

## **Achievement Gap – John Merrow Podcast #23**

TEACHER: He was generous, okay. Everybody, excellent. What's another word?

JOHN MERROW: Throughout the nation, schools are struggling to overcome a problem known as the achievement gap. White and Asian students, for the most part, outperform black and Hispanic students, and the affluent outperform the poor.

RON ROSS, National Urban League: I look at your zip code and I can basically tell you what you're going to do on the SAT. We know it doesn't measure intelligence. It measures what your parents make and it measures where you live. How have you been?

JOHN MERROW: Ron Ross is the former superintendent of Mount Vernon schools. Now a fellow at the National Urban League, he studies achievement gap issues.

RON ROSS: An achievement gap? Yeah, sure we have one. It's economic, it's class and it's race.

### **How one school eliminated the achievement gap**

JOHN MERROW: While this disparity is found in almost all schools, it's most prevalent in districts like this one, Mount Vernon, N.Y., a racially diverse, working-class suburb 20 minutes outside of New York City. Once an enclave of wealth for New Yorkers during the 1940s and '50s, Mount Vernon now grapples with issues of poverty, single-parent homes, and integration. But here in Mount Vernon, there's a lesson to be learned about how to eliminate the achievement gap.

GEORGE ALBANO, Principal: I'm very tough and very passionate about proving to America that a well-balanced, integrated school in a community like Mount Vernon, which is a city, and some people describe it as an inner-city, can work.

Go line up now. Come on, the bell rang.

JOHN MERROW: George Albano has been principal of Lincoln Elementary School for 25 years. He's made it his mission to ensure that success cuts across lines of race and income.

GEORGE ALBANO: And when a child comes to school, it comes to your oasis. I think you have an obligation to say whatever's happening outside, we have to push that aside and make this youngster succeed.

TEACHER: Find the price...

JOHN MERROW: Sixty percent of the students here are black or Hispanic; 38 percent are white; 2 percent are Asian. Half the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 6 percent are in special education. It's the kind of place where researchers and educators have come to expect an achievement gap.

But there's no gap at Lincoln. On last year's New York state exams, white, black and Hispanic fourth graders scored within 2 percent of each other. Statewide, there was a 35 percent gap. So what's Lincoln Elementary doing that other schools aren't? The answer starts with teachers.

### **Retaining good teachers**

RON ROSS: When we talk about student achievement and an achievement gap, we are focusing now in this country on the students. That's the wrong thing. You're never going to close it by that. Focus on the teachers.

TEACHER: All right, conclusion?

JOHN MERROW: This can be hard to do in places like Mount Vernon. Research shows that better teachers gravitate toward better districts. For one thing, there's a stigma associated with teaching in schools like Lincoln.

LUCILLE DIROUCCO, Second Grade Teacher: When I socialize with my friends, they say ... they say, "Where do you teach?" And when I say Mount Vernon, you could see the expression. They don't want to say anything, but you could see the expression in their faces, that, "Oh, good Lord, you teach down there?"

JOHN MERROW: Another obstacle to recruiting great teachers is money.

GEORGE ALBANO: Mount Vernon spends less than just about every single district in Westchester County. Probably \$10,000 to \$11,000 per student, as opposed to \$19,000 to \$20,000 per student. It's not that our teachers are paid the highest, because they're probably at the middle of Westchester County, if not the lower middle. Why are they here? Why are they committed? Because they feel they're part of something special.

I'll put a flyer in your mailbox...

JOHN MERROW: In fact, teachers in neighboring districts earn as much as 20 percent more. Yet teachers do not leave Lincoln. Almost half the staff has taught here for at least 15 years.

GEORGE ALBANO: When I interview a teacher, obviously a person has to be certified, qualified, and have all the credentials required by the state. But to me, equally important is that that person brings something else to the table.

TEACHER: But I'm looking for a word, a more specific word...

JOHN MERROW: Albano finds his teachers by tapping into business connections, combing through hundreds of resumes and getting recommendations from the 18 members of his own family who are also in education.

TEACHER: Who can tell me what's happened...

JOHN MERROW: Some of Lincoln's teachers come from outside education. Linda Linton was a corporate executive at a Fortune 500 company.

LINDA LINTON: Good, very good...

I teach sixth grade, and I try to relate what we're doing in school in terms of how it's going to be useful in their lives as they go forward.

JOHN MERROW: Using her corporate connections, Linton recruits PR executives, doctors, lawyers and even the town's mayor to the annual career day she established at the school.

TEACHER: Naturally occurring?

STUDENTS: Yes.

JOHN MERROW: The staff at Lincoln also includes a former NASA consultant, who heads up the science program.

CHESS INSTRUCTOR: I can't go here. I'd be in check.

JOHN MERROW: Chess masters teach chess, a program Principal Albano established through a private donation. And a professional opera singer teaches music.

CHILDREN SINGING: See we're making music it's a happy day...

### **Keeping parents involved**

DANA BHATNAGAR, Music Teacher: Our job is to make them the best students they can be, the best citizens they can be. I'm more tired at the end of a workday than I am after performing a three-hour opera, not because it's hard work, but it's because I'm giving them everything I've got, and this is so worth it for me.

CHILDREN SINGING: We're making music all day long.

DIANA MESISCO, Curriculum Coordinator: We don't focus on just academic achievement here. We are completely committed to developing the whole child. And we are just as concerned about a child's social well-being, their emotional well-being, their physical well-being. And that's why we all play a part in this.

LUCILLE DiROUCCO: We have a meet-and-greet at the beginning of the year. The parents come in and meet the new teacher. And I always write on the board, "expect the best from your child, and that's what you'll get." And that's what we do: We expect the best. And if we raise it up here, we'll get something here. But if we start off in the middle, we'll get something down here. So it's our expectations.

TEACHER: What's state --

JOHN MERROW: Teachers' expectations go beyond academics.

STUDENT: They feel like you are in heaven.

JOHN MERROW: Students in this second grade class hone their writing, art, and business skills by developing a marketing campaign for sneakers.

TEACHER: Who designed it? You designed it?

STUDENT: Me and my father.

TEACHER: You and your dad helped, and your sister? Wow, it's beautiful.

TEACHER: What's this squiggly thing at the end of the first measure? What's that called?

STUDENT: A quarter rest.

JOHN MERROW: In other schools, test preparation is a big part of the academic year, and teachers focus extensively on preparing students for the national and state exams. However, at Lincoln, these standards are part of the daily routine.

TEACHER: Ready, go!

JOHN MERROW: For example, gym class includes lessons on velocity and force.

TEACHER: Freeze! And when you throw it high, it takes more?

STUDENTS: Time.

TEACHER: Time. And if you have a contest and you only have ten seconds, you can't waste?

STUDENTS: Time.

TEACHER: Time.

JOHN MERROW: This approach has paid off. Last year, only 66 percent of New York state's fourth graders achieved at or above grade level on the state exam. But at Lincoln, 99 percent made it over the bar. That is, there's no achievement gap because virtually every child is succeeding.

TEACHER: Just so I can know a little bit more about your child, there's a sheet here...

JOHN MERROW: Research proves that parents are critical to students' success. Albano has found a way to guarantee that Lincoln parents are part of their children's education.

GEORGE ALBANO: No child receives a report card unless a parent personally comes and picks it up and has a conference with the teacher.

JOHN MERROW: Do people complain?

GEORGE ALBANO: People complained and I was even threatened with lawsuits. And my answer to the superintendent, to the critics, was: I will accommodate parents from 6:00 in the morning to anytime at night. And if a parent does not come, as far as I'm concerned, the parent is the one that should be in court for educational neglect.

TEACHER: Thank you.

GEORGE ALBANO: In the beginning, I would say about 25 percent to 30 percent did not come to pick up report cards. Now, if we have one, two, or three parents out of 800-plus children, it's a lot.

GEORGE ALBANO: Go right in with the...

### **The importance of a good principal**

JOHN MERROW: While some of his actions have angered school board members in the past, after 36 years in education, George Albano has learned which rules to bend, how to tap into community resources, and most of all, how to be a strong leader.

MARY ANDERSON, Fourth Grade Teacher: A teacher can't be a good teacher without a good principal. Because I have worked for other principals and I didn't have the motivation to do new things and to try things that Mr. Albano would

encourage teachers to do. He's the secret of success in the school.

RON ROSS: I call him P.T. Barnum. It's his building. It's his building from 6 a.m. in the morning to midnight. It's his building on the weekends. If I could clone George, we wouldn't have an achievement problem in this country, with public schools.

JOHN MERROW: What will happen to these kids when they move on to middle school or junior high school, where in fact that achievement gap and all those other ills are still present?

RON ROSS: For some of them, tragically, they're going to get lost. For others, because of what they've learned so far, they're going to survive. We've got to transport this model. We've got to carry it all the way through to 12 grades.

GEORGE ALBANO: I do think this model could be duplicated in other areas. And then maybe as those schools succeed, we could expand it. We have to start someplace. We cannot give up on the city schools. To me, the answer is to show a model that can succeed.

JOHN MERROW: According to George Albano, fixing the achievement gap requires a certain attitude.

GEORGE ALBANO: If you don't think of color and you don't think of gender and if you don't think of economic background, well, then, all children are equal. And if all children are equal, they should learn on an equal basis.

JOHN MERROW: At the end of the day, George Albano remains hopeful that schools like Lincoln, where everyone is achieving, can become the norm and not the exception.