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Feature stories

Six off and running in community schools pilot

by Maisie McAdoo | published September 27, 2012

Physical education teacher Adam Cohen puts students through the paces in the new Sandra Feldman Gymnasium at PS 188 in Coney Island.

In the medical clinic at PS 30 in East Harlem, children are tended to by physician assistants such as Ivor Bharat and teachers like Brenda Shufeit.

UFT President Michael Mulgrew greets Sunset Park HS Paraprofessionals Representative Melody Summers Diouf on opening day at the Brooklyn school.

Six city schools will reach out to their communities this year to bring neighborhood resources, medical programs and social services to their buildings, thanks to a combined grant from the UFT, the City Council and the Partnership for New York City.

Borrowing from a successful community schools model in Cincinnati, the grants are intended to help transform schools into community “hubs” where children and parents have ready access to health, tutoring, counseling and social services — the “wraparound” services that support learning and strengthen families.

“These types of supports are the missing piece for students who are struggling,” said UFT President Michael Mulgrew. “Putting these services into schools ensures that all kids can learn and excel.”

The six were selected, from a much larger applicant pool, for their collaborative cultures and existing relationships with community partners, said UFT Vice President Karen Alford, who is heading up the project for the union. “With all of them, I think we saw a collegial staff, and that was a high priority for us,” she said. “But we are also trying to meet schools where they are.”

Community Health Academy of the Heights, for example, a grade 6-12 school in Washington Heights, works with New York Presbyterian Hospital, which is helping to construct a health clinic in the school, and with Community League of the Heights, a long-standing community organization that helps Heights families with housing, economic development and youth programs. With the grant, the academy hopes to strengthen the relationships with Presbyterian and the Community League to offer stable, reliable, on-site resources to students and their families.

Gym named for Feldman

PS 188 in Coney Island hopes to partner with a nearby hospital to provide mental health, dental care and other medical services. Former UFT President Sandra Feldman was a graduate of the school, and a brand-new gym, named for her, will be available for community use. The school is high-performing and its staff is close-knit, but their families, many of whom have limited means, badly need health care, translation services and GED programs, staffers said. Bringing in those services will help “show the neighborhood we are willing to do whatever it takes to benefit their kids and their own lives,” said PTA president Sonia Maldonado.

PS 30 in East Harlem already offers workshops in health and literacy to parents. Because health concerns are a major issue in the community, though, the school wants to expand and strengthen its nutrition and fitness programs and offer them to more community members, drawing on its existing connections with Harlem Hospital.

PS 18 in the South Bronx has been working with CookShop, the nutrition education program of the Food Bank For New York City, to fight child hunger, obesity and diet-related disease. The grant will help extend the program to older students and families. In addition, the school hopes to offer more after-school programming, as well as literacy and financial literacy workshops for local families.

Helping the community

Sunset Park HS in Brooklyn will graduate its first class at the end of this year. The three-year-old school already has a health clinic up and running, staffed by Lutheran Medical Center, and has a community partner in the Center for Family Life. But a large immigrant population brings many challenges, and the school plans to use the clinic to reach out to the community, providing grief counseling, anger management, ESL and parenting classes.

Curtis HS in Staten Island is a large, diverse school that strives not to let any student fall through the cracks, staffers said. The principal and staff would like to coordinate services for individual students to help each navigate the education system. The school’s strong athletic program is one way to reach students. A new health clinic, sponsored by the Children’s Aid Society, is under construction to bring health services into the building. Reducing truancy and engaging parents are major goals.

In addition to funding, each school will receive planning and logistical support from UFT experts throughout the year. As the program develops, schools will partner with local businesses and organizations to identify their needs and pull in the resources with the help of a paid coordinator.

Alford said each school’s program will look a little different, but each will aim to create a “seamless” system of services to support students. In the Cincinnati model, for instance, the service providers are integrated with the faculty and staff in the school buildings.

“This is an important beginning of a big idea,” said Kathryn Wylde, the president of the Partnership for New York City, one of the major funders of the program.

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