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### School of surprises: Lincoln students excel despite challenges

By Susan Troller

"We didn't know we went to 'bad' elementary schools until we went to middle school and other kids told us," laughed Aubrey Chamberlain, Laura Borgwardt and Donta Brown.

But just look where it's gotten them: The three high-achieving West High School seniors, who will graduate from high school this weekend, are mostly focused on the exciting road ahead.

Chamberlain is heading to Harvard to study anthropology, Brown will be going to the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater to study business and Borgwardt will be off to Syracuse University, pursuing her dreams in an acting and theater program there.



Photo by Mike DeVries/The Capital Times

Graduating West High School students (from left) Aubrey Chamberlain, Laura Borgwardt and Donta Brown all say their years at Midvale and Lincoln elementary schools were an important factor in their later successes.

The three say their years at Midvale and Lincoln elementary schools were a platform for their later successes, which might come as a surprise to some because those schools are often viewed through the lens of the challenges that face them.

Located on Madison's racially diverse south side, Lincoln in particular has borne the brunt of that skepticism.

It is one of the poorest schools in the district. It does have many students who have limited proficiency in English. And its aggregate standardized test scores do lag behind those of many other Madison schools.

But spirits and expectations are high among staff, and particularly for Beth Lehman, who is just completing her fifth year as principal at the south side school, located on Sequoia Trail.

"It's an honor to work in such a diverse setting with such incredible, wonderful students and parents. It's a really rich community and I love it," she said.

As she gives visitors a tour of her school, which serves about 350 students, she warmly greets students by name. It takes a while to get down the hall because so many children - from a little Hmong girl in purple sweatpants and sparkly top to a tall, shy African-American boy to a mop-haired white boy in an oversize T-shirt - run up to her to say hello or get a hug. She speaks to them with respect and with endearments that make them smile.

Even three fourth-grade boys reading quietly in her office on a cold spring day earlier this year appeared happy to see her, despite being sorry to be missing recess.



Photo by Mike DeVries/The Capital Times

Amy Geiger (left) gives Luis Santana-Vasquez a high-five in...

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a soap bubble during a REACH science class taught at Lincoln Elementary School by Clare Seguin (in center background).

"I know it's hard not to throw snowballs, especially when the snow is so perfect," she told them. "But you know the rules." They grinned, nodded, sighed and went back to reading.

Lehman observed, "These are my children - all of them."

She said that statement reflects a general attitude at Lincoln, where there is low teacher turnover and a deep staff commitment to help all students, no matter how needy or how gifted, learn and succeed.

**Raising expectations:** Parent Jackie Hunt, who brings her children every day to attend the Open Classroom program at Lincoln, believes in Lehman and the educational opportunities at Lincoln.

Her son is thriving, she says, thanks in part to the leadership at the school, and to the Open Classroom program. It offers multi-age learning in classes that join kindergartners with first-graders, second-graders with third-graders and fourth-graders with fifth-graders. Students stay with the same teacher for two years.

"Beth is just way out in the lead in learning to understand African-American boys," Hunt observed. "She's really open, and she's working hard to identify what will encourage them to be highly successful, and realize their full potential."

Hunt, who is articulate, thoughtful and fiercely committed to seeing her kids succeed in school, was discouraged by her son Julian's experience in another Madison school.

"Julian is a very smart boy, and capable of being a good leader and role model for other kids. But he was getting discouraged because his very, very high grades on his homework and tests did not match the grades he was getting on his report card," she said.

"I tried for some time to frame it as his teachers wanting to challenge him to do even better, to live up to his potential," she recalled. "But eventually it was just too obvious that no matter what he did, he wasn't going to get credit for it."

The last straw was when he was suspended in second grade. He and another little boy were playing with a rubber band, Hunt said, and made some shapes and giggled over what they said they looked like. Because a child complained that she was uncomfortable, the school suspended Julian for sexual harassment, Hunt said.

She has nothing but positive things to say about the experience Julian and his younger sister have had in the Open Classroom at Lincoln. She also has high praise for both the high expectations and the respect teachers give their students, which she says is key in challenging a child like her son.

"It's like we are a family within the larger Lincoln community," she said. She added that it was worth it to drive her children every day to and from school. "I wouldn't have them go anywhere else," she added.

**Daunting challenges:** Lehman recognizes that many of her students face daunting challenges in their lives outside of school.

Overall, Lincoln students are among the poorest in the Madison school district. Sixty-eight percent of the children are identified as low income because they qualify for free or reduced-fee meals at school. Only 65 percent of Lincoln's students are considered proficient in English. The racial mix at Lincoln is divided among Hispanic, white, black and Asian students, a diversity many parents and teachers at Lincoln say is an advantage to students as they learn to get along with a true microcosm of a changing district and America.

There is also a high mobility rate, meaning students frequently enter and exit the student population at both Lincoln and its sister school, Midvale Elementary.

Midvale serves the kindergarten through second-grade students of the pair while Lincoln students are mostly third-, fourth- and fifth-graders. A small number of kindergarten through second-grade students participate in the Open Classroom at Lincoln.

Midvale Principal John Burkholder spoke of one student who had changed schools, including preschool, 11 times by second grade.

"That's an extreme case, of course," he acknowledged. "But when students are constantly changing schools, and teachers, and classes, there's no question that it has an impact on what and how much they're learning."

Because of No Child Left Behind legislation at the federal level, schools are being cajoled, challenged and held accountable as never before to find the keys that unlock performance and achievement among all children. The Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations were expanded this year to test all elementary students third grade and above, plus eighth-graders and 10th-graders.

There is an unprecedented emphasis on testing, not just in Madison but across the country. In a school with many economically disadvantaged children and students who are still trying to learn English, that can be a scary proposition. Traditionally, many of these students have not done well on standardized tests, and now their performance, or lack of performance, can lead to sanctions against a school, including losing funding.

While that has so far not been a problem at Lincoln or any other Madison school, there is a slowly closing window that demands that all schools have virtually all of their students testing proficient or better by the 2013-2014 school year.

Making the situation even tougher is that some of the ways test data are reported make the results look worse than they are for a school like Lincoln.

Lehman says that her students who are not proficient in English are not expected to take a test they don't understand because of a language barrier. However, their scores, listed as zeroes, are averaged in with other scores. For a school with many more students in this category, there is a disproportionate impact on scores.

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"It seems unfair, but I don't want to seem like I'm whining," Lehman says with a sigh.

"We'll just have to do better, and, fortunately, I think we have among the best teachers and resources in the district to tackle these problems, but they are tough," she acknowledged.

On the other end of the scale, Lehman is happy to report that high-achieving students do especially well at Lincoln, blessed by the same great teachers who are well aware that all students need to have their unique needs met in the classroom.

"Getting to work with this diversity of students is just a great thing for me. It's a really cool convergence of society coming together in an elementary school," she said.

**Fond memories:** Brown, the future business major, said he appreciated the diversity of the Midvale-Lincoln pair.

"I liked that fact that we learned about other cultures. It's a great advantage, and I also felt I had so much help from the teachers there," he said.

The three West High seniors recently took some time during their lunch hour to talk about their memories of Midvale and Lincoln, which they all said they loved and appreciated as a great platform for their later studies.

Borgwardt, the aspiring actress, got her start on the stage performing in "Winnie the Pooh" at Lincoln for the Open Classroom. Chamberlain, the budding anthropologist, said the emphasis on community interaction at Lincoln inspired her. All three praised the programs and staff, particularly singling out Dave Spitzer, who is still teaching at Lincoln. "I think we did things other elementary schools didn't do, and they taught us to have pride in our school and each other," Chamberlain said.

Borgwardt said both schools emphasized a creative approach to learning that included lots of art and experiential projects that captured students' imaginations and made learning fun.

And all three fondly remembered a weeklong camping trip they took with Spitzer's fourth-grade class to Door County and across northern Wisconsin, visiting other schools along the way and learning about the state.

"I never would have done that without Mr. Spitzer," Brown said.

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