Getting personal

New York City’s District Two puts priority on principals

By Liz Willen

It’s three weeks into the school year for the nation’s largest school system, and Mary Timson needs a second opinion.

As acting principal of Midtown West Elementary School in New York City, Timson worries about everything from building conditions to fund-raising and reading scores. But on this rainy September morning, she is zeroing in on her teaching staff. Are their lessons sharp and focused? Are they ready for the challenges ahead?

That’s where Leslie Zackman comes in. Zackman, a veteran staff developer and principal of a small East Side elementary school, is Timson’s mentor, a position taken seriously in District Two. This district includes some of the city’s highest performing and most popular elementary and middle schools, along with some that are lagging behind. At the start of classes today, Zackman is at Timson’s door like a personal trainer, prepared to prod, push, and encourage her newly assigned mentee.

Together, the two embark on a walk through this building in the heart of the theater district, peeking into classrooms, exchanging ideas, and making lists.

“It is so helpful to have another set of ears and eyes,” says Zackman, who over the years has benefited from having veteran principals visit her school, dispensing specific advice about everything from supervision and instruction to budgeting.

This time, as Timson’s mentor, Zackman will be ready to share what she has learned and help Timson zoom in on what is working, what is missing, and what needs improvement.

HOW IT WORKS

Mentoring in Community School District Two grew out of a longstanding emphasis on supporting principals and has been formally in place for more than five years.

Here’s how it works: Each fall, the superintendent identifies a group of principal mentors; they tend to be the most experienced administrators who are offered a stipend along with an opportunity to take on additional responsibilities.

Great care is taken to match principals
whose specific skills are in line with what another school needs; for example, a principal who has been successful working with at-risk students might be assigned a principal with a similar population.

This year, the district selected 10 senior principals as mentors. Eight are also responsible for their own building, while two are full-time principal mentors who can devote a great deal of time to their colleagues. Thirty principals are being mentored this year.

At the beginning of the school year, mentors are assigned and mentors and mentees attend a kick-off meeting, but many speak or work together even before the start of school. After that, they’ll meet at least once a week, and may be in frequent phone contact.

In addition, the mentors meet with one another, as a group, to discuss mentoring and share activities and success stories.

Deputy Superintendent Tanya Kaufman says there isn’t a high turnover of principals in the district; there are no vacancies at the moment.

“I think principals stay because of the collegial nature of the district and the support they get, and the strong professional development they are offered here. There is a proud feeling to be in District Two,” she says.

**HIGH PRIORITY**

There is nothing new about mentoring, but it’s easy to understand why many city principals say they have no time for it in a staggeringly poor and troubled school system of 1.1 million students and roughly 1,100 schools. Only half the city’s public school students graduate on time; one out of three were in danger of failing last spring, while two are full-time principal mentors who can devote a great deal of time to their colleagues. Thirty principals are being mentored this year.

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**THE PRINCIPAL**

Bea Johnstone hand out sheets of paper, asking principals to detail their challenges and concerns, and to describe what makes a mentoring relationship work.

As they sip tea and nibble cookies, the principals are ready with low-key support, questions as simple as “How is it going?”

“I get tired at around 3:30 p.m.,” acknowledges one principal, describing the post-dismissal slump, a time of day when the building empties out but much work remains. Another wants advice on slowing down, reacting less, and becoming a better listener.

At no time, though, does the meeting turn into the usual gripe session about overcrowding, low salaries, and crumbling buildings. There’s little dwelling on the inevitable rough patches that are part of the landscape for urban principals, like problem kids, pesky parents, and inexperienced teachers.

District Two is clearly the kind of place where principals throw life rafts to one another, but in past years they’ve spread out a bit, offering to mentor principals in Brooklyn and parts of the Bronx, and spreading their philosophy of team-work.

**STRESSFUL JOBS**

One-on-one mentoring programs aren’t easy to come by in city schools: Efforts to pair all new principals with a “buddy” principal several years ago ultimately fizzled out, recalls Jill Levy, who heads the Council of Supervisors and Administrators, the union representing city principals.

Time pressures and the day-to-day stress of surviving the job made the mentoring program nearly impossible to keep in place — almost as tough as keeping principals in the city.

“Nobody wants these jobs. The stress is too high,” Levy says. “The New York City principal is responsible for everything in, around, and related to the school — and that includes every aspect of school life, from the time kids leave home until they go home and beyond. If you had a stress barometer of zero to 100, the levels would burst right through the top.”

— N o b o d y w a n t s t h e s e j o b s . T h e s t r e s s i s t o o h i g h , ” L e v y s a y s . “ T h e N e w Y o r k C i t y p r i n c i p a l i s r e s p o n s i b l e f o r e v e r y t h i n g i n , a r o u n d , a n d r e l a t e d t o t h e s c h o o l — a n d t h a t i n c l u d e s e v e r y a s p e c t o f s c h o o l l i f e , f r o m t h e t i m e k i d s l e a v e h o m e u n t i l t h e y g o h o m e a n d b e y o n d . I f y o u h a d a s t r e s s b a r o m e t e r o f z e r o t o 1 0 0 , t h e l e v e l s w o u l d b u r s t r i g h t t h r o u g h t h e t o p . ”

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Already this year, there are more than 200 principal vacancies and 680 vacancies for assistant principal jobs, Levy says. “We used to get several hundred applicants for a job. Now we get two or three.”

District Two noticed a dwindling pool of applicants, so administrators created their own training program to create new leaders, collaborating with nearby Baruch College School of Public Affairs, another way they focus on solutions rather than on the problems.

In District Two, principals don’t dwell on the stress of their jobs as much as they discuss ways to cope with it. Often, that is where the mentor fits in.

“I can say I’m having a bad day, and my mentors have just been there for me,” says Timson, who has relied heavily on veteran principals Carmine Farina at PS 6, Ann Marie Carrillo at PS 116 and Anna Switzer of PS 234, a TriBeCa school whose top reading scores are the envy of the school system.

**FRINGE BENEFIT**

Many principals say the support they get from their colleagues is part of what keeps them in the job. Eric Byrne, principal of the progressive PS 183 on the East Side, says he turned down a job in an affluent Long Island school district, where he could have had a higher salary, a secretary, and even a coveted parking spot.

But Byrne is staying put, in part to pay a debt to the many mentors he’s had, including Kaufman, the deputy superintendent. Kaufman was once principal of PS 183 and shares Byrne’s passion for a school where 43 languages are spoken, where children of doormen and janitors learn alongside the kids of prominent physicians and cancer researchers from nearby Sloan Kettering and the United Nations.

Kaufman, he says, “is the person I go to with everything. I will put anything on the table with her, and it doesn’t scare me that she is the deputy superintendent.”

But the list of principals Byrne has sought advice from is a long one. When he needed suggestions about kindergarten staffing, he called Zackman. To find out why his school was losing students to the ever-popular PS 6, Byrne marched his entire staff to the building, asking them to observe veteran principal Carmen Farina. In turn, he asked Farina to walk through his school and give him some advice.

Instead of lecturing Byrne, Farina “helped me to focus,” says Byrne, adding that in his old school, staff development “meant going to a workshop. Here, it is our language and our legacy. I don’t think this kind of support exists anywhere else.”