

## MEDIA RELEASE



### Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Eagle Creek Elementary School Validated as a 2016–2017 Minnesota School of Excellence

*(St. Paul, MN – August 29, 2016)* – Eagle Creek 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 Eagle Creek 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, 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.”

Eagle Creek Elementary opened in 2007 and currently serves 850 students in the Shakopee Public School District. Approximately 100 staff members serve the students. An active PTO supports Eagle Creek teachers and students with activities and fundraisers. The purpose of Eagle Creek Elementary is to ensure ALL students learn at high levels in a safe and respectful environment. The school lives out their motto: “If We Believe, We Can Achieve!”

The staff at Eagle Creek tries to stay informed of the continually changing context for teaching and learning. For the past four years, small groups of staff have been sent to the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Summit to be properly equipped with PLC strategies. Groups will continue to attend the summit until the whole staff is trained. Teachers share new concepts with other teachers through their PLC work. A full-time instructional coach in the school provides two-week coaching sessions to new teachers, including observing, modeling, and providing feedback. Tenured teachers can go through the coaching cycle in lieu of formal observation. In the next year, Eagle Creek hopes to provide and communicate more professional development opportunities to teachers and staff.

“The process of coming together to analyze our school was amazing,” said Principal Josie Koivisto. “Eagle Creek embraces the PLC culture. We work each year to move our mindset from my kids to our kids. We believe ALL students can learn and we strive to work together to help all student achieve the next level of their learning...We have amazing teachers who are willing to take risks...When we all row in the same direction we can do great things.”

The staff works together to plan and set goals, ensuring everyone is working towards the same result. Each certified staff member writes a growth goal, which aligns to the district, building, and PLC goals. Those goals are monitored throughout the year by administration. A Building Leadership Team meets twice a month to discuss building topics and then brings the information to the grade-level teams. Teachers focus on four questions in their PLCs: What do we want students to know? How will we know they learned it? What will we do if they already know it? What will we do if they don't learn it? PLC SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-Bound) goals are shared with grade-level teachers and with students, and students celebrate when SMART goals are reached. The principal solicits staff input on capital outlay, scheduling, and other building-level decisions, which helps create a shared vision. Teachers facilitate "Barrier Buster" days twice annually for teams to meet for a half-day or full-day to review data, plan lessons, and discuss student progress while their classes are covered by a substitute.

"The process of identifying what we do well and how we compare to the best schools was amazing," said Principal Josie Koivisto. "It is so easy to focus on where we need to improve. This process was fun to look at the standards and realize how many really positive things we already had in place. As we studied each standard, the committee was focused on what we can implement to better meet the standard. The committee was also focused on connecting the standards to our building goals to make sure we are working smarter. We really feel the process led us to a multi-year plan. We focused on striving to be better each and every day. Once we receive validation it will be a huge boost to our staff and community. Their constant commitment to student achievement will be recognized and celebrated. I believe we will also connect with our community more because of the process. It is one area that we felt we needed the most growth."

The school community works to ensure that policies are aligned to effective teaching and learning. Principal Koivisto is active in the Elementary Political Action Committee and MESPA. The district works with the rotary club to support community involvement. Teachers are actively involved with and have the support of the Shakopee Education Association. An important part of Eagle Creek's vision is to stay current with technology and prepare students to be 21st century learners. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) curriculum has been used in kindergarten classrooms to teach engineering skills through hands-on activities. Digital Learning Coaches (DLCs) support classrooms by teaching technology to teachers, planning PLCs, and informing staff of useful tools and apps. The school stays connected to the community through a weekly podcast, the principal's Twitter account, and the school's hashtag: #eaglecreekers.

“We always felt our community supports Eagle Creek Elementary,” Koivisto said. “We realized we didn’t have intentional partnerships and we did not communicate test scores intentionally to the community. We are excited to make this a more important part of what we do at Eagle Creek. We also found that celebrating success was something our staff struggled with across the board. They were able to identify things we need to work on, but really struggled to celebrate things we do well.”

As a school with a diverse community, supporting and celebrating diversity is very important to Eagle Creek. Teachers believe it’s important for the school’s strategic plan to incorporate diverse parent voices, knowledge, skills, and experiences to support high performance of students and adults. Many events have brought the community into the school, such as Math Night, ELL Family Night, Title One Family Night, Reading Night, and Movie Night. The Mdewakanton tribe supports teachers by providing services to students in reading, writing, and the Dakota language. The school also utilizes tools and writes curriculum with an emphasis on Native American culture and history. Culturally relevant books were added to the library from the Mdewakanton Community. School liaisons from a variety of languages partner with the staff to communicate with families. Talent shows and cultural field trips allow students to share their own culture and experience a variety of different cultures.

Students new to the school are paired with language/culture buddies. The EL team is purposeful in placing EL students in classrooms. All new students are strategically placed in classrooms based on individual needs. One unique offering at Eagle Creek is Young Scholars, a program for high potential, under-represented students to provide unique and differentiated instruction. Buddy classrooms are assigned at the beginning of the school year to promote school-wide community and encouragement. Students have the opportunity to connect with programs outside of school through Youth Frontiers Kindness Retreat, Junior Achievement, University of Minnesota Extension Alcohol and Tobacco lessons, and parent volunteers who share their expertise. The Summer Reading Program is focused on students who need reading support throughout the summer. Intervention teachers meet students at a park to share literature.

Many efforts have been made to enhance the culture of the school. A school-wide character education plan focuses on a character trait each month and students are recognized at a monthly assembly for displaying that trait. Positivity is spread throughout the school and community through a variety of means such as Positive Post-It Day, classroom postcards to share good news with families, and good news phone calls from the principal to families. The staff is extremely supportive and goes above and beyond when it comes to seeking out students and families in need of support academically, mentally, and physically.

From helping those in need, in crisis, and noticing those who many need extra care, Eagle Creek’s staff shares its heart of gold as it continuously seeks out programs and resources.

“Eagle Creek is a great school. I am so proud of the staff, students and parents that work well together to help all student achieve,” Koivisto said. “I want to thank the Eagle Creek team that worked on the [SOE] application. A big thank you to the superintendent and school board for endorsing our application. Lastly to the School of Excellence Committee and MESPA for putting together this great reflective tool which allows schools to continually strive towards excellence.”

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.