

Local Progress Grabs National Attention

The secret to success at this district's top elementary school starts with respect

There are many things Principal George Albano can't do. He can't walk through the brightly colored halls of Lincoln Elementary in Mount Vernon, N.Y., without virtually talking to every other teacher, lightly touch a shoulder in a warm gesture and explain the staff member's "never-missed-a-day-of-school" dedication.

He can't oversee carpeted classrooms without waving to students who look for his smile and compliments on their work.

He can't mention the school's chess competitions and trophy table, in-depth music program featuring a young opera singer and jaw-dropping test scores without saying how "special" it all is.

He can't let his teachers flounder, but instead urges them to pump up enthusiasm for reading or throw a party as a reward for good student work.

And he can't let his students down—black or white, short or tall, skinny or meaty, shy or bubbly, poor or not.

"There is a touch of genius in every child," Albano says. "We find a little notch of genius and expand on that."

And that's the secret to success at Lincoln Elementary School.

Just 25 minutes north of midtown Manhattan and in one of the state's wealthiest counties, Mount Vernon City School District has made a good start toward being a successful educational model.

Lincoln Elementary School alone—with a 60 percent black and Hispanic student body and half of all students

"There is a touch of genius in every child."

—George Albano, Lincoln Elementary

eligible for free or reduced lunch—has defied the naysayers, overcoming the "achievement gap" with its stellar reading and math test scores.

In 1999, 57 percent of Lincoln's fourth-graders met state standards in language arts, while 74 percent met standards in math. Test scores slowly increased in both subjects until 2002, when they jumped to 99 percent and then dipped to 97 percent in 2003.

Even poor students at Lincoln are reading and writing and solving math problems better than most of their wealthy counterparts in Westchester County and across the U.S.

About five of the district's 11 elementary schools are showing good test scores, but Lincoln, with 800 students, is the largest and has the most minority students. The achievement gap between whites and minorities is all but obliterated in this 800-student school.

The accolades have been high and

large. U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige points to the school as an example of achievement. "Lincoln Elementary personifies what No Child Left Behind is all about," Paige says. "Any time a school can close its achievement gap, it's a great day in America."

National media attention has brought about donations for special programs, such as chess lessons, from private and business organizations. Educators nationwide have written congratulatory letters and visited the school to try to grasp the recipe for such success. And Albano, who has been invited to speak to various educator groups nationwide, is looking to lead a mentoring program at his school that would welcome administrators and educators from other districts to see the school in action on any given day.

Bright Flight to Great Heights

While several elementary schools appear to be making a name for themselves—with some named or nominated as national Blue Ribbon School Awards for excellence—the district's middle and high schools are trying to catch up.

Sixty percent of students receive free or reduced lunches and only 39 percent of all students who start in Mount Vernon schools ever graduate from the two high schools, according to Superintendent Brenda L. Smith. Students sometimes move or head to other schools after elementary or middle school, she says.

But change is happening. Nelson Mandela Community High School's 160 students, many of whom were struggling in the larger Mount Vernon High School, are now "flourishing" and learning, Smith says.

Smaller schools created within the high school are also showing positive results. For example, the pilot Learning



Mount Vernon (N.Y.) City School District

Number of schools: 16 (11 elementary, two middle and

two high schools, plus a pre-K facility)

Number of teachers: 783

Student population: 9,700

Per-pupil expenditure: \$7,665

Drop-out rate (2003): 2.6%

Ethnicity: 79% black; 12%

Hispanic; 8% white; 1%

Asian/other

City population: 70,000

Per-capita income (2000):

\$20,827

Median value of single-family

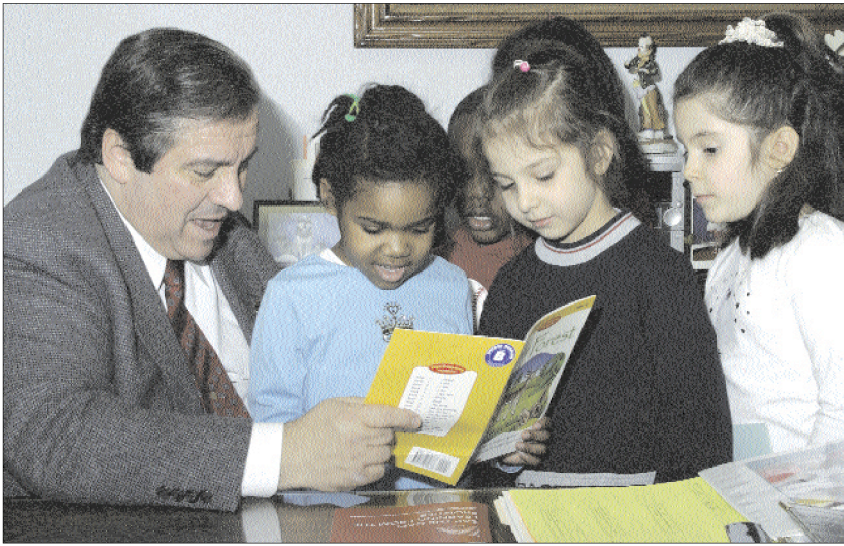
house: About \$600,000

Superintendent: Brenda L.

Smith, since 2002

Web site: www.lhric.org/

mtvernon



HIGH-FLUENCY Kindergartners Mandisa St. Hilaire, Marian Hassoun and Kathy Martins read to Principal Albano as part of a reading program to prepare for fourth-grade proficiency.

Academy for 125 ninth graders this year offers additional guidance counseling for students and prepares them for college, Smith says. “We’re hoping that over the next four years we’ll be able to restructure the entire high school.”

Other initiatives include an evening Learning Academy, for students 17 and older who repeated grades in high school, and a Saturday program for middle school students who need help in math and language arts.

Before Mount Vernon had a chance at success, however, it endured a divisive community. In the late 1970s, many black and Hispanic students came into the mostly white neighborhoods. The changing demographics started a trend of “bright flight” where mostly white students sought out parochial or private schools to get their education, Albano says.

When he became principal at Lincoln, three months after its 1979 opening, Albano started buying up-to-date teaching materials that told stories of heroes from every culture and walk of life. He brought in the best curriculum and transformed the dark gray walls into bright yellow, orange and blue, upon which children’s artwork hang today. He put mats at the front doors so children would wipe their shoes upon entering the building.

“The secret to this school is that teachers give the kids the respect that they want back,” says fourth-grade

teacher Mary Anderson, who, at 70-something, is the school’s oldest teacher.

“The teachers feel excited, like they are part of something special,” Albano adds. Two years after Albano started, the parochial school next door closed its doors for lack of business.

Former Superintendent Ronald Ross, who served from 1998 through 2002, first focused on elementary education. He increased staff development, placed an administrator in charge of specific state learning standards. He also offered donated bicycles to every student reading 50 books or more a year.

Whether it’s in math or pull-ups, every child has to feel talented at something, says Lincoln physical education teacher Frank Chousa. “We’re here to love the kids.” Music teacher Dana Bhatnagar, also an opera singer, offers history and language lessons in music. “I let them know that they can do what they dream of doing,” she says.

Third-grade teacher Donna Correale says her 24 years there have paid off. Many former students update her on their life changes; one sends her a birthday card every year.

Eyes and Mouths Wide Open, Arms Straight up Waving

It is near lunchtime and second graders are finishing their weekly media center lesson. Time to recall what they know. Teacher Lucille DiRuocco asks, “What do you need to make a good story?”

Half the students raise their hands in DiRuocco’s face, eyes wide open. Their eager looks reveal they know the answer and, oh, so want to answer it. “Use a good beginning,” one student answers.

Albano smiles and gently grabs one student’s arm. Others chime in: “A grabber.” Every story needs an attention-grabber, the students learn early on. It is evident that learning is fun here.

In other classes, a few students proudly read their own stories, now hanging from the ceiling or displayed on a hallway wall. They use flashy adjectives such as “creamy” and “extraordinary.” Devonte Banner, a black second grader, wrote about his favorite person—his mother: “Splash went the waves as my mom and I had built a massive sandcastle on the beach.”

Later, Reading Specialist Diana Mesisco explains that teachers use practice materials, but they don’t teach to the state test. “Everything we need to do well starts in kindergarten,” she says. Through constant assessments that teachers conduct for each child, heavy phonics instruction and steering children to think more critically (“Show me how and why the answer is right”), students are pushed to solve problems independently, Mesisco says.

The Big Crunch

Looking at the scores, the students, teachers, and excitement, one has to ask, is there anything wrong with this school? Albano and a few teachers admit, yes, there is.

Space. So many students want to be there that the school is busting at the seams, with one reading specialist and one psychologist. Classroom sizes range from 25 to 32 students as opposed to the low 20s of years past. The former Catholic School across the street accommodates sixth-graders and autistic kids.

“My goal is to continue to provide a quality education for all children, rich or poor, no matter the ethnicity,” Albano says. “I’m a firm believer in positive reinforcement for children. ... It’s so important to instill in [children] how special they are.” **DA**

Angela Pascopella is features editor.