

Meeting Superman

At Lincoln Elementary School in Mount Vernon, New York, amazing as it may seem, no child is left behind. Mr. Merrow profiles the school, its principal, and its teachers and reflects on what it would take to change U.S. education so that such success would no longer be exceptional.



BY JOHN MERROW

PICTURE Superman in your mind's eye. Nope, you got it wrong. The Superman I know is just five feet seven inches tall. He's on the stout side and walks with a limp. But he's clearly Superman, because this 58-year-old elementary school principal has done

what nobody else in education seems to be able to do: get rid of what educators and politicians call the "achievement gap." That's the name given to the huge differences in academic performance between white and Asian kids and their black and Hispanic peers.

The achievement gap is everywhere and at every grade level. Take fourth-

graders in New York State, for example, where the gap is 35 percentage points in math, English, and science.

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The achievement gap has become a national preoccupation. “Google” the term, and about 1.2 million entries come up. Most of the ones I looked at were what I call “hand-wringers,” full of lamentation about the costs, the risks, etc., of the achievement gap.

But the notion of an achievement gap is superficial and misleading. In most schools there are gaps in *opportunities, expectations, and outcomes*. Focusing on outcomes alone is a fool’s exercise, something my Superman understands.

If you happened to “Google” my Superman by his real name, George C. Albano, in late November, you would have found that only six entries appeared. Maybe that’s why the achievement gap persists, because nobody’s paying attention to Albano, even though he’s been doing his job for nearly 25 years at Lincoln Elementary School in Mount Vernon, New York.

This K-6 inner-city school has 800 students: 60% black and Hispanic, 38% white, and 2% Asian. Half the kids are on free or reduced-price lunch, and 6% are in special education. You might expect Lincoln to be the poster school for the achievement gap.

Except there is no achievement gap at Lincoln. This year, 99% of the school’s fourth-graders made it over the achievement bar that New York State sets for English, math, and science. By the numbers, that means that a total of three kids did not make it, and the teachers at Lincoln are now giving those children extra attention so that they can get over the bar next time.

George Albano has figured it out, but if you’re hoping for a silver bul-

let, forget it. It comes down to hard work; great and dedicated teachers; a thoughtful approach to testing; an integrated curriculum; lots of art, music, and physical education; the willingness to bend and break rules occasionally; and the complete refusal

Success comes down to hard work; great and dedicated teachers; a thoughtful approach to testing; an integrated curriculum; lots of art, music, and physical education; the willingness to bend and break rules occasionally; and the complete refusal to let any child fail to learn.

to let any child fail to learn. As Albano says, “When your child comes to school, he or she comes to an oasis. I think we have an obligation that, no matter what’s happening outside, we have to push that aside and make this youngster succeed.”

“No matter what’s happening outside” is George Albano’s recognition that many of his children live with economic hardship and don’t have book-lined libraries or a private place to study in their homes. He does his best to close these and any other “opportunity gaps” by bringing in teachers with special expertise, by raising outside funds, and by keeping classes small. He knows that, if a teacher is responsible for 35 to 40 students, she’s almost forced to engage in triage, thus lowering expectations for some

kids. And presto, an “expectations gap” is created, which is understandable if not acceptable.

“No matter what’s happening outside” means a schoolwide “no excuses” attitude. If a Lincoln teacher said, “I covered the material, but the kids didn’t learn it,” George Albano would educate that teacher — or move her out.

Albano has caring about children hard-wired in his genes. His parents, Carmen and Eleanor, were a loved and respected doctor/nurse team known across Westchester County. Four of their five children chose careers in education, and today George has 17 close relatives who work in public education, including two brothers, a sister, and all three of his children and their spouses. One brother who did not go into education is George’s older brother Lou, who is nationally known as a manager of professional wrestlers.

Let’s run through Lincoln’s “recipe” for success, beginning with a crucial ingredient, teachers. As Ron Ross, a former superintendent in Mount Vernon, notes, “When we talk about student achievement and an achievement gap, we generally focus on the students. That’s wrong. You’re never going to close it by doing that. Focus on the teachers.”

That’s where George Albano focuses. Most of his 70 teachers have been at the school for at least 15 years, even though teachers in neighboring districts earn as much as 20% more money. Albano finds teachers by tapping into business connections, by combing through hundreds of *résumés*, and by getting recommendations from all those family members who work in education. “When I in-



Academic content is built into every class at Lincoln — including the study of math in music class. Here music teacher Dana Bhatnagar, who is also an opera singer, and master mentor Larry Bibb, a pianist, work with students to prepare for an upcoming school program.

interview a teacher, obviously that person has to be certified, qualified, but to me, it's equally important that the person brings something else to the table." And so Lincoln's faculty includes a former NASA administrator and a former executive of a Fortune 500 company, not to mention a professional opera singer and a chess master.

The arts are also part of the school's recipe, and Lincoln is suffused with art and music. One day, I watched several teachers working with second-graders, who were designing sneakers and ad campaigns to "sell" their products. The next day, their cardboard and papier-mâché sneakers were hanging in the halls. Dana Bhatnagar sings at Carnegie Hall — she's that good — but the young opera singer spends her days teaching music at Lincoln. And she doesn't coast through her days. As she says, "I'm actually more

tired than I am after performing a three-hour opera. Not because it's hard work, but because I'm giving the children everything I've got."

Of course, academic standards matter. But instead of the drill-drill-drill approach that many inner-city schools adopt, academic content is built into just about every aspect of Lincoln. Music teacher Bhatnagar is well aware that her kids are learning math in her music classes. Math and science also find their way into gym class. In a physical education class I watched, the gym teacher combined exercise with a lesson about velocity and force.

Lincoln doesn't shy away from practicing or teaching values. As Ron Ross notes, "Good schools teach character. We teach values. We have to teach the next generation how to get along with each other. If we don't do that, then we ought to close the schools, because I don't care how good you are

on a test, if you can't live with your neighbor, then I don't think you've been taught."

Is that risky business? I asked Ross. "There is a line that one doesn't cross," he answered. "We're not telling students, 'You must be a Baptist' or 'You must be a Roman Catholic.' But we are saying, 'You must not fight, you must not cheat, you must not steal.' The schools are supposed to transmit the values of society, not just give multiple-choice tests. We wonder why so many kids are cheating. It's because they came from schools where they concentrated on a test."

But tests do matter, and I wondered how much time and attention teachers at Lincoln devoted to passing them. I asked a group of fifth- and sixth-graders whether they got nervous before the big state exams in math, reading, and science. One boy almost laughed as he replied, "I

know they taught me everything I'm supposed to know, and I know I know it, so I just go and I take the test like it's a regular test." A girl chimed in, "The teachers are more nervous than us, because they want to make sure that they taught us everything. We're the ones taking a test, and they're like, 'Oh, my gosh, how is she going to do? Did I teach her that?'"

When I asked what teachers did when a student wasn't getting it, one cut to the chase: "They'll say, 'You want to stay after school with me and I'll help you?' Or they'll say, 'Can you stay in at recess?' or 'Can I tutor you?' They just try their best to give you special attention so that you can learn."

The teachers were quite specific about strategies, and they were eager to explain them. What they said struck me as a primer for successful teaching and learning:

- "First of all, you don't give up. You try a number of strategies to develop a rapport with the child, which could be just sitting down after school and having a conversation."

- "A lot of times being punitive with a child isn't going to be successful. You have to have rules, but punishment is not necessarily the thing you want to go to the first time, and perhaps even the second time, to get your point across."

- "Always capitalize on the parts children do well. All children do something well, and if you praise them and capitalize on just that little bit, I think you can get some growth from them."

- "Let them know that you really care about what they're doing correctly."

- "If I am not getting through,

the teacher that had the child last year is the one I go to and ask, 'What was successful with this child? What did you do that really worked?'"

- "As a younger teacher, I'm always looking to the other teachers

Part of Lincoln's recipe for success may shock traditionalists: the kids enjoy school. As one boy said, "Some people say school is so boring, like 'I can't wait until I get out of high school or college.' But I don't really think that. I like school."

for advice, and everybody always has ideas to help me out."

- "The most important thing is to not make the child who's not getting it feel embarrassed. You have to do it privately. Go over it again at lunchtime. You do things with them by themselves. Treat them with the respect that you want back."

"Respect" came up again and again. Teachers told me that three words define Lincoln: respect, enjoyment, and success. One put it this way: "The culture of Lincoln is success. Whatever it takes to help children succeed. To get higher than they were. To bring them up, so that they enjoy life, because they can read better, so they can do math, so they get along with each other."

At Lincoln, there is none of the "soft bigotry of low expectations." Sadly, many schools do have an "expectations gap," but racism and stu-

pidity are not sufficient to explain why there are reduced expectations for some kids, but not all. Often schools expect less because no one has made the goals clear. Once we know what the goals are and how they're going to be measured, it's easier to make it clear where the bar is being set. The purpose of schooling then becomes to get everyone over the bar, and it doesn't matter how much any particular kid clears the bar by — as long as the bar is set meaningfully high and as long as the adults are committed to getting everyone over it.

The kids I met at Lincoln seemed to have an intuitive understanding of the "expectations gap." As one noted, "I think in the other schools, it's the teachers' fault that the students don't do well, because the teachers sometimes expect good scores from the white kids but from the black kids they just say, 'Nah, he's not going to learn as well as the white kids.'"

Ah, race, our American dilemma. I asked a mixed group of kids to tell me what percentage of the Lincoln students were African American and Hispanic. The correct answer is 60%, but none of them came very close: their estimates ranged from a low of 10% to a high of "more than 70%." Curiously, the estimates offered by the teachers were just as far off. Albano's explanation for this apparent colorblindness is simple: when all the children are succeeding, there's no reason to focus on anyone's race.

Social class doesn't seem to be an issue at Lincoln, perhaps because most families are working class. That fact, however, was not at all apparent, at least not to me. I spent about an hour chatting with six kids, all fifth- and sixth-graders. Three of them came

to Lincoln from other countries and spoke no English when they arrived. I was impressed with their intelligence, curiosity, and eloquence. And when I asked what their parents did for a living, I was expecting to hear such things as lawyer, doctor, or banker. I was bowled over by their answers: two fathers were garage mechanics, three mothers cleaned houses, one father worked at a Blimpie's.

Part of Lincoln's recipe for success may shock traditionalists: the kids enjoy school. As one boy said, "Some people say school is so boring, like 'I can't wait until I get out of high school or college.' But I don't really think that. I like school. It's fun, but we deserve a little fun here, because that's where we spend most of our time."

The kids also told me stories about their friends who weren't lucky enough to go to Lincoln. "I have friends in other schools who say, 'Oh, my teacher's stupid. I hate her.'" Another chimed in, "Sometimes they like kick the wall of the school, saying, 'Oh, you suck. I hate you!'" Amid laughter, he explained further, "As soon as school gets out, they go, 'Freedom!' And then they start kicking it and everything like that. And then they just leave."

It's a curious comment on the profession that Lincoln's teachers get scant recognition from their peers — and even from their families. As Lucille DiRoucco told me, "When I socialize with my friends, they ask, 'Where do you teach?' And when I say 'Mount Vernon,' you can see the expressions. They won't say anything, but you can see the expression in their faces that says, 'Oh good Lord, you teach down there?'"

"They look down on us," Mary

Anderson added. "I live in Eastchester, where there are Scarsdale teachers who don't understand how I could work in Mount Vernon and why I would go in as early as I do and stay as late as I do. They think that's foolish." Anderson is an interesting case. She's well past retirement age and is actually losing money by continuing to teach. But she loves her job, loves the success she, her colleagues, and her kids enjoy. And watching her second-graders taking apart words and

Report cards are supposed to go home with the kids, but Albano sent a note instead: if you want to see your child's report card, come to school to pick it up.

sentences with energy and skill makes one hope she never retires!

Veteran Jim LeRay has felt his own family's disappointment. "Some are kind of uneasy with the fact that I'm still teaching and I'm teaching in Mount Vernon. It's almost as if I didn't make it professionally."

Given George Albano's family history, it comes as no surprise to discover that he believes in parent involvement, another ingredient in Lincoln's recipe for success. As he says, "If children grow up in an environment where they see their parents involved, they will follow suit."

But he faced a dilemma when he took over at Lincoln because not many Mount Vernon parents were coming to school for parents' night or other activities. He decided to *make* them show up. Report cards are supposed to go home with the kids, but Albano sent a note instead: if you want to

see your child's report card, come to school to pick it up. Here's what happened. "People complained, the board told me to change, and I was even threatened with lawsuits. My answer to the critics was to say that I would accommodate parents from six in the morning to any time at night, but they had to come."

In the beginning, he recalls, 25% to 30% of parents did not come. But now, "if we have one, two, or three parents who don't come, out of 800-plus children, it's a lot." He adds, "If parents do not come, as far as I'm concerned, they should be in court for educational neglect."

What George Albano did was in flagrant defiance of the rules, but, as Ron Ross says with a laugh, "You show me a principal who follows the book on everything, and I'll show you a lousy principal. You can't make a good school by following the rules."

Lincoln's success turns on leadership, but what kind of leader is my Superman? The adjective I heard most often was "strong," as in "Mr. Albano is a very strong principal," but strength has a special meaning. "When I say 'strong,' I don't mean he's just telling you what to do and making sure you're getting it done. 'Strong' means he's getting things done for you. Any help that you need, any assistance that you need, he will provide it for you. We have the materials and support. So that kind of strong leadership allows us to do the things that we're doing in the classroom."

Another teacher described Albano's strong leadership in a different way: "He's a master at capitalizing on the talents and expertise of others. He loves to admit that we know more than he does, and he's not afraid to

say that. And so he empowers us, and he delegates tasks. He makes us feel important, and he gives us a lot of respect. And that's what keeps us going."

Albano calls what he provides "situational leadership." "I can be very direct when it comes to the well-being of children, their best interests, and their health, but I also can work collaboratively." I asked him just how much effective leadership has to do with getting out of the way of people who know what they're doing. "Some people," he said, "have a problem doing that, but I'm comfortable with who I am, I love that so many of my teachers have special expertise, and I don't mind giving them whatever they need to be successful with children. That's the bottom line, not who gets the credit."

We end where we began, with Superman and the perplexing question: Does it take a Superman (or Superwoman) to make an excellent school? If it does, we are in big trouble, because they're in short supply. I took that question to Ross, who told me that our worst schools need outstanding leaders who will be on the job 24/7, until they climb out of the hole.

Ross adds a cautionary note, however. "Even when schools are performing, they require strong leadership. Anyone who wants to excel shouldn't expect to go home at three o'clock. I tell anyone who gets into teaching, 'If you're coming in here because you think it's a five- or six-hour job with summers off, do me a favor. Find something else to do with your life.'"

So that's the recipe: strong leadership, parent involvement, teachers who do whatever it takes, respect, the

arts and physical education, a curriculum that matches the tests, and a genuine belief that all children can learn. Ron Ross told me that if he could clone George Albano, the achievement gap would disappear. But on this point I don't agree.

Although thousands of George

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Albanos would be a good start, our schools need more. Begin by acknowledging that our problem is not simply an achievement gap. What we have is more complex: it's an opportunity gap, an expectations gap, and an outcomes gap. Until we distribute resources more fairly *and* staff our schools with adults who expect the best from every child, we will continue to have big gaps in performance. George Albano works hard to dig up extra resources to close the "opportunity gap," and he only hires teachers who expect the best from every child, which eliminates any "expectations gap." Then, magically, the "outcomes gap" disappears.

Right now, states, school districts, politicians, and educators focus almost entirely on the achievement gap. They create compensatory programs with all the best intentions in the world. But that exercise is doomed to failure. The gaps won't disappear if one day poor and minority kids score at the same level as whites and well-to-do kids.

And isn't it fundamentally racist

to assume that white is the measuring stick against which to judge all others? It's like judging Head Start by comparing Head Start kids to preschoolers of middle- and upper-middle class families. The latter are going to keep moving up, because those families know about the importance of early stimulation. Then, because the well-off keep moving up, it's easy to conclude that Head Start has failed. That's wrong. If, instead, we had some rational set of expectations for Head Start, we could judge its success or failure against that set of standards (Are kids healthier? Do they know the alphabet and the sounds of letters?).

White performance on standardized tests shouldn't be the standard by which all others are judged. Instead, we need to do the hard work of setting standards, which requires some prior hard work. And we need to debate deep questions, including "What does it mean to be educated?" and "What skills and knowledge does one need in order to be productive, lead a satisfying life, and contribute to the greater good?"

A cautionary note: Albano's message, now attracting attention from as far away as New Zealand, has been largely ignored in his own district, and not one member of the current Mount Vernon School Board has visited Lincoln. Moreover, when his students leave Lincoln Elementary School, they are likely to attend other public schools with differential expectations that are marked by drill and boredom. Both Albano and Ross concede that many of the children will probably be lost, because middle schools and high schools in Mount Vernon — and almost everywhere else — do business in the same old ways. **K**

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0402mer.pdf

John Merrow, "Meeting Superman," Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 85, No. 6, February 2004, pp. 455-460.

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