

August 6, 2010

I grew up in Mt. Vernon and graduated from Lincoln School in 1939. As a volunteer with the literacy program of Westchester Community Partners (WCP) and a retired teacher, I requested to come back to Lincoln in the fall of 2009. Frankly, I was curious to see if I could discover why this school with 800 students (over 50% African American, 25% Latino, over 50% eligible for free or reduced price lunch and 25% limited English proficiency) consistently scored in the upper 90's to 100th percentile on state achievement tests in math, language arts, science and social studies in all grades tested. Where was the "achievement gap" we had all come to expect not only within the school's diverse population but with wealthier, whiter surrounding communities? It defied the norm.

From the moment I walked up the two flights of stairs to the office and first floor classrooms, I began to understand that Lincoln School, under the leadership of its principal George Albano, really was different. Chess trophies covered a long table outside the office. Walls were covered with art work, writing and photos of present students and more photos and news clips celebrated years past. After almost 25 years as an elementary school teacher, I knew I was in a school filled with pride and the joy of learning.

After six months as a mentor, I know that the difference comes from the top. Mr. Albano has inspired the Lincoln School community (children, staff and parents) to believe in themselves and embrace a "can and will do" mind set. He empowers his hand-picked teachers and support staff to do their best and provides a clean, structured, disciplined and nurturing environment where everyone can grow and succeed. He easily and often expresses his determination that every child should receive a quality education. To that end, he has established a curriculum based program incorporating academic subjects into music, art and physical education. When given the opportunity, Mr. Albano introduced a school wide chess program and invited WCP mentors. When materials and support are needed, he finds a way to provide them: class trips, cultural experiences? His response is yes.

George Albano doesn't have the same resources of his wealthier suburban school districts. He doesn't have smaller classes or more teachers than his peer elementary schools. Nor does he have the demographics or advanced learners that might suggest why Lincoln Elementary School is among the top performing schools in the state. What Principal Albano does have is a belief in the ability of each of his students to achieve and the willingness to seek out opportunities to strengthen his school: a competitive chess program, collaboration with Horace Mann, a high quality arts program, or mentors from WCP to overcome their personal learning challenges. Additionally, he inspires his teachers and the parents to be active in the educational process. He helps them succeed and thus, his students succeed. The difference is one man's commitment to do what it takes.

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