Meet 2017 Ryan Award Winner:

Elizabeth Vandlik

Success Academy Bronx 1
Bronx, NYC
K-4
54% African-American | 42% Latino | 89% low-income

This is an Emergency

The small faces stare out from the worn pages school leader Elizabeth Vandlik carries around with her throughout the school day and studies every night. These are her “reading emergencies,” students at Success Academy Bronx 1 who are in danger of falling behind.

The pages are curled, the pictures highlighted in pink, yellow and green, with numerous notes, proof of how often Vandlik is checking on their progress. That focus has driven her students—most of whom reside in the poorest congressional district in the nation—to the top. Under her leadership, 99 percent of Bronx 1 students passed the state math exam in 2016, compared to 36 percent in New York City. And 83 percent passed the state English-Language Arts exam, compared to 38 percent of students in the district.

“We don’t have to accept that things have to be the way everybody says they have to be,” Vandlik says. And she has built a team that doesn’t accept it. She needs to move 16 kids to make sure they meet the December benchmarks she has set. The kids whose photos are in her packet are separated into categories according to what they need, with some below grade level and regressing, some below grade level with zero growth, others below grade level but growing, and still others on grade level but stuck.

To push all her students where they need to be, Vandlik and her staff have thought through every moment of the day and what it should look like, from requiring students to wear Velcro or slip-on shoes so they’re not distracted by tying shoes, to sketching out what student-led learning looks like during discussions.

Vandlik, who received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Chicago and has a master’s in education from Pace University, started her career in education with Teach for America, working at a school in
the South Bronx. She then served as an outreach educator for the American Museum of Natural History before deciding she wanted to get back into the classroom. Vandlik taught kindergarten and fourth grade at Success Academy Harlem 1, but started to see she could have a greater impact by working with the whole school, rather than just the 30 students in her classroom. Success Academy founder Eva Moskowitz approached her at a Saturday soccer game and asked if she’d be interested in a leadership position. Vandlik took the opportunity and became an assistant principal at Success Academy Bronx 1, stepping into the principal role in 2013.

Vandlik meets parents and kids at the door at 7:15 a.m. She knows their stories and interests, stopping students to suggest a book she thinks they would like. “This school would not run without the relationships she has with kids, with staff and with parents,” says teacher Steven Madan.

Her staff says she creates an environment that allows them to be professionals. “Liz puts the thinking work on us a lot,” Madan says, by not just telling teachers what to do, instead asking them what they see.

Leading the Team

The staff culture is one focused on adult learning, which means teachers must have an openness to constant feedback.

Coaches sometimes have teachers wear earpieces so they can provide immediate tips in the moment. In meetings, leaders ask for teachers to bring in student work to provide a more immediate check on where students are and make sure teachers understand the thinking and possible misconceptions students might have. “We realized we were skipping steps and not investing enough in adult understanding,” Vandlik says. “Kids should never do something in class you haven’t done yourself, because you don’t know the misconceptions they’re going to have, so now more and more, we’re looking at teachers’ own answers and work to understand the different ways kids’ thinking might break down.”

The school’s success also hinges on agreement around what excellence looks like. A number of times throughout her leadership tenure, Vandlik has engaged the staff in vision building to create an environment where every kid is able to listen and learn. Often that means going on “a war to eliminate gray areas,” Vandlik says. “We thought about every routine or system in the building, mapped out what we want, what will we not accept. There had been a lot of stuff that had been in gray areas, where some people thought it was unacceptable, and some thought maybe something wasn’t that big of a deal. We had a discussion with staff (about) all those little things—we all agreed this is the way it’s going to be even if it’s not a big deal to you.” That means in the hall, the staff discussed which way students should walk down the hall — with their hands at their sides or folded in front of them. (Hands at their sides.) “It may seem like a silly example, but it means every kid in the building knows what every adult expects,” Vandlik says.

The school is not built for the adults, says education manager Kellie Grant. “It’s not about what you want. It’s about what’s best for the children.”

She concedes the environment may not be for everyone. “It’s a high performance culture—it’s OK if you do not want to work at that level, but we need everyone on board,” Vandlik says. To excel in the culture, teachers don’t need to be someone who’s wanted to be a teacher since they were 4 years old. “You have to really be a learner and you have to crave feedback. You have to be really reflective and hungry and asking all the time how you can get better,” she says.
Jennifer Fuoco, building operations manager, says Vandlik likes to remind the staff that “we carry the boxes.” What that means is that everyone takes ownership, so if a staff member is walking down the hall and sees a piece of trash, that person doesn’t wait for the custodian to pick it up at 4:30 p.m. or for someone else to do it. “You bend down and pick it up,” Fuoco says. While everyone has their deliverables and roles, Fuoco says Vandlik links everyone through her daily emails and communications.

Grant says Vandlik doesn’t assume the worst about people, so when staff members are not meeting goals, it’s not a “gotcha!” situation. “She’ll say, ‘Is there anything you need from me to help with that situation?’ And then she’ll say ‘Going forward, we need to make sure we get this done,’ and she works with the person instead of being like ‘You didn’t do this!’” Grant says. That creates an environment where “everyone is held accountable, so you know you can trust your colleague,” Grant says.

Teacher Alex Margolis agrees. “If things are not going well, it’s never about the mistake; it’s about what we can do and how can we fix it.” Daily morning emails inform the staff of happenings and what to expect that day. The school doesn’t use substitute teachers; other staff members fill in for absent teachers.

Managing adult culture includes building strong relationships with parents as well, who may have to adjust to the very high expectations set for families. “With all our expectations, we’re really upfront about what we’re asking,” Vandlik says. From the time parents attend information sessions about the school, the staff makes sure to lay out the work that will be involved on their end, from nightly reading and homework packets to promptness. “We know it’s work, and it’s not easy,” Vandlik says. “But if you do these things, we will get your kid to college.”

Staff members describe Vandlik as calm in parent meetings. “She says, ‘We love your kid—this is what we’re going to do,’” says Madan. “She never leaves a meeting without a plan.”

To help a young staff prepare for difficult parent conversations, the staff does role-playing, with actors brought in to help teachers practice, sometimes dialing up emotions to make sure teachers can react. “It’s one thing to talk about how you’re going to have a conversation, and it’s another to practice it,” Vandlik says.

Parent Liz Vazquez commended how the staff works with families. “They take control and ownership, making sure the child is up to par,” she says.

**Schedules and Structures for Success**

*The school is set up to enable the team to focus on the kids and instruction.*

A business operations manager handles logistics and operations matters, such as safety, ordering, and building matters that typically fall on the principal’s plate, giving Vandlik more time to be in classrooms. She has two assistant principals, one for kindergarten through second grade and one for third and fourth grade. In addition, she has a dean in charge of attendance, homework, and overall family involvement, as well as an education manager who handles special education services and interventions for students.

Vandlik has built into the schedule a check-in at the end of the day where the team can communicate about any student or parent issues or items coming up the next day.”
For herself, she schedules daily culture checks, too. “You can spend all your time on systems, but if you’re not checking it, over time they erode,” Vandlik says.

In one-on-ones with school leaders, teachers identify specific goals aligned to school benchmarks that they regularly revisit. Recurring agendas for meetings spell out all the goals for the year. “That keeps us honest. If every week you have to report on these data points, it’s hard to slip through the cracks,” Vandlik says.

**Eye on the Prize**

*Teachers name their classrooms after their alma maters. Scholars write their college graduation year on their paper as “class of 2030” and the like.*

“We start talking about skills that they use now that we will use in college,” says Madan. Teachers and students sport college gear. At the end of the year, students pull together a resume to present to their teacher for the next year, an exercise that prompts conversations about how students can best prepare for their future starting now. “You want to be an engineer? Here are the great classes you can take,” Madan says. “I don’t remember thinking about college until sophomore year. If they already have that in them, I can’t wait to see where they are in high school.”

The daily reminders of college make it seem accessible “in a community where maybe their family members did not think it could be for them,” says science teacher Lindsey Ganslow. Most students can readily name colleges where they want to study. “I’m most proud of shattering this idea of Mott Haven being a community where kids are not as successful academically—when you’re looking at numbers, graduation rates, or kids who read on grade level—and that being so acceptable to so many people,” Ganslow says. “Then coming back with great scholar work and showing these kids are capable of so much more.”
For school leader Elizabeth Vandlik, schoolwide priorities have evolved in the years since she took over as principal at Success Academy Bronx 1. As she closes out each year, she delves into hard data from the network accountability systems and “soft data” from her observations to identify trends. She also considers who will be on her team going into the next year.

Year One. In her first year as a new principal, she stepped into a school environment where a few key teacher leaders had created “pockets of excellence.” Those teachers really knew the curriculum and had excellent behavior management. But spread throughout the school were rooms where the teacher was brand new or struggling. “The goal was to make sure we didn’t have a situation where a kid in one fourth grade class would have a different education than one in the room next to it,” Vandlik says. “My priority was to take those pockets of excellence and leverage the team to make sure we had consistency across the school.”
That meant encouraging those stronger teachers to step up and become leaders and create an environment where every teacher felt ownership over the performance of every kid in the building. “We’re school teachers, not classroom teachers,” she says. She focused on teachers’ individual strengths, and built complementary teams around those.

**Staff Shifts.** One year, a number of experienced staffers moved on to become school leaders, which ushered in a wave of fresh staff members. Behavior management became her priority that year, because of its foundational importance. “We know that if classrooms are not run well and kids are not actively listening to adults and each other, we can’t do anything else,” Vandlik says.

In other years, when staff is on more solid ground, she has been able to push on other levers. In 2017-18, she identified three priorities: Training her junior leaders to better develop teachers, increasing parent investment and improving the reading culture.

**Read the Data.** Parent investment rose to the top of her priorities after she noticed a spike in students being tardy or absent. She identified measures that she could refer to regularly to know where the school stood. She set a goal that at least 97 percent of kids be in school every day, and 96 percent of families be on time. On one recent morning, eight students are absent (“Not good,” she says.) Thirteen are tardy, which is within range, but she’s still concerned. The same names keep popping up over and over again.

Teachers call home in the morning if the student is not present and enter information into a shared tracker explaining why the student isn’t there. “Every teacher is responsible for knowing where their kids are, and we want to see notes on why,” Vandlik says. When one class has three students absent without explanation, she heads to the teacher’s classroom and checks in to see what’s behind it. The teacher explains that the dean has already set up a meeting with the parents of one student who has a number of absences, and that she is waiting to hear back from another. To support families around this goal, the staff arranges wake-up calls for families, coordinates carpools or walking buddies, and organizes incentives for older siblings to get younger kids to school on time. “I’ve once sent a cab for the kids when the parent was really sick,” Vandlik says. “Parents see how crazy we are about this, but also know we are crazy about supports.”
At Success Academy Bronx 1, school leader Elizabeth Vandlik has built systems and structures that keep her team focused on her kids and instruction. But she is quick to caution: “You can spend all your time on systems, but if you’re not checking them, over time, they erode,” Vandlik says.
How can you set your school up for success?

Establish Benchmarks. To keep her team on track, Vandlik sets benchmarks in every area: instructionally as well as culturally, looking at parent investment, the classroom community, behavior management, student attendance and other areas.

Revisit Goals Regularly. Vandlik then creates systems that require staff to check in with those benchmarks often. In one-on-ones with school leaders, staff members identify specific goals aligned to schoolwide benchmarks, and then check in on them regularly. Agendas for regularly scheduled meetings spell out the goals for the year, along with mini-goals. "That keeps us honest. If every week you have to report on these data points, it's hard to slip through the cracks," Vandlik says.

Set Daily Checkpoints. Vandlik has built into the schedule a check-in at the end of the day where the leadership team comes together to communicate about any student or parent issues or items coming up the next day. Staff members say it helps keep everyone on the same page.

Structure Your Team. A business operations manager handles all logistics and operations matters at the school, such as safety, ordering and building matters that typically fall on the principal's plate, giving Vandlik more time to be in classrooms. She has two assistant principals, one for kindergarten through second grade and one for third and fourth grade who are primarily in classrooms coaching teachers. In addition, she has a dean in charge of attendance, homework and overall family involvement, as well as an education manager who handles special education services and interventions for students.

Schedule for Excellence. The day starts at 7:15 a.m. and doors are locked at 5:30 p.m. so teachers have to go home. Students get daily science, and recess is considered essential. Tutoring is available before or after school for small groups of students. Timers and music are used to keep transitions on schedule and students moving.

Every Wednesday students dismiss at 12:30 p.m., giving the staff the afternoon for professional development and meetings, which they periodically use to check in on school-wide goals or meet with their grade level team. Teachers have daily prep time when their students go to science, art, music, dance or other electives. Leaders also meet with the teachers a few times a week during those blocks for data check-ins and to provide feedback.

Every day, Vandlik builds in time to assess school culture, reviewing trackers and following up with teachers on some key indicators, such as tardies. She also looks at softer data from her observations, which helps her gauge whether the staff is meeting culture goals.

Free Up Teachers. Teachers are provided with books, supplies and curriculum from the network. A shared resource called Education Institute offers lesson plans and other resources for teachers. Rooms are fully stocked with books to encourage reading. "They take so much of the weight off the teacher's shoulders," says teacher Steven Madan, who previously bought desks for his classroom at another school, but now has a classroom library of 1600 books. The principal is also freed to concentrate on training teachers. "The way the system runs here, you have the principal and assistant principals working with teachers, so you’re able to get developed faster," he says.
What makes your school successful?

We have a very high bar for teachers, leaders and parents, and we’re really serious about it. We don’t accept that things have to be the way everybody says they have to be. And we are crazy about the details. None of our kids wear shoes with laces because we don’t want them to waste time having to tie shoes. They wear Velcro or slip-on. We think through every part of what we want kids to do.

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"We know that if classrooms are not run well and kids are not actively listening to adults and each other, then we can’t do anything else."

-Elizabeth Vandlik
What helps you keep the focus on learning?

We went on a war to eliminate gray areas. We thought about every routine or system in the building, mapped out what we want, what we will not accept. There was a lot of stuff that had been in gray areas, where some people thought it was unacceptable and some thought maybe something wasn’t that big of a deal. We had a discussion with staff about all those little things, and we all agreed this is the way it’s going to be. Even if it’s not a big deal to you, it’s a big deal to the school and there has to be consistency...Should kids walk with their hands at their sides or folded in front of them? Now we pick one way, hands at their sides. It may seem like a silly example, but it means every kid in the building knows what every adult expects.

What do you wish you’d known when you started?

I would have thought more about what it needs to look like to effectively manage grown-ups. I was doing that work mostly from instinct and how I like to be managed, but you learn very quickly that not everyone is like you. The adult stuff is the hardest part of the job.

What’s been your biggest challenge?

How to know what is good enough, what looks tight enough, smooth enough. You think it is, but if you aren’t really maniacal about it, you get six weeks in and it already starts to crumble.

The pool of teachers coming in has changed. Often this is their first job and they have no background in education or teaching, so trying to teach people how to manage a classroom and teach the curriculum and understand the curriculum on an adult level at the same time is a really big challenge. We were jumping in with PD almost too many steps ahead and now we’re trying to pull back and really invest in adult understanding. I can’t talk to you about teaching the kids if I don’t talk to you about your understanding of this text, or of the math concepts in this unit. We’re trying to do a lot more adult-level study of text and math work so teachers truly understand that we’re trying to teach kids how to think.

Tell us about the role actors play in your school.

A lot of our teachers are young, without kids, and may be afraid to have direct conversations with parents, so we do a lot of role-playing of conversations with parents. We bring actors in, and it is so helpful. It’s one thing to talk about how you’re going to have a conversation; it’s another to practice it. We spend a lot of time talking and planning, but we build in time to actually practice. Instead of just having a meeting where we’re talking about a lesson, we actually bring in a group of kids and try it out on them. One teacher tries it out, and it’s like a fishbowl and everyone watches—or we do small groups and teachers try it out, and we walk around and coach. We do progressive dinner-style feedback sessions where one teacher does a lesson and others watch to give feedback in the moment, then we all move to the next teacher’s room, and the goal is for that teacher to do it better than the teacher before. We (brought actors in) at the network, but we also brought them here to do it. The actors dial it up from normal to irate—whatever you need to practice.