

MEDIA RELEASE



Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association
1667 North Snelling Avenue, Suite C101
St. Paul, MN 55108

Contact: Olivia Gault, MESPA Director of Communications

651-999-7310

Matt Dorschner, MESPA Minnesota School of Excellence Program Chair

952-556-6700

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



***Dr. Fatima Lawson, principal
L'Étoile du Nord French Immersion School***

L'Étoile du Nord French Immersion School Validated as 2008-2009 Minnesota School of Excellence

(St. Paul, MN, September 2008)— *L'Étoile du Nord French Immersion School*, Independent School District #625, St. Paul Public Schools, is validated as a 2008-2009 Minnesota School of Excellence. The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA) developed this research-based program aligned with national standards in: leadership, vision, student learning, the culture of adult learning, data and decision-making, and community engagement. MESPA endorses schools whose principal, staff, students, and community -- working as a team -- demonstrate the desire to strengthen education by successfully undertaking the Minnesota School of Excellence program. This school improvement process, recognized by the Minnesota Department of Education and National Association of Elementary School Principals, involves a systematic self-study, development of a school improvement plan, and implementation of the plan based on demonstrated results.

“In this time of high stakes testing, the quality of our school communities can far too easily be misrepresented by the single-purposed federal testing requirement,” said P. Fred Storti, MESPA executive director. “High stakes tests, such as the MCA II tests used to evaluate Minnesota schools for Adequate Yearly Progress as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, offer a snapshot in time with no context. One high stakes test should not determine a school’s public stature and cannot adequately assess its educational effectiveness. Elementary and middle level schools provide the foundation for children’s

lifelong learning, and the Minnesota School of Excellence program clearly connects the education process to student learning," Storti continued.

“The Minnesota School of Excellence Program takes schools on a meaningful analytical endeavor, engaging staff and community in purposeful conversations about their school,” said Matt Dorschner, Minnesota School of Excellence Program chair. “It is the premier way to identify current strengths and areas needing improvement for a school. The reward of the analysis is two-fold. First, it takes measure of where a school is and reveals where it needs to go. Second, it creates a wonderful opportunity for communities to celebrate their school—and to connect to their role in the school’s accomplishments.”

Dr. Fatima Lawson is the principal of L’Etoile du Nord French Immersion school, the first and only French immersion school in the urban districts of St. Paul and Minneapolis, and the first school to receive this validation in Saint Paul. L’Etoile du Nord was established in 1996 as a program within a school and became an independent school in 2002. The school is one of the fastest growing in the St. Paul Public Schools district, and currently serves students in grades K-6 with program articulation into the junior and senior high schools. The administration of the MN SOE self-study included the self-study coordinator, Christi Schmitt, who serves as co-chair of the Site Council and an English Language Learner Teacher at the school.

As principal, Dr. Lawson believes: “This is without a doubt a more valid means of measuring success in schools. Going through the Minnesota School of Excellence process has not only redefined the meaning of excellence in education for us, but has also ignited a passion for working together as a learning community. We found out that we measure our success through the works of our students who are the sum total of the different parts that we all played in this endeavor. This recognition is certainly the result of the work of many, many people in this community, who are linked by a common goal -- excellence in learning, and a common interest -- students!”

All core subjects are taught in French, beginning in kindergarten. English Language Arts are introduced in second grade. All students are encouraged and given ample opportunity to maximize their potential regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic background, or disability.

One of the major points of L’Etoile du Nord is that it has a culture of a shared vision. Everyone knows the mission and vision of the school largely due to the fact that it was created with input from the community. Staff believe that all children are capable of learning academic content through a second language. The school’s ultimate goal is to prepare students for life by giving them a gift of a second, relevant language (French), while educating them to meet and exceed district expectations and state standards. Its stated vision is, “to prepare life-long learners for success in a multi-lingual, global community” while its

mission consists of “providing a nurturing learning environment where French language immersion enhances and infuses the curriculum.”

L’Etoile du Nord is one of the most diverse schools in terms of cultural backgrounds: staff and students represent over 38 different countries and cultures from around the world. The school has received the Superintendent’s Award for Academic Achievement every year since it started summative assessment and standardized testing of **its** students. L’Etoile du Nord has made Adequate Yearly Progress since the No Child Left Behind law was enacted in 2001; the students have consistently earned high achievement in state and national standardized tests.

All classroom teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals either have lived or studied abroad, or are from a foreign country. All classroom teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals have at least a bachelor’s degree in the area of study, and about 75 percent with advanced degrees in curriculum and instruction and other related fields. All paraprofessionals have met the NCLB requirements for “Highly Qualified paraprofessional.” All classroom teachers are proficient in French with native or near native competence with a delicate balance of native and non-native French speaking teachers. The school community benefits from strong partnerships with parents, art organizations, Francophile and international organizations, Site Council, and the Parent/Teacher Organization.

A high percentage of students at L’Etoile du Nord are identified as gifted and talented. Activities within the classroom are rigorous, challenging, and motivating throughout the school day. Students work together solving complex problems through service learning projects, investigation teams, research teams, arts residencies, creative writing residencies, and flexible grouping. Students participate in local, state, national, and international competitions in both French and English languages. Students also participate in a Young Authors’ Conference in a college setting and at school and regional science fairs. Dr. Lawson was awarded Minnesota’s Elementary and Middle Level Math and Science Principal of the Year in 2007.

Staff members have worked hard to integrate key learning goals into hands-on, experiential activities. Many have written grants to enrich student learning in their classroom and grade level. One example of this is a collaboration between the school’s Science specialists and the Ramsey Washington Metro Area Watershed program called, “Runoff and get it done.” They have addressed the erosion problem by growing plants from seedlings and planting these native species into the school hillside to prevent further erosion.

Teachers and parents work collaboratively through the Arts Partnership Committee to build and sustain meaningful artist partnerships. This committee was responsible for securing workshops and grants from

the Minnesota State Arts Board, The Perpich Center for the Arts, Arts for All award, and the Education Minnesota Foundation for Teaching and Learning.

In addition to *L'Etoile du Nord French Immersion School*, eight other elementary schools achieved recognition as 2008-2009 Minnesota Schools of Excellence: *Delano Elementary School*, Delano (ISD #879); *Hubert Olson Elementary School*, Bloomington (ISD #271); *Indian Mounds Elementary School*, Bloomington (ISD #721); *Lake Park Audubon Elementary School*, Audubon (Lake Park ISD #2889); *Pinewood Elementary School*, Mounds View (ISD #621); *Sheridan Hills Elementary School*, Richfield (ISD #280); *Valley View Elementary School*, Bloomington (ISD #271); *Washburn Elementary School*, Bloomington (ISD #271).

--- end ---

The Minnesota School of Excellence program was established in 1986. The program offers a powerful comprehensive school improvement process that results in student learning growth. The program combines the findings of current research on effective schooling with the practical on-site experience of working principals and education staff. Since the program's inception in 1986, 135 schools have earned Minnesota School of Excellence validation.

MESPA is the professional association of Minnesota's elementary and middle level principals. With the vision to "be the premiere resource for preparing today's principals for tomorrow and a strong leading voice for public education" and a statewide membership over 950 principals, MESPA has represented Minnesota's principals since 1950. MESPA is affiliated with the National Association of Elementary School Principals and its 29,500 members nationwide.

MESPA Mission Statement

The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association is dedicated to promoting and improving education for children and youth, strengthening the role as educational leader for elementary and middle level principals, and collaborating with partners in education to assist in achieving these goals.