

Greetings from the MCNC Director

Hello everyone! First off, I want to say ‘thank you’ for your participation in our first Virtual Winter Leadership Conference which was held via Zoom on February 4th. We had great presentations and discussions around how schools are meeting new and continuous demands presented by COVID by building community on multiple levels – supporting students emotionally, engaging outside partners, and deepening the college connection. We’re looking forward to continuing these important conversations at our upcoming summer conference when teachers and other school support staff will also be joining us.

In a [new study](#) released by the National Bureau of Economic Research, C. Kirabo Jackson, Professor of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, and his colleagues found that schools with robust impacts on student well-being may be helping students in ways that are not picked up by standardized tests. These schools may not have the highest test scores, but they are the most likely to motivate students to graduate and attend college, especially those students who are less likely to do so in the first place. This study validates our MCNC Design Principle #2: Comprehensive Student Supports which focuses on providing students with academic and socio-emotional support. It also underscores the reason why our students do so well in college courses during high school. The study also highlights a shift away from the importance of test scores as predictors of student success. Research like this supports the ongoing effort all of you have made at your schools, to focus on the well-being of our students at the moment, over a rush to cover curriculum content.

Therefore, in this issue of our Newsletter, we interviewed two MCNC counselors about how they are supporting students’ emotional health and academic readiness. They both speak to the importance of meeting individually with students on a regular basis and the need for strong school communication systems. Also, we highlight our professional development offerings which focus on engaging and supporting students in a holistic way. Be well and we will see you next month, right here!



Mental Health Training for Our Educators

This past December and January, MCNC held its first set of virtual professional development workshops for our MCNC community members. Understanding that many of us needed some extra social and emotional support to get through these challenging times, this professional development series focused on mental health awareness and strategies. The *Building Resilience in Our Time* workshop engaged participants in an open conversation about COVID-19, mindfulness, and self-care. Then, the *ADULT Mental Health First Aid Certification Training* and the *YOUTH Mental Health First Aid Certification Training* workshops focused on how to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and reach out and provide initial support to connect a given person in crisis with appropriate professional care, but with differentiated features and strategies for adults versus adolescents. Read excerpts from our conversation with the instructor, Abeda Khanam.



Abeda Khanam
Mental Health First Aid Instructor
NYC Department of Education
New York State Chaplain Task Force

“This past year, the biggest challenge at the surface feels like engagement, but I think it’s important to recognize that this apparent engagement issue is coming from somewhere and often stems from the stressors of isolation and loneliness. Although it is a unique time, teaching and its underlying themes do not change. Students are still looking for teachers and counselors who love to teach and mentor, who can demonstrate flexibility and empathy across the board. The only real difference is not being able to show that empathy in a physical classroom full of in-person learners. The idea of what the traditional physical classroom looks like has changed but it’s only the technology that has really changed, not the core principles of teaching and engagement.”

“I believe in professional developments that don’t just focus on how to increase our teaching output, but to fortify us as individuals – a holistic approach, if you will. An educator with a healthy mind is better equipped to serve their students, their families, and their community as a whole. I think it’s important to remember that it is not so much that we are all on the same boat, but perhaps, more like we are all in the same storm but on different boats. I cannot tell you how amazing it felt, after one year in lockdown, to meet with my colleagues from different states around the country and experience a slice of pre-pandemic normalcy; in the past, we would be at an MCNC conference talking to each other over a cup of coffee!”

SAVE THE DATE – March 18 & March 25, 4:00pm-6:00pm EST

Upcoming MCNC Professional Development Offerings! Learn to increase student engagement through equity- and access- focused curricular and instructional approaches that help cultivate deeper purpose and agency for students and their learning. The March 18th workshop will focus on English Language Arts and social science subjects and the March 25th workshop on math and science. Please make sure to save the dates and see the excerpts from our conversation with the instructor, Carlton Jordan, and what’s on his mind.



Carlton Jordan
Curriculum Specialist and Academic Coach
Institute for Student Achievement

“For me, every work sits within a landscape of other works and the tricky part there before teachers is to uncover that landscape so that they can make different paths and drive through a text to ensure that the right questions are being asked of the students and that the kids are writing, thinking, and creating. And I believe that doing this in a way to build students’ agency is really critical.” | “I’ve enjoyed working with schools that are struggling with engagement, which has been a much bigger challenge these days. When you’re in a classroom, it is easier to develop engagement when you can use tricks such as movement proximity to students, but now that we’re on computer screens and many of the kids are choosing not to show their faces, we’ve had to rethink how to engage students. Knowing that we’re in someone else’s home, we have no idea what’s behind the screen so I am encouraged when people don’t focus on kids not turning on their video. Having grown up poor on a potato farm, I can’t imagine how we would have negotiated different computers, Zoom classroom conversations, and just the space for us five kids!” | “For this professional development workshop, I’m interested in making sure that we use some tools that can be used to support overall critical thinking around concepts, and not a set of bells and whistles. It’s about how certain tools provide a doorway into engaging conversations with students.”



Velina Espinosa
School Counselor
Middle College High School
Santa Ana, CA

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“It’s certainly been a big pivot since everything is online and technology based now that we aren’t seeing anybody in person. And it looks like that will be the case for the rest of this school year here, so I’ve learned to just use the technology and the Zoom platform is just such a blessing in an amazing way to still be able to see students. We’ve had to learn how to digitalize a lot of forms and processes; we would typically go into classrooms for this. Well, I can still go into online classrooms! I see the way that we do our work in the future definitely changing more like this.”

“I teach a weekly one-hour non-credit course for 9th graders called Freshman Friday that focuses on equipping students with academic and socio-emotional strategies to handle school and life, and it’s been so important during this time when we can’t be together in-person. I collaborate with the college counselor and we’ve been doing this for over 10 years. Today, I’m doing a lesson on coping with anxiety and how to identify anxiety; recently, I’ve been presenting on our college course-taking pathways so that our 9th graders can be thinking about this now, despite not being physically at school on the college campus.”

“This year, our principal assigned 20 students to each staff member – we all have a small caseload of 20 students whom we check in on every week. This helps to ensure that we don’t have students just floating out there without any tethering to support and other people. This is critical with our students having to deal with online learning and family disruptions and what not during this time.”

“The social emotional piece, not surprisingly, has been so key for our students this year. For years, we’ve had a Collaboration Of Services Team (COST) which has met a few times each month. But now it’s been so much more important to meet on a weekly basis because we don’t have any way of just bumping into one another to talk informally about our kids. Certain formal meeting structures are important so we are very diligent about meeting once a week, sometimes even twice a week to talk about student needs. The COST includes our principal, college counselor, myself, a social worker intern from the district level, and our school community involvement person who helps in connecting with families. The COST also works with other planning groups in our school, like our Student Success Team as well as with individual teachers, to make sure our students are not falling through the cracks.”

“Despite the pandemic, we’ve been able to continue many of our partnership programs which helped us to keep our students engaged.

For example, our partnerships with the medical school and law school at the University of California Irvine – Street Lawyers and Doctors for Diversity – we’ve been able to continue these programs remotely through Zoom so that’s been really great. Lawyers and doctors will meet with our students monthly or even twice a month, to share their experiences and talk about related career opportunities and mentor and tutor our students. For the medical program, when we were in-person, they would also do hands-on labs with our students.”

“I think it’s really important for us to continue to think about who we’re serving and who needs us in terms of dual enrollment. It can very easily become the cream of the crop getting another opportunity. It’s not that they shouldn’t have the opportunity but there are a lot of different ways for that population to have a dual enrollment experience. Therefore, it’s so important to really continue our mission of serving students who need these early college course-taking opportunities the most.”

“Reflecting on my 36 years as a counselor, I think it’s really important for counselors to have a strong, working relationship with your administration and that there’s a plan and shared understanding around the role of counseling so that there is support all around in helping our students to be successful.”



Paula Fontes
Academic Counselor
New Heights Charter School
Brockton, MA

<https://www.newheightscharterschool.com>

“These have been challenging and stressful times for everyone – students, families, faculty and staff. Not being in the building together has been hard since we do everything virtually. Before I could pop into a classroom and easily connect with a teacher or student about any concerns.”

“Sometimes it feels as if the work is never ending. It felt like that even before the pandemic but now it feels like that even more. There are texts or emails at all times and sometimes, students may be expecting an immediate reply. For example, a student emailed me on a Saturday because she had just seen my email and she emailed saying she had time to meet at that moment, so we emailed and met even though it was a weekend.”

“It’s been easier to meet with families virtually since they don’t have to finish work and drive to school; they can get on Zoom from their phone from anywhere. We are still doing our monthly College Knowledge nights for families and we are finding that more people can attend these events because again, they can join from anywhere. They may even be preparing dinner while listening to or watching a presentation. This shift to virtual has helped us meet with more families and helped us overall, rethink how we can make school engagement easier for our families.”

“I work with all the students in grades 10-12 but my time is focused heavily with seniors at certain points to get them ready for college. I also meet once a week with the juniors, and once a month with the sophomores since they just started college classes. Our lab sessions that support students’ college classes are mandatory and we have an early alert system that lets us know if a student is in danger of failing a course. I can then reach out to students, particularly through the Remind App. My calendar is available online so students can schedule appointments with me and now being remote, students have a bit more flexibility than when we were in-person, so there are definitely pros and cons to this virtual world.”

“When I meet with students one-on-one, they typically turn on their cameras so I can see their expressions and get a sense of how they’re doing, but when I meet with students as a whole class, many don’t turn on their video. I have weekly meetings with juniors and seniors in my College and Career Readiness Class which focuses on college exploration, the application process, financial aid, transition after high school, college courses they’ve taken during high school, and course and career pathways. For a class of 20 students, I may have one or two students turn their cameras on, so it’s been harder to tell how students are taking in the information I present or share. Not being able to see students’ facial expressions and struggling to get students to respond or react through chat or unmuting their mics – I’m sure others can relate to this!”

“We also have an adjustment counselor who works with the same students I work with so that’s been very helpful. She does a great job of bringing students together around different activities like coping and self-care strategies to aid students with challenges or struggles they may be facing on top of their school work.”

“Students have been learning to advocate for themselves more and this is a good starting point. We are here to check-in, monitor, and provide support as much as we can, but at the same time, we’re not physically in school to walk the hallways and see if they’re having a bad day and pull them aside; we now have to call and reach out in different ways now.”

“As a counselor, I try to also support teachers but they also support me! Everything is now online so we do more excel spreadsheets than ever before! But that has really helped us to keep track of things. It can feel like you never stop meeting but we’re helping each other through all this and that’s been so important. We use the Google platform so we can all jump on and work together as a team. We try to find a common time that everybody can meet and also try to do professional development when everybody is available to meet together.”

“God bless all the counselors, teachers, and administrators and what they doing! And the students and families! We’re all in it together and sometimes, that is what’s getting me through all of this, knowing that I’m not alone.”