

# From Immersion to Impact: A Major University's Response to the Covid and Post-Covid Pandemic Needs of New York City and State Schools

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## Abstract

*Established in 2006, the Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP) at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education propelled Fordham's immersion in the educational landscape of New York City and State public and non-public schools. Today the Center serves more than 900,000 students grades pre-K - 12, thousands of teachers and hundreds of administrators and parents.*

*In this paper, we describe how the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic challenged CEP's ability to continue to serve schools both with programs that would assist them with their "real time needs," as well as modes of delivery; and how the Center's initiatives, expertise, and experience prior to the pandemic enabled Fordham to pivot and successfully respond.*

**Keywords:** *higher education; NYC and State public and non-public schools; COVID-19 pandemic.*

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## 1. Introduction

A vision to contribute in meaningful ways to improve New York City's public schools, coupled with faculty and graduate students' desire to work with schools in underserved neighborhoods fueled Fordham University's outreach to New York City Schools. The establishment of Fordham's Center for Educational Partnerships at the Graduate School of Education in 2006 propelled Fordham's immersion in the educational landscape of New York City public schools and in so doing, transformed the university's relationship with the system. (Wilson, 2012)

"The projects at the Center for Educational Partnerships allow us to deepen our involvement with schools because the work isn't at the theoretical level. We are in those buildings working with teachers and administrators to help improve student learning." James J. Hennessy. Ph.D.,

Dean Emeritus, Graduate School of Education (2008). Immersing itself in the educational landscape of New York City was in keeping with the university's mission.

In 2006, the Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP) was established as the “outreach arm” of Fordham University's Graduate School of Education (GSE). In so doing, Fordham reimagined the role of higher education to go beyond degree granting programs and certification tracks. Today the center serves more than 900,000 students in grades pre-k - 12, thousands of teachers and hundreds of administrators and parents both public and non-public in schools throughout New York State.

In this paper, we describe how the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the Center for Educational Partnerships' ability to continue to serve public and non-public schools both with programs that would assist them in meeting their “new needs and challenges,” as well as modes of delivery.

We discuss how our initiatives, that go beyond traditional programs and services, are currently responding to the “real time” needs and demands of the schools throughout New York City and State that we are serving in this post-Covid period. Section 2 outlines the programs that were implemented through 2019 and then discusses recent Covid/post-Covid programs and their development as a result of responding to the needs of New York City and State Schools. Section 3 presents impact data; Section 4 concludes the paper with a summary and discussion of further work into the future.

## **2. The Center for Educational Partnerships – Initiatives developed and implemented 2006 through 2019 (Pre-Covid)**

The Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP) at Fordham University, serves one of the largest school systems in the United States; namely, the New York City public school system consisting of 912,064 Pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and 1,596 schools with a budget of over \$40 billion. In addition, CEP also serves teachers and administrators from among the 1,800 independent and religious schools throughout New York City and state as well as 212 Community Schools in the Eastern Region of NY State.

Our initiatives focus on the on-going need for instructional support in the form of “Professional Development” for current teachers and administrators through numerous formats including in-classroom coaching at school sites; as well as workshops, institutes, and conferences held throughout the city and state. Each of our initiatives, funded by grant awards and contracts from State and City governments during (2006-2019) were designed to support a specific educational area of need (Bilingual/Bicultural education, on-site coaching in academic subject areas-Literacy, STEM, Social Studies), the Community Schools model, educational reform, school partnerships, and professional development for non-public schools.

Our work has always been research based and outcome oriented; with the goal of bringing critical resources and expertise to teachers whose student populations are most at-risk of academic failure.

The Center's initiatives, expertise, and experience from (2006-2019) enabled Fordham to pivot and develop new initiatives, (as well as to adjust existing initiatives), and modes of delivery, to meet the Covid and post-Covid needs of New York City and State Schools.

### **2.1. Covid-Post-Covid Initiatives (2020-Present)**

Mid-March 2020 as New York City went into "lockdown" the University physically closed and New York City Schools closed also. Within a matter of days we became a virtual center operating through Zoom and other platforms. We continued providing services through our initiatives, but realized the need for a major focus shift to address mental health/social emotional needs and escalating crime.

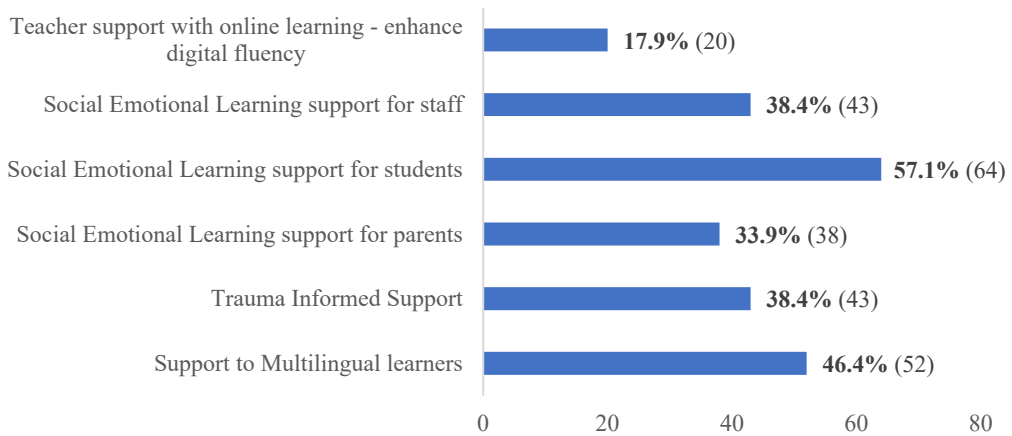
### **2.2. Mental Health Support**

As of April 2020 through our professional development initiatives, we began a series of virtual sessions (conducted by mental health specialists) for teachers, administrators, and parents (English and Spanish) focusing on trauma, anxiety, depression, cultural diversity, and prolonged trauma. Our Bilingual/Bicultural initiatives delved deeper into cultural differences concerning mental health awareness, treatment, availability and/or acceptance. Additionally, in 2022 we were awarded a mental health awareness grant from the federal government to provide training for teachers and school staff in the borough of the Bronx (one of the poorest boroughs and severely affected by Covid) focusing on developing a deeper awareness of signs of mental health concerns in elementary school (grades Pre-K to 5) students. De-escalation techniques for emotionally challenged students as well as mental health provider linkages with hospitals, clinics, other NPO providers are also addressed.

### **2.3. US Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) ACT**

In 2021 Fordham's Community Schools Technical Assistance Center at CEP was selected by the New York State Education Department to distribute over \$1.2 million of New York State CARES Act monies to high need "at risk" schools throughout New York City and on Long Island, NY, to address both "learning loss" and Covid-related "Mental Health" Issues. Both a distribution formula and an application process were developed by the CEP CARES ACT Staff.

Figure 1 illustrates that school and district administrators surveyed reported that Social Emotional Learning Support for Students (57.1%) and Support to Multilingual Learners (46.4%) were the two highest needs of support requested to address the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic



*Figure 1. CARES Act Initiative Survey Data Results. (2021)*

## **2.4 Stop School Violence**

The serious problem of school violence in NYCDOE schools is prevalent throughout the city's five boroughs. The latest (School Year 2020-21) School Safety and Educational Climate (SSEC) Incidents Report published by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) for NYC reported a total of 1,031,193 elementary and secondary students attending NYCDOE schools during that period. That report cited 4,143 violent incidents in various categories (e.g. assault resulting in no/minor or severe physical injury or weapons possession) among the city's 1,851 public schools that compromised school climate and safety in SY 2021-2022. Table 1 details those student infractions.

As schools began to re-open in the fall of 2020, the Center for Educational Partnerships received a grant from the United States Department of Justice to address School Violence in the Bronx. Focusing on trauma informed practices, school staff and groups of students grades (6-12) participated in sessions addressing trauma, bullying, social-emotional issues, gang violence and reaction to crime in their neighborhoods. The purpose being to improve and sustain a positive school climate Covid/post-Covid.

In 2023 we received a second grant to implement this program in the borough of Manhattan grades (3-12).

## **2.5 Social Emotional Challenges (2021-Present)**

A significant number of students throughout New York City, especially those in under-served communities, returned to school exhibiting Social Emotional challenges (anxiety, depression, decreased social skills); due to COVID-19 as well as virtual and/or hybrid learning that took place during lockdown.

**Table 1. NYCDOE SCHOOL SAFETY INFRACTIONS – SY 2021-2022** Source: NYSED (2023).

Type of Incident	# of Occurences
Homicide	0
Sexual Offenses: Forcible Sex Offenses	9
Sexual Offenses: Other Sex Offenses	70
Assault: Physical Injury	209
Assault: Serious Physical Injury	13
Weapons Possession: Routine Security Check	141
Weapons Possession: Other	169
Discrimination, Harassment, and Bullying: All excluding Cyberbullying	1,230
Discrimination, Harassment, and Bullying: Cyberbullying ONLY	2,125
Bomb Threat	22
False Alarm	35
Use, Posession, or Sale of Drugs	111
Use, Posession, or Sale of Alcohol	9
<b>TOTAL ALL Incidents</b>	<b>4,143</b>

### 3. Impact Data

As a result of the new programs developed and the change of focus in pre-Covid programs, a summary of surveys conducted show participant ratings indicate high levels of satisfaction with sessions focusing on mental health and social emotional needs.

During this period 2022-23 our social emotional learning sessions focused on utilizing empathetic communication skills that support student academic success, and understanding the social emotional framework and the benefits. Figure 3 depicts participant satisfaction.

Our efforts to work with schools to improve school climate utilizing trauma informed practices has resulted in participants' increased understanding of promoting a positive school climate; gaining knowledge of ways to help improve school culture and climate, and improved understanding of the link between mental health, student behaviors, and school safety.

**Table 2. Participant Ratings – All workshops combined SY20 – SY22.** Source: Policy Studies Associates (2022)

Quality Measure	2019-20 (n=81)		2020-21 (n=125)		2021-22 (n=91)	
	Mean Rating	Percent ‘Strongly Agree	Mean Rating	Percent ‘Strongly Agree’	Mean Rating	Percent ‘Strongly Agree’
Presenters were knowledgeable about the topic	4.9	89%	4.9	94%	4.8	95%
Presenters responded to participants’ questions, comments and/or ideas in a positive way	4.9	89%	4.9	96%	4.8	95%
Workshop/Presentation was engaging	4.8	86%	4.9	96%	4.8	95%
Purpose of the workshop/ presentation was clear	4.8	85%	4.9	94%	4.8	95%
Workshop/ presentation was well organized	4.8	83%	4.9	96%	4.8	95%
Information provided/ discussed was useful	4.7	79%	4.9	96%	4.8	94%
Workshop/ presentation accomplished its objectives	4.7	77%	4.9	94%	4.7	92%
I plan to use information from this event in my own work	4.7	79%	4.9	96%	4.8	95%
The content of the workshop/ presentation addressed my professional learning needs	4.7	77%	4.9	95%	4.8	94%
Workshop/ Presentation increased my knowledge about the topic presented	4.6	73%	4.9	96%	4.8	94%
I plan to share information from this event with others	4.5	76%	4.9	97%	4.8	95%
OVERALL	4.7	81%	4.9	95%	4.8	94%

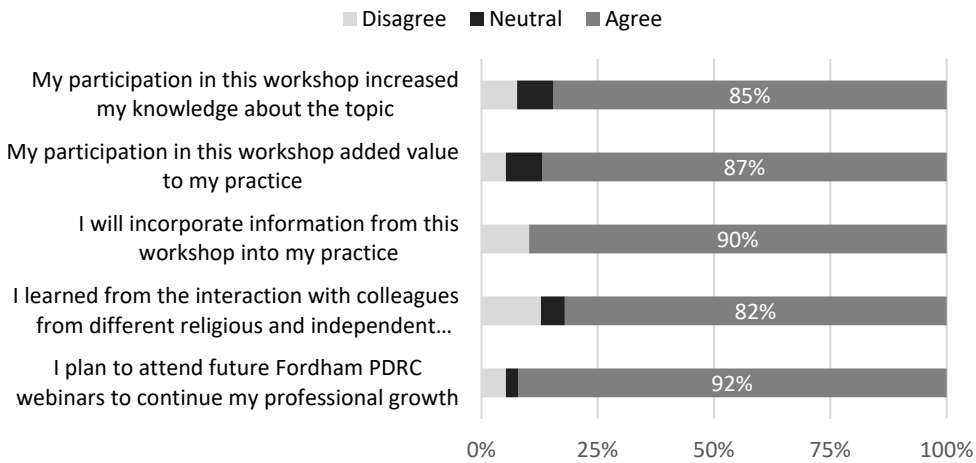


Figure 3. Satisfaction Scores for SEL Sessions (2022-2023) Source: Policy Studies Associates (2022)

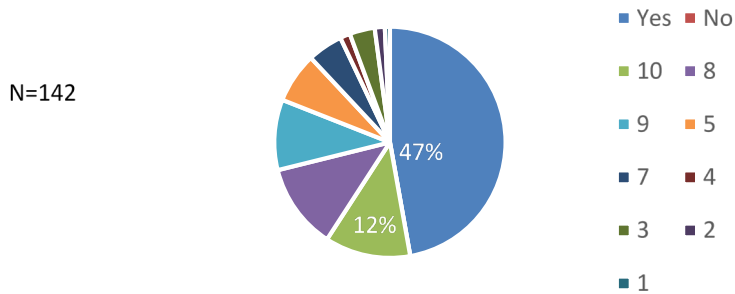


Figure 4. Was there a Connection between the workshop and promoting a positive school climate? Source: CEP Internal Document (2024)

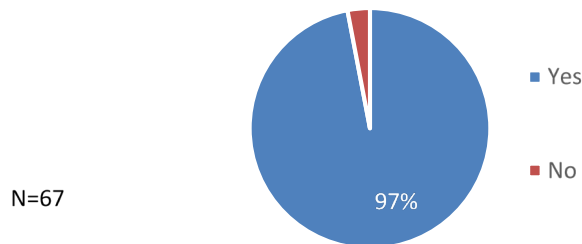
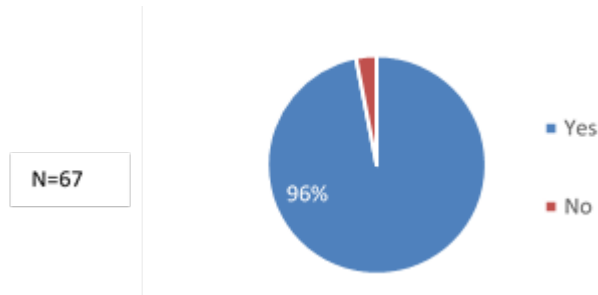


Figure 5. Do you feel you learned ways to help improve school’s culture and climate?. Source: CEP Internal Document (2024)



*Figure 6. Did workshop help improve your understanding of the link between mental health, student behaviors, and school safety? Source: CEP Document (2024)*

## **4. Conclusion**

Fordham was able to develop new programs that meet the “real time” Covid/Post-Covid needs of schools throughout New York City and State. Program participants noted that the professional development sessions and related supports were “immediately useful” in their work.

### **4.1. Summary**

This paper illustrates how a major university has responded and continues to respond to the needs of the public and non-public schools it serves both pre and post Covid through its Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP) established 19 years ago. By developing programs and securing funding to complement them, the CEP is impacting schools in this post-pandemic period with initiatives focusing on mental health, school climate, social emotional concerns and improving teacher practice enabling students to overcome learning loss.

### **4.2. Future Work**

Future work includes supporting NYC and State schools in relation to the major influx of migrant students, the expansion of our Community School Technical Assistance work to serve the entire Eastern Region of New York State and the expansion of services to non-public schools statewide, for which we have recently been funded; working with rural schools, continuing our mental health focus, and sharing our work both nationally and internationally.

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