

Meet 2017 Ryan Award Winner:

Alexa Sorden



Concourse Village Elementary School

Bronx, NYC

PK-5

60% Latino, 34% African-American, 85% low income

There are no islands here.

Doors remain open to reveal a marked consistency in everything from classroom design, music used for transitions, the manner teachers use to speak to students and the language used. *"Our curriculum has evolved and we are enhancing it constantly, but the vision has been the same since day one,"* says teacher and instructional coordinator Raquel Linares. *"You can't be an island. If I'm*

doing all these fantastic things in my room and not sharing, what's the point? They're going to leave my class next year and everything I worked so hard to build was for nothing. We have an open door policy, we collaborate, we're always sharing."

The history of this campus that serves a high-poverty population in the South Bronx has not been a happy one. In 2008, the NYC Department of Education closed a failing school in this space, announcing a new model, the Performance School, would open to properly serve kids. But by 2013, the Performance School was failing as well with only 14 percent of students performing at grade level in English and 12 percent in math.

In stepped Alexa Sorden, with a clear map of where her new school would go, and how it would erase a history of failure to propel her students to the top. The team she built did just that, with 98 percent of Concourse Village Elementary students meeting or exceeding expectations on the 2016 state math exam, while 94 percent did so in English-Language Arts. Her students beat the district average by 62 points in math and 56 points in English-Language Arts.

"We are a community of one," is Sorden's frequent refrain. It's about the kids in the building, not the adults, she says. She sets up systems so children know what to expect in every room, laying the foundations of those systems starting in preK. *"They shouldn't have to relearn systems every year, that's unfair,"* Sorden says. *"They should be able to come into an environment they know very well and is predictable. That's not only good for kids, it's good for educators. If you know what green means all the time, you feel safe."*



Sorden invested time upfront in envisioning what her school would look like, and enforcing those ideas across the school. At previous schools where Sorden taught, she kept her own room with her own systems. She did earn praise from the administration for her students' results, but that closed-door approach feeds division among the staff, and limits the school's potential as a whole. Thus, the open doors here.

She rooted the school in the core values of integrity, perseverance, optimism, willingness, empathy and respect (I-POWER). Students cite these values in their work and interactions with other students.

Sorden, who grew up in NYC and attended public schools, had personal experience in what didn't work for kids struggling in schools. Labeled an "at-risk youth" at one point, she was connected with Outward Bound, assigned a mentor and a given community service project to tutor children in reading. When she

helped a little boy finally succeed in learning to read, she felt for the first time the greater impact she could make, and it shifted her entire focus. Sorden went on to earn a bachelor's degree in English then went on to Columbia University to earn a master's degree. A reservist for eight years, she worked as a literacy coach and director of student achievement then was assigned to take over a failing middle school. She knew the school would be closing, but loved creating a positive place for kids, prompting her to design her own plan for a school. She was assigned this campus, one of several in a large building tucked behind a large apartment complex. Many of her students face challenges of poverty at home, and some families even struggle to stay in their homes, as Sorden says about 20 percent of the students are in homeless shelters. In making her school plan, Sorden sought to give the students a bright, happy place where they could feel safe and know what to expect day in and day out so they had the best chance of succeeding

What Consistency Looks Like

The first thing her team did was paint everything bright, with welcoming murals and painted gates to give the school an entirely different feel from its failed past iterations.

Structures in the classroom are consistent, from the bulletin boards using the same colors to classroom roles for students. The "Mission Impossible" theme song plays throughout the building during transitions. Teachers and students alike use "TAG," which stands for "Tell me something you like, Ask me a question and Give me a suggestion" to provide feedback.

To make students more aware of possible future jobs, tables are named after different professions, from archaeologists to authors. She incorporated these titles into the plan when she noticed children often replied that they wanted to be a basketball player or other athlete when they grew up.

"I wanted to expose them to different professions and to build that vocabulary, then once exposed to it, introduce them to the colleges or universities where they could become the archaeologist," Sorden says.

Students are given community positions to reinforce the idea that for communities to function, citizens need to be active and thoughtful. One group representative from the table is designated to pick up the table's basket, which has been organized with the supplies the students need for each subject. Other roles include pencil manager, sanitation team and line leader.

The day starts in the gym with students lined up by class reciting math facts or songs together, getting ready for their "Magnificent Monday" or "Terrific Tuesday." Students dance to music and afterward, the quietest class gets dismissed by Sorden "to have a great day." Students recite the scholar's creed to root them in the core values.

Learning intentions are repeated by the students at the start of each lesson, structured in this way: *"Thoughtful readers answer questions to check for understanding using text."* Students frame their answers starting with "I agree" or "I disagree" during classroom discussions. All classes use a five-phase shared reading protocol Sorden developed to help students understand, annotate and discuss their texts.

Most classes have two teachers; sometimes they will have a teacher and an instructional assistant. The instructional team members spend half their time in the classroom, and half of it working on curriculum or supporting the teachers they are coaching.

Teachers are required to conference with students individually every week for 3 to 5 minutes. An app helps them keep notes on students' progress. The structure of the student conferences help teachers open a conversation with students about what they need. *"They know that's their sacred time to have you to themselves, and you have the*

opportunity to work with them on whatever they need," says Linares.

And while much is similar from room to room, classrooms still work in individual themes to add fun, such as a kindergarten room with decorations from the movie "Trolls," or a Harry Potter theme for older kids.

New teachers are provided with preselected texts and the curriculum, and are expected to work through the tasks the students will be asked to do. Sorden wants them thinking through what the students will need to learn to understand the standard. When new teachers get their footing, they are brought in to contribute more.

Team Dynamics

Sorden says the school only works if leaders can keep the staff working as a team, and not allow individuals to try to take the school in different directions. There have been difficult situations with staff members who disagreed with her vision. After the first year, 11 out of 26 staff members left. *"They wanted their own program, and that's one thing I don't allow is your own program,"* Sorden says. But it was a necessary shift, and a new wave of teachers came in. *"I have a strong belief that you should work where you feel comfortable and you should abide by a mission you really believe in,"* she says.

Her teachers are part of the union, and so she works within the union requirements to make sure everyone has the right fit. *"I do have real honest conversations. You're not happy, you don't believe in this system. I'm not changing it,"* she says. *"We're all adults, so do what's right for you because I have to do what's right for my students."*

Once a teacher is hired, she personally trains them, with a focus on behavior management and culture. *"If your kids are out of control, you can't teach. You could know everything about this topic, but they're not going to let you get to it,"* she says.

A schoolwide growth mindset has helped shape an environment where a 21-year veteran teacher must be as open to learning new things as a first-year teacher. *"I always want to keep learning,"* says veteran teacher Lizzette Roman Nunez, who joined the team after many years at a different school. *"You have to be very open to that community of consistency."*

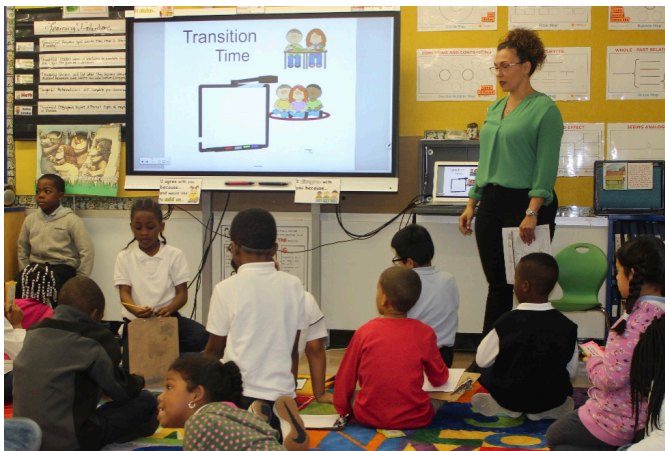
For example, Nunez is paired up with a teacher in his third year and they visit each other's classrooms regularly to learn from each other and push each other. Nunez says this system builds the confidence of the younger teacher that he is making a contribution and is valued, and it feeds the curiosity of the more experienced teacher.

Nunez says that in trying to replicate the school's success, some schools fixate on the wrong factors. *"The first thing that has to happen is to make sure your staff is open to change and open to working together and knowing that it's not a package product, the PS359 starter kit,"* Nunez says. *"There are people who are like can you send me your lesson plan? Yes, but it's all a process."* The key is the staff growth mindset. *"You have to be willing to grow and change,"* she says.



2017 Ryan Award Winner: Alexa Sorden

Team BUILDING



When Alexa Sorden got the green light to move forward with her plan for Concourse Village Elementary School in the South Bronx, she recruited a core team of people who she knew bought into her vision.

After the first year of the school, 11 out of 26 staff members left. *"They wanted their own program, and that's one thing I don't allow is your own program,"* Sorden says. If the whole staff agreed to recite the scholar's creed every morning, the principal shouldn't have to watch *"to see if you're doing the scholars creed of excellence because you like another one."* The staff change was necessary to keep the school on course, and a new wave of teachers came in. *"I have a strong belief that you should work where you feel comfortable and you should abide by a mission you really believe in,"* she says.

Her teachers are part of the union, so she works within that system to try to find teachers who are the right fit with the school mission. *"I do have real honest conversations. You're not happy, you don't believe in this system. I'm not changing it,"* she says. *"We're all adults, you do what's right for you because I have to do what's right for my students."* Typically most teachers depart peacefully after these conversations, but Sorden concedes the pace and mission are not for everyone.

She says principals have to be protective of their team culture. If one toxic person emerges, leaders must take action to neutralize the negativity from spreading throughout the team, she says. *"If you have one toxic person running around saying this is unfair we shouldn't have to do this, do you know how many people can turn on you by just that one person?"* Sorden says. When that negativity emerges on her team, she shifts schedules to keep that person from having a forum to bring down others.

To create a culture where more are opting in and taking ownership, Sorden also broadens leadership roles to include more people on the team so there is not one teacher who becomes the *"the queen of third grade."* Teacher Lizzette Roman Nunez says that approach helps nurture leadership. *"We rotate those roles so everyone can eventually come into that leadership role,"* she says.

Instructional team members spend half their time in the classroom and half planning or conducting observations because that classroom time is key for their credibility with others. *"Those teachers know you're also in the classroom so you know what I'm living,"* Sorden says. *"I'm not telling you to try this strategy because I just got it out of a book. No, I'm in the classroom 50 percent of*

the time, the other 50 percent writing curriculum or directly supporting teachers."

Newer teachers highlighted the way coaches frame their feedback. Teacher Yasmin Al-Hanfoosh says her partner teachers push her to think critically about what she's doing. *"The feedback is not just telling me to do this or change this, it is why do you think this is the best instructional decision?"* she says. *"That helped deepen my thinking."*

Hiring is a team effort

The grade team is involved in every step of the screening of potential candidates, from observing demo lessons to panel interviews and the final recommendations. Prospective teachers are required to do three demo lessons and complete a form detailing what went well and what they would change. Sorden says she often will throw a wrench into the plan for the day to see how the teacher reacts, changing the grade the lesson is geared toward to gauge how flustered the teacher gets or how quickly he or she can rebound. She's looking for people who can problem solve and think on their feet.

After the demo lessons, the team provides feedback then gauges whether the candidate can incorporate the feedback. Candidates are also asked to fill out forms asking about their core values, including a question that asks what promise they would make to the school if hired. *"I can ask you what you know about balanced literacy, maybe you memorized it, that doesn't make you a good person,"* she says. The team determines if someone should advance to an interview with Sorden.

Once teachers are hired, Sorden personally trains them, with a focus on behavior management and culture. *"If your kids are out of control, you can't teach. You could know everything about this topic, but they're not going to let you get to it,"* she says. *"It's very important to have strict systems in place so everything is safe and predictable and you can teach."*

From new to veteran teachers, everyone grows

A growth mindset is crucial to the school's team environment. With 21 years' experience teaching, Nunez is paired up for weekly observations with a teacher in his third year. They're both pushing and learning from each other, which she says builds the confidence of the younger teacher that he is making a contribution, while also feeding the curiosity of the more experienced teacher. *"I always want to keep learning,"* Nunez says. *"You have to be very open to that community of consistency,"* says Nunez.

The emphasis on open doors helps create an environment where teachers are all valued for the professionals they are. *"I like to collaborate. I don't like keeping to myself. I don't think it's healthy,"* Nunez says. *"If you're going to be successful in any field, you have to be a team player."*

Q&A

with Alexa Sorden

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How did you determine what was key to your school plan?

"I knew we needed to stand for something. I knew community and language was important, and by language, I mean speaking the same language, being on the same page...I started with perseverance, optimism, willingness, empathy and respect (POWER). When you're in a classroom and struggling with a problem, I need you to persevere and I need you to be willing. I want you to be optimistic about everything. I want you to be empathetic to your partners and your friends and show respect. The third year, I added integrity for IPOWER. My staff was becoming complacent. We'd had some successes but they weren't driving the children as much as they should have. Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is looking. Everything was grounded in those core values."

"You were not going to have your own curriculum. We were all going to do the same thing at the same time, because this was the only way for me to know what was working and what wasn't. It's about what's systematic for children so they know what to expect in every room. They shouldn't have to relearn

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systems every year, that's unfair. They should be able to come into an environment they know very well and is predictable. That's not only good for kids, it's good for educators. If you know what green means all the time, you feel safe, we feel like we have the same language."

What's your advice to new leaders?

"What is your vision? What is it you see when you see this perfect utopian school you envision? Write that all down. What is it you see, what do you hear the teachers say, what do you see the teachers do, what do you hear the students say, what do you see the students do, how are you, as the captain of the ship, making these things happen?"

"You have to be very clear. When I envision

greatness, this is what I see. What does a classroom that speaks respect, integrity and all that look like to you? Sketch that out. Be super clear because this way it leaves no room for argument. Once you establish your vision, it should come with a why... Write a script of what each thing looks like, then don't bend. What's going to happen is someone's going to say 'I like this better,' but if you're solid on your why that's nice but we're going to do this because this is what works... You have to stand for something and make it nonnegotiable."

What's your approach to communicating with your staff?

"They only hear one voice and it's mine. I don't have an AP. I don't have anyone in between me and the teachers. I plan with them, co-teach, model lessons. I'm open when I don't know something. I can't teach

fifth grade math. I don't mind sharing my weaknesses and my next steps."

"As long as you keep it that it's about kids, not about the principal and what you want. It has to be about kids... Once you're grounded on all your decisions are about kids, then you're OK because no one can say you have an agenda about yourself."

How do you plan your strategy for each year?

"You have to stay one year ahead minimum... I already have next year's organization sheet mapped out based on who's out the door, who needs to go to a different grade."

What's the secret to your school's success?

"Consistency."