

City convenes principals to discuss plight of record number of homeless students

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The Department of Education last week held its first-ever meeting of principals who oversee schools with high homeless populations, part of an ongoing effort to provide support services for a record number of school children in temporary housing.

Top education officials, including deputy chancellor Elizabeth Rose, community schools director Chris Caruso and Office of Safety and Youth Development CEO Lois Herrera met with 50 principals and social workers from 33 schools that educate large numbers of homeless students.

The meeting came as Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration has worked — and sometimes struggled — to keep up with the largest homeless student crisis in the city's history as students with a staggering variety of needs flood schools in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

There are, by the latest tally, more than 100,000 students living in homeless shelters, foster care, or doubled up with family or friends — about 10 percent of the city's 1.1 million school children. Recent research has shown that a small number of the city's 1,800 public schools educate the lion's share of those students, prompting questions about whether the city has done enough to support the most burdened schools.

Schools chancellor Carmen Fariña, a longtime former principal, created the idea for the principals meeting during a recent interview with POLITICO New York and Sunny Ramos, the principal of PS 188 in Manhattan, where just under half of the student body is living in temporary housing.

Fariña has made collaboration between educators a hallmark of her leadership style, and is often most enthusiastic when brainstorming ways for teachers and principals to share best practices.

Last week's meeting at DOE headquarters at Tweed Courthouse in Manhattan focused on creating new ways to support vulnerable and transient students.

Clarence Ellis, superintendent for District 17 which includes Crown Heights and Flatbush in Brooklyn, also helped lead the meeting. Ellis has emerged as one of Fariña's most trusted local superintendents.

Herrera, who helps manage the flow of students in temporary housing, said the meeting functioned both as a way for principals to share ideas and something akin to a “focus group” for DOE officials.

Principals traded tips for establishing food pantries in schools, including suggestions to physically visit shelters to ensure families know about the pantry, Herrera said. “It wasn't just the usual conversation about having more school supplies and extra uniforms for students [in temporary housing],” she said. “It was a much deeper conversation.”

Olivia Francis-Webber, principal of PS 114 in the Bronx, said she shared an anecdote about how a new staff social worker was able to reunite a family from the Ivory Coast that had been separated after the father was granted political asylum but the mother was not. The father and five of the couple's young children who attended PS 114 were living in a homeless shelter. The social worker worked with various embassies and government agencies to ultimately reunite the family in New York.

Francis-Webber said she heard from other principals about how to better support students living in shelters across the city who commute up to 2 1/2 hours to school each way, and which city agencies are most helpful.

Herrera said the city will continue to host principals of schools with significant homeless populations and create other ways to support those school leaders.

Schools with large homeless student populations typically share the same obstacles: chronic absenteeism among students who frequently change their housing status, trauma and mental health issues and basic needs many school leaders don't have to consider, including making sure students are properly fed, clothed and physically healthy.

The city's community school program offers social services for many of those schools, and federal Title I money funds social workers and other supports for schools with large homeless populations. Last year, de Blasio also announced \$30 million in additional funding for homeless students, including attendance teachers at city shelters, health clinics at schools with many homeless students, and new social workers.

But advocates have noted the money was only earmarked for one year, and it's still unclear whether the funding will be renewed or expanded during the upcoming city budget process.

And while educators and advocates have acknowledged the enormity of the homeless student crisis the city is facing, they have also increased pressure on City Hall to do more. Improving transportation services for homeless families, improving communication between the various city agencies tasked with supporting homeless students and hiring more in-school support staff rank among the top priorities.