

Mount Vernon, New York is a small city on the Hudson River about 20 miles from New York City. Bordering both the Bronx and Yonkers, the city has a population of about 68,000. Lincoln is the largest of the district's 11 elementary schools (the district also contains two middle schools and a high school).

Lincoln Elementary is situated on a busy but tree-lined street in a largely mixed-use area, giving it both an urban and suburban atmosphere. Signs at the school's entrance proudly announce the school's USDOE Blue Ribbon School award. Also welcoming visitors is a vibrant, buoyant, grandmotherly woman who expertly puts visitors at ease; she is the school's security guard, and has been for more than 21 years. Her warmth is repeated over and over by students and staff throughout a two-day visit.

Lincoln Elementary School Mount Vernon, NY

www.mtvernoncsd.org
800 students K-6

African American	50%
Hispanic	25%
White	23%
Free/ reduced-price meals	54%
Limited English Proficient	28%
Student/Teacher Ratio	23:1

The school consistently leads all the elementary schools in New York State assessments in ELA, math, science, and social studies, and since 2002 no fewer than 96% of its tested students have scored on levels 3 and 4, often reaching



100% on math, science, and social studies, as they did in the 2005-2006 school year. This means that in a school where 28% of the students are classified as Limited English Proficient and 54% are eligible for free or reduced price meals, the achievement gap that plagues many urban schools is largely non-existent among the disaggregated groups.

Before 2002, Lincoln students performed well on the state assessment, but not as well as now. The principal and staff admitted that the earlier state testing (the PEP test) was not very challenging. The movement toward accountability and No Child Left Behind, coupled with new, more challenging state assessments, stimulated school leaders to review and revise the curriculum and instructional supervision. Today, all students consistently score high.

How does this success occur in this setting? Part of the answer hangs on the walls of the school corridors and literally in just about every nook and cranny of the school: student work. This means not merely the display of best papers, but rather artistic presentations of student work from all grades and with appropriate degrees of

sophistication. “The corridors are another learning center” explains Principal Albano. The quality of displayed work emphasizes the high expectations for all students and provides a sense of a shared mission. And there is not an



errant mark, rip, or tear on the displays—signaling respect students show to each other and their work. There is even a large display of student-made miniature clay figurines at the entrance to the school office.

The theme of student creativity is carried over to the open classrooms where more content-specific and both large and small scale works are displayed. The term print-rich only begins to describe the school environment.

Key Practices

Asked the cause of students’ success as measured by test scores, teachers, both new and more experienced, as well as parents and members of the school leadership team universally answer: “The principal, George Albano.” All describe a principal who has taken it upon himself to become a true instructional leader comfortable discussing content areas with teachers, a mentor to

faculty, and an administrator familiar with all the children and their accomplishments and struggles. Albano reads all the work on all the walls and can call out from the classroom, by name, its student authors to read or explain their work to a visitor. He



has made a deliberate attempt to balance testing with an infusion of arts, saying “Capture them in the arts and the academics will follow.” And finally, he has consciously set out to create an environment where there is discipline and respect for all.

Principal Albano’s whole-school approach to education involves a handful of key practices. The school’s assessment program includes both comprehensive formative and standardized assessments. Results are communicated to all stakeholders and drive decision-making, instructional policies and programs, resources and expenditures, curricula, and academic and support services. Curriculum frameworks are aligned with state standards in all content areas. Reading, writing, and the arts are integrated throughout the content areas. A supervisory presence in all classes,

formally or informally, has fostered a dialogue among teachers and administration that has heightened awareness and use of best instructional practices in the classroom. Professional development includes training in data use to determine needs and assess effectiveness. Faculty members are identified, chosen, and nurtured to maximize and



support their abilities. The principal capitalizes on his staff members' expertise to share their "best practices." Students have ample opportunities to develop leadership and social awareness as a formal part of their education.

This approach has developed over time since Mr. Albano assumed school leadership in 1980, when the district was under an Office of Civil Rights order to integrate. With a \$100,000 state grant, Mr. Albano stocked the school with culturally relevant materials and

hung oil paintings and reproductions on the walls, forerunners of the student work on display today. This was a deliberate attempt to offer students a diversity of role models and to raise their awareness of the contribution of the groups represented in their school and community. He then set out to develop and attract proficient educators who shared his high expectations of all students and comfort with a diverse student population.

Signal among these educators are the Assistant Principal and members of the Resource Team. The Resource team comprises two reading specialists and one ESL specialist, experienced faculty members continually motivated to expand their skills and share them with the faculty. The team is instrumental in keeping messages consistent across grades and content areas; it spends time in classrooms mentoring teachers, coaching, and organizing in-house professional development workshops to keep teachers motivated and professionally up-to-date. The principal and assistant principal conduct regular formal and informal observations.

Staff turnover is low; one teacher just completed her 42nd year of service to the school, while a former student has returned as a teacher, and another former teacher (now retired) serves as an adjunct science teacher in Kindergarten classrooms and also makes recommendations on schoolwide science supplies. Students are rewarded for good behavior through PA "Good Citizen of the Day" announcements, and students recently made and sold a school chorus tape,



donating \$8,000 to charity. Many students are moved to action without external rewards: student Future Teacher Volunteers donate their free time in classes, and fourth graders tutor first graders in some classes. Students' academic success has generated both publicity and funding, such as a sizeable, multi-year donation to the school's chess club from a benefactor in Connecticut, which has supported a chess master who teaches the game's fundamental principles and how to notate games to all interested students.

Parents expressed appreciation for the school's structured reporting of student progress through scheduled conferences, monthly meetings, and child study meetings, to name a few. A trilingual monthly newsletter also helps



to keep parents informed. An active PTA raises funds and coordinates after-school activities such as sports and reading, chess, and language clubs. A parent said that her child "feels the caring and expectations put upon her, which results in not wanting to disappoint her teachers." Parents often volunteer to help classroom teachers and are welcomed throughout the school.

A member of the leadership team remarked that there is "a high level of accountability for teachers" but that they are also given a great deal of recognition and support. Teachers observed that Principal Albano ensures that all faculty members have the supplies they need for teaching and that the office administrative assistant has all the materials and supplies ready by the first day of school. On each floor of the building, teachers have access to a copy machine.

Support for the Key Practices

Lincoln Elementary School offers two ELA programs in support of the school's Balanced Literacy Program. Additionally, every classroom has its own library of leveled readers, trade books, multicultural anthologies, and supplementary workbooks. The school Reading Specialists provide grade-level support for teachers in implementing the literacy program. The school library occupies a large, prominent area in the school and is home to many student-centered activities and the computer lab. The dynamic librarian has created many attractive displays and story areas for teachers and students.

Student support programs include small-group pull-out and push-in programs by reading specialists. The district has trained teachers in an intensive, short-term, one-on-one intervention to meet the needs of the hardest-to-teach children and to help struggling readers catch up. At Lincoln all K-1 teachers use a multi-sensory program to teach reading, spelling, and handwriting.

School administrators and staff are deeply committed to fostering the love and habit of reading in their students. Monthly schoolwide reading themes thread the school year, such as "Reading is a Gift You Give Yourself" in December and "Reading is at the Heart of Everything We Do" in February.

As examples of literacy across the curriculum, the music teacher and first grade teacher collaborated and taught first graders to read and perform a jazz rendition of Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* for a Reading is Fundamental distribution day honoring the famous author. Two fifth grade classes used the scientific method to make a hypothesis, gather materials, collect observations, and draw conclusions about the differences between combining an egg with green vinegar and combining an egg with green water.



As part of "Star Search," a schoolwide literacy incentive that integrates the arts, students were not only required to read books, but asked to write original songs about their favorite book characters or turn the plots of their favorite books into lyrics set to their favorite songs. Students who successfully completed the incentive's goals were invited to attend or perform at a musical competition. Four hundred fifty students met the goals, 80 of whom volunteered to



perform. Those 80 students also volunteered to compete in the first "Lincoln School Idol Competition," inspired by the popular television show.

Science and math in particular are frequent centers of multidisciplinary experience. For a fifth-grade project about rockets, the teacher built on an exercise led by the physical education teacher, using bouncing balls to demonstrate the theory of velocity. Lincoln students, who by second grade have already learned the difference between a dependent and independent variable, use rocket-simulating balloons to test their hypotheses about how far the balloons will travel, based on their measures of inflated air.

The school schedule provides uninterrupted 90-minute literacy blocks. Weekly common planning time gives grade-level teachers and coaches time to meet to discuss instructional and curricular issues. Common pull-out times by support staff minimize class interruptions and maximize teacher class time.

"At Lincoln, assessments drive instruction," members of the leadership team concurred. Teachers said they don't wait until a month before testing to begin to monitor student progress; they give the principal monthly student reading and writing portfolios to gauge their and student progress. In addition to the NYS standardized tests administered from third through sixth grades, less formal assessments include portfolios, program assessments, diagnostic tests, and specifically designed rubrics used by both teachers and students. Classroom teachers and specialists meet to analyze individual student profiles and to identify students "at risk." Students are made aware of their progress and assessment results through weekly test folders sent home and signed by parents or guardians as well as through frequent teacher-student conferences.

The visitors found a variety of instructional approaches in use: modeled, whole-group, and direct instruction as well as small-group and individual instruction. Flexible groupings and cooperative learning groups, based on ability, interest, or choice were well-implemented. Teachers have designed rubrics specifically tied to the ELA Standards to enable students to understand what is expected of them. The school's strong mentoring program is provided to all new teachers and to more experienced teachers whom administrators feel may benefit from it.

Conclusion

Principal Albano has developed an understanding of what a sound educational organization should look like and what it takes to maintain it at a high-functioning level. The elements are a strong curriculum tied to standards, with a strong assessment component that informs instruction, a highly qualified and motivated staff, a strong but supportive



supervisory presence, and empowered parents and students.

With a talent for hiring imaginative, creative people who really want to teach, Mr. Albano is also skilled at finding talented people or spotting potential in people with some special quality or content knowledge. And he has leveraged the students' high test scores (and the attendant national fame) to attract even more resources

and talent to support and enhance the educational programs. For example, the leader of the school's science education program is a former NASA engineer who was unemployed when his children attended Lincoln; Mr. Albano brought him into the school to work as a teacher assistant, then urged him to pursue the Master's program at Fordham University.

Mr. Albano has spread the word about Lincoln's success to national and international educational conferences as well as on television shows and in newspaper and magazine articles. Open discussions with numerous visiting educators have led to the sharing of ideas, practices, and valuable information. Lincoln's "Success" booklet details the school's most effective strategies for improving student performance levels on state assessments.

Lincoln Elementary School State Criterion-Referenced Tests				
% proficient and above: 4th grade ELA				
	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	97	99	96	100
Low income	94	100	95	
State average				68
% proficient and above: 4th grade Math				
	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	97	100	100	99
Low income	100	100	100	
State average				78

