

## MEDIA RELEASE



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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



*Jon Millerhagen, principal  
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### **Washburn Elementary School Validated as 2008-2009 Minnesota School of Excellence**

(St. Paul, MN, September 2008)—*Washburn Elementary School*, Independent School District #271, Bloomington 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.”

Jon Millerhagen is the principal of Washburn Elementary School. The school serves 530 Kindergarten through Fifth Grade students—representing a diverse socioeconomic background: 49 percent of the student body qualifies for free and reduced lunch. Washburn is a Title I site and serves 100 students in reading and math. Washburn is also an ESL (English as a Second Language) site: 135 students represent 22 countries.

The school’s mission states that: *In cooperation with families, students, staff, and the surrounding community, Washburn Elementary is committed to providing an enriched educational environment. The school embraces diversity and believes in the importance of respectful attitudes to create a safe and positive learning atmosphere. High standards for learning and behavior promote success and opportunities for lifelong learning.* Washburn is renewing its 2002 MN SOE validation—the endorsement stays in effect for seven years.

In Millerhagen’s words, “‘Is it best for kids?’ is the first question asked in regard to every decision made about Washburn’s programs, staffing, and operation. All programs operated in Washburn must be able to answer this question in the affirmative. “Through this questioning process we changed our schedule for prep classes and pull-out services to better serve our students and provide a more consistent school schedule,” said Millerhagen. “We now have an entire staff, PTA, and community working toward the common goal of providing quality opportunities for all students while answering the question ‘Is it best for kids?’”

Washburn staff members believe strongly in community involvement, and the school has a high level of community participation. The PTA (Parent Teacher Association) sponsors many programs such as lyceums, book fairs, the spring carnival, Family Fun Nights, BRAVO (music appreciation lessons), Art Masterpiece (art appreciation lessons), and the Washburn Review newsletter. The Parent/Community Committee organized a gift drive for the past seven years during the holiday season. And the PTA just completed a three-year \$15,000 pledge to purchase Guided Reading materials. The PTA also finances a

Parent Involvement Coordinator who assists with volunteer organization. Volunteers are part of A.C.T. (Assisting Children and Teachers) and provide over 12,000 hours of service annually.

Over the past five years Washburn has gained many allies who help supply students with the materials they need to be successful. The school's business partners at Office Depot in Bloomington and the Northwestern Health Sciences University are major contributors. Annually, NWHSU hosts the Back-to-School Picnic, at which they serve enough food to feed all of the Washburn families who come to see their class lists and meet their new teachers. Employees from MetLife and Embassy Suites donate similar items.

Community members who are not typically active in the educational process are encouraged to participate in many ways. While dads are crucial to each child's life, they often do not volunteer in schools. Washburn's PTA hosts "Donuts with Dad" to bring these important men into the school building. At this annual morning social event fathers bring their children in for a donut treat and learn about ways to become involved at Washburn. One such opportunity is a volunteer corps of dads and grandfathers called "Papa Bears" who help staff monitor the morning drop-off procedure in our parking lot (as featured on *Fox9 News* on May 3, 2007). The PTA also hosts "Family Fun Nights," "Movie Nights," "Muffins with Mom," and "Grandperson's Day." In addition, the PTA organizes "Art Masterpiece," art appreciation education; "BRAVO," music appreciation education; and ACT (Assisting Children and Teacher) through which parents volunteer help classroom teachers..

Washburn has a Youth and Family Center that works to organize and provide services for students, parents, and community members. This center is responsible for a number of programs including Violence Prevention, Youth Service Learning, Camp Washburn (an Alternative Learning Center after-school program serving 190 students) and KIDS' SAFARI, a school-aged child care program available before and after school hours, most school vacation days, as well as during the summer.

Washburn teachers are professional educators dedicated to success, both self-motivated and self-reflective. First and foremost, according to Millerhagen, teachers at Washburn love children and strive to build meaningful relationships with the students and families in their care. When students know their teachers are life-long learners, as demonstrated by participation in staff development and training, summer workshops, discussion of their love of knowledge, and graduate degrees, they are much more likely to internalize the significance of the quality education possible at Washburn. Over 40 percent of the teaching staff holds a Masters Degree or is currently enrolled in a program.

Washburn utilizes information from multiple sources to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of its programming, including: Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment II, Bloomington's Computerized

Achievement Levels Test, Developmental Reading Assessment, Alternative State Assessment, Early Literacy/Kindergarten Testing, and report card data. In addition to the standardized tests teachers incorporate results from STAR Reading tests, Accelerated Reader results, and Math Facts in a Flash. All of this data is reviewed with parents throughout the year. With this information Washburn teachers reinforce their curricula when necessary to meet the needs of students through differentiated instruction.

In addition to *Washburn Elementary School*, eight other elementary schools achieved recognition as 2008-2009 Minnesota Schools of Excellence: *Delano Elementary School*, Delano (ISD #879); *L'Etoile du Nord French Immersion School*, St. Paul (ISD #625); *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).

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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.