

MEDIA RELEASE



Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association

1667 North Snelling Avenue, Suite C101
St. Paul, MN 55108

Contact:

Lisa Pikop, Miltona Science Magnet Elementary School, Principal
877-736-1419

Sam Richardson, Minnesota School of Excellence Program Chair
Glendale Elementary School Principal
Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools
952-226-0200

Kelsey Gantzer, MESPA Communications Manager
651-999-7313

For immediate release



*Lisa Pikop, principal
Miltona Science Magnet Elementary School*

Miltona Science Magnet Elementary School Validated as 2015-2016 Minnesota School of Excellence

(St. Paul, MN – August 31, 2015) – Miltona Science Magnet Elementary School has been validated as a Minnesota School of Excellence by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA). This prestigious honor was awarded to Miltona Science Magnet Elementary School for its commitment to 21st century teaching and learning.

The Minnesota School of Excellence Program promotes excellence through a rigorous evaluation process that showcases dynamic schools of the 21st century. Established by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA), the program is recognized by the Minnesota Department of Education, as well as the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and was nominated for the Brock International Prize in Education – which “recognizes particular innovations and achievements in the field of education.”

MESPA endorses schools whose principal, staff, students, and community -- working as a team -- demonstrate the desire to strengthen education by successfully undertaking the research-based Minnesota School of Excellence school improvement process. This includes a systematic school-wide self-study, development of a school improvement plan, and implementation of that plan. The entire Minnesota School of Excellence Program is aligned with six national standards: Learning Centered, Diverse Communities, 21st Century Learners, Quality Instruction, Knowledge and Data, Community Engagement.

Sam Richardson, chair of the School of Excellence Committee, said of the School of Excellence process, “It takes hard work and commitment to thoroughly assess areas of strength and at the same time plan for continual improvement. The SOE process provides an opportunity for the entire school community to reflect on the collaborative work being done and to celebrate these accomplishments. Schools that receive validation have had the important data-driven conversations about what a high quality 21st century learning experience should be for all students. Honoring the important work of dedicated staff, eager students and supportive communities is an essential component of becoming a School of Excellence.”

“Through the MN School of Excellence program, grounded in national research on high performing schools, MESPA has created the premier opportunity in the state for validating greatness in a school community,” said Jon Millerhagen, MESPA executive director. “This school improvement program examines the entire school community, as opposed to making decisions based solely on students’ assessment data.”

Miltona Science Magnet Elementary is a K-5 school located in Miltona, MN and is part of Alexandria Public Schools. Approximately 50% of the student population buses in from Alexandria to Miltona to attend the magnet school. The school’s motto is, “Branching out to create an appreciation of our environment.” The students live this motto through their exploration of the 12 acres of forests with trails, a meadow, and a wetland area used for exploration and data collection. Families get involved in the environmental exploration, helping plant and harvest the school garden. In their SOE validation application, the teaching staff wrote, “Families are a critical part of our team... We count on parents as partners in their child’s education.” Miltona’s code of conduct includes five key tenants: respect, honesty, kindness, responsibility, and fairness.

Alexandria Public Schools, to which Miltona School belongs, has a five-year strategic plan that has been developed by the community and staff members. Priorities of the strategic plan include closing the achievement gap, ensuring all students are ready for Kindergarten, and ensuring all students will achieve grade level literacy by third grade. Bi-monthly Professional Learning Communities (PLC), made up of

teachers, paraprofessionals, learning resource teachers, and the social worker, meet to analyze students' work to create short and long term goals for students. Teachers develop individualized learning plans for each student that will track and change with students' needs, interests, and progress from kindergarten through fifth grade.

“The Alexandria School system supports all of the schools with great leadership and vision,” said Principal Lisa Pikop. “Without that vision and leadership we wouldn't be where we are. I'm so proud of my teachers and staff for the countless hours and above and beyond activities they provide for our students. I'm grateful for the parents and community partners that support the school. We all work hard to bring the best out in our students and help them to meet and exceed their potential. We have a sign hanging in the entry way, ‘Great happens here!’ That pretty much sums it up.”

Students take an active role in setting and achieving their individual goals. Parents, students, and teachers meet during a fall conference to create SMART goals. 98% of families attend these conferences, demonstrating the commitment and partnership Miltona School has formed with families to support their vision for lifelong learning. This collaborative culture between parents and the school is enhanced through the school's open door policy, strong communication, monthly family nights, parent feedback through surveys, and parent educational opportunities.

The teachers at Miltona School model the importance of continuing education. All of the classroom teachers have their master's degrees and 56% of the collaborative teaching staff members have their master's degrees. All new teachers at Miltona School undergo a three year long mentorship program that helps retain new hires by providing support through monthly meetings and celebrating staff successes at bi-annual celebrations. Teachers receive funding to attend learning opportunities outside the district, and are given a half-day to reflect on that new learning, organize it, and share it with the rest of the staff.

“Teachers are so incredibly busy that they don't take time to celebrate,” said Principal Lisa Pikop. “Through this time intensive [School of Excellence] process there were many celebrations. It was great to be able to take time to celebrate what is going well within our school. Reflecting on the many, many things that are helping students grow was rewarding and beneficial.”

Miltona School embraces emerging knowledge and trends in the field of education and continually seeks out and uses researched-based educational practices: “Our 21st century learners will be inundated with technology as they enter the workforce. We implement new technology, not only to prepare them for their future careers, but also as educational tools to help us differentiate and reach diverse learners,” stated Principal Pikop. Technology helps broaden the students' global perspectives and exposes them to

different cultures – which is especially important due to the small, 450 person population, of Miltona, MN.

This focus on technology is balanced with a whole child emphasis. Family nights are held to provide parents with information and strategies for their child’s success. The school also strives to be the stable environment for children, by providing additional academic and social support, ensuring safety, and utilizing their on-site social worker to build students’ problem solving skills. The Miltona School staff looks at the social and emotional development of their students, not just their academic scores. When a student needs some extra encouragement, even the janitor helps by offering praise or an extra wink of encouragement. In addition to the staff’s support, the school finds community members to be lunch buddies and mentors for students who need more support.

Flexible schedules are built to increase the impact of support staff in classrooms. Schedules and resources are aligned to the changing needs of students throughout the school year to maximize student growth. “Having a vision is important; knowing, understanding, and living that vision is essential. Our vision is to continuously improve the quality of instruction and learning for our students through rigor, relevance, and relationships,” wrote the school staff in the School of Excellence application. All primary staff members are trained with positive communication skills that focus on positive behavior and are designed to move students to independent self-regulation, otherwise known as TCIT: teacher child interaction training. Parents are also offered various opportunities to master the language and skills that are being used with children during the day, to create consistency and ensure that all who are invested in the student are on the same page, using the same language.

Principal Lisa Pikop emphasized the individual attention students receive at Miltona Science Magnet School: “Our school district has the vision to personalize learning for each student and individualize instruction and that was apparent with our [School of Excellence survey] results. Miltona has a strength for setting high expectations and standards for the academic, social, emotional, and physical development of all students in an environment that acknowledges, fosters, and celebrates diversity. We are able to accomplish this by having a vision that reflects the core values of our school community. We also broaden the framework for child development beyond academics. This is where our ‘magnet’ really comes shining through. Teachers at Miltona Science Magnet are always searching for a way, a place or an experience to bring learning to the next level for our students.”

One unique experience students are able to participate in is building a fish house – which they raffle off to pay for a field trip to South Dakota. Students are assigned to a work group: treasury, lumberyard, trailer,

interior design, and press/public relations. Many community members offer their support to make this opportunity possible and to provide the students with “real world” information and experience.

“Working through the SOE process was very much a celebration,” said Principal Pikop. “I think we surprised ourselves when we put pen to paper and actually listed all of the things we have going on at school to help each student meet or exceed their potential. At the same time, the reflecting and planning during the processes ensured what we do well continues and improves into the future. The teachers never settle, they are always looking for improvement in not only their students, but also themselves.”

Six elementary and middle level schools achieved recognition as 2015-2016 Minnesota Schools of Excellence:

- *Carlos Elementary School*, Alexandria Public Schools, Principal Lisa Pikop
- *Cedar Park Elementary*, Rosemount–Apple Valley–Eagan Public Schools, Principal John Garcia
- *Cold Spring Elementary School*, Rocori Public Schools, Principal Eric Skanson
- *Groveland Elementary School*, Minnetonka Public Schools, Principal David Parker
- *Lake Park Audubon Elementary*, Lake Park Audubon Public Schools, Principal Sam Skaaland
- *Miltona Science Magnet School*, Alexandria Public Schools, Principal Lisa Pikop

--- end ---

Minnesota School of Excellence Program Mission and History

The Minnesota School of Excellence Program promotes excellence through a rigorous evaluation process that showcases dynamic schools of the 21st century.

The Minnesota School of Excellence Program was established in 1986, combining the findings of current research on effective schooling with the practical on-site experience of working principals and education staff. It offers a comprehensive school improvement process that results in student learning growth. This school improvement process focuses on six national standards and involves a systematic self-study, development of a school improvement plan, and implementation of the plan based on demonstrated results. Since the program’s inception, 177 schools have earned Minnesota School of Excellence validation. The validation remains effective for seven years, at which point schools may choose to reapply for validation.

MESPA Mission and History

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.

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 20,000 members nationwide.