

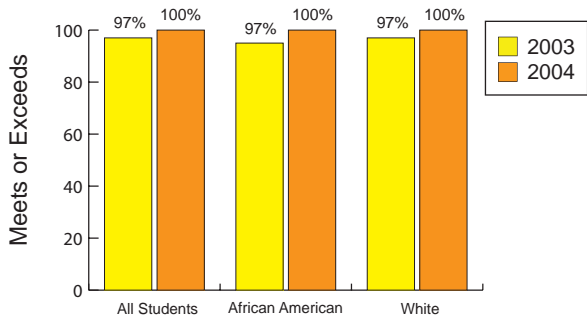
“We Can’t Give Up on a Generation of Children.”

-- George Albano, principal
Lincoln Elementary School, Mount Vernon, New York

Lincoln Elementary School Mount Vernon, NY

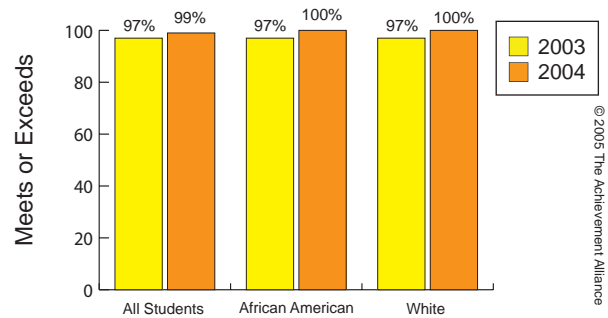
- 49% African American
- 28% White
- 21% Latino
- 48% Low Income
- 27% LEP
- Made AYP for 2003–04

All Students Meeting Standards Grade 4—Mathematics



Source: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2004/overview-analysis/660900010006.pdf>

All Students Meeting Standards Grade 4—English/Language Arts



Source: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2004/overview-analysis/660900010006.pdf>

Lincoln Elementary School in Mount Vernon, New York, has become so used to performing toward the top of the state that its performance hardly seems remarkable anymore.

When the preliminary results from the 2005 state English Language Arts test showed that all but one of the fourth-grade students scored at or above state standards, the staff was pleased, but their only surprise was about the student who did not score well. “I know he can do the work, I guess he just had a bad day,” said his teacher, Mary Anderson.

Some years – such as 2004 -- no one has a bad day and Lincoln posts 100 percent of students as meeting or exceeding state standards.

Few people expect schools like Lincoln to perform at such a high level. A large school, it has 800 or so students, 43 percent of whom are African American and 21 percent Latino. In 2005, 41

percent of the children received free lunch and another 11 percent received reduced-price lunch, a measure of poverty (in the 2003-4 school year it was 36 percent and 11 percent, respectively). Twenty-seven percent of the children – more than 200 -- are limited English speakers. The most common language among non-English speakers is Brazilian Portuguese, but students also speak Spanish, Korean, Russian, French, Creole, and Chinese.

And yet, Lincoln performs comparably to much wealthier schools in Westchester County. It has a much higher percentage of students meeting and exceeding state standards than schools identified by New York State as demographically similar. At those schools, only 57 percent of students meet or exceed state standards, in comparison to students at Lincoln, whose passage rates fluctuate from about 95 to 100 percent. And in science, 82 percent of Lincoln students don't just meet state standards but exceed them (in comparison to 32 percent of students in similar schools).

Lincoln's performance on state tests is the least of it. Performance in chess matches is just as valued – chess trophies stack up at the entrance to the school, a mark of the many competitions students win. Art fills the first-floor hallways, and so does the sound of classical music. Students love to show off their reading and writing, which is posted throughout the school, and they enjoy playing a version of stump-the-guest with difficult vocabulary words. At the school's science fair, projects range from the usual elementary school plant-growing projects to much more sophisticated engineering projects demonstrating the feasibility of magnetic transportation and molecular separation.

Ask the teachers what makes Lincoln special, and they say the principal. Ask the principal, George Albano, and he says that he manages the school in such a way that teachers can do their best.



**George Albano reading with students.
(Photo taken from www.georgealbano.com.)**

"I didn't think I was doing anything out of the ordinary," Albano says. "I thought most American schools operated this way." But when test scores began to be published in 1999 and Lincoln began outperforming many other schools, including much wealthier ones a few years later, Albano realized that his school was, in fact, out of the ordinary. And he is convinced that the reason other schools do not match the performance of Lincoln is simply one of poor management, a problem which could be solved with better training of school leaders. "The teaching force is there," he says. And, he adds, today's teachers are often

better trained than he was at the beginning of his career. He boasts that he has no trouble finding excellent teachers, though he acknowledges the school's being an easy train ride from New York City helps. But, he says, poor management drives so many teachers out of the profession that it appears as if the nation has a teaching shortage when in fact the real shortage is in skilled principals.

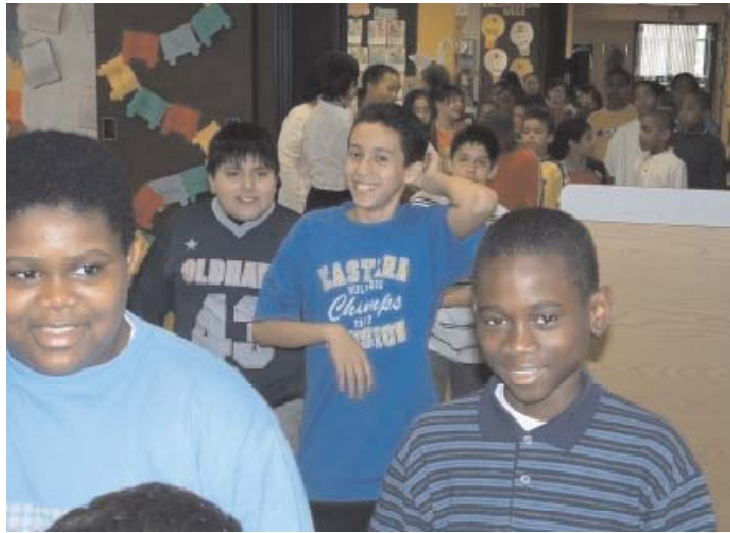
As exhibit A he produces fifth-grade teacher, Hilary Harness.

Harness began teaching after college as part of the New York City Teaching Fellow program which

recruits new teachers. Her assignment was to teach special education in a school in the South Bronx.

“It was a terrible experience,” she says. The school, she adds, was badly managed meaning that, among other things, discipline was a serious issue. “It wasn’t a healthy environment. I was called all kinds of names that I wouldn’t repeat in this school -- and it was accepted.” Disruptive students knew they wouldn’t be called to account for their behavior. “When I got to teach, I loved it. But I didn’t get the opportunity to teach much.” She was on her own, with little support from other teachers or administrators. “I asked my principal for a reading program,” she says, because her students needed phonics instruction. She says he said no, “because it didn’t matter, they’re special ed.”

She kept asking for books and materials, which were never provided. “The principal would literally hide from me when I brought my class into the hallway.”



She was ready to quit her dream of teaching and go to law school. But she thought she would give it one more try. She had heard that Lincoln was different, and she visited, interviewed and was hired. “After the first three days I felt that there’s no way I’d leave here.” She now plans to teach long enough to retire from the profession.

“The kids are basically the same,” she says, comparing Lincoln with her old school. “But it’s the administration. One of my [former] principal’s favorite things was to tell us what bad

teachers we were. Mr. Albano tells us what a great job we’re doing and he has an incredible mentoring program that tells us the direction to go in.”

For his part, Albano points to Harness as an example of an excellent teacher who was almost “lost to the profession” by poor managerial practices.

When Albano first arrived at Lincoln, 26 years ago, it was to clear up a mess. A desegregation order had quickly changed the demographics of the school. The new building had been open for only three weeks when African-American students were bused to the previously all-White school, and White families began fleeing to the private school next door. The private school “went from having 13 in their classes to having 43 students in their classes – practically overnight,” says Albano.

“The Black families didn’t feel welcome. But [the White families] weren’t fleeing from integration. They were fleeing chaos.” Discipline was a serious problem, and very little teaching was going on, Albano says.

Albano, who had taught high school U.S. and world history for seven years, was already an experienced principal. He had served as a principal in a middle-class Black school and then in an inner-city Black school. He wasn’t eager to take on such a chaotic situation as Lincoln, but the school was only two blocks from the house where he was born and where he continues to live, and he agreed to accept the challenge.

Built in the 1970s, the school’s design itself contributed to the chaos. Except for the kindergarten, almost all the classrooms are open classrooms – small alcoves opening onto common areas. “Teachers were always shouting to be heard, and the noise was terrible,” Albano says. He began playing quiet classical music throughout the building and told teachers and the students that if they couldn’t hear the music they were speaking too loudly.

He spent the first year dealing with discipline. “We developed a zero-tolerance for disrespect,” Albano says. And that works both ways -- teacher-to-student disrespect as well as student-to-teacher disrespect. Early on, nine teachers transferred. “They left,” Albano says. “I’ve never fired a teacher.” Now the atmosphere is one of courtesy and respect. Students say please, thank you, and excuse me, and are eager to show teachers and administrators their latest project or paper; teachers greet children by name and with affection and interest.

Although graffiti appears on the school building perhaps once a week, it doesn’t last a day – building maintenance takes care of it immediately so that from the outside the school looks orderly. Inside, the walls are unscuffed and the hallways and classrooms are free of debris. Albano says there haven’t been any thefts in years. The biggest discipline problem he has faced recently came when a neighbor came in to complain that he had almost been hit by an industrial-sized roll of toilet paper that had been thrown from a bathroom window a couple of stories up. After investigating, Albano found the culprit and when he talked with him found that the boy had the night before learned that his parents were getting divorced. “I gave him community service, and so forth,” Albano says, but more importantly he was able to find out something important about the child and refer him to a counselor for help.

This is a far cry from the early days when disrespect and disorder were the norm.

When he arrived, Albano immediately established a policy that report cards must be picked up by a parent or guardian in order to establish a home-school connection. The first year, he says, only 40 percent of the report cards were picked up. Teachers called home, and Spanish-speaking parents and staff called the Spanish-speaking families to remind them. After awhile, it became part of the school’s culture and now just about all report cards are picked up. Some parents were unhappy initially, but Albano eventually convinced them that it was not difficult to stop by the school. “I’m here at 7 in the morning and I’ll meet a parent as late as 10 o’clock if they need it,” he says.

Parents and guardians are deliberately incorporated whenever possible, but in a way that all can participate. Writing projects are completed in school, but they are often illustrated at home where parents can help, for example. Students and parents work on changing the extensive hallway displays every week – parents who can’t come in to help cut out letters at home.

“We have wonderful parents who don’t have a lot of means...but they want to give back,” says Albano.

Many schools with similar demographics to Lincoln are not calm, well-ordered, and high-achieving schools where parents participate regularly. Albano says bad management is often to blame – sometimes monumentally bad management. He tells the story of a school in which he was assistant principal. He walked in to complaints that there was vastly insufficient money for supplies. His first step was to inventory what was in the building. “There were 900 gallons of ditto fluid sitting next to the furnace room. The place was a time bomb.” The previous principal, he found, had simply submitted the same supply request year after year without ever reviewing it or changing it. After donating ditto fluid to every school in the area, Albano quickly got control of the supply issue.

At the same school, he found that textbook distribution was a job given to the building maintenance people. “You had first-graders with fourth-grade books and fourth-graders with second-grade books, etcetera.” He immediately straightened that out.

At Lincoln, school-wide curriculum committees work together to select materials, and then each teacher puts in an order for books and supplies before the end of the year; when they arrive back before school starts, the books and supplies are waiting for them in their classrooms.

But managing a school isn’t just about books and supplies. Albano’s key management strategy is

hiring good teachers and then keeping them. “We select the best in the profession and then retain them,” Albano says. He was able to bring a few teachers with him, including Diana Messisco, who is now the reading specialist, and fourth-grade teacher Mary Anderson, who is now 75. “My accountant tells me it costs me \$8,000 a year to keep working,” she says. For a few years, he had opera singer Dana Bhatnagar teach music, until she moved to Colorado to continue her music career and get married. Now the music teacher is Fred Motley, who among other things leads the jazz band at St. John’s University and the pep band at Hofstra University. “I’ve taught for 31 years,” Motley says. “This man cares about every aspect of the school from graffiti to the arts,” Motley says about Albano. “He creates an environment where I can teach -- I’ve been in schools where I’m a policeman for 95 percent of the time.”

Teachers in the Mount Vernon district make less than teachers elsewhere in Westchester – sometimes as much as 20 percent less. But, Albano says, he is able to retain them because they “know they’re appreciated and part of something special.” The way Anderson puts it is that he gets 50 teachers to feel that “the best time of their life is spent here.”

Albano looks for skill and potential everywhere. For example, one day office manager Veronica Schaeffer (who was lured from a corporate job) told Albano that an unemployed father who brought his children to school every day had been, until he was laid off, a NASA contractor. Albano hired him as a lunchroom aide and set him up in Fordham University’s two-year master’s program. Under that program he received a free master’s of education and a stipend of \$300 a month. When he was done, he got a job at Lincoln, where he leads the science education program. His influence can be seen in the heavy emphasis on engineering projects in the science fair.

Although Albano is bound by district hiring rules, he has few applicants from within the district. Instead, he solicits resumes from all over. Coming from a family of educators (18 members of his extended family teach in the New York area), he has connections throughout the region. But he is not the only one involved in hiring decisions. Teaching applicants meet with a committee of parents and teach a model lesson in front of a classroom of children and five adults from the school before they’re hired.

“Then we have to give them support,” Albano says. “New, insecure teachers” need a lot of support, he adds. For example, a new teacher just out of school was paired with reading specialist Messisco. “I mentored [her] two hours a day every day,” says Messisco. “She’s very bright and capable, but she didn’t know the curriculum.”

Teachers feel supported in lots of different ways. . Although teachers work hard, veteran fifth-grade teacher Jim LeRay says, “the burnout issue doesn’t arise” because of the good management of the school. “The reason you don’t burn out is the frustrations aren’t there. When you have a discipline problem, a supply issue, a furnace issue -- that burns you out.”

In addition, Lincoln provides a family atmosphere for its staff. “I was in the hospital for gall bladder,” says teacher Esther Ehrman. “The first person who called was Mr. Albano.” Albano encourages monthly staff breakfasts in the auditorium where each grade level takes a turn arranging the room and ordering the food

Albano, in other words, has created a school in which teachers feel comfortable teaching and in learning to be better teachers. Seventy-five-year-old Anderson says, “I was not as good a teacher with four other principals.”

Part of that is the fact that Albano encourages teachers to take risks. For example, Anderson felt strongly that there should be a chess program in the school to give the children some intellectual excitement and a new field to conquer. Her husband volunteered to be the sponsor of a chess club.



Teacher Mary Anderson (left) with students. The everpresent chess tables are on the right.

The club proved popular, and chess is now a cornerstone experience of the school. When a wealthy businessman wanted to make a donation to the school, Albano told him instead to donate to the National Scholastic Chess Federation with direction that the money be used to send chess masters to teach chess. Now, twice a week, Lincoln students receive classroom instruction in chess by chess masters using felt boards and pieces hanging in front of the classrooms. All students learn the fundamental principles and how to notate games. If they want to pursue the subject further, they join the chess club. Anderson brags about the kindergartener who beat a wealthy Westchester County child who had “two personal chess coaches.”

That story also illustrates how Albano pulls in resources in addition to the \$13,807 per student the school receives from local, state, and federal sources. Although that amount sounds high in comparison to many schools in the country, it is considerably lower than many other schools in Westchester County. Nearby Bronxville Elementary, for example, spends \$19,711 per child per year. In any case, Albano is constantly looking for “ways to close the opportunity gap.” He welcomes volunteers, and has several working and retired professionals read to kids, play chess with kids, and have lunch with kids. When a local, exclusive private school was replacing its computers, someone from the school called to see if Lincoln wanted its old computers. The call was treated as an immediate call to action, with office manager Schaeffer and the building computer technician jumping in cars and renting a truck to go move the computers. As a result, Lincoln now has an iMac computer lab. Albano writes to people out of the blue asking them to visit, and Lincoln has hosted actress Phylicia Rashad, author-illustrator Jerry Pinkney, and mystery writer Carol Higgins Clark.

But at the heart of what Lincoln does is classroom instruction, which is very carefully and thoughtfully built.

It begins with reading. “We have a comprehensive, balanced reading program,” says reading specialist Diana Messisco. In order to make sure no element of reading is left out, all the early reading teachers use a common curriculum supplemented by a wide selection of quality trade books. Great emphasis is placed on reading aloud, shared reading, and guided reading. “What makes us special is fostering a love of reading,” Messisco says.

In addition to the daily emphasis on reading, the school sponsors all kinds of reading events, including a track-and-field day when contests include children racing with books on their heads. “Hats Off to Reading Day” means that students wear hats of a book character. The Reading-is-Fundamental organization provides books, and Lincoln holds regular book swaps for students. The PTA sponsors a picnic with blankets and drinks for kids to sit and read. And this year’s “VIP Reading Day” featured the custodian and the physical education teacher reading books to the children.



“It didn’t cost us a dime,” says Albano. In addition, every classroom has a set of “books-in-a-bag” which consist of large ziplock bags each containing a book and a worksheet with some kind of activity – a short character study, for example – to be taken home and completed every week. Teachers select books that are above, below, and on-grade level; if the book is above the ability of the child’s ability to read, the child is expected to find a grownup to read it to him or her. Teachers are able to take quick stock of children’s reading and comprehension from the activities, which are kept in a folder. Every time a child finishes a book he or she is entitled to a sticker from the principal.

Reading is just the beginning, however. Writing is also carefully and systematically taught, with just as much enthusiasm.

Student writing is posted throughout the school, and the first thing a visitor notices is the handwriting. Papers are uniformly neat and legible, pointing to careful instruction in handwriting. “Everything is important,” says Albano. “Spelling is important, handwriting is important. Grammar, etcetera.”

But it is also clear that great attention is paid to the content of writing. A few minutes in Lucille DiRuocco’s second-grade classroom shows the level of instruction.

“When we write, we want our stories to be interesting. We say we want them to be ‘juicy.’ What makes a story juicy?” DiRuocco asks her class. The first student she calls on, James, says, “We need a grabber. For example, dialogue, which is conversation between two people.”

Jonathan: “Action – It’s when you are doing something, like diving.”

Camille: “You can use thoughts and feelings. For example, ‘When I was outside I was thinking, “what is that creature?””

Sabrina: “Sound effects. For example, ‘Splash as I dove head first into the crystal clear water.”

Evan: “A question. For example, ‘Where’s papa going with that ax?’ (This last is an example from *Charlotte’s Web*, a favorite book at Lincoln in part because its author, E.B. White, graduated from Lincoln.)



“What else do we have to put in our story to make it good, to make it juicy, to make it interesting?” asks DiRuocco, and a student answers, “A simile – A simile is when you put ‘like’ or ‘as’ in the middle of a sentence and compare two words. For example, ‘My dad looks as brilliant as a diamond.’”

Lucille DiRuocco: “What makes a story juicy?”

DiRuocco recognizes that line from an essay the students had written about a special person. “When we wrote about a special person we used sense words,” she reminded the students, asking for an example.

Yasmin: “My dad sounds calm like the sea.”

DiRuocco: “Oh, isn’t that beautiful. That’s a special person who sounds calm like the sea. You can get a real picture from that, can’t you? That sounds better than ‘my dad has a nice voice.’”

When students enter her second grade, DiRuocco says, “They don’t know how to indent

paragraphs.” But toward the end of the year, they are entering into sophisticated discussions of how to write effectively. And student work posted all over the building shows the effects of such careful instruction.

For examples of student writing, go to www.achievementalliance.org/files/Lincolnwriting.pdf.

Creativity is constantly encouraged and developed, but it is built on a solid base of knowledge. DiRuocco says, “Facts have to be memorized.” Making flashcards – gluing paper onto both sides of a cut-up cereal box, for example -- is a frequent homework assignment that can be done with family members. Time (analog and digital clock faces), addition facts, multiplication facts, and spelling words are all fodder for flashcards. One student demonstrates the way students at Lincoln memorize facts. “We say the fact three times and then we close our eyes and we have to push it in three times” (with a hand gesture that shows him “pushing in” the fact into his head).

Each student has a creative writing folder, a math folder, and a science folder (with a minimum of four experiments written up each quarter in the different areas of science – earth, physical, and life) that follow him or her through school and that are reviewed regularly by the teachers and by Albano. But students also monitor their own work using rubrics developed by the teachers, so they know before a teacher ever reviews it what standards it is supposed to meet and whether it meets it.

Every aspect of the curriculum gets this kind of care. “Nothing is left to chance,” says assistant principal Lyuba Sesay. Teachers meet regularly in grade levels and across grade levels to work on what will be taught when. Once a month, for example, they have a “science day” to plan the month’s worth of science lessons. Classroom and teacher schedules are carefully choreographed to make sure that teachers get the time they need to meet so that they can make sure children are getting the instruction they need. Instruction is not constantly interrupted. The teachers and administrators work hard to schedule all special services – counseling, occupational therapy, speech therapy, music lessons, and so forth – in such a way that teachers have their full classes for at least 85 percent of the time.

Some of the instruction is, certainly, focused on preparing for the tests given by New York State. But the popular notion of a school doing mindnumbing “test prep” and “drill and kill” focused narrowly on the tested subjects doesn’t describe Lincoln. “Test preparation doesn’t have to be boring,” Albano says. “What is chess? Critical thinking. What is music? Listening skills.” Mock fossil digs teach students about geography, geology, and evolution. Spanish lessons once a week in kindergarten through sixth grades, provided by a special grant, give English-speakers knowledge of a second language. Art and music lessons give students a sense of aesthetics and a way to be successful even before they learn English. “We had a student who spoke only Russian. We captured him with music and arts,” Albano says. “Then his academics flourished. Two years later he received a perfect score on the New York State English Language Arts assessment.”



Instruction is provided by 34 classroom teachers supplemented by five teachers of English as a Second Language, 14 special education paraprofessionals, and five special education teachers, a resource specialist and reading teacher, all of whom work with classroom teachers to provide services as part of general instruction. Students are not pulled out of classrooms for these

services. Instead, the services are “pushed in” to the classrooms. (The exception is that Lincoln has a special program of three classrooms for 24 students with autism.)

Toward the end of the year Albano sits down with each teacher to discuss every child’s progress. Out of 130 children in each grade level, two or three are usually held back each year – less than half the retention rate Albano started with. Albano doesn’t take holding a child back lightly, but he also doesn’t see it as a tragedy, either. “I was held back the year my father died,” he says. “It was the best thing that happened to me.” Sometimes, he argues, children simply need another year of intensive instruction and help before moving to the next grade.

Albano and all the members of his staff are passionate about their mission – to educate all their students and to demonstrate that well-run schools with enthusiastic, knowledgeable teachers are not only possible but necessary, in order to give today’s children a chance to succeed and thrive. “We can’t give up on a generation of children,” Albano says.

And the families of Mount Vernon seem to understand what Lincoln can do for their children; the private school next door that was booming in the late 1970s has since closed. Lincoln rents the space as its annex.

To see the state data on Lincoln Elementary, go to the [New York State Report Card](#).
Story based on a visit by Karin Chenoweth and Nicholas Alexiou in May, 2005.
Photos by Karin Chenoweth, except where noted.