LEADERSHIP AND THE NEW YEAR: WELCOMING CHANGE AND TELLING OUR STORIES

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Happy New Year, leaders! As we are well into 2022 I have had time to reflect on our current events while still finding joy in welcoming a new season. The start of the new year led me to ask myself what is required to lead and support my team and our system through ongoing change and, at times, adversity? I arrived at the necessity of compassion and what it means to embrace and welcome change even in the most challenging times. I believe that one of the ways I can best support my team is demonstrating compassion and modeling what it means to honor change and welcome the possibilities that come with it. To support this, my team and I have read An Agile Approach to Change Management and Connect with Empathy, But Lead with Compassion to support our moving forward and continuing to ground our learning in professional literature.

As a native New Yorker and proud leader within the largest school system in America, I am excited to welcome the possibilities that come with having a new mayor, Mr. Eric Adams, a new Chancellor, Mr. David Banks, and a new Deputy Chancellor of School Leadership, Dr. Desmond Blackburn.
We look forward to your feedback on this issue which is focused on leadership from central to the schoolhouse as well as welcoming the new leaders of our city and system. Leading a city and public school system of this magnitude is no small undertaking. It will take all of us, especially those committed to community excellence and equity, with focus on the right drivers to lead our students to sustainable and bright futures where they can thrive.

Change is constant, may we all work collectively and cohesively to continue strengthening our leadership muscles while finding and applying new tools that support us in being agile, adaptable, flexible, and focused on supporting our leaders in being the best possible educational practitioners for our students. Welcome to 2022 leaders, and a warm welcome Mayor Adams and Chancellor Banks!

Dr. Rahesha Amon
Senior Executive Director, Office of Leadership, Professional Learning, and Continuous Improvement (LEAD)

Leadership, Policy, and Practice: Consultation with Union Partners
News you can use by Randy Asher

Consultation is a formal block of time set aside on routine intervals for labor management discussions. If implemented, there are some best practices that will optimize the use of the time to positively impact the community.

At the school level, the formal consultation between the principal and the UFT is a contractual vehicle that provides chapter members an opportunity to voice concerns. The chapter should be sending an agenda, preferably in advance, as the foundation for the discussion. Consultation is ideally, a true collaborative partnership and a chance for the principal to listen and get a clear understanding of the members’ issues and concerns. Principals are not required to provide detailed answers on the spot; therefore, they should spend the time listening to the concerns raised, take notes, delve deeper into topics between meetings, and follow up after the meeting with well-prepared and researched responses. Principals may also bring other members of the school community to the meeting and should do so, especially if someone with expertise around a specific agenda item would help advance the discussion. As needed, principals should not hesitate to engage additional resources, including support from the operational teams at the Borough Citywide Offices (BCO’s) to address concerns raised.

At the district level, the formal consultation between the superintendent and the district representatives of our labor partners are contractual vehicles that provide forums for escalating issues. These may be issues that were not or cannot be resolved at the school level, or they may be issues that are of a more systemic
nature. The best practices cited above hold true for district consultations as well. In addition, the Office of Labor Policy can provide support to superintendents with preparing for district consultations. They can provide talking points for specific agenda items, direct them to relevant centrally issued communications, and flag which items are not appropriate for discussion at the district level and should be escalated for discussion at Chancellor’s Consultation.

While the consultation is a formal structure, it is important to note that many of the issues that may come to consultation can also be resolved informally between meetings or at other standing committees that may exist at the school or district level. Each school and district has unique relationships with their local union partners, and each might have different approaches to resolving issues. Regardless, the goal of consultation is to work in collaboration with our union partners to find the best ways to serve our students, and the best practices outlined here can support that goal.

**LEAD Learning**

*Leading for Community Excellence, Equity, and Achievement!*

Prior to the winter break, LEAD’s Michelle Herbowy facilitated LEAD’s Assistant Principal Pioneers (AP Pioneers), a professional learning community (PLC) composed of APs approaching tenure designed to support APs approaching tenure in telling the stories of the impact of their leaders in preparation for tenure recommendation. The gathering of approximately 75 APs also included opportunities for APs to organize their work around their theories of action for school improvement and equity-centered outcomes. In January, a cross-divisional collaboration with Sonya Hooks of the Office of Equity and Access and LEAD’s Robin Pitts served to launch the Principal Equity Fellowship. The fellowship is designed to support principals in developing a deeper understanding of equity-centered leadership and using an equity lens in principal practice. Over 30 principals were in attendance, and had the opportunity to share their equity journey and connect with colleagues. Robin also hosts LEAD’s MPPR Office Hours. LEAD’s Stacey Walsh facilitated the January Superintendent Advisory Meeting, working with superintendents who collaborated and identified superintendent learning/support needs while engaging in a mid-year pulse check. Stacey also continued the Superintendent Onboarding and Orientation program while offering ongoing Superintendent Support and Evaluation System (SSES) Office Hours. As January came to a close, Dr. Lulu Palmer facilitated a whole group meeting with LEAD’s Inspired Leaders, a group designed to provide mentorship and support to assistant principals who aspire to be principals by matching them with a mentor principal. When recapping the meeting, LEAD’s Rex Bobbish shared, “The enthusiasm of currently serving principals to mentor assistant principals was palpable. Experienced principals supported assistant principals in preparing for what their first
90 days of school leadership could look like to start their leadership in the strongest way possible. Principals work with assistant principals 1:1 virtually and through school visits.” February ushered in the launch of two of LEAD’s bedrock programs; the Leadership Book Club for Principals, now in its second year, was facilitated by Robin Pitts with a Master Class by Queens South Executive Superintendent, Dr. Mauricière de Govia, and the third cohort of the Equity and Excellence EdPacesetters, facilitated by Stacey Walsh with Marcel Deans engaging and supporting this cohort from the lens of equity centered leadership in Borough Leadership Councils. The convening also featured former EdPacesetter, Dr. Sean Davenport (cohort I), who led a brief opening on the importance of leadership development and deputy superintendent of citywide transfer high schools, John Sullivan (cohort II), who shared reflections on his EdPacesetter experiences. And in saving the best for last, Chancellor David Banks was able to greet, welcome, and offer an inspirational message to New Principals at the LEAD New Principal meeting just prior to sending school-based staff off for mid-winter break.

All of LEAD’s offerings align with the LEAD Focus areas:
Focus Area I: Onboarding and Leadership Development
Focus Area II: Support and Retention
Focus Area III: Supervision and Evaluation

LEAD Professional Learning Calendars

LEAD is excited to share its professional learning opportunities with our readers. Executive superintendents, superintendents, and deputy superintendents are invited to attend MPPR office-hour sessions on Thursdays now through May 2022. During this time, attendees will receive ongoing support and guidance in understanding and aligning leadership practices using the Multidimensional Principal Performance Rubric (MPPR) tool. Interested participants may sign-up for these 30-minute optional sessions up until the day of each event by emailing Robin Pitts (RPitts@schools.nyc.gov). In addition, principals are invited to attend their respective MPPR office-hour sessions. Links to MPPR office hours can be found within the calendar below and on LEAD social media.

Additionally, LEAD invites superintendents to attend Superintendent Support and Evaluation System (SSES) office-hour sessions in March facilitated by Stacey Walsh in collaboration with and led by the Office of Family and Community Empowerment (FACE). Dates have been shared with superintendents and appear on the LEAD calendar along with additional and upcoming office-hour opportunities.

All other program offerings included on the calendar(s) below are intended for assistant principals and LEAD alumni. LEAD program leaders will send invitations directly to the above talent group for each respective series so participants can register
through UpLearning and receive the link for the session. If BCO or superintendent team members would like to request to join any of the series listed below or for further information, please contact LeadershipPathways@schools.nyc.gov.

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4 Actions Transformational Leaders Take
by David Lancefield and Christian Rangen

Leading transformational change involves helping the organization transcend its current positioning, performance, and capabilities. This requires visionary thinking, the ability to tackle complex problems (like overcoming organizational inertia), and the courage to make difficult choices (like when to shut down or sell off assets that were once considered “core”). Leaders must think deeply and manage their emotions in intense situations, all while stakeholders expect to see results. Continue reading here.

Why Every Executive Should Be Focusing on Culture Change Now
by Rose Hollister, Kathryn Tecosky, Michael Watkins, and Cindy Wolpert

The change management process had not embedded the leadership principles and supporting behaviors into the performance management and reward systems that would reinforce them. Recognizing that this was the issue, the leadership team launched a concerted effort to embed the new culture into goal-setting and people processes. Doing so helped managers understand why and how they needed to change their focus and priorities and the consequences of not doing so. By aligning people processes with the desired culture, managers had incentives to behave differently, hire differently, and develop new competencies. Continue reading here.

Leading Behind the Scenes
An interview with Senior Executive Director of Transportation, Mr. Glenn Risbrook

Please share your “why” and your journey to your current role; what inspires you to do what you do.

I began my career in the DOE in the Office of Pupil Transportation as a router, which involves scheduling and assigning students to yellow busing. My past managerial experience informs how I view work; this experience helped me identify ways to improve the services we were delivering to our students and families. From my position as a router, some of my ideas and suggestions were not always considered and at times I felt they were not welcomed. That inspired me to seek higher positions within the organization so I could be in a better place to create change.

What makes school transportation unique in New York City?
Many of our students travel across borough lines. This is a unique challenge in New York City as these students customarily travel across bridges and through tunnels on their way to school. This causes a susceptibility to traffic and longer commutes. At times, direct routes across borough lines require buses to traverse outside city limits to drop students to school. New York City uniquely has an outsourced workforce that provides yellow bus services to 150,000+ students who use the services daily. This has its own challenges.

**Where were you born and raised and how did you arrive in the NYC DOE?**

I was born in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn and raised in Jamaica, Queens where I attended NYC public schools in District 27. I began my professional journey in transportation in 1986 as a Ticket Agent for American Airlines. During my 26 years with American Airlines, I moved up through the company and took on several managerial roles, most of which were customer-facing. Here, I developed critical-thinking skills and the ability to provide customer solutions in real time as well as operational planning on a national and global scale. After leaving American Airlines, I continued working in transportation management throughout NYC.

**State one thing that it is the most important thing for the community-at-large, all inclusive of our citywide colleagues, to understand about your work and school transportation.**

My goal and what drives and gives me satisfaction is making sure that student transportation is allocated equitably to our traditionally underserved student populations. All students no matter where they reside, economic status or challenges, are entitled to services provided by the Office of Student Transportation and the City of New York equitably without favor or bias.

*Glenn Risbrook has been with the NYC DOE for 6 years and currently serves as the Senior Executive Director of Transportation.*
Leaders on the Move

Denise D’Anna

The Office of Leadership, Professional Learning, and Continuous Improvement (LEAD) is taking a moment to celebrate and offer congratulations to our talented leaders on the move. This issue, we offer congratulations to Dr. Denise D’Anna and Reginald Higgins.

D’Anna joined Community School District 31 as deputy superintendent under the leadership of superintendent Dr. Marion Wilson. D’Anna most recently served as a D75 borough liaison and has served in New York City Public Schools for 22 years.

Reginald Higgins

Higgins joined Community School District 2 as deputy superintendent under the leadership of superintendent and EdPacesetter alum Kelly McGuire. Higgins most recently served as the principal of the Ralph Bunche School (05M125) and has served the children of New York City Public Schools for 20 years.

Please join us in sharing celebratory greetings with Dr. Denise D’Anna and Mr. Reginald Higgins.
Principal Leadership in Action: School Building Leadership, Culture, and Practice

Featuring Principals: Michael Johnson, Brendan Mims, and Greer Phillips

Photography and Words by: UNA KARIIM A. CROSS
Principal Leadership in Action

SCHOOL CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Principals are the core talent supported by the Office of Leadership, Professional Learning and Continuous Improvement (LEAD). The New Year/Principal Leadership in Action inaugural issue serves to spotlight and lift the work of some of our system's most talented leaders.

From Left: Brendan T. Mims, Greer Phillips, and Michael Johnson
PS161K

Featured Team:
Mr. Michael Johnson, Principal
Mrs. Michelle Williams, Assistant Principal
Ms. Verónica Vega, First Grade Teacher
Ms. Melinda Flecha, First Grade Teacher
Good teams become great ones when the members trust each other enough to surrender the me for the we.

-Phil Jackson

As I approached PS161K, affectionately known as “The Crown” on an unusually rainy January morning, I spotted principal Michael Johnson, clad in a dark three-quarter length raincoat and matching mask with the school’s logo. He was handing out fist-bumps and salutations while collecting [forms]. Despite the fact that students were bundled from head to toe and also sporting masks, he greeted each one by name. “It is important for me to be outside every morning; rain, snow, or cold,” shared Johnson. “Most of the time a principal knows a child’s name because that child is in trouble.” And that was clearly not the case at “The Crown”.

Upon entering the building, young people are seen standing with their backpacks and coats, engaged in a group recitation of “This is the Way!” by educator Linda Michelle Baron. Principal Johnson leads grades 3-5 as Assistant Principal Michelle Williams leads grades K-2 through the morning affirmation, and warmth and regard fills each room.

Over the course of the day, I was inspired by the clear and present instructional leadership and student engagement in each classroom we entered. A student was at the front of the class during a guided practice of “hear it, say it, spell it” when I entered the classroom of first grade teachers, Ms. Flecha and Ms. Vega. Upon being introduced as a guest for the day, a collective group of students asked “Ms. Cross, how are you feeling today?” Asking how one may be feeling at the start of each class is a part of the social emotional practice incorporated into the class period.

When teachers were able to speak with me, they volunteered information around their practice, how they are being developed, and the overall culture of the school. First grade co-teachers Ms. Flecha and Ms. Vega spoke about how they use common planning every day to prepare lessons, discuss practice and the needs of students. “We work on scaffolding and providing things to the children that they need to succeed”, remarked Ms. Flecha.
The school is calm yet energized. Teachers are present in hallways offering one-on-one and small group support to students. The interior design and decor is enhanced by artist Jason Costina, who used art to bolster the school’s look and feel. The school’s core values are everywhere; on the walls, on the floor, and in symbols on their masks. Most importantly, the core values are in the hearts of the staff as they see them modeled by the school leaders. “They are present and they show up. Mrs. Williams is all around the school; in class, in the cafeteria, unpacking boxes”, shared Ms. Reno, a second grade teacher. “This is definitely a place I am going to retire,” she concluded.

In our time in the hallways and between class visits we discussed life at “The Crown” in the vein of how it started, how it’s going. Principal Johnson and Assistant Principal Williams reminisce on the number of years they have been working together. Speaking fondly of their professional relationship, AP Williams shares that the staff call Principal Johnson “soft shoes” because he is always walking around the building and entering classrooms. They speak of the intentionality behind scheduling common preps and share about ongoing events that may finally resume as Covid restrictions ease, such as the school carnival, end of year performances, and big end of year holiday celebrations where the staff ensure that all students are fed and Principal Johnson’s father bakes a cake. Yet the most heart-warming of all is the day that fathers walk their children to school and Mr. Johnson’s father walks him to school.

I would like to extend a thank you to Assistant Principal Michelle Williams, Ms. Flecha, Ms. Vega, Ms. Reno, Mr. Varas, Ms. Lewis-Knight, and the entire PS161K school community for their willingness to share which facilitated my learning about instructional practice, leadership capacity building, and school culture.

The goodness instilled in Mr. Johnson by his parents and growing up in the community is something he pays forward to his staff. “I never want my staff to feel that I don’t appreciate them. We have work to do, but I am proud of where we have come from and where we are going. I always say, “I am the proud principal of PS161”.

**Principal Johnson’s principal practice in his own words:**
LEAD: Briefly describe your school “story”, how it started, how it’s going.

Principal Michael Johnson: When I started in 2011 the first thing I had to do was change the culture. There were good things happening in pockets, but there was no structure. Things were being done in isolation and there was no teacher collaboration. Student discipline was also lacking. I had to change the mindset of the staff and the entire school community. We put structures in place for teachers to collaborate and share ideas. We did a lot of team building events, created teacher teams, developed a professional development plan by and for the teachers.

We implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to deal with student discipline. Spirit Day was and is currently held once a month to celebrate the positive things happening in the school. Over time, the culture started shifting. Student discipline was restored and teachers were allowed to teach.

LEAD: Please share one strategy that you use to cultivate talent and promote leadership among staff and students within your school.

MJ: I cultivate talent and promote leadership by empowering students and staff. I give them a voice and a seat at the table to have input in school-wide decisions. We have a Student Government and a Student Council. Students have a say in what they would like for lunch and the types of programs they would like to see in the school. In addition to the School Leadership Team, I also have staff and parents that sit on teams to discuss curriculum. I have a hiring committee that staff, students, and parents sit on so they can have input into new staff that we hire. Our teacher teams are teacher driven and teacher-led. Natural leadership abilities always surface when empowered. It’s important to identify future leaders and have a succession plan to carry out the vision.

LEAD: There’s a popular saying “teamwork makes the dreamwork”; describe one example of teamwork in action or how teamwork is modeled in your school.

MJ: There’s an African proverb that says “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Everything we do in the school is through teamwork. I’m especially proud of our teacher teams. When I first arrived, when the teachers did meet, they met to talk about things such as what trips they were going to plan together. They now have a weekly double planning time that is grounded in the work. They analyze and disaggregate assessment data and follow “Looking at Student Work”
protocols. Teachers meet across the grades as well as vertically. The result has been an increase in efficacy of teacher practice and instruction that is more targeted to students’ needs.

**LEAD:** Describe one powerful tool or practice that you employed to support your students, staff, school community and self in order to remain focused on your school culture and mission in challenging times.

**MJ:** Our morning routines. Every morning, rain or shine, I stand outside to greet my students as they enter the building. The first experience of every day that I want my students to have is a smiling face and a fist bump welcoming them to school and letting them know it’s going to be a great day. Once inside, we do a daily morning affirmation and discuss the school’s core values of Pride, Resilience, Integrity, Determination, and Excellence- P.R.I.D.E. Our teachers do social emotional activities in the classrooms throughout the day. We strive for the culture to be a warm, safe, inviting environment where the students want to be.

**LEAD:** Where do you excel and how would you like to expand relative to Chancellor Banks’ vision for reimagining the school experience?

**MJ:** When I think back to my Elementary School experience, I think of a place where I enjoyed going because there were people who cared about me and I had fun. Students need to know that their teachers care about them, have their best interest at heart, and want to see them succeed. Providing a positive, encouraging, accepting place will encourage a student to try their best.

We also need to make learning fun for students. The arts should be something that is embedded into the regular curriculum. It shouldn’t be something that is done only if we have extra money. We also need to take advantage of the world around us because the world truly is a classroom. With all the cultural resources and technology at our fingertips, the experiential learning that can take place is beyond limits.

Principal Michael Johnson has served New York City Public School Children for the past 29 years. He was born and raised in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. When sharing his “why” he states, “Education did not start out as my career path. Once I started as a substitute teacher, which was supposed to be
temporary, I realized this is where I’m supposed to be. A role model that our Black and Brown children can look up to”. He has served as the principal of PS 161K since 2011.
The Magnet School for STEAM Exploration and Experiential Learning

Featuring:
Brendan T. Mims, Founding Principal
MAGNET SCHOOL FOR STEAM

Principal Brendan Mims  In His Own Words

LEAD: What is your “why” relative to your choice to pursue education as a career and become a principal?

Principal Brendan Mims: I chose to pursue education as a career and to become a principal because I believe in community, advocacy and that all students can learn at high levels regardless of their socio-economic status. Growing up in Brooklyn, I had childhood friends that did not have access to schools with high quality teaching and learning. I firmly believe in effective teaching in every school for every student.

LEAD: Please describe your school culture and the steps you have taken to prioritize student health and wellness.

BM: The culture at MS 358, The Magnet School for STEAM Exploration and Experiential Learning, is anchored in our core values of F.I.R.E. - fellowship, integrity, resilience and excellence. The culture promotes and rewards both students and adults for being “on F.I.R.E.”, which stands for demonstrating core values. To prioritize student health and wellness, we have reimagined our approach to teaching learning, and have embedded social-emotional learning opportunities strategically throughout the instructional program. Our students engage in wellness checks, participate in brain breaks, experience small group support sessions, use the “Mood Meter " for common language with feelings and emotions, and take pride in their school and learning. We celebrate student successes weekly through our “Phoenix Houses" and quarterly at our marking period assemblies. When students are recognized and celebrated, they have a higher propensity to learn at optimal levels.
**LEAD:** Please share your approach to adult learning/professional learning and how you have worked to build capacity and support your team in order for them to best be in service to children.

**BM:** My approach is aligned with researched based practices by Dr. Elie Drago-Severson. I have designed professional learning opportunities for my team to grow in their content areas as well as with teacher leadership roles to support MS 358 with being a self-sufficient school. I have used teacher teams and collegial inquiry opportunities for my staff to develop and sustain interdependence, while we continuously pursue best practices to increase student achievement. I use mentorship and leadership roles as tools to build teacher capacity. This is done in order for teaching and learning to be seen through varied perspectives, to have a higher impact on students, families, and colleagues.

**LEAD:** What steps do you take to “win the day” as a principal?

**BM:** I have five steps that I take to “win the day”. Step one - visit multiple classrooms to enjoy the art of teaching. Step two - organically interact with students to better understand their experiences and level of joy. Step three - engage in discourse with teachers that will support me with becoming a better school leader, while simultaneously adding value to their learning. Step four - find a highlight of the day that gives me the opportunity to laugh or smile. Last but not least, step five - eat properly and stay hydrated. At times, I have to set an alarm on my phone to remind me to do these things.

**LEAD:** Describe a leadership practice that you actively employ to elevate your team and keep everyone focused on student health, wellness, and achievement.

**BM:** One leadership practice that I actively employ to elevate my team and to keep everyone focused on student health, wellness and achievement is creating shared understandings and using common language. As a founding principal, I initially understood that all teachers hired at MS 358 would have different interpretations of commonly used terms in education such as differentiation, assessment, and social-emotional learning. The practice of unpacking these high-leverage terms and collaboratively defining what they look like at MS 358 has supported us with successfully remaining focused on student health, wellness and achievement. The time invested to create shared understandings has always yielded huge returns with clarity and transparency.

**LEAD:** Chancellor Banks shared his vision for student achievement with New York City Public School leaders in January. One of those was “Scale, sustain and restore what works”, how does that resonate relative to the work you are doing?
BM: “Scale, sustain and restore what works” is something that we do really well at MS 358. When implementing school-wide initiatives I believe in scaling up and learning with a small sample group first prior to rolling it out school-wide. This approach allows me to create surveys, have focus groups, analyze data, and receive feedback from students, staff and parents to make adjustments prior to full implementation. As a founding principal, this approach has allowed my school to sustain initiatives that had positive impacts on teaching and learning while simultaneously engaging all stakeholders in the process. Initiatives such as “Looking at Student Work” protocols, learning walks, SEL courses, and data team meetings all started as pilot programs and were scaled across the school. Having the vision to scale, sustain, and restore what works has accelerated student achievement and sustained our culture for teaching and learning at MS 358.

Principal Brendan Mims is the founding principal of Middle School 358 in Jamaica, Queens. He was born and raised in Crown Heights and has been the principal of MS 358 since 2015. Principal Mims shared photos from MS 358.
Featured Team:
Ms. Greer Phillips, Principal
Ms. Cindy Valentin, Assistant Principal
Ms. Lia Sacks, Teacher
Mr. Joel Ochoa, Data and Library Specialist
"Education is a gift; embrace it with diligence, own the challenges and savor the successes."

-Dr. Greer Phillips

The art of storytelling lay within the speaker's ability to tell a story. Masterful storytelling comes from one’s ability to truly tell his or her own story. I found this to be true when speaking with Dr. Greer V. Phillips and her staff on the day of my visit to PS M079, The Horan school, a D75 school located in East Harlem. Each story painted a picture of the interconnectedness of leadership, community building, and working in concert for and on behalf of the youth of New York City Public Schools.

The warmth of the massive building began with being greeted by school safety and with every student and staff member I encountered prior to entering Principal Phillips’s office. Almost immediately upon entering Principal Phillips’s office, she began walking me through her stories of leading through and beyond a pandemic. She spoke of the heaviness of the pandemic and what she, her staff, and students were experiencing and she quickly moved to discussing practices that centered levity and joy. “In the midst of a crisis, you have people looking to you for guidance,” shared Phillips. Every story and emotion was palpable, as was Phillips’s commitment to persevere and support her staff in doing the same. Her words and recollection of those dark times, from March 2020 forward, held something greater than the now overused “resilience”; her words and actions embodied fortitude.

To support her staff and students in moving through the darkest of times, she implemented the “Breakfast with the Principal” Zoom meetings - each starting with a breathing exercise which ultimately fostered a space for people to be vulnerable. “We created a space where people could talk about their feelings and I knew I needed to support the staff who were out there every day supporting our students and families,” stated Phillips. Shortly thereafter, the staff launched a Friday Zoom dance party for students which “allowed students to see each other in the midst of dealing with so much loss”.

![Image 1](image1.jpg)

![Image 2](image2.jpg)
As I listened, I quickly snuck glances around her office as I am ever curious, in general, and am especially interested in how principals and other leaders decorate their office spaces. Dr. Phillips's office decor was minimalist with clean lines and print rich. My eyes landed on the school's mission and vision located to the right of her desk and I later spotted a poster of a poem, “Dream in Color” that I would later notice that Dr. Phillips authored.

Principal Phillips’s story is one of aspiration, excellence, and mentorship. She began, similar to Principal Johnson, and myself, as a substitute teacher. In a classroom full of energized teenagers finding and testing out their identities, “I commanded attention by getting to know the students”, shared Phillips. From there, she became a New York City Teaching Fellow followed by continued leadership centered learning and degrees with Bank Street and the Cahn Fellows.

She spoke fondly of the people and communities that fostered her development, from principal and CUNY professor Yvrose Pierre to CSA vice-president Henry Rubio, and how each either guided and/or encouraged her to grow beyond the classroom to becoming a school leader. Later, and over the course of the day, I would hear stories from her staff and Assistant Principal Cindy Valentin who runs the on-site, New Teacher Academy, and a host of other teachers, all of whom would speak of the culture of the school and the ways that Principal Phillips has empowered each of them to lead.

Over the course of the day, and similar to my time at PS M079, I met several students and staff. Each speaking of their instructional practice and of Principal Phillips action steps to empower each of them in their roles while supporting them in growing beyond.

The sweat equity and support were apparent from the design of the school store, to the redesign and full makeover of a classroom but the through line of all the stories I heard during my time at M079 and the one that most captured the spirit of leadership, support, and empowerment were said by Assistant Principal Valentin when speaking of the leadership capacity support that staff at M079 receive, “Wherever you go, you should be able to shine and hold your own. People here are open and invested in the community. It’s about celebrating skill sets and what we each bring to the table, and everyone gets invited to the table”.
I would like to extend a thank you to Ms. Lia Sacks, Mr. Joel Ochoa, Ms. Michelle, Assistant Principals Del Negro and Valentin, Mr. Ramon Perdomo, student Destiny who represented the student voice of the school, and the entire M079 school community for their willingness to share which facilitated my learning about instructional practice, leadership capacity building, and school culture.

**Dr. Phillips’s principal practice in her own words:**

**LEAD: Briefly describe your school “story”, how it started, how it’s going.**

**Principal Greer Phillips:** The Horan School/P79M story is grounded in our vision and mission. We aim to create equitable, inclusive opportunities for all students and stakeholders in a safe and supportive environment. We seek to transform our teaching and learning by continuously reflecting on data to refine and sustain effective practices in tandem with identifying our academic gaps. Coherence across a milieu of learning is cultivated when engagement in focused cycles of inquiry on specific aspects of the work is encouraged amongst stakeholders (Fullan, 2016). Our practice is dedicated to students who are alternately assessed. Every decision is intentional and grounded in qualitative and quantitative data to support improved outcomes for our learners.

**LEAD: Please share one strategy that you use to cultivate talent and promote leadership among staff and students within your school.**

**GP:** Talent [development] and distributive leadership are two hallmarks of our practice. They are cultivated by consistently providing opportunities for staff to unearth new aspects of learning and support their interests while working toward a shared purpose. We purposefully ask about their interests and skills beyond pedagogy when interviewing prospective employees. Furthermore, I encourage staff to seek opportunities to evolve their understanding of instruction and leadership. Effective leaders strive to cultivate future leaders. Several former and current staff graduated with leadership degrees from Bank Street College of Education through my encouragement and support.

**LEAD: There’s a popular saying “teamwork makes the dreamwork”; describe one example of teamwork in action or how teamwork is modeled in your school.**
**GP:** Teamwork is pivotal in all aspects of our practice. For instance, most of our new hires are part of the New York City Teaching Fellows or Teaching Collaborative Programs. To that end, there are gaps in their understanding of the work. We decided five years ago to create a New Teacher Academy to support our first and second-year teachers based on data culled from observations, surveys, and conversations. Our professional development sessions are held weekly after the school day, and staff is compensated for participating. Each session is facilitated by a member of our community with the skill set specific to the content of the learning opportunity. Research purports that effective leaders engage in behaviors to support coherence within their systems by linking resources and utilizing technology to engage teams in flexible, efficient interactions that help make change efforts more impactful.

**LEAD:** Describe **one powerful tool or practice** that you employed to support your students, staff, school community and **self** in order to remain focused on your school culture and mission in challenging times.

**GP:** We initiated “Breakfast with the Principal”, a safe virtual space created to encourage staff to engage in conversations about their fears, expectations, and feelings of gratitude as we navigate the uncertainties of the COVID-19 crisis. Breakfast with the Principal was held daily from 8:00 to 8:50 and began with a five-minute mindfulness exercise. Providing the forum for social and emotional support for staff was critical in preparing them to meet the needs of our students and families who were also experiencing feelings of uncertainty and loss. During the meetings, some staff shared what they were thinking and feeling, while others took comfort in just listening. At the same time, others disclosed that they looked forward to the daily meetings, and the sense of community it generated made a tremendous difference for them as they faced the unfolding changes of the crisis. One staff member stated, “It kept us together as a community and created a sense of normalcy.” This sentiment was also underlined by another who said, “As the principal, you were open, compassionate, and you made me feel better about having to deal with the challenges the situation presented. It made you more approachable, and it showed that you cared about others.”

**LEAD:** Where do you excel and how would you like to expand relative to Chancellor Banks’s vision for family engagement?

**GP:** The Horan School has been fortunate to be selected to participate in a grant-funded program for My Brother’s Keeper. The genesis for this work is to improve family engagement to better support families. We want to replicate and build upon the successes we experienced with our Dual Language Program. Parents and guardians of students enrolled in the program participated in monthly
classroom visits and engaged in ongoing conversations with the teachers. They supported the class with classroom projects, potluck meals, and holiday celebrations. The targeted activities helped to foster positive parent interactions and trusting relationships. We also saw improvement in student attendance and engagement.

To further support and prioritize intentional engagement with parents, families, and communities, we applied to become a community school and were successful in the application process. We serve a primarily immigrant and bilingual population. Through parent interactions, anecdotal and quantitative data, we know that although our dental and vision screening services continue to be an asset to our families, having a wrap-around service provided by a partnering community-based organization would be more effective and efficient in addressing the needs of our families. Wheatley (2017) brilliantly underlines our dependence on each other "Life changes through emergence, not incrementally. Instead of the simple sum of individual parts, life mixes it all up in networks or relationships and produces something new" (p.226).

Dr. Greer V. Phillips has served New York City public school children for the past 20 years. She spent her formative years in Guyana, South America and attended high school in Brooklyn. When offering words of encouragement to future leaders, Dr. Phillips shared “Leadership evolves with the pursuit of learning and is critical if we hope to enhance our different approaches for varying leadership contexts. I would encourage future leaders to capitalize on professional development opportunities higher academic pursuits and to be able to articulate their why.” Dr. Phillips has served as the principal of M079 since 2010.
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