

FAFSA4caster Gives College Hopefuls Jump Start on Federal Aid Availability

New Online Tool Simplifies Financial Aid Process

A new online tool to help students and families prepare financially for college before a student's senior year of high school is now available. Called the *FAFSA4caster*, it provides high school juniors with an early estimate of their eligibility for federal financial aid, which could include a Pell Grant of up to \$4,310 based on financial need.

"Improving college access and affordability is key to giving more Americans a chance at higher education and keeping America competitive," said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, who introduced the tool in late March. "Families need more information—sooner—about students' federal aid eligibility so that they can plan ahead for college. The *FAFSA4caster* gives families an important tool they can use to make decisions about the future."

The *FAFSA4caster*:

> Calculates a student's eligibility for federal

student aid, including grants;

> Reduces the time it will take to complete the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* (FAFSA); and

> Simplifies the financial aid process for students and families.



The *FAFSA4caster* allows for an easy transition to *FAFSA on the Web*, the online version of the federal application. It pre-populates 51 of the 102 questions on the FAFSA, significantly reducing the time it takes for students to complete the FAFSA in their senior year of high school.

The *FAFSA4caster* is available in both English and Spanish at <http://www.fafsa4caster.ed.gov>.

Last September, Secretary Spellings announced her plans to improve the U.S. higher education system, based on the recommendations listed in the final report of her Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The report included five

> continued on page 2

INSIDE

2 Virginia Tech University Condolences

Around the Country—Georgia and Texas

5 Calendar

Q&A—Improving Math and Science Achievement

Education News Parents Can Use

6 Making ED.gov More User-Friendly

Rigor in K-6

Interdisciplinary Curriculum, Strong Leadership Account For 100-Percent Proficiency at New York School

Discussing a helicopter flight he'd recently taken to care for a critically injured patient, Dr. William Meade, Jr., recalled where he first learned the navigational terms "latitude" and "longitude": in elementary school. The 31-year-old physician, who will be completing his residency training in emergency medicine at the University of California—San Diego next June, said he attributes a lot of what he has learned to his primary years at Lincoln Elementary School in Mount Vernon, N.Y.

"That's one of the things that is special about Lincoln—they created that strong foundation, that skill set and support system, that allows anything to be possible in terms of educational accomplishments subsequent to Lincoln," said Meade, who, with merit-based scholarships, went on to prep school and then to Duke University, where he earned both his undergraduate and medical degrees. "I think that's the environment Mr. Albano created by pushing his teachers

> continued on page 2

Nothing is left to chance.



major recommendations for improving college access, affordability and accountability: 1) aligning K–12 and higher education expectations; 2) increasing need-based aid for access and success of low-income students; 3) using accreditation to support and emphasize student learning outcomes; 4) serving adults and other nontraditional students; and 5) enhancing affordability, decreasing costs and promoting productivity. The release of the *FAFSA4caster* puts into place one of the secretary’s action steps in response to these recommendations.

Our Condolences ...

In response to the shootings on the campus of Virginia Tech University on April 16, President George W. Bush and U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings issued the following statements of support:

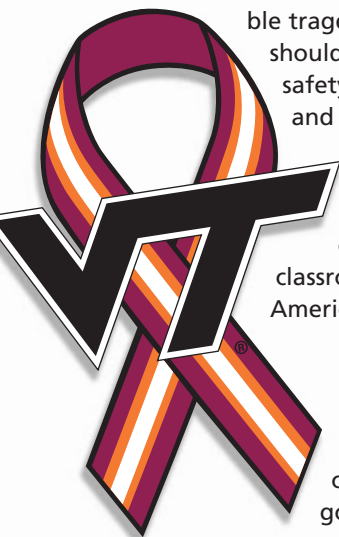
“... Laura and I and many across our nation are praying for the victims and their families and all the members of the university community who have been devastated by this terrible tragedy. ... Schools should be places of safety and sanctuary and learning. When that sanctuary is violated, the impact is felt in every American classroom and every American community.”

—President Bush

“As the mother of a daughter in college, my heart goes out to the parents of the students who lost their lives and to the entire Virginia Tech community on this sad day. My Department is working with the White House and other agencies to identify what resources can be provided to Virginia Tech as the university assesses its needs.”

—Secretary Spellings

Secretary Spellings is asking for suggestions from the public about school safety via e-mail to her at safeschools@ed.gov.



to get the most out of their students.”

Meade was referring to Principal George Albano, whose 27-year leadership has been widely credited for the school’s legendary success. Honored last year as a *No Child Left Behind*–Blue Ribbon School for consistent high academic achievement, Lincoln has increasingly attracted both local and national attention for its rigorous yet innovative approach to elementary education.

The largest elementary school in the Mount Vernon City School District with nearly 800 children, Lincoln has reached capacity due largely to the out-of-boundary enrollment of students by parents who have heard of its remarkable reputation. “For anyone who cares enough about their child to want something better, I’m not going to deny that,” said Albano, regarding the 30–40 special permission requests granted each year.

“At Lincoln, the children are challenged and made to believe they can excel,” explained Delia Farquharson, who transferred her nine-year-old daughter, Kenja-Rae, there last fall following her disappointment with the neighborhood school. “So I could not leave her in an environment where she was at risk of being taught that mediocrity is okay.”

Demographically, Lincoln is the typical multicultural school on the urban fringe, seated in a racially and economically diverse suburb of New York City and facing challenges similar to its city counterparts. However, academically, it is anything but ordinary. Since 2002, nearly every fourth-grader has met or exceeded state standards in reading and math. (In 2004 and 2005, 100 percent of

students did so in math as well as in reading in 2006.)

Moreover, when the state of New York tested additional grades for the first time last year, Lincoln’s third- through sixth-graders proved consistently strong in both subjects. Even fifth-graders’ scores, which were a little lower than those for other grades, were still considerably higher than state averages (77 percent in math and 76 percent in reading, compared to 68 percent and 67 percent, respectively).

Revealing an even more brilliant picture, the most recent disaggregated

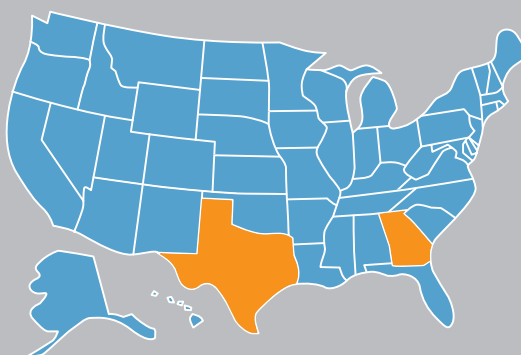


data (2005) by ethnicity and economic levels showed African-American and white students, along with those qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches, performed equally well on the state exam.

For Albano, closing the achievement gap is a matter of closing the gap between the haves and have-



AROUND THE COUNTRY



GEORGIA—More than 8,500 high school students from across the country with 344 robots competed at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta for the 2007 *FIRST* Robotics Competition Championship, held April 12–14. Free and open to the public, the annual event, administered by the public charity *FIRST* (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and

nots when it comes to enriching academic opportunities. “Just because you’re born into a certain race or neighborhood, you should not be denied what wealthy people can afford,” he said. “We’ve got to stop making excuses. We have an obligation to give the children in these schools what everyone else gets.”

That means assigning students at Lincoln highly sophisticated projects that involve creating dioramas depicting artifacts from the Precambrian to the Cenozoic eras and teaching Latin in a study of Julius Caesar.

Yet, to make these types of enriching experiences possible at a school with a 54-percent poverty rate takes more than dollars and cents. “Would I welcome more money?” asked Albano. “Yes. But to me that’s another cop-out. You have to be innovative. What I’ve done is used our success to excite people, because there are a lot of good people out there who want to make a difference.”

For instance, more than a decade ago, the retired spouse of one of the teachers volunteered to start a chess club at Lincoln. The children became so adept at the game—winning several local competitions—that a private donor gave a sizeable grant toward funding the training services of chess masters. Today, this expert instruction is the center of a class held twice a week that teaches students not only the art of chess but also the critical thinking skills necessary for reading and math.

By integrating subject matter across the curriculum—even in a nontraditional classroom activity like chess—Lincoln has created a seamless tapestry of learning that allows students to experience firsthand the meaningful, interactive world of knowledge. A second-grade science lesson in which students describe the tools they would bring on a fossil hunt,

for example, morphs into a classroom discussion about how writing has its own collection of tools, such as a “grabber” or engaging introduction, which the children would need to employ for their journal assignment describing the imaginary expedition.

“Everything is interdisciplinary,” said teacher Mary Anderson, whose husband started the chess club. “There isn’t a way to separate the subjects. There isn’t a way that you could teach, say, fractions without them learning the vocabulary—the concept of numbers and languages together.”

As faculty members collaborate across disciplines and grade levels to prepare lesson plans, interdisciplinary instruction is seen as both a team-building and a time-efficient approach. “People say we don’t have enough time in elementary [to cover all the material], but the key is integrating the subjects,” said Albano.

Science and math, in particular, are often the center of this multidisciplinary experience. For a fifth-grade project about rockets, teacher Dawn Mullins builds on an exercise led by the physical education



Technology), wrapped up its 16th and largest-ever season. It followed 37 regional competitions held in March, from which teams were invited to the championship based on their performance in competitive play, sportsmanship and the development of partnerships among schools, businesses and communities. *FIRST* participants are eligible for nearly \$8 million in college scholarships.

TEXAS—The National Math and Science Initiative, whose goal is to foster the next generation of scientists and engineers, was launched in March by leaders in the education community and ExxonMobil with \$125 million in initial support from that corporation. Based in Dallas, the nonprofit initiative seeks to improve U.S. global competitiveness by expanding two programs that have proven successful in Texas schools. This fall, it will award

grants in up to 10 states for training and incentive programs for Advanced Placement (AP) and pre-AP courses, and up to 10 colleges and universities for the replication of the UTeach program, which encourages math and science majors to enter the teaching profession. Within five years, the initiative plans to expand these programs to 150 school districts in 20 states and to more than 50 campuses nationwide.

teacher using bouncing balls to demonstrate the theory of velocity. The children, who by second grade already have learned the difference between a dependent and an independent variable, use balloons that simulate rockets to test their hypotheses on how far they will travel based on the measure of inflated air.

Classroom lessons at Lincoln draw regularly from a stock of manipulatives and props—including microscopes, magnifying glasses and miniature models—that fill three walk-in closets supplied mostly through generous donations from science institutes and



other organizations.

“No one wants to sit all day and read something from a book,” said Mullins about the hands-on learning. “And I don’t think they’ll remember years from now if someone were to ask them about the relationship between velocity and distance. I don’t think it really makes an impression on them if they aren’t actively involved.”

From left to right: Albano with students Kenja-Rae and Mizraim; Mesisco (center) with some of the Star Search participants; fourth-graders Tayler and Isaiah play chess; and Mullins along with fifth-graders Juliana, Ashley and Anthony anticipate a rocket’s distance. On the cover, Vaccaro, holding a spherical dodecahedron, with student Eleidalee. Photos by Tom McWilliam, Jr.

Woven also into this academic framework are the arts. To learn about the water cycle, first-graders sing with piano accompaniment a catchy song written by the music teacher: “Water travels in a cycle. Yes, it does. Yes, it does. . . . Goes up as evaporation. Comes down as condensation. Rains down as



precipitation. Yes, it does. Yes, it does.” Following a few song rehearsals, the focus turns to a language arts lesson dividing the scientific terms into syllables, finishing with a discussion of the technical stages of the water cycle.

Like the music session, art class is another occasion to explore complex themes, as students learn the difference between a polygon and a polyhedron by dipping small paper

cups in paint and gluing together three color groups to construct a disco ball-like geometric structure called a “spherical dodecahedron.” In a well-connected curriculum, said art teacher Jennifer Vaccaro, “nothing is left to chance.”

Last year, reading specialist Diana Mesisco used the performing arts as a platform to launch a schoolwide literacy incentive program called “Star Search” inspired by the popular television show *American Idol*. Students were asked to write an original song about the plot or a character from their favorite book, then invited to perform in a competition judged by a panel of parents and teachers. Along with a medal award, participants were treated to a surprise performance by *American Idol*’s own Julia DeMato, who reached 10th place in the show’s second season.

While the ingenuity of these efforts clearly has been the hard work of the staff, many of whom have taught at Lincoln for at least 15 years, all agree that none of it would be possible without the longstanding leadership of Principal Albano. “I believe lots of schools have good teachers, but it takes a great instructional leader to really bring out the best in them,” said Mesisco.

An educator who could have retired five years ago at age 55, Albano is considered a tireless advocate for better schooling for the less-than-privileged. “I’m here because I’m on a mission to just not tell you it works, but to show you it does.”

—BY NICOLE ASHBY



Lincoln Elementary School



- > **Grade Span:** K–6
- > **Locale:** Suburban
- > **Total Students:** 754
- > **Race/Ethnicity Enrollment:** 50% African-American, 25% Hispanic, 23% white, 2% Asian
- > **Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible:** 54%
- > **English Language Learners:** 28%
- > **Special Education Students:** 16%
- > **Percentage Proficient:** In reading, 100%; in math, 99% (based on fourth-graders assessed on the 2006 state exam).
- > **Interesting Fact:** Since 2002, nearly every fourth-grader at Lincoln has met or exceeded state standards in reading and math. In 2004 and 2005, 100 percent of students did so in math as well as in reading in 2006.

May 7-11

Teacher Appreciation Week, a celebration sponsored by the National PTA. Established in 1984, the week's observance provides an opportunity to honor the dedicated educators who teach America's children. Visit <http://www.pta.org> or call toll-free 1-800-307-4782.

May 15-16

White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Conference, Phoenix, sponsored by a consortium of federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education. Part of a series of regional conferences being held around the country, this meeting for grassroots leaders will provide information about federal grant opportunities. Visit <http://www.fbc.gov> or call 202-456-6718.

On the Horizon

This fall, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition will host the Sixth Annual Celebrate Our Rising Stars Summit, Oct. 29-31 in Washington, D.C. Designed to help educators of English language learners in all grades achieve academic success, the summit will highlight best practices and research, as well as provide an opportunity to network with policymakers at local, state and national levels. Visit <http://www.oelasummit.org>.



What is the Department doing to improve math and science achievement?

In a recent study, U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 24th out of 29 nations in math literacy and problem solving, performing below the international average. Results of another study proved just as disconcerting: only 7 percent of fourth- and eighth-graders achieved an advanced level in math and science, compared to 41 percent of students from Singapore. In response to this crisis, the U.S. Department of Education has undertaken several new initiatives to help America's students develop the solid math and science skills needed in today's global economy.

> Created in 2006 and modeled after the influential National Reading Panel, the National Mathematics Advisory Panel will make recommendations based on the best scientific evidence on the improvement of mathematics education, with a particular emphasis on algebra readiness and success.

Following a yearlong series of public meetings across the country, the panel will submit a final report early next year. President Bush is requesting \$250 million in his 2008 budget to help states implement these recommendations.

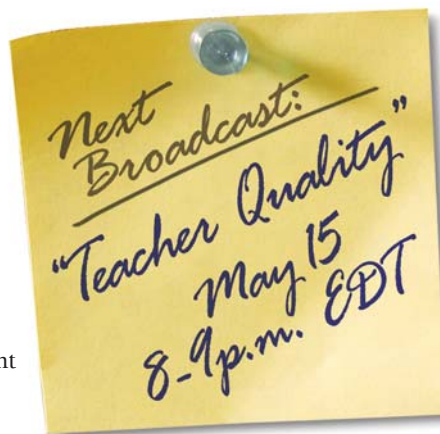
> Also part of the president's 2008 budget request, a proposed \$25 million for the creation of the Adjunct Teacher Corps would encourage well-qualified math and science professionals to become adjunct secondary school teachers. Funds would be used to make competitive grants to partnerships of school districts and states (or of school districts and appropriate public or private institutions) to create opportunities for professionals with subject-matter expertise to teach secondary school courses in math or science, and provide students real-world applications for math and science concepts being taught in the classroom.

> Since the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2002, schools have been required to annually assess and report student progress in math and reading in an effort to identify problem areas and inform instruction. By the end of the 2007-08 school year, students will also have to be tested in science.

News Show Focuses on Teacher Quality

High-quality, effective teaching, as well as innovative approaches to better recruit and retain exceptional teachers, will be the focus of the May edition of *Education News Parents Can Use*, the U.S. Department of Education's monthly television program.

All across the country, highly qualified teachers are inspiring excellence in students. The May broadcast will showcase several award-winning teachers and explore how effective teaching is at the core of America's long-term economic competitiveness. Among the many features are: an overview of the current state of the teaching profession and what is being done to place a high-quality teacher in every classroom; innovative and alternative strategies



to recruit, train and reward effective teachers; and how programs like the Teacher Incentive Fund, along with the proposed Adjunct Teacher Corps and other teacher quality programs under the American Competitiveness Initiative, are designed to strengthen our nation's teachers, schools and students.

Each month, *Education News Parents Can Use* showcases: schools and school districts from across the country; conversations with school officials, parents and education experts; and advice and free resources for parents and educators.

To learn about viewing options, including webcasts, visit <http://www.ed.gov> and click on "Parents," then "News Parents Can Use"; or call toll-free 1-800-USA-LEARN.

Making ED.gov More User-Friendly

The U.S. Department of Education has enhanced its Web site, <http://www.ed.gov>, to provide a more user-friendly resource for promoting educational excellence for all Americans. The site now has a brighter, more uniform look, and many of the links have been streamlined to make navigation much simpler.

While the Web site retains its most popular links—including the four categories designed for students, parents, teachers and administrators—it

introduces two new features:

> **Secretary's Corner.** This feature highlights the Department's key priorities, which focus on the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*, higher education and the American Competitiveness Initiative. In particular, a fresh addition, "Meet the Secretary," provides detailed information about U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings: her biography, speeches, reflections from recent travels, and responses to questions from teachers on various policy issues. Also included is a sequence of video excerpts spotlighting the secretary's views on topics ranging from the reauthorization of *NCLB* to making college more affordable.

> **Success Stories.** Broadening the online video offerings drawn from the Department's monthly television show, *Education News Parents Can Use*, this new feature offers video clips of schools with promising practices, such as a school in Georgia where 100 percent of its third- and fifth-graders are performing at grade level.



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