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Creating a burn to learn

UFT in-school Teacher Centers still help to ‘ignite’ education

By RACHEL NOBEL

“When the UFT Teacher Center came to our school, we started cooking with gas,” says Jean Ellen Murphy, an ELA teacher and Teacher Center site coordinator at Community Health Academy of the Heights in Washington Heights in Manhattan. “It helped our school ignite.”

The UFT Teacher Center has been “helping schools ignite” for more than 40 years. A school-based professional development program, the Teacher Center supports educators as they investigate best practices, seek out new materials and collaborate to improve their instruction. Since the onset of the pandemic, the UFT Teacher Center has also helped many educators make a successful transition to remote teaching.

There are about 115 Teacher Center sites embedded in schools across the five boroughs. At each site, a teacher takes on the role of site coordinator. Site coordinators facilitate professional learning among the school staff, provide resources for teachers and act as mentors and coaches. They also participate in monthly professional learning sessions with other site coordinators to bring best practices back to their schools.

About the program

School-based UFT Teacher Centers serve as the hub of on-site professional learning, collaboration and support for teachers in a school. The central UFT Teacher Center staff provides ongoing professional learning to each school’s site coach and school community.

Principals must provide a space in the school to house the Teacher Center and resources such as technology and instructional materials for the site.

The UFT Teacher Center site coach is a school-based position funded by the school. The DOE lists a citywide posting for the position; the Teacher Center human resources team vets the candidates and forwards their names to principals who are interested in opening sites in their schools.

For more information, email info@ufttc.org.



Alyssa Stalzer, a teacher at PS/IS 30 in Bay Ridge, stops by the Brooklyn school’s UFT Teacher Center, where site coordinator Ricardo Colon is ready to help.

“I see the Teacher Center as a driving force for collaboration and communication in a school,” says Melissa Balsamello, an English teacher and the Teacher Center site coordinator at Tottenville HS on Staten Island. “It’s a place where teachers can be honest with each other, share ideas and trust each other.”

Celeste Arrigo, a Teacher Center site coordinator at IS 2 on Staten Island, emphasizes that the “Teacher Center way” is to combine the experience of learning about new pedagogical strategies with practical, hands-on experience.

“If we’re showcasing a new digital tool, we’re giving teachers the experience of it at the same time as learning about the research-based protocol behind it,” she says.

Arrigo and fellow IS 2 site coordinator Mercedes Gleason valued the discussion protocols they experienced at Teacher Center professional learning sessions — so they showcased them in their own school’s workshops with staff, who in turn began using them in their classrooms.

At PS 60 on Staten Island, site coordinator Monica Iacono participated in a series of professional learning sessions on culturally responsive teaching that she brought to the staff at her school just before the pandemic hit in March 2020.

“All the learning we did in our professional development sessions is having an impact on what our teaching looks like now,” she says. “Instead of saying, ‘Don’t you know school starts at 8 a.m.? You’re late,’ a teacher can say, ‘How can I help you get to school on time?’ It was per-



The Teacher Center at PS/IS 30 is equipped with “a bounty of resources” to encourage teachers to improve their practice.

fect timing for that.”

Because Teacher Center site coordinators are themselves teachers at their schools, they understand firsthand the needs of students and staff — and they strive to respond to those needs in a nonevaluative way.

“When I go into a classroom, I’m not the silent observer in the back,” says Ricardo Colon, the site coordinator at PS/IS 30 in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. “I may become part of the lesson without correcting the lesson.”

While site coordinators pride themselves on providing teachers with a bounty of resources — “If you need something, we’ll have a solution by the time you walk out,” says Iacono — they also work to foster a school culture that encourages teachers to collaborate with each other to improve their practices.

“I’m able to connect teachers together. If someone asks me for something, I can direct them to another teacher who’s doing it well,” says Balsamello.

The Teacher Center culture also helps teachers develop a deeper respect for their own craft.

“I’m a dual-language teacher, and I used to think about language in terms of English or Spanish. But now I think about the language of learning and teaching, the language of pedagogy,” says Colon. “Teacher Center has helped me hone my skill in explaining purposefully why I’m doing what I’m doing and what impact it has on children. In that sense, it’s made me go from a teacher to an educator.”

ERICA BERGER