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## Parents, staff say Midvale defies stereotypes

Called "best kept secret"

By Susan Troller

The parents at Midvale Elementary School have heard it all:

It's a school no ambitious parent wants. The bus rides are long and unpleasant as children are sent far from their homes along the hazardous Beltline. After more than 20 years, the pairing of Midvale and Lincoln elementary schools, developed as part of an effort to desegregate two south side Madison schools, is a failed experiment.

"The misperceptions about our school are so frustrating, and so wrong," sighed Dave Verban, who is part of a group of Midvale-Lincoln parents that has joined forces to try to tell what they say is the real story of their school community.



Photo by David Sandell/The Capital Times

Isabelle Tigges-Green (left) shows students how the Chinese spin a scarf at a recent cultural fair.



Photo by Mike DeVries/The Capital Times

Lincoln Elementary School teacher Mr. Spitzer in his classroom.



Verban and others say the Midvale-Lincoln pair is the best-kept secret in the Madison Metropolitan School District, a magnet for excellent teachers, passionate administrators and exceptional resources. They say the school's rainbow student population, which includes a high percentage of non-native English speakers and special needs children, is an advantage for students because it is a microcosm of the real world and prepares them to learn from all kinds of people.

What's infuriating, the Midvale parents agree, is hearing negative comments about Midvale-Lincoln from outsiders who have no firsthand knowledge of their school community, but who are perpetuating a stereotype that has dogged the pair from its inception as part of a district desegregation effort in 1984.

"I don't begrudge anyone their choice of school," Verban said, "but this is, honestly, a great place for our kids with amazing opportunities for learning. We'd like the local community to know that's been our experience."

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**TCT graphic**

Midvale-Lincoln area

He said it's hard to imagine a school that more effectively combines a nurturing, mellow atmosphere for the earliest grades with as rigorous an academic curriculum. Other parents nodded in agreement. Unfortunately, they said, that notion has not been the general public perception.

**Lincoln students excel despite challenges****Editorial: Bush backs discrimination**

Last winter, a School Board-sponsored task force studied various school boundary changes to address rapid growth and overcrowding in some schools in the West and Memorial high school attendance areas. Many options were considered, including the possibility of creating a new pair that would join Thoreau Elementary with badly overcrowded Leopold.

Other notions involved moving some students from the popular Franklin-Randall pair to Midvale and Lincoln, making room for other changes among student populations.

In public meetings, online commentary and private conversations, it was clear that there are some negative notions about Midvale-Lincoln.

In a news story about a well-attended meeting at Cherokee Middle School to discuss some of the task force suggestions, Gloria Beach was quoted saying that parents in the Midvale area were "very unhappy with pairing."

But Beth Morledge Webb, whose children had attended both Midvale and Lincoln schools before a job change required a move to Boulder, Colo., wrote an e-mail to her former schools' parent-teacher organization, defending the experience her family had with the Madison pair.

"I am delighted to report that my Midvale-Lincoln educated children are soaring academically here, even in a school considered to be challenging. Their teachers, across the board, have told us at the kids' conferences how wonderfully prepared our children are and they comment that we must have come from an excellent school system.

"I applaud Midvale/Lincoln for everything from its dedicated, highly skilled and creative staff to the special social environment. I only wish that people who seem to take issue with Midvale/Lincoln could recognize what a treasure they have right in their own community. We yearn for what we had to leave behind," she wrote.

For Julie Yendreck and Greg Downey, parents of a Midvale first-grader and a preschooler, the social environment of the school is a gift to the families who attend the school.

Although she said in an e-mail that she didn't want to assume that all parents share their views, she and her husband believe that the greatest benefits both they and their son "receive from this pairing is the opportunity to learn about and befriend a wider mix of families than we otherwise might - a mix of other students and parents which is much more representative of both our nation and our globe than any single neighborhood could ever be."

**What's to fear?** So what is it, exactly, that some parents fear when they look at Midvale-Lincoln?

Midvale's student population is truly diverse, with a mix of students that includes approximately 13 percent Asian, 24 percent African-American, 34 percent Hispanic and 28 percent white.

Midvale and Lincoln have among the highest percentages of poor children in the Madison school district (67 and 68 percent, respectively, based on the number of children who are eligible to receive free and reduced-cost meals at school).

Many parents also say they prefer having their children attend elementary school in their own neighborhood. But that option is becoming less common as many neighborhoods age, high housing costs price young families out of the local market and a tax-wary public seems less willing to support building new schools.

A paired school arrangement like the one at Lincoln and Midvale requires students to attend Midvale for kindergarten through second grade, and Lincoln for grades 3 through 5. It guarantees that each child will not attend a neighborhood school for at least a portion of his or her elementary education, and will also ride a bus to a school outside of his or her home area for three years.

"I think it's true that some hard feelings remain from the time when the Lincoln-Midvale pair was created, and that has taken a long, long time to heal," acknowledged Mary Kay Johnson, an instructional resource teacher who has taught at Midvale for the last 18 years.

The Midvale neighborhood was chosen as the paired school with Lincoln rather late in the process, and some Midvale residents resented the fact that Thoreau Elementary was spared from the pairing, even though the two schools shared a common border.

But Johnson said in the last five years there have been more new, young families moving into the Midvale area as the neighborhood demographics change with time. It also has become more common to see families making additions to their homes and staying in the area rather than moving as their families grow.

"We give school tours on Tuesday mornings, and while I used to defend, defend, defend Midvale, now I sense a real interest in what we're doing here," she said, adding that for the last two years, there has been a waiting list to get into Midvale for students from other schools.

Johnson also said visitors express enthusiasm about the curriculum, the teacher/student ratios - among the best in the district - as well as the visible enthusiasm of the staff and the range of volunteers that are in and out of the school to help out and be part of the children's education.

"The staff is very, very bright and very eager to do whatever is necessary to help every child, across the whole range of abilities, learn to their absolute capacity," Johnson said.

Teachers take advantage of many opportunities for professional development at Midvale, Principal John Burkholder noted, adding that they routinely work beyond the school day and school year to keep honing their skills.

For example, this summer, Midvale teachers are getting together on their own time for a book group that is focusing on why African-American children are over-represented in special education classes.

Burkholder, who has been principal at Midvale for the last three years, said he recognized that middle class parents with non-special needs kids may look at a school pair like Midvale-Lincoln and worry that all the resources will be focused on the significant population of needy children.

"The achievement of every child is important to us," he said, "including the really smart kids. I want *all* the kids to be challenged."

He said the training, experience and creativity of the staff, which has very little turnover each year, is at the heart of what makes Midvale tick academically, along with a commitment to find the unique key to learning for every child.

"Mary Kay works with a little group of kindergartners that read at the fourth- through sixth-grade level. Now *there's* a challenge," he laughed. "They read at the middle school level, but they're just 6 years old, so much of what's written for older kids is not appropriate." They are gobbling up lots of non-fiction, especially science and history, he said.

More generally, Burkholder said low teacher-student ratios that give kids plenty of one-on-one attention and a group of parents that are deeply committed to the school community make Midvale both a nurturing and exciting environment for students and their families.

**Achievement gap:** A more serious challenge to both Midvale and Lincoln is how to address the achievement gap between minority students who struggle academically and middle class students who are proficient or above average in their schoolwork.

Burkholder, who grew up in Madison just down the hill from Midvale, attended Madison schools, including the University of Wisconsin. He then headed to Southern California, where he earned his Ph.D. in educational administration and business at the University of Southern California, and worked as an educator in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

In Los Angeles, he developed plenty of experience working with poor, non-English speaking students, including working in a school made up primarily of Armenian immigrants, 86 percent of whom came from impoverished families.

"We label too many kids as learning disabled. They are not. They are instructionally disabled," he said. And, he believes, it's something the schools can do something about.

In many cases, Burkholder explained, students may not hear or recognize some sounds in English, perhaps because of the language they hear at home. Based on his experience in California, he is certain that raising this awareness of the sounds of language - he calls it phonemic awareness - even before it is attached to the symbols necessary for reading, will reap significant benefits in how students perform academically.

At Midvale, Burkholder has seen phonemic awareness scores jump this year with his class of kindergartners.

"I've seen it work in California," he said. "I think it will work here, too. Change in terms of improving the achievement gap can't happen too fast.

"What I've found is that pretty much all parents want the same thing. They want their kids to succeed, to do well in school. We need to tap into that resource," he said.

And, the schools, he said, need to help give the students the tools to do just that.

### Racial Demographics

- Madison elementary schools: 52 percent white, 14 percent Hispanic, 23 percent African-American, 11 percent Asian
- Franklin Elementary: 64 percent white, 10 percent Hispanic, 13 percent African-American, 12 percent Asian
- Midvale Elementary: 28 percent white, 34 percent Hispanic, 24 percent African-American, 13 percent Asian

Source: official 2005-2006 count at [www.madison.k12.wi.us/stats.htm](http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/stats.htm)

### Low-income Enrollment

- Madison elementary schools: 42 percent
- Franklin Elementary: 25 percent
- Midvale Elementary: 67 percent

Source: official 2005-2006 count at [www.madison.k12.wi.us/stats.htm](http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/stats.htm)

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