

## Best Practices Case Study: Meeting Critical Needs at the Elementary Level

Susan P. Tangorre, August 2011

### Lincoln Elementary School Mount Vernon City School District

*Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day*



- Mount Vernon City School District motto

#### School Context

Mount Vernon is a small city considered a suburb of New York City, located just 20 miles north on the Hudson River. It is an urban-like suburb with a mix of downtown, high-rise apartments, industrial sections, and tree-lined housing areas. The diverse population has a high poverty rate, particularly by comparison with much of Westchester County. The district, with over 8,500 students, serves many ethnic groups and cultures, predominately African-Americans, who represent 77% of the student enrollment. At Lincoln School, 60% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and its multi-cultural community is comprised of 49% African-American students, 24% Hispanic/Latino, 21% White, and the rest Asian or a multiracial mix of students, with 15% identified as limited English proficient.

#### Student Demographics 2009-10: Lincoln Elementary, Mount Vernon City School District<sup>i</sup>

Grades served: K- 6	Lincoln	Mount Vernon CSD	New York State
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	60%	72%	48%
Limited English Proficient	15%	8%	8%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
African-American	49%	77%	19%
Hispanic/Latino	24%	15%	22%
White	21%	6%	50%
Other	6%	2%	8%
Total Enrollment	758	8,586	2,692,649

Demographic data are from the 2009-10 state report cards (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/Home.do?year=2010>).

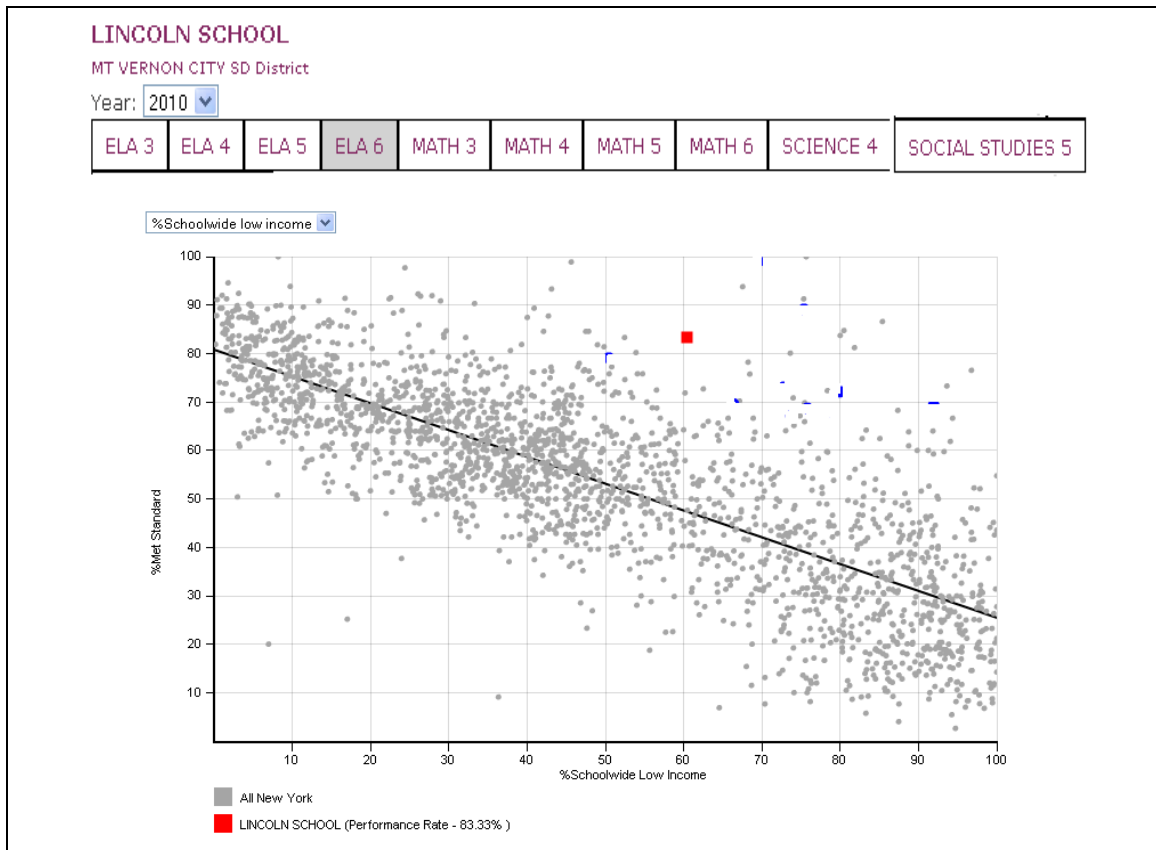
Like many of its counterparts in urban areas, the district experiences the challenges of overcrowded schools, lack of funding, and large pockets of impoverished families. Despite these potential impediments, the district has been working diligently to improve student achievement levels, particularly at the secondary level and in recent years has consistently shown growth as measured by the NYS Education Department's annual yearly progress indicators.

*I certainly feel that we have made strides, particularly when you look at the fact that we had to do it every year with a budget that was smaller than the year before. For three of the last four years, we've been a district in good standing. We've been struggling to maintain that status, but at least I can say, for three years, we have accomplished that.*

- superintendent

Lincoln Elementary, the largest of the 11 elementary schools in the district, serves over 750 students in grades K-6 and is portrayed by one teacher as an “oasis in the community.” The school has shown high student performance for many years and was selected as a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School in 2006. In its application the school was described as follows: “A positive climate and tremendous pride in our school’s diversity pervades throughout the building. At Lincoln every student is provided with countless opportunities to grow through educational experiences that are both challenging and rewarding. It is a team effort accomplished with great enthusiasm, dedication, and cooperation. A true sense of community and of a shared mission prevails at all times.”

*The priority is excellence. We have a reputation. The parents know that. – teacher*



Data are based on publically available NYS Assessment data as displayed at <http://knowyourschoolsny.org>. For results for additional grades, years, and assessments, click on “Find Your School” on the website.

Given its percentage of low income students, Lincoln students score well above the predicted level, which is represented by the diagonal line as shown in the chart above. As a result, it became known in the district as the school where “no child *was* left behind.” Many in the school today credit a long-time former principal for his role in creating the culture of excellence that his successor continues to nourish.

## Best Practices Highlights

Many factors contribute to the student performance at Lincoln. These highlights express the essence of the best practices that were shared during the interviews with teachers and administrators as well as a review of documentary evidence as part of this study. Lincoln School is characterized by the following best practices:

- Fervent, respectful, and visionary leadership
- Curriculum that meets standards and sparks the imagination
- Working “above and beyond” for students
- A culture of openness
- The Lincoln “Formula for Success”

### Fervent, Respectful, and Visionary Leadership

*“Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day” must be more than a motto; it must be a way of life for the Mount Vernon City Community. Together we can make a difference.*

- superintendent’s letter on district website

Visionary leadership in the district starts at the top. The superintendent, who has just completed his fourth year in the district, seems undaunted by problematic issues and resolute in his efforts to find solutions. His “attraction to Mount Vernon was to be able to . . . impact children’s progress in an urban district where they have the greatest challenges.” His expectation that “every child” succeeds is the core belief that creates high expectations for administrators and staff as well as parents. The sign on his desk -- “NO EXCUSES” -- gives some sense of the tenacity of his character and his desire to make a difference in this community.

The academic agenda and culture at Lincoln had been guided by the somewhat legendary principal mentioned above, who over his 30-year tenure was a powerful advocate for students. He is said to have collaborated with staff to set high academic standards. Together they created curriculum and school-wide events that focused on the “whole child” and showed respect for the diversity of the community. His relentless commitment to setting high academic standards for *all* students and high expectations for staff was instrumental in creating the culture in this school community today.

*Having a really strong leader is the number one piece. Effective leadership. He was deeply dedicated and devoted, a tough act to follow. She [new principal] walked right in and did a beautiful job this year. She’s certainly proved herself.*

- teacher

*The new principal . . . had big shoes to fill . . . and she has just been wonderful. It’s a good time . . . transitional, but in a good way.*

- teacher

The transition to a new principal seems to have been successful. This new principal spent 22 years in the district and brings a rich background of experiences as well as a strong sense of the community and the needs of Lincoln students and their families. She has shown an understanding and appreciation for the customs at the school as she seeks to set a renewed

direction for Lincoln Elementary School that is respectful of its past traditions and accomplishments, yet with a fresh vision and new expectations for the future.

### **Curriculum That Meets Standards and Sparks the Imagination**

*We all follow the same curriculum, but there's the freedom to do what's best for your particular group.* - teacher

Teachers at Lincoln have been highly engaged in working on curriculum and standards and the impact on student performance for many years. Although there is a clear set of expectations for the elementary curriculum, it is balanced with a respect for diversity and creating relevance for students.

*Sometimes we get caught up in developing the skills as opposed to developing a child's ability to imagine, a child's ability to be creative, to use prior knowledge in terms of drawing conclusions. That is something that I think many of us are struggling with.* - superintendent

There seem to be two aspects to the curriculum at this school. First is the understanding that although there are very high expectations for every student to be successful, this is not to be accomplished by using a “skill and drill” approach. Staff speak passionately about the need to improve student skills and achievement but not at the expense of losing creativity – or as they say “sparking the imagination” of their students. Second is the understanding that teachers have a valuable role in designing some of the curriculum to meet the needs or interests of students.

*Teachers are intellectuals and they really should play a large part in crafting the lessons so that they really speak to the various needs of their students. Who would know better than the teacher who is there with them every day, what would capture their imagination and spark their interest?* - principal

### **Working “Above and Beyond” for Students**

*When I first came, one thing I heard was, if you're not a person who likes to work, Lincoln was not the school for you. I found that to be true. Everybody in this building does something above and beyond what's expected in the classroom.* - teacher

*Everyone has such high expectations. It is one that is very cooperative and it's a going above and beyond mentality. They don't like mediocrity: they always go to lend a helping hand.* - principal

To say that the administrators and staff at Lincoln work “above and beyond” may be an understatement. Over and over again various staff members expressed pride and described a dedicated work ethic as part of the expectations at this school. For example, one teacher said of her school day: “I come in a 6:30 to tutor. I choose to. I'm not paid to do that, but I'm usually not the first or only one to be here that early. It's the same around the whole building. . . . and often, I'm still working with students here at 5:00.” She was not alone in this effort. The words “above and beyond” were spoken often as teachers talked about their work with students or their families.

The principal noted the “great flavor of volunteerism here” and said that her predecessor had shared some important advice about the teachers: “Now make sure they do something other than *just* teach.” Thus the expectation to do more has been part of the culture for many years. Doing more might include working before or after school with students or a school-wide chess club, special literacy activities, a fund raiser for a family in need, or a Relay for Life event.

### **A Culture of Openness**

*It’s important to never feel territorial. Having a dynamic in the school where it’s open and it’s okay to ask questions and it’s okay for people to help you.* - teacher

Openness is an essential professional practice at Lincoln. The school is literally and figuratively open. Just inside the front doors a small foyer is the busy hub that leads to the cafeteria and paved courtyard or to the second floor where the main office and media center are located. Clusters of open classrooms rise above and around the center of the building, which is visually open to the courtyard area below. The structure of this vertically oriented building provides many open areas for students to work and supports the culture of openness that encourages teachers to support each other. Whether it is sharing ideas about reading, how to help a particular student who is having behavior problems, or the best way to teach fractions, teachers consider such discussions important.

*Another great practice is the grade-level team meetings. We have teachers who go into other classes and teach.* - principal

*Best practices are always shared. . . . We are all encouraged to share.* - teacher

Many teachers referenced the importance of weekly grade-level meetings. These meetings are attended by literacy specialists and the special education or ESL teachers, as appropriate, to discuss issues related to teaching and learning. One veteran teacher shared her perspective on this practice, “On each grade level, there’s a common prep for everybody on that grade level to meet once a week where we discuss the curriculum, assessing where we are and how we’re doing it, sharing best practices. One of the fourth-grade teachers was my student when she was in fourth grade, so I’m now her mentor.” Simply stated, there is a common understanding that you help each other at Lincoln.

Monthly staff and curriculum meetings are also used to facilitate such discussions on a school-wide level as well as share perspectives with administrators. These formal structures encourage teacher input, but there is a long tradition in this school that supports and values teachers sharing ideas and suggestions with each other.

### **The Lincoln “Formula for Success”**

*A commitment to educational equity and excellence by consistently acting on the belief that all students can, must and will learn.* – school mission statement

A small booklet developed by the principal in collaboration with staff a few years ago details the school’s philosophy and strategies for improving student performance. This booklet summarizes their “formula for success,” which is outlined in the following acrostic:

Setting high standards  
Unconditional commitment  
Curriculum alignment with the standards  
Communication and collaboration  
Effective leadership  
Staff, student, and parent accountability  
Staff and student support

The shared process of committing their beliefs to print was an important part of the process of developing the culture of excellence at Lincoln.

## **A Closer Look**

The culture of excellence in Lincoln Elementary School has been shaped by the best practices described above. The sections below expand on these practices as demonstrated in each of the five dimensions that frame the larger study of which this case is one part.

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

*You obviously have to focus on the needs of every child as an individual and they will always be different. You have to make certain that in spite of the obstacles and challenges, you give them every single opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. It has to be consistent, that effort has to happen every day of their existence.*

- superintendent

Academic goals for all students at Lincoln Elementary School have a dual focus: first and primary, to achieve successful academic performance, but also to “spark” interest in learning. Administrators and teachers in the district work as a team to continuously develop curriculum that is aligned with the State standards and create appropriate goals while remaining sensitive to the multi-ethnic and cultural diversity of the students.

*Children need to love learning.* – teacher

In the past few years the district has been moving toward developing a unified curriculum at the elementary level. The superintendent asserted that this is essential for tracking student performance and has played a role in the growth in academic achievement: “We unified the curriculum to make certain that every school was using the same type of text and curricular materials. I think the unification of the curriculum is important, because once you have a varied curriculum, you have no real sense of where everyone is going.”

Within the uniform curriculum teachers have much discretion to modify based on the needs and interests of their students. One veteran teacher views the curriculum guidelines in this way: “We are pretty closely monitored, seem to have a lot of freedom. The district policy is that everybody has to be on the same page, so you can’t go ahead, but you can add depth.” Teachers are given district curriculum maps and guidelines, and they are encouraged to teach the curriculum but not lose that “love of learning” for the students in the process. In addition teachers are given opportunities to contribute to the selection of new district-wide programs. Feedback from teacher

teams and pilot programs is an essential part of developing or modifying guidelines for current curriculum or choosing new programs.

### **Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**

#### **Effective Leadership**

*I just feel like I'm very supported. That makes a world of difference, because without that management in place, you obviously can't teach.* - teacher

*Effective leadership . . . without that, a school just does not run properly.* - teacher

The Lincoln community is proud of past achievements yet eagerly embraces the transitions that result from new leadership. The school staff are united in their efforts to ensure a balance of preserving past traditions that define the culture of Lincoln while striving to implement new curriculum or adapt to ever-evolving demands of standards and accountability.

Teachers spoke fondly of administrators, past and present, and voiced appreciation for the complexity of their jobs. They seem to value a principal's compliment or time spent recognizing their efforts or interacting with students. Over and over teachers reported that they knew that the principal or the special education supervisor who is assigned to the school would always be there to support them. Speaking to the importance of leadership, one teacher stated, "I really have to give a lot of credit to our supervisor and the principal. It's the leadership. Yes, things are very interdependent, but if you have leadership you know that they're there behind you. I have to credit them, because it wouldn't be the same without them."

The process of selecting a new principal for Lincoln a year ago provides a current instance of the hiring process. Like any other administrative position in the district, the top candidate for this position was selected by an extensive bi-level interview process that involved staff and parents. One of the teachers reflected on the selection made and on the leadership skills of the principal hired, stating, "[Leadership.] . . . That has to be the most important thing she brought with her. She had been in the high school before. . . . Discipline . . . she could manage the children very well. She's friendly, professional, everything we needed!"

Teacher selection is also completed in a thorough, bi-level process that includes a school-based team with two or three final candidates sent to the district office for final consideration. Typically teacher turnover is low at Lincoln partially due to a high level of staff satisfaction. One teacher was hired recently as a result of increased enrollment.

#### **Effective Teachers and Trusted Delegation**

*I think there's a lot of delegation now, especially here, and it's trusted delegation. They come to you, they put you in charge of something and they wait for you to report. There's no micromanaging. I think that's important. If you're going to delegate, you need to trust.* - teacher

Teachers are provided numerous leadership opportunities to share professional expertise related to curriculum and student learning, specifically at weekly grade-level meetings and monthly staff

and curriculum meetings. They credit the culture of respect, trust, and open communication at the school for making these formal and informal “staff development” opportunities so meaningful. Reflecting on the practices of this group of highly effective teachers, the principal said, “The priority has always been on the students. And being able to address their learning needs, and being able to make sure that the bar that’s been raised stays there, and that we continue to find curriculum and practices that speak to the intellectual capacities of these students and not just intellectually, but socially as well.”

Teacher collaboration is not just an expectation, it is a professional way of life at Lincoln. The schedule is designed to provide time for grade-level meetings with the literacy specialists each week. One teacher spoke about the value of the weekly grade-level meeting saying, “It’s very important because you need time to compare with peers.” Discussions of curriculum, data/assessments, student academic progress and modifications for special education or English language learners (ELL) may be the focus of the grade-level meetings.

*They [administrators] expect a lot and you have to raise your own bar to meet what they want. There’s a lot of staff development from texts and coworkers.* - teacher

*If you’re not dedicated, you don’t belong here.* - teacher

The culture of the school values the professional expertise within. Educators respect the collective experience and knowledge among their own staff members. As one teacher said, “We have so many good people in the building. Use them. You don’t have to ‘go to PD’ – you don’t have to pay an outsider when we have these experts in house.” The monthly staff and curriculum meetings are opportunities for the principal and teachers to collaborate and share current issues or concerns. These meetings are specifically structured to reflect on learning or performance expectations for the students at this school. One teacher shared, “Teachers do really work well together. We’ll stay late together and talk.”

Despite their high regard for each other, district Professional Development (PD) is also an important part of maintaining continuity of curriculum and high standards across the district. Annually PD is scheduled three days district-wide, but additional training or workshops may be provided as well. For instance, feedback from teacher teams and those teachers using a pilot mathematics program has been essential. Additional training has been ongoing as part of the district-wide implementation of the new elementary mathematics curriculum for the next school year. District curriculum may also be revised or developed by representative grade-level or curricular-area teacher teams from each school in the district. Teachers speak positively about these opportunities to contribute, to learn, and to participate as teacher leaders.

Another aspect of teacher delegation in the district is reflected in a change this year for Title I program funds. Rather than a district-level protocol, a building-level team was created and given site-based responsibility to develop activities or programs to use the funding in the most effective way for Lincoln.

Teachers seem to understand that the district, and particularly the building administrators, respect their knowledge, dedication, and professionalism. They take pride in using ongoing opportunities both in and out of the district for professional development and communication



with colleagues. The district clearly supports a distributive leadership that demonstrates respect for staff collaboration and expertise.

### Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

*We need to build instructional practices that challenge them intellectually and honor their cultural identities.* - principal

At Lincoln typically at each grade level there is an accelerated class and an integrated co-teaching class (ICT) with a cluster of students with disabilities. The instructional practices are highly individualized to meet the needs of all students. A literacy specialist works closely with classroom teachers and special education teacher(s) at each grade level. There is ongoing coordination with grade-level teams as well as the ESL teacher, school social worker, or other specialists to meet the academic or social needs of the students. The greatest challenge, as one teacher said, is “to meet every child’s needs, whatever they may be.”

*For most of the kids in this school, the best part of their lives is the time spent in school.* - teacher

*We all make it work here and this is the philosophy.* - teacher

*I think we’ve been able to . . . understand the dynamic between learning to read and reading to learn.* - superintendent

*Speaking, reading, writing, listening and thinking are integrated into all subjects and at every grade level.* – Blue Ribbon Schools application

The strong commitment of the staff to assure that all students are academically and socially successful takes on many dimensions in the day-to-day life of educators. As mentioned previously, the work ethic of the teachers is exceptional and provides the framework that sustains their students before, during, and after the school day.

### **Literacy at the Core**

At Lincoln the goals for all students center around literacy -- a philosophy of learning to read and learning to love reading. As described by the former principal, teachers strive to help students “develop into successful readers, writers, listeners and thinkers.”

The district English language arts program includes a multicultural body of works. At Lincoln, the principal stated, “We really need to make sure what we do is culturally relevant and impacts their lives personally, so that learning is meaningful.” As a result of this focus, a comprehensive balanced literacy program has been the core of the language arts curriculum for many years. Month-to-month literacy maps provide a coordinated district-wide guideline for instruction. Grade-level benchmarks and rubrics align to state standards and are the foundation for instruction and assessment. This approach provides students with a wide range of teacher-directed instruction and student-centered activities.

The daily literacy block of at least 90 minutes is a key factor to the success of students in reading and language arts. Several teachers also spoke to the effectiveness of the extended and uninterrupted block period for reading as well as math. The principal is supportive and proudly shared, “I think teachers use the literacy blocks and math time wisely. I don’t think instructional time is lost here. We use time wisely.”

Differentiated instructional practices, cooperative learning, and flexible groupings are essential components used to meet the learning goals of all students. A literacy specialist is considered to be a key member of each grade-level team. Literacy specialists also provide direct instructional support for some students in class as well as through a congruent pull-out program. In addition, some students participate in an early intervention program in grades K-3, Preventing Academic Failures (PAF), which provides supplemental support for reading, spelling, and writing skills.

A literacy specialist spoke to the success of some students becoming successful readers as a team effort. She said, “I find it’s the combination. To be candid, my successes are always the result of a combination of an effective classroom teacher and the extra support. It’s amazing when you combine the support with truly effective classroom teachers. The students I see most growth with, they always have a solid classroom teacher, and with my intervention it is utterly amazing.”

Differentiated instructional practices are also integrated throughout all curricular subjects. The math curriculum encourages the use of basic computation skills and an array of problem-solving strategies and hands-on activities using a variety of manipulatives, as well as technology to enhance instruction. Science, social studies, and special subject area classes follow State curriculum guidelines and integrate the ELA objectives whenever possible.

When asked about what might be considered a promising practice at Lincoln, the principal said, “I would say it’s small group instruction. It’s working with students at their instructional level and raising the bar and building capacity over time. I think the small group instruction is key and that’s what you see quite often here.”

### **Focus on Special Education Students**

*The IEPs are a team effort with parent input. . . . It’s tailored to the child. It really helps structure their education for success.* - teacher

For some students who are classified as students with disabilities, an integrated classroom program with a regular education teacher and a special education teacher is available at each grade level at Lincoln. These integrated classes with two full-time teachers are service-rich educational settings that provide a mix of academic, social, and emotional support. One of the teachers explained her philosophy in this way, “I believe in an integrated model. It works both ways – exposing them [gen ed students] to children with differences, exposing those children [special ed students] to their typical peers, allowing friendships to grow.”

*Consistency and solid programs that are congruent with the classroom program. Direct instruction is very important. That’s the key.* - teacher

In addition to the classroom instructional program and the services of special education teachers, students with disabilities also receive direct reading instruction daily with a literacy specialist.

When asked what accounts for the success of these students at Lincoln, one special education teacher enthusiastically said, “The unwavering support of them and their families on all levels, from Ms. J. down to the monitors on the playground. The unbelievable support that we give the whole child, not just academically.”

Approximately 20 students who live throughout the district are enrolled at Lincoln Elementary in an ungraded intensive special education program option with an 8:1:2 (student:teacher:aide) ratio. These students are included in school-wide activities and may be mainstreamed as appropriate with grade-level peers for any special area classes as well.

*We do not make them feel any different. We include them in whatever we're doing. . .  
That's what makes it work for them. . . . They form relationships.* - teacher

### **Focus on English Language Learners**

Approximately 15% of the students at Lincoln Elementary are identified as English language learners (ELL). By far the largest percentage of these students are of Spanish/Latin background and the others are a mix of Portuguese, Creole, Arabic, and Chinese. The district is dedicated to supporting these students and their families. A strong emphasis on a multi-cultural curriculum, Spanish or bilingual publications, and events such as a multi-cultural feast each fall are efforts to involve the families in the school environment. In addition, the school and district develop partnerships with community agencies in programs to involve parents and guardians in the school community.

*You can't be a teacher today with no connection to the family. If you are, then you're not going to be a very good teacher. . . . So help the parents to help their children.* - superintendent

Academically the needs of students who are linguistically or culturally diverse are met through the integration of a variety of instructional strategies. One teacher shared this perspective about her students: “It’s just making them feel comfortable and giving them as much support as possible, making them feel secure, and then they can just open up and there’s no anxiety.” The ESL teacher who works collaboratively with classroom teachers uses a coordinated curriculum and a mixture of push-in or pull-out instruction. In addition, these students participate in an after-school “Homework Club” twice a week with the ESL teacher. For some students an extended summer program provides additional support as well. As the principal has noted, “The teachers take time to work with those students -- before school , after school -- and they don’t get paid for it. . . . That’s just part of the culture here.”

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data**

*Everyone has such high expectations. They hold themselves to very high standards and as a result of that, I think that's one of the reasons why we have done so well in terms of closing the achievement gap and getting very high scores.* - principal

Whether it is at a grade-level meeting, a Child Study Team review, or a district-level analysis of NYS assessments, the task of monitoring student performance is a serious endeavor in the Mount Vernon City School District. The importance of *every* student achieving excellence is the abiding

principle. One teacher described the expectations in this way, “There’s unwavering support. There’s a demand for excellence.”

Teachers use a combination of formal and informal assessment measures to determine student achievement. This may include a reading assessment administered at least twice a year, a review of district benchmark levels, and assessment of writing portfolios or literacy folders in addition to evidence from tests or homework or projects. For some grade levels, prototypes of NYS assessments have been developed to familiarize students with the format, reduce test anxiety, and help monitor student progress. Although test results per se do not dictate instruction, neither are they ignored. An ongoing individualized assessment of authentic student work is used to inform and differentiate instruction. Literacy specialists are viewed by the principal as well as colleagues as critical contributors to improving student literacy. In addition to direct instruction for students, they provide a background knowledge of data, instructional support, and modeling for classroom teachers.

A comprehensive Academic Intervention Support (AIS) Program has been developed district-wide, and a Response to Intervention (RTI) plan for Grades K-4 is ready for implementation. The superintendent captures the overall purpose of these programs and explained it this way: “Simply stated, to be able to focus assistance as it is needed from the broadest spectrum of assistance to the most narrow spectrum. We want to make certain we’re providing – and it gets back to ‘every child, every chance, every day’ – every child with exactly what he needs individually to succeed.”

Students with disabilities and English language learners at Lincoln Elementary have consistently succeeded on NYS assessments and reached Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals. Although the results of test data are shared with staff, the existing technology capacity in the building somewhat limits individual access to use such data. The principal hopes that these test data and other on-line resources would be more accessible for staff in the future. One of the district goals is to use data management systems more effectively to review norm referenced assessments to measure students’ academic progress.

### Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

*We’re in this together – that’s how it works. We work together because this is what we need to do. That’s what it’s about, helping each other for the benefit of the children.*

- social worker

*We have honor roll breakfasts with parents.* - teacher

Students are recognized for even the smallest of accomplishments in a number of ways. Something as simple as having students help the principal make morning announcements is treated as “special” and it *is*. Students are more formally recognized for perfect attendance or making the honor roll. Parental involvement is encouraged at school concerts, art shows, or school-wide events, such as a Relay-for-Life, which are organized in cooperation with the PTA or the community.

Throughout the school year the most important events at Lincoln are focused on developing a “love of reading.” At the beginning of the year Kindergarten students are given a special book

tote with bookmarks and pencils as part of their introduction to the Library Media Center. The school has a Book Swap Shop where students can swap a book for one they have never read before. “Giving Thanks,” a Reading is Fundamental activity sponsored with the support of local businesses, allows each student to select a new book each year. Students are then encouraged to send letters of thanks. There is also a Book-in-a-Bag program to encourage students to read at home with parents. Throughout the school year incentives for reading are the focus of school-wide events -- a December “Reading Is a Gift You Give Yourself” or a February “Reading Is at the Heart of Everything We Do” to name a few.

In addition to these events, a large number of community volunteers participate in the Smart Program, which is an intergenerational literacy program. Volunteers who are weekly reading partners with students were recognized by the principal, staff, and students at an end-of-year breakfast. Reading is not just part of the curriculum at Lincoln; reading is celebrated! It is part of the school’s mission that children enjoy reading and become life-long readers.

### **Communication Is Important**

*Report cards are only given to parents – not mailed home. – teacher*

*We encourage the parents to come in. We want the parents to come in. – superintendent*

Twice a year the expectation at Lincoln Elementary School is to “hand” Student Progress Reports to parents/guardians. This requires a special effort on the part of teachers, who may need to come in before or after school or stay into the evening or on a weekend to have this chance to talk informally with parents/guardians. Teachers make every effort to abide by this custom, which is a high priority. It is the commitment to communicating about student learning that is highly valued. Although doing so may not be possible in every case, the school strongly encourages this practice rather than mailing reports home.

Communicating with all stakeholders, but particularly parents/guardians, is vital, according to district administrators. Every fall the Superintendent compiles a summary report for board of education members with highlights from each school. In this annual report a flavor of the academic programs, special events, and activities is provided by the principals to illustrate an individualized perspective about each school. There is no precise format but rather a unique summary from each school that reflects building priorities and events.

The district website is a rich source of information and a useful tool for students, parents or guardians, as well as staff. The website has a user-friendly format that provides a wide range of information in addition to the typical need-to-know data and State School Report Cards. Social networking through Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube are also used as additional ways to communicate. Newsletters in both English and Spanish are provided for parents/guardians at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

At the end of the school year a Report to the Community from the Superintendent is also provided for all stakeholders, but particularly geared toward parents/guardians. This summary includes, for example, special district/school accomplishments, status of district programs, building projects, or new programs. It is an important public commitment to accountability.

At both school and district levels, another kind of informal communication is evident and communicates a respect for students: Displays of student work or art or achievements are proudly and profusely displayed. The unspoken message is clear... students are important. Personal interactions with parents, guardians, or community members are also respectful, friendly, helpful, and professional.

## **In a Nutshell**

*Surviving is important, but thriving is elegant.* - Maya Angelou

For many years the educators at Lincoln Elementary School have been doing far more than just surviving. This highly dedicated staff works very hard to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students. They are not daunted by the challenges of the task in their diverse, impoverished, urban community. They embrace it. Their mission is academic excellence for every child.

Just as the structure of classrooms is designed to be open in this building, so too is the culture of the school community. The physical setting encourages professional openness and fosters a close, caring, educational environment. Teachers sincerely value the cultural diversity of their students. They are candid in their reflections about curriculum and teaching as well as highly committed to learning from each other. With open minds and open hearts they make Lincoln Elementary School a special place to learn, a place to thrive.

The district motto, “Every Child, Every Chance, Every Day,” is not just a catchy phrase on a website, but a belief system that is expressed through the dedication of administrators and teachers in both school and district, who strive to make a difference in the lives of their students and their community.

**Lincoln Elementary School**  
**Rebecca Jones, Principal**  
**170 East Lincoln Ave.**  
**Mount Vernon, NY 10552**  
**914-665-5039**  
<http://les.sharpschool.net/>

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<sup>1</sup> This case study is one of a series of studies conducted by Know Your Schools~for NY Kids since 2005. For the study of critical needs elementary schools, conducted during the 2010-11 school year, research teams investigated ten consistently higher-performing and five consistently average-performing elementary schools. Schools were selected based on the performance of critical needs subgroups – African American, Hispanic, English language learners, and special education students, and students living in poverty as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch – on New York State Assessments of English Language Arts and Mathematics for grades 3 through 4, 5, or 6 (depending on the schools’ grade range) in 2007, 2008, and 2009.

Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as analyses of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. Percentages of ethnic minority students, English language learners, and/or students living in poverty exceed the state averages in sixty to seventy percent of the higher-performing schools. Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Details regarding the project, its studies, and methods can be found on the project’s web sites: [www.albany.edu/aire/kids](http://www.albany.edu/aire/kids) and <http://knowyourschoolsnyc.org>.