

Building an Intervisitation Program at Creston Academy

Creston Academy is a middle school in the Bronx that began incorporating formal teacher leader roles into their school community through the Teacher Incentive Fund grant (TIF) during the 2013-14 school year. Although collaboration has been an essential value of the school since it opened five years ago, Principal Pamela Edwards credits the team's partnership with TIF and the support of their Teacher Team Leader, Michael Abbey, for the inspiration to begin a formal intervisitation program.

Now in its second year, Creston Academy teacher leaders have been empowered by their school leaders to expand the intervisitation program, and the results are transforming teaching and learning for students and teachers alike. As Ms. Marilyn Guidice, a second year Peer Instructional Coach (PIC) and eighth grade science teacher puts it, "We have so much to learn from each other and just being able to share what's working in our classrooms, that's a big thing!"



The Creston Academy teacher leaders, from left to right: Nelson Mejia, Evelyn Roman, Marilyn Guidice, Theresa Dwyer, Carmen Auwarter, Lesley Lemos, and Leo Singleton.

Assistant Principal Mellissa Miller explains why the Instructional Leadership Team is invested in building a strong intervisitation program, "We wanted to make sure that our school's coherent set of beliefs reached the kids. Sometimes we see professional development and discussion that doesn't really reach the students. We feel it is really important for these beliefs to make [their] way into the conversations that teachers are having – and those conversations make their way into the work they are doing with individual students."

"This program makes everyone better – the teacher leaders and the teachers who are working with them. It's one of those things that is circular; it makes everyone up through the administration better. "

**- Mellissa Miller,
Assistant Principal**

The problem of practice for each visit is selected collaboratively by participating teachers. Creston's school-wide instructional focus is incorporation of small group instruction into each lesson to provide greater differentiation and opportunities for students to engage in rich academic conversations with one another. Ms. Guidice shares that the collective impact on student learning is visible, "The students are taking initiative in terms of their own learning and discovery. I feel like a fly on the wall – they are able to take the information and relate it to their own world and explain it. It's mind-blowing to see 8th graders ... have these conversations. [Focusing on] small group instruction was key for me."

Ms. Guidice and Ms. Lesley Lemos, also a second year PIC and eighth grade math teacher, shared some additional information about their intervisitation program:

Teacher leaders partner with school leaders to set aside time and space for all to learn.

Ms. Lemos says, "Principal Edwards carved time into our schedules for us to meet and do this - that's what makes it possible." In addition to providing the teacher leaders with dedicated time to meet as a team and with the teachers they mentor each week, Principal Edwards provides coverage for teachers so that they are able to visit the Demonstration Teachers (DT) and PICs, as well as participate in professional learning and debrief conversations with them.

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Teacher leaders establish clear processes and make information readily available to colleagues.

The teacher leaders take advantage of scheduled meeting time as well as prep periods to plan the intervisitation calendar for the month. Teachers interested in participating are matched with DTs based upon their own problems of practice. According to Ms. Lemos, “The new teachers get mentored by [the PICs] and we meet with them once a week. So we are able to have conversations about what they need or want to work on and then we can communicate this to the DTs. [We do this to] make sure that the teacher has the opportunity to see [instructional strategies] in action and then debrief the visit next time we meet.”

PICs publish a monthly calendar of upcoming professional learning offerings and classroom visit opportunities. Then, teachers are provided with tools to request intervisitation, record notes, and generate reflections during and after the visit. Ms. Guidice explains, “Having clear expectations and targeting each individual learner helps us create the space. We have a Peer Instructional Request form, so teachers are able to request exactly what they want to see when they come into the DT’s classroom. In addition to that, we have feedback forms and checklists that we ask the teachers to fill out during the intervisitation process.”

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- Lesley Lemos,
PIC and Math
Teacher

Teacher leaders provide multiple ways for colleagues to participate.

Each teacher has their own unique learning style and may have varying levels of experience or comfort with the intervisitation process. With this in mind, the Creston Academy team developed several protocols for intervisitation. Ms. Guidice describes the intervisitation options, “We have two types of intervisitations – a silent and an active visit. It is up to the visiting teacher and the DT to determine which will work best. With a silent intervisitation the teacher just observes without interacting with the kids. With the active visit, the teacher may actually lead a group or talk to the students. “

Ms. Lemos adds, “We also offer an option where the DT visits a teacher’s classroom to see their practice and pinpoint what strategies they are going to model when the teacher visits the demonstration classroom. It’s up to the teacher what they are comfortable with.”

Teacher leaders are flexible and willing to grow alongside colleagues and school leaders.

As Ms. Miller puts it, “This program makes everyone better – the teacher leaders and the teachers who are working with them. It’s one of those things that is circular; it makes everyone up through the administration better.”

Ms. Lemos reflects, “Seeing that we can all be leaders – people are stepping up and taking a leadership role, taking ownership. The intervisitation process has made us [teacher leaders] better teachers. We’re not just helping other teachers, we’re learning from them. Our new teachers are going to grad school and learning new techniques and sharing them with me. I’m like, ‘That’s a good idea! I am going to try that!’ It keeps us on our feet.”

“It helps to start off small and then build, build, build. See what works and fix what doesn’t,” Ms Guidice advises, “We are constantly changing, constantly reincarnating ourselves.”

What is the secret to your school’s success with sharing instructional practices? We’d love to hear about the ways that visiting your colleagues’ classrooms impacts your teaching practice and students’ learning?

To share your story, please email teacherleadership@schools.nyc.gov.