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Please see the pool report below from Staten Island Advance reporter Annalise Knudson.

First Lady Chirlane McCray and New York City Schools Chancellor Meisha Porter and were able to share their feelings and emotions along with students during a visit to PS 78 in Stapleton on Thursday — celebrating the second anniversary of the city Department of Education’s (DOE) social-emotional learning initiative.

Porter and McCray were joined by LaShawn Robinson, deputy chancellor for School Climate & Wellness at the DOE, as well as Staten Island’s (District 31) Executive Superintendent Barbara Freeman and Superintendent Dr. Marion Wilson.

The school visit was held to celebrate the anniversary of the comprehensive social-emotional learning plan, Resilient Kids, Safer Schools — a plan that supported students and made sure every school is a supportive and welcoming environment for students.

They were greeted by Principal Jodi Contento, and McCray remarked that they were all dressed in bright colors, saying, “What a beautiful rainbow!” They posed under a student-made sign hung at the entrance, welcoming them to PS 78. A group of younger students walking by in the hallway told Contento they helped make the signs.

“You did an amazing job on those signs,” Contento told the students. “You guys worked so hard on those.”

McCray and Porter went upstairs and visited a third-grade classroom to learn about social-emotional learning scenarios, taking a seat next to students in the circle. The class was led by general education teacher Nadine Thompson, and special education teacher Nicole Attardo.

“We are honored to have you visit our class. We’re honored to have you guys come visit us while we show you how we do social-emotional learning,” said Thompson.

The class participated in a restorative circle to promote positive social and emotional behaviors in the school community. Third-grader Olivia Pierre helped go over circle agreements, which included things like, “stay on topic,” “use soft moves,” “listen to each other,” “take turns talking,” and “stay in your space.”

Thompson and Attardo invited the students to stand up for their next exercise, sharing how they were feeling while holding a beach ball. Both Porter and McCray said they “feel excited.”

The class took three “whale” (deep) breaths, and then participated in a pass clap, where students clap at the same time to the person next to them. The lesson during Thursday’s class was to focus on emotions in real-life scenarios.

“We’re going to be focusing on our emotions and the emotions of others, by engaging in some real-life scenarios,” Attardo and Thompson said. “The reason that we chose scenarios to work on is that the students can focus on strategies, coping strategies, not just for things that happen in our classroom or in our school community, but also at home as well.”

The scenario: Math is very difficult and you’re working very hard, but it’s taking extra time and can be overwhelming and frustrated.

Students passed the beach ball to each other to share how they would feel in this scenario and what their initial reaction would be. In pairs of two, students then used social-emotional anchor charts to discuss coping strategies they would use, like taking a drink of water, taking a deep breath, or asking for help.

McCray says some of the strategies can “help calm your whole body.” A strategy she would use is to sit in a quiet corner. Porter listened as a student told her he would draw a picture, maybe of a lizard.

“We learned so much from you all today, great job,” Porter said, at the end of the lesson.

Porter and McCray then popped into a classroom next door, and gave some students high fives.

They traveled back downstairs to the gymnasium for a roundtable session. They met non-profit workers from New York Center for Interpersonal Development (NYCID), the community-based organization that partners with PS 78, as it is a community school. The PTA President Jean Council and kindergarten parent Francesca Santiago also participated.

The roundtable started with each participant sharing how they were feeling, like they did in the third-grade classroom.

“Two years ago, First Lady Chirlane McCray announced a comprehensive social-emotional learning plan called Safe Schools, Resilient Kids,” said Robinson. “This plan supported our students and made sure every school, every single school is supportive and welcoming environment for all children. The pandemic highlighted for us all the value of this work and we are fortunate to have schools like PS 78 under the leadership of our great principal here, who has been embraced the importance of social-emotional learning and understand that we have to support the whole child – academics and social-emotional learning.”

McCray said she has “no words for all the emotions flowing through her body.” As part of the plan, the city trained thousands of teachers — and it was all done before the pandemic, which McCray called a “blessing.”

“That we have this infrastructure in place before because we need it now more than we’ve ever needed it before. And we also know that this new part of our curriculum cannot be really successful unless it’s instituted within our classrooms. So today, sitting inside a classroom, going through the scenarios and listening to the children, I think is a great way to celebrate because this shows that it’s about the whole school community, it’s about the teachers, and principal, the parents, the family, all participating in this effort,” said McCray.

Porter said this learning is needed now more than ever, and that it's so important that students identify emotions within them and the strategies to deal with them.

"As we come back from the pandemic, as we bring all of our students back to school, it's going to be so important that we create safe spaces in our classrooms where they can deal with those feelings, deal with the trauma of coming back..." Porter said.

Contento said PS 78 takes a proactive approach by including social-emotional learning during a block of the school day. She explained she's seen a positive impact and a big difference in the school community, especially within classrooms where students can share how they are feeling. Thompson added that teachers are able to look at what the child is going through and what they are carrying with them in the school building, as opposed to a student simply being disrespectful.

Participants at the roundtable were invited to enjoy breakfast and coffee.