Teachers College conducts research, adds programs at 7 Harlem schools

TC professors are conducting focus groups in the schools to analyze the city’s education system as well as expanding after-school activities.

By Sharon Liao

Teachers College has begun to fulfill its pledge of a partnership with 12 Harlem public schools, establishing professional development workshops for teachers and expanding after-school programming for seven schools this semester.

The schools are serving as training grounds for TC faculty to conduct research and for students to apply the theories that they have learned in the classroom.

Faculty members “learn more that will be valuable to the field of urban education, and, on the ground, use that research to change and improve the learning conditions simultaneously, so that
it’s not just research for research’s sake,” Brian Perkins, director of TC’s urban education leadership program, said. “It’s research used to make decisions in the schools.”

Students, meanwhile, can “learn about a particular theory, and they have the opportunity to see it and address it in person,” he said.

TC professors are already using the partnerships to enhance graduate student learning. Professor of psychology and education Marla Brassard had her students interview families and teachers from the partner schools to assess what needs to be improved in the city’s education system.

“Leading focus groups to build stronger Family-School partnerships was an incredible opportunity to get out into the context of the schools and hear the voices of the people who are directly affected by the education system,” Allison McLaren, a master’s student in school psychology, said in an email.

Amy Landis, a master’s student also in Brassard’s class, described the focus groups as a “safe environment” for the public school students to discuss what they like and dislike about their schools.

“The Partnership Consortium is a wonderful way for Columbia students to learn about the day-to-day life of NYC public schools from a student’s perspective, and not from a professor, or text,” Landis said in an email. “Having this hands-on experience will hopefully bring more qualified, passionate graduates to public schools.”

The information garnered from focus groups will “help inform the development of family engagement programming that will be tailored to each specific school setting to address identified barriers to student success,” Michael Laucello, the teaching assistant for Brassard’s class, said in an email.

Parents seemed to enjoy the opportunity to bounce ideas off one another, Laucello said. “In addition to asking what changes the school could make, we also asked parents to discuss changes they could make themselves to help foster student success, and what expectations teachers have of them,” he said.

The flagship of the Partnership Schools Consortium is the TC Community School, which opened in September. The other six schools are Heritage High School, P.S. 36, P.S. 76, P.S. 154, Columbia Secondary School, and Frederick Douglass Academy II.

Kecia Hayes, director of the consortium, said there are six goals of the consortium: developing school leaders, improving teachers’ instructional capacity, enhancing after-school programs, ameliorating the relationship between school and family, strengthening physical and mental health, and making early childhood programs more comprehensive.

TC has also set up professional development workshops for principals and teachers from the schools. On Monday, at the most recent workshop, teachers learned team-building skills and methods of student assessment.

Dan Milbrand, a special education teacher at Heritage High School in Spanish Harlem, said that “it’s huge to have a partnership with Columbia University.”
“It’s just begun, but there’s been steps made in developing assessment tools we use in the classroom,” he said.

Pamela Echols, a fifth-grade special education teacher at P.S. 36 in Morningside Heights, said that she is looking forward to being able to collaborate with other teachers. She said that she believes she will “come away with viable ways to meet those goals.”

TC has also set up after-school programs in digital storytelling, which is designed to improve literacy; instructional technologies, which teach skills through computer programs; and health literacy, to promote nutrition and exercise, according to Hayes.

Perkins said that, while he experienced lopsided partnerships with universities when he was president of a school board in Connecticut, he does not believe that will be the case with the consortium.

“The partnerships have to work two ways,” he said. “It has to be that the university is doing more than research and serving as a laboratory for its students. It has to make an investment in the school, as TC does.”

Hayes said that she sees securing resources as the greatest challenge the program faces.

“We need to make sure we have the resources to effectively meet all the needs—financial as well as the human capacity,” she said.

“It’s not always easy to get people involved who have traditionally or historically not been,” Perkins said. “One challenge is re-engaging parents in a way that makes them full partners, and helping them understand their role in educating their children.”

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