

Local School Leadership Reenergized With Hidden Sparks

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Barbara Deutsch of HANC

An educator for decades, Mrs. Barbara Deutsch, assistant principal at HANC West Hempstead, recognizes that the need for professional development for school administrators is ongoing. As Mrs. Deutsch states, “I need opportunities to grow and adjust my thinking to the needs of children and schools today.” From projects as complex as cultivating quality professional-development programs for their staff, to tasks as seemingly simple as making time to respond to a myriad of e-mails, local school administrators have numerous responsibilities that compete for their time. School leaders know that finding a forum that provides support, opportunity for collaboration with peers, and targeted presentations by experts in the field of education is crucial to their ongoing success. This is where Hidden Sparks steps in.

Hidden Sparks stands at the vanguard of professional-development organizations providing opportunities for teachers and administrators to better understand and meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. This year, at the Hidden Sparks annual retreat held earlier this month at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, 60 teachers and administrators from partnering schools came together to hone skills and practices that have been presented during prior Hidden Sparks trainings. While much of the day focused on the needs of those educators who have trained through Hidden Sparks to be coaches for teaching to diverse learners, additional time was allocated to the specific needs of principals such as Mrs. Deutsch and Dr. Evelyn Gross of Shulamith School for Girls of Long Island. Together with other principals from Queens, Brooklyn, and New Jersey, they spent time as a group sharing their strengths and focusing on the challenges that they face as leaders. Mrs. Deutsch returns to this retreat annually because, as she says, “I know I have a forum where I can be open and comfortable.”

The leadership session at this year’s retreat was presented by Dr. Rona Novick, co-educational director of Hidden Sparks and dean of the Azrieli Graduate School of Education and Administration at Yeshiva University. Using current articles on topics such as improving morale and performance among staff, and managing time and priorities, Dr. Novick created a springboard for rich and intense discussion and peer input on topics of immediate concern to the group. Debbie Niderberg, executive director of Hidden Sparks, was thrilled with the outcome, “It’s a unique opportunity to share leadership challenges and ideas and collaborate with both colleagues and educational leaders such as Claire Wurtzel, Dr. Rona Novick, and Esther Kramer. The engagement and depth of learning is so energizing.”

This leadership session came on the tail of two others held this past August and November, marking the inaugural year of Hidden Spark’s leadership program. The initial two meetings of the leadership program focused on developing professional learning communities in schools, and were topped off by a panel session by experts in the field. Rabbi Sebbag, principal of Yeshiva Darchei Menachem in Brooklyn, has been appreciative of the program, “I had wanted to network with other leaders, but I came out with much more. We came in to the first training session and the Hidden Sparks facilitators really listened to what the educators were saying. The very next time we met, they brought in professionals on those particular subjects—it was refreshing to have that kind of responsiveness.” The session at this month’s retreat returned to more global leadership concerns: “Engaging school leaders in the Hidden Sparks process, approach, and content is an essential and natural step towards our shared goals. We have seen huge outcomes when school leaders take our course and then drive the change in their schools,” says Debbie Niderberg.

Following Dr. Novick’s quip that principals “are like OPEC” in their need to energize their staff, Mrs. Shoshana Leibowitz, principal of Shaarei Zion Ohel Bracha Girls school in Queens, reaffirmed the need for programs such as these, saying, “I need to make sure that I have a ‘full tank of energy’ so that I can make sure that my staff do as well.”