

## MEDIA RELEASE



### Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Cuyuna Range Elementary School Validated as a 2016–2017 Minnesota School of Excellence

*(St. Paul, MN – August 29, 2016)* – Cuyuna Range Elementary School (CRES) has been validated as a Minnesota School of Excellence by the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA). This prestigious honor was awarded to Cuyuna Range 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, and Community Engagement.

“Through the Minnesota 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 through six national standards, ensuring there is a holistic approach to creating a plan for future achievement and celebrating the unique accomplishments of each School of Excellence.”

Sam Richardson, chair of the School of Excellence Committee, said, “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 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.”

Cuyuna Range Elementary School has 550 students in grades K-6 and is located in the Crosby-Ironton School District. The district and school’s mission is “Career and College Readiness for All,” which is taken to heart by everyone at CRES. Cuyuna Range is working towards an integrated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics) program for all students. The school foresees that the STEAM path will create many opportunities to establish partnerships in their community and beyond. “The SOE process allowed us the opportunity to take a long, deep look at our current practices and reflect on where we are, where we are heading, and how we plan to make Cuyuna Range Elementary School the best school it can be for our students,” said Principal Kurt Becker. “This validated the many great practices we already have in place, but it also helped us identify the areas where we have an opportunity to show a lot of growth.”

Cuyuna Range Elementary School believes strongly in creating a respectful, collaborative, and caring environment to make all children feel as though they belong and can contribute in a positive way to the school. A variety of efforts are put in place to create this environment: daily morning meetings are held in each classroom, Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) initiatives are implemented to encourage positive and respectful behavior, Educational Non-Verbal Yardstick (ENVoY) gestures are used in classroom management, staff works closely with school professionals as resources in meeting various children’s needs, and many different programs occur during and after school to meet the diverse needs of the students beyond academics.

The entire staff at CRES is highly collaborative. All teachers are active in monthly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). After each PLC, a summary is written and given to the Data Leadership Team so

concerns can be addressed. All results are shared with administration and the school board. Teachers participate in peer observations, providing opportunities for everyone to share and refine their learning skills. Teachers also integrate lessons across grade levels and collaborate with specialists in the classroom. The school district has a strong mentorship program for new staff, beginning before the school year and enforced through new teacher PLC's. The staff not only works together within their school to share best practices, but they visit nearby communities to gain insight and adopt new, effective practices.

“The greatest strength that was identified through this [School of Excellence] process was the fact that we have a great staff working with our students,” Becker said. “No matter what their role, each adult in the building plays a key part in providing a great learning experience for the kids of CRES, and, as a team, we have been able to establish a culture where all people, adults and children alike, are set up to be successful. I couldn't ask for a better group of student-centered people to work alongside.”

The entire CRES staff shares leadership responsibilities across a number of committees including a PBIS team, Data Leadership Team, Staff Development Committee, District Technology Team, Teacher Evaluation Team, Teachers Assisting Teachers Committee, and Child Study Team. Parents and students also take part in the leadership of the school through the Parent Teacher Organization and Student Council. The CRES staff values the importance of involving the community and diversifying the atmosphere for their students' learning. They invite outside members of the community to take part in a number of programs: care center monthly visits; Watch D.O.G. (Dads of Great Students) program, which brings in fathers of students and provides a positive male role model for students who do not have a male figure in their life; family nights; and Paw Pride, CRES' honor system that encourages students and staff to follow and guide each other in the learning community. Other community-centered events include Bingo for Books, Science Night, Ranger Readiness, Muffins for Moms, Donuts for Dads, and Gym Nights.

“Our school is a very strong part of our community, and in return, we enjoy a great deal of community support,” stated one of CRES' veteran teachers. CRES staff also emphasized the importance and scope of parent involvement in their School of Excellence application, “While parents are encouraged to attend conferences to discuss their child's many assessment scores, they are also invited to be a member of the staff committees to analyze school data. We have parents serving on our staff development committee, as we believe their input is valuable when it comes to the professional training that our staff receives. Similarly, we have parent representation on our Technology Committee, our Data Leadership Team, and our School Improvement Committee.”

In their School of Excellence application, the CRES staff wrote, “At CRES, school improvement is continuous. No year looks like the past year and no day is preplanned without continuous monitoring of performance data. It starts in the summer with administration and school board pouring over the past year’s performance data from each grade level. It is shared with the entire staff, not just the teaching staff, but the custodians, secretaries, and paraprofessionals as soon as they enter the building in the fall...once the data has been analyzed for strengths and weaknesses, each stakeholder does their part in addressing both.”

The Cuyuna Range Elementary School staff meets regularly to examine the alignment of instructional practices with their school’s vision, mission, and beliefs. The school’s core values are outlined and supported through Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) initiatives. The PBIS team focuses on implementing the school’s vision of respect for all: respecting self, others, learning, and property. The implementation of STEAM education to fulfill the district-wide vision of collaboration, creativity, content mastery, and critical thinking is evident through their continuous staff development efforts in integrating technology into all subjects.

CRES has developed a STEAM program in a room they call the Creative Café, where students can create freely and develop new skills in the areas of STEAM education with guidance from the Technology & Innovation teacher. In addition to the Creative Café, other technology initiatives include smartboard placement in several classrooms, with plans to add more, and one-to-one iPad initiatives in the upper grade levels. CRES also utilizes Schoology, a web-based program that teachers, parents, and students can access at any time. The program can be used both in the classroom and at home with iPads for continuous learning and feedback. Principal Becker sums up many of the school’s initiatives by saying, “...the SOE process really did highlight the fact that we are heading in a very positive direction. We’ve made a lot of changes over the past few years in practices, curriculum, and personnel, and all of those changes have had a positive impact on helping us meet our expectation of providing our students with the best education possible.”

Not only does CRES work to create the best education possible for their students, they also believe it is everyone’s job to advocate for policies and procedures that support the high performance of all students and adults. Principal Becker plans to become further involved in policy work by testifying in front of congress to advocate for more education reform and pushing to keep in place current practices and policies that have proven effective. The CRES staff wrote in their SOE application, “We will also continue to invite our legislators to visit our school, as we believe that, if they feel a connection to the schools, they are more likely to advocate for what is right for students.”

“Cuyuna Range Elementary is an excellent example of how great a school can become when the staff, students, parents, and community work together,” said Principal Becker. “Being named a Minnesota School of Excellence isn’t a destination, it’s a journey, and that journey has just begun. I look forward to the additional greatness the staff and students will accomplish in the years to come. I am truly honored to be a small part of such an awesome school.”

Six schools achieved recognition as 2016-2017 Minnesota Schools of Excellence:

- *Cuyuna Range Elementary School*, Crosby-Ironton Public Schools, Principal Kurt Becker
- *Eagle Creek Elementary*, Shakopee Public Schools, Principal Josie Koivisto
- *Hiawatha Community School*, Minneapolis Public Schools, Principal Deb Regnier
- *Howe Community School*, Minneapolis Public Schools, Principal Kevin Oldenburg
- *Kenny Community School*, Minneapolis Public Schools, Principal William Gibbs
- *Randolph Elementary School*, Randolph Public Schools, Principal Matt Rutledge

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#### **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, 189 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**

MESPA is the professional association of Minnesota’s elementary and middle level principals. MESPA has represented Minnesota’s principals since 1950 and is affiliated with the National Association of Elementary School Principals and its 20,000 members nationwide.

The Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association strives to be the premier leadership resource for elementary and middle-level principals and a strong leading voice for public education. MESPA is committed to ensuring a high quality of education for all children through strengthening and enhancing the principal’s role as educational leader in our schools.