

Dr. Rafaela Espinal
Response to Written Questions OCPs
June 2, 2022

1. Efficient Operations: Walk us through a time when you had to revise procedures and policies to improve efficiency and transparency. What led to the revisions and what was the outcome?

Two critical areas where I collaborated with stakeholders to improve efficiency and transparency was in the physical location of the district's office and in the functioning of school offices and principal's time. I chose this based on the patterns of concerns, and long-standing challenges of families (and leaders) receiving support that allowed them to place their focus where it belongs: on the learning outcomes for each and every child.

I arrived as a new superintendent, the district office was located on a fourth floor in a building outside district lines and inaccessible to families and staff. Offices for varying operations worked in silos. I wanted to create welcoming places and a responsive environment. In order to obtain resources and support for a complete relocation and redesign, I had to engage the community to revise procedures and policies to improve efficiency and transparency. That started with creating a physical environment allowing for team members to have the ability to function more efficiently. I received grant funds and relocated to a central location accessible to families. It was a transportation hub, and in New York City this is a critical element for accessibility, particularly in underserved communities.

After relocating and creating an inviting environment, I collaborated with community members to gather feedback on the structures needing revisions to offer more transparency and collective efficacy. I met with parent groups and staff representing each school. Principals were also instrumental in helping me understand the challenges they faced when working with the district. I met with focus groups to gather ideas. I wanted principals and staff that interacted with the district to feel supported and know that they could trust the team to be transparent in communication efforts, to make their jobs easier, and to honor their requests when possible— all in the service of students.

It was important to standardize management practices. This required creating a manual for how the district would operate, designating functions for employees to ensure that everyone was clear in their role. This included how visitors would be greeted, steps for varying functionalities, and organizational systems. It was critical to develop a monitoring system to communicate performance goals and timelines for various departments. We had team liaisons that provided an additional level of support and direct connection to me. In turn principals felt supported, valued, and respected. Families felt heard and included when we improved structures for them to voice their concerns and to ensure that they left with solutions to the challenges they faced.

I created a model of clear expectations and used our district office as an exemplar. I set up the expectation for how school main offices and school environments would function, feel like, and sound like when others visited as well as how principals could organize for increased efficiency. It was important to create instructional and operational coherence throughout the district, a common language and belief on how we promoted each school and ourselves as a collective as we designed projects and pursued district goals. (500)

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2. Engaged and Invested Community: Specifically discuss how you have aligned the community to promote, advocate, and advance support for teachers, staff, students, and public education.

I am well versed in the work of advocating and promoting public education externally. For — years I have been learning, teaching, collaborating, leading, and growing in public schools. As a teacher, I was a founding member of an innovative bilingual model that continues to shape best practices throughout NYC. That work led to my selection into the Leadership Academy and my first principalship in a historically underserved school in the midst of so many challenges to public education. I learned to become a brand strategist and marketer for my own trilingual school in Harlem in order to keep our space in a competitive environment. As superintendent, I was able to help forge partnerships with district programs and charters that resolved conflicts over space and added value to our school communities.

In my view the superintendent is the head teacher and lead learner that sets the direction for the district through strategic planning, by engaging the community, leveraging expertise within the district, and finding additional resources and supports to make the vision a reality. One of my strengths is the ability to engage stakeholders in developing a focused and collective vision for district improvement. I am a visionary leader who has transformed individual schools as a principal and an underserved district with limited resources. I was able to transform the culture by setting clear and high instructional expectations, being visible, accessible, and responsive to all stakeholders.

In order to advance support for teachers I applied for a grant to work with the New Teacher Center and pilot a mentoring and coaching initiative. It included tiered professional learning to **support teachers** in different levels of development and capacities. We also engaged in strategic instructional leadership development for school leaders so that we were normed in observing teacher practice, giving feedback and actionable next steps so that teachers would feel supported in the evaluation process. We developed a common language for effective practice anchored in research-based strategies so that all teachers were evaluated fairly and were provided with high leverage feedback which in turn advanced **student** learning. We were able to achieve:

- Effective **distributed leadership with intentionality** which led to increased teacher effectiveness and student learning
- Multi-layered approach to **building capacity -- Principals, APs, mentors, coaches.**
- Develop a common practice around **shared vision.**
- In high need, hard-to-staff districts, **teacher retention** and **development** was critical!

Feedback became a customary practice that we embraced and both students and staff were able to name their strengths and areas where they needed support. Our “I love feedback” movement demonstrated increase in student learning and served to help the community to speak a common language to advocate for individual (students, teachers, school leaders and staff), school, and district needs.

I have almost thirty years of experience synthesizing ideas/processes into positive action for students and families and by demonstrating how we create coherent systems for instruction allowed us to advocate for district needs to increase resources for our students. (490)

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3. Positive Climate and Safe Environment: Describe how you have balanced stakeholders' needs in the ongoing improvement of school culture and safe working environment?

As a superintendent, I focused on solidifying and closely monitoring preparedness and security standards to address any threats. I worked closely with the NYPD and Student Safety to ensure that our practices were always improving and aligned through ongoing training and development.

Ensuring that there were systems and structures to develop and maintain a healthy, and inclusive environment that was both physically and psychologically safe was my priority. We selected and engaged in learning and integrating models such as Resolving Conflicts Creatively, Restorative Justice, Yale's RULER and the CASTLE frameworks all created measurable improvements in our schools. Maintaining a continued focus on training and development was essential.

While all of these actions formed a critical foundation for a safe and positive school/ district culture, I believe what enabled us to move faster -farther -together, were some of the things I learned across decades of experience as a teacher, parent, and a leader that are less obvious when we first think about safety and culture.

First, I intentionally created regular opportunities for authentic conversations to take place. The lenses of individual lived experiences, small and large group conversations all communicate differently and critical pieces of the true needs within the community. Therefore, I spent a considerable time in schools.

These conversations enabled me to leverage my *second* tool for change which was being vulnerable about my own learning process, decisions, and any mistakes. I was often asked by consultants, how I was able to have such an open forum for adult learning since they rarely see it. The truth is, it was incredibly hard to do. There were some who mistook my transparency for their own purposes, but 95% of the time, these open exchanges were the keys that enabled me to balance stakeholder's needs with the PACE of change to improve school culture and instructional efficacy.

Deeply listening and constantly anchoring into decades of experience created natural openings for me to learn about personal tragedies, collective challenges, and current stressors in neighborhoods that I would have never known about otherwise.

Developing a deep knowledge of current needs in order to shape our priorities for the district was the *third* key to our success. **Using adult development theory and understanding developmental capacities helped me establish a learner-centered culture. I created a "holding environment" to provide support and embrace challenges.**

I was relentless about collaboratively sharing and growing together in workshops for parents and professional development for all school staff from paraprofessionals to principals, each one planned as if it were the most important meeting of the year.

I am notoriously intentional about dwelling in the details AND the big picture. My plans spanned the full range of a learner's experience from diving deep into critical strategic initiatives to cultivating moments of inspirational joy with peers- and that meant we had journals, healthy snacks, purposeful differentiation—all things that contribute to healthy learning while also modeling a

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gradual release of responsibility and the importance of making our work sustainable, replicable, and purposeful. (500)