By Elisha Sessions

Over with a million students, New York City’s public school system is one of the most complex in the country. In a system so vast, information and resources are a way of falling through the cracks, making it difficult for principals to tend to the needs of their teachers and students.

The New York City Leadership Institute, under the mentorship of Mayor Bloomberg’s education agenda, aims to create a new generation of principals who can make the leap from managing their schools to leading them. At Columbia’s Graduate School of Business is helping them marshal the resources they need by offering a course known as the Education Leadership Consulting Lab.

In its second year of operation, the course places small teams of students with principals from the Academy, many of whom are in New York’s toughest schools.

The principals get help with information and contacts they don’t have time to dig up on their own. The students get a crash course in street-level consulting.

“We have to create a plan that’s actionable,” says Kelly Fischbach, a student in the Lab. “In the toughest schools, you create a case study and realize that ‘x’ is really ‘a’ ‘b’ ‘c’. Our job is to help him navigate our job is to help him navigate criteria on everything. Part of our work is to create an analytics he’s been given.”

Classes for the Education Lab are led by Donald Waite, executive-in-residence at the business school, and William Duggan, an assistant professor there. Duggan notes that the case studies created by his students are “classic consultancy projects.”

“In any consulting project,” says Duggan, “your client will say, ‘Will you find out about x? ’ You look into it and realize that ‘x’ is really ‘A’ ‘B’ and ‘c’.”

Last year, for instance, one principal asked his students to find out why the majority of his students weren’t yet enrolled at a health clinic in the network run by Montefiore Children’s Hospital.

Students found that it was nothing the kids were doing or weren’t doing—it was the school’s problem,” says Duggan. “It was that Montefiore simply wasn’t aware of the trouble kids had to go through to get enrolled.”

So Lab students created a plan to improve communication and coordination among students, school administrators and the clinic—thereby increasing enrollment.

Regardless of whether the Lab students eventually pursue a career in education (most do not) Duggan says that the real prize is experience in on-the-ground problem-solving—a “very rare and valuable commodity in business school.”

Columbia School of Social Work, Columbia Business School, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, School of Social Work, and School of Nursing.

As the nation’s prosperity has risen, so has the number of homeless Americans—indicating that “we have dealt with a National Institute of Mental Health.

The creation is in step with recent push by both the United States Inter- agony and director of the new center: “It’s crucial to know what doesn’t work. Is what people are really looking for?”

For more information on the Mailman School’s new initiative, go to columbia.edu/columbians.