, and PAC to envision and organize an initiative focused on three outcomes:

- Developing instructional mentors and school leaders who can better cultivate and retain quality teachers
- Reducing the number of teachers leaving D9 schools by giving new teachers the support they need to be successful and creating new roles for teachers ready to take leadership in the development of their colleagues
- Engaging parent leaders as key partners in assessing and driving school improvement

The goal of the partnership, Hulse said, is to “build a teaching corps deeply invested in the neighborhood and in improving schools in District 9, who see themselves as skilled practitioners who know how to work with students to improve outcomes, and also work with parents and community members to achieve those goals.”

Center believes that “NTC’s approach to developing school communities from within is essential to building and sustaining the capacity we need in communities like the South Bronx. By developing multiple stakeholders simultaneously in the same model, there is a common language and approach to teacher development and student learning that helps shift practice and culture school-wide.”

“The new administration really believes in this approach of developing educators, fostering teacher leadership, and respecting the knowledge and experience of educators,” Hulse said. “I think that’s why NTC’s approach resonated so powerfully with people in the Department of Education.”

“This has been a true collaboration of parents, teachers, administrators, superintendents, and I don’t think that’s seen very often,” said District 9 Superintendent Leticia Rodriguez-Rosario. “It shows the power of people sitting around the table crafting an action plan that is real, that is do-able, and all voices are heard. I’m seeing a new sense of hope and excitement around our work and empowerment at every level.”

A former school-based instructional coach before she became a principal, Rodriguez-Rosario believes in the power of highly developed and skilled mentors to improve teaching and teacher retention. She explains, “the best way to support teachers is to have credible peers supporting them. This is the most respectful way, most effective way, and most impactful way to support them so they stay and continue their professional growth.”

This unlikely coalition convinced the Department of Education to fund a pilot in 2014–2015. This year, NTC has partnered with 46 schools to put in place the comprehensive system of support that PAC leaders imagined. It focused on instilling in mentors and school leaders the same intensive approach to guiding teacher development, and putting structures and systems in place to empower a laser-like focus on student learning and quality teaching.

The program involved selecting and rigorously training 85 mentors to work with their colleagues to improve instructional practices and student outcomes. Principals
and Assistant Principals at those schools participate in their own professional development track to build their capacity as developers of teacher talent through observation, effective feedback, and coaching-based supervision.

“It’s helpful to us because we can use the same strategies our mentors use,” says Victoria Dickerson, Assistant Principal of K.A.P.P.A middle school. “(Leadership) work is so overwhelming. This is helping me.”

**MID-YEAR PROGRESS**

Here are some snapshots of the initiative at mid-year Spring 2015:

- PAC parent leaders planned and presented Mentor Forums about the importance of parent communication and cultural competency. The parent presenters spoke in Spanish, with English translation provided through headsets. The reversal slipped mentors into the shoes of District 9 parents and students who speak 192 languages and daily navigate the language barrier. “When there is a good relationship between parents and teachers, children do better,” grandmother Ana Maria Garcia told the mentors. “We want you to see us as allies. We want to work with you.”

- Principals reported that mentoring strategies were helping them build professional learning communities that prioritize student learning. Principal Edgar Lin of M.S. 22 sees that “my first-year teachers have much more accelerated growth this year than last year. Mentoring provides a layer of support. It helped put beginning teachers at ease with the work. The literature suggests that establishing a professional learning community takes six years. I think we will see progress in three years.” Principal Daniel Russo of P.S. 294 sees mentoring as a way to retain strong teachers at his school by offering a leadership role and a career “next step.”

- First year teacher Sonya Flannory says she would have left her school by Christmas if she hadn’t had a mentor. Instead, in February, she was planning things she will do differently in her second year. Her mentor “provided feedback I needed to hear in order to grow. Otherwise I would have quit.”

- Beyond teacher retention, principals are seeing growth in teaching practice. “We had experienced teachers who didn’t have the strong pedagogy skills needed to push student thinking,” said Lucia Orduz-Castillo, principal at P.S. 42. One veteran teacher whose lesson plan was written on a Post-It early in the year received ongoing support to plan differentiated instruction. Another veteran teacher was coached around making lessons more challenging for students.

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- 86% are eligible for free lunch (19% higher than citywide)
- One in four is an English Language Learner (compared to 15% of students citywide)
- 16% receive Special Education services
- 10% of District 9 students live in temporary housing

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M.S. 22 Jordan L. Mott Middle School in the South Bronx has had 13 principals in the past 23 years. Two-thirds of the teachers have less than five years experience; half have less than three years.

Principal Edgar Lin, two years into the job, hopes to be the leader who ushers in a new era of stability and student achievement. In 2014–15, he selected two experienced teachers to be full-time mentors. Mentors attend New Teacher Center professional development for instructional mentors; Lin attends NTC sessions for school leaders.

“As administrators, the (learning) shifted the way we give feedback. We ask, ‘What do you think your next steps are?’ There’s also a layer of accountability for leaders to support next steps and learning. ‘How can I support you to make that happen?’”

Mentor Tyson Strang uses the same protocol in this work with teachers. Last winter, his work with teacher Nickolas Sakellariou focused on instructional strategies, student engagement, teacher movement in the classroom, and questioning techniques.

During a history lesson about the Three-Fifths Compromise, students called out “that’s stupid,” and “that’s racist.” They got it. Students then worked with partners as Sakellariou circulated. Afterward, Strang and the teacher debriefed:

“How do you think the lesson went today?”

“It could’ve gone better,” Sakellariou admits. “I don’t feel they got it as well as the other classes.”

“How did you know?”

“The conversation was better in the other classes.”

“What made the conversation better?”

“More students participated.”

“One of the ways I’ve seen to increase participation is to allow time to think about the answer before they share out.”

“I counted to 10. I’m working on my ‘wait time’.”

“Another way is to have them write, and tell them they will have an opportunity to share what they’ve written with a partner.”

“Turn-and-talk.”

“Right. Let’s talk about managing behavior. You’re moving around the classroom. What about Jennifer?”

“When I hear ‘Mr.—I need your help’ I need to get to her.”

“Your class is the only one she does anything in. When you save her, you save 20 minutes of learning time for everyone.”

Sakellariou smiles at that news. “Sometimes I feel like an ER doctor. Four people come in, two shot, two stabbed. Everyone needs me right now. Hopefully there will be a day when they are self-functioning.”

“Let’s talk about the ‘how.’ What might you do tomorrow that would be a first step?”

The most important part of his job, Strang says, is “being in classrooms having hard conversations about how students learn best.”

MENTOR TYSON STRANG IN FRONT OF M.S. 22 JORDAN L. MOTT MIDDLE SCHOOL.

“As administrators, the learning shifted the way we give feedback.”
—Principal Edgar Lin
Mentors were navigating the tensions of assuming their new role. “Mentors need a second stage [of development] to follow up, provide consistency, and deepen the learning so it becomes a sustained part of the school,” said mentor Fatima Jernigan, a mentor at J.H.S. 145. “One year of training is not mastery.”

Hopeful from early signs of impact in schools, participating principals and mentors wish not only to sustain the initiative, but deepen it. The second year of the program would expand school-based supports for mentors and leaders, providing more touchpoints for quality implementation.

A COMMITMENT TO TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS AND RETENTION

The program is tracking teacher retention, teacher performance, and student learning data to assess the impact of the District 9-NTC Instructional Mentoring and School Leadership Development Initiative, and to study the progress of participating schools over time.

All parties realize that growth takes time. “We’re not going to see every teacher amazing at the end of this year,” Hulse acknowledges. “Hopefully, parents will see the same (teachers’) faces in the fall. What we have started building is a really thoughtful collaboration around supporting teachers, both veteran and beginning, and thoughtful partnerships between educators and parents. This initiative has brought people together around something concrete to benefit educators and families, and that’s the beginning of something powerful and important. It is a model of how we can build relationships between different stakeholders to improve student achievement and what that can mean long-term.”

“District 9 has been characterized by instability over many years,” said Bronx Writing Academy Principal Kamar Samuels. “A sustained commitment is needed.”

Vazquez continues to be part of that commitment. She worked with her son’s teacher to get the boy into a tutoring program. Through hard work, he was able to bring his reading skills up to grade level, though he needed additional support when he entered college. He is still in college and plans to go into the medical field. Vazquez’s focus has broadened to improving outcomes for all District 9 students.

“My dream is that one day, Bronx education will be good and all of our students will go to college, and that this (mentoring program) is not just a pilot, but permanent, not change for a little bit of time for a few students, but change for all our children,” she says. “This works inspires me. Every day I’m more committed.”

Rodriguez-Rosario also has hopes and goals. “If we can get teachers to understand the impact they have, that their work is great work, that it is so important on a daily basis, that it impacts lives, that’s my goal,” she said. “For my parents, I hope that by being part of this work, part of the growth of teachers and their children, that they have the opportunity to grow and take on leadership roles.”

KEY COMPONENTS OF NTC’S WORK WITH DISTRICT 9

- NTC’s Professional Learning Series provides school-based mentors with skills and tools to cultivate new teacher development and effectiveness. Mentors participate in eight days of professional development and four Mentor Forums (professional learning communities).
- The School Leadership Development Series advances the skills of principals and assistant principals in the areas of effective observation and feedback cycles, shaping productive and professional school cultures, and coaching-based supervision. School leaders participate in four full days of professional development.
- Ongoing program implementation support to school partners, including site-based coaching visits from NTC staff in 2015–2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie Baldacci is an instructional designer for New Teacher Center, a former Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teacher and has mentored over 100 beginning teachers through NTC’s work with CPS. She is author of Inside Mrs. B’s Classroom: Courage, Hope and Learning on Chicago’s South Side.
ABOUT NEW TEACHER CENTER

New Teacher Center (NTC) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to improving student learning by guiding a new generation of educators. Founded by teachers in 1998, NTC works in conjunction with school districts, state policymakers and educators across the country to increase the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders at all levels. These programs are built upon research-based principles for teacher onboarding, mentoring and ongoing coaching, and are proven to accelerate teacher effectiveness, reduce teacher churn and improve student achievement. NTC has made it their mission to overcome challenges students and teachers face by providing all educators with the support and resources necessary to succeed from their first day to their last.

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