

# School of Education Celebrates 10 Years of Supporting RIVERTOWN PARENTS

**A**s never before, parenting has become a challenge of unimaginable proportions. The compounded stressors of the pandemic, with its school closings, job insecurity, health concerns and adjustments to virtual learning, have only served to heighten the pressures on parents of school-age children, not to mention teachers and the young students themselves.

Yet parenting challenges are not new. For almost a decade Mercy College's School of Education has been an active partner in a community effort to support parents in the difficult and often baffling task of parenting. Rivertown Parents, a consortium of five neighboring school districts located along the Hudson River near the Dobbs Ferry Campus, was founded in 2012 to provide support and educational resources for parents, students and educators. The result is a long-standing relationship between Mercy College and the surrounding school community, and a bond that has deepened over the years.

That relationship began when leaders of the parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) in Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry, Hastings-on-Hudson, Irvington and Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow decided to pool their resources by creating a consortium of PTOs known as the Rivertown Parents. Based on the premise that PTOs can help parents strengthen their coping skills



and learn new tactics for raising emotionally balanced children, the founding members invited Mercy College to join the group. As an institution of higher education, with its access to experts, educators and resources, the College would serve not just as a consultant but as an educational partner.

"The School of Education has long-standing, robust partnerships

with many local schools and districts that enable us to work with teachers, school staff and administrators in mutually beneficial ways," said Eric Martone, Ph.D., interim dean of the School of Education. "Social-emotional learning is an important trend in contemporary education practices, and most districts in our area include it in their school curriculum planning. Our aim is to provide resources that can contribute to meeting the needs of the children and adolescents in our communities. From the outset, this partnership with parents seemed like a natural extension of these efforts."

Mary McNamara, one of three co-chairs of the Rivertown Parents, said that Mercy College's reputation for educating teachers has enhanced the parent group's ability to provide resources for families and teachers in the community. "From the beginning, Mercy has helped us advance our mission of parent education," she said. "They've made it possible for us to offer local resources and programs that have been very well received. Mercy's contribution has made a significant difference in what we have been able to achieve," she said.

The inaugural team of Mercy College representatives consisted of JungKang Miller, Ph.D., associate professor and chair, Department of Literacy and Multilingual Studies, Ilene Rothschild, Ed.D., associate professor of Special Education, and Aramina Ferrer, Ph.D., former associate professor, Literacy and Multilingual Studies. Current Mercy representatives are Victoria Núñez, Ph.D., assistant professor, Literacy and Multilingual Studies, Carolyn Cullen, Ph.D., assistant professor and program director, Mental Health Counseling, and Miller.

Through the years Mercy has hosted and developed workshops free of charge for parents and educators. Some programs have touched on sensitive yet critical subject matter requested by the Rivertown Parents. “In the beginning, the group was most interested in issues related to academic learning, such as STEM and technology in the classroom,” said Miller. “But gradually parents started to regard Mercy as a source of guidance on a range of topics that related more to what they faced as

parents. They began asking for help with complex challenges, such as emotional resiliency, identity, internet safety and digital boundaries—topics that have been more relevant than ever since the pandemic.”

Supporting the community’s goal of addressing complex issues led to Mercy’s decision to host a screening of a 2015 film about sexual assault on college campuses. “While it’s a difficult film to watch, it provided vital information that parents had asked for,” said Rothschild.

“We know we can always rely on Mercy to provide practical, applicable takeaways, not just talk,” said McNamara. “We’ve received feedback from parents who attend Mercy workshops and come away feeling empowered, better informed, and equipped with strategies and ideas they can use in their own lives.”

At present, Mercy continues to provide access to its faculty and administration who are well-versed in topics of interest such as Title IX, equity compliance, mental health counseling and more. As the

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partnership has grown, Mercy has provided access to additional supports, including bilingual interpreters, materials in Spanish, buses, and even babysitters. “We’ve tried to make the meetings more inclusive and accessible to all the families in these districts,” said Rothschild.

“There’s a lot of give and take when we all get together and afterwards,” said Miller. “Between meetings with the Rivertown Parents, we continue brainstorming to try to think of new ways to serve the families. It really does feel like a community.”

“These efforts are just one of the ways in which the School of Education strives to apply Mercy’s motto, *inserviendo consumere*, ‘to be consumed in service,’ to our interactions with local communities,” said Martone. “It’s not just a phrase. It dictates how we approach everything we do.”

