For immediate release

Dr. Brad Gustafson, Wayzata Elementary School Principal,
Selected Minnesota National Distinguished Principal

(St. Paul, MN, April 27, 2016) – Dr. Brad Gustafson, principal of Greenwood Elementary in the Wayzata Public School District, and a member of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association (MESPA), is Minnesota’s 2016 National Distinguished Principal (NDP). MESPA and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) present the prestigious award, with corporate sponsorship from VALIC.

The National Distinguished Principal program was established in 1984 to recognize and celebrate elementary and middle-level principals who set high standards for instruction, student achievement, character, and climate for the students, families, and staffs in their learning communities. The program highlights the fundamental importance of the school principal in achieving educational excellence for pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade students and reinforces their continued leadership in helping children develop a lifelong love of learning. One NDP principal is chosen annually from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Dr. Gustafson’s commitment to ensuring all kids experience a relevant education can best be described in his own words; when asked about his educational philosophy, Brad said, “I consider it educational malpractice to limit student opportunity based upon what we refuse to learn.”

Dr. Gustafson and the staff at Greenwood Elementary strive to meet the needs of all learners. “Our
team provides world-class learning experiences to students who excel and to those who struggle,” said Dr. Gustafson. “Students benefit from exemplary first time instruction regardless of whether they have been identified as ‘gifted & talented’ or have difficulty with foundational concepts. A team of interventionists collaborates with teachers to implement research-based interventions when students struggle. Grade-level PLCs [professional learning communities] create team goals that align with overarching school goals. We meet to discuss achievement data, culturally sensitive teaching, and strategies to support struggling students.” The Greenwood team demonstrates that on the other side of every number and data point is a child who wants to learn and grow: “At the end of every year we come together as a staff to share progress on our PLC goals and celebrate student growth,” said Dr. Gustafson. “One year our kindergarten teachers achieved their grade-level goal the last week of school, and I’ll never forget the shared celebration.”

In her letter of recommendation for Dr. Gustafson, Dr. Jill Johnson, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning for Wayzata Public Schools, wrote, “What sets Brad apart from others is the passion and energy that he brings to his work. There is a quote in the book The Leadership Challenge by Kouzes and Posner, that I feel best describes Brad’s work: ‘He transforms values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risks into rewards.’”

In describing how he involves parents and community members in supporting student achievement, Dr. Gustafson said, “Our school is intentional, transparent, and inclusive in how we involve the community. We’ve added events like ‘Passport to Passion’ so that all families can celebrate and learn together. We’re also teaching students that families can look different so that each and every student feels a sense of belonging. Diverse community members have shared with staff during professional development sessions to help us better support our students and families.” The Greenwood team is thinking outside-the-box to meet more families where they are. An example of this is, “live-streaming to broadcast events like concerts, geography bees, parent meetings, and assemblies. Live-streaming has enhanced our ability to involve working and extended families who are unable to physically attend school events.”

Mary Harding, a parent of a Greenwood Elementary student, wrote about Brad’s commitment to his students in her letter of recommendation. She described the relationship he formed with her son who transferred to Greenwood after his first year of grade school. “[Brad] drove all the way from his home, about thirty miles distance, to cheer Elliot on [at a hockey game]. From that showing of support, Elliot could feel Mr. G ‘was in his corner’. Their relationship grew also as Brad would ‘plant’ himself in the hallway each morning specifically so he could greet Elliott, high-five him, and make him feel
welcome.” Harding summed up her recommendation by saying, “I could go on with several more examples specifically sharing how Mr. G has been such an outstanding principal for our son. I really want to relay that it’s not just for our son. He has created a positive tone for the whole school.”

Not only does Dr. Gustafson create an inclusive culture for his students and the community, he also works to create an inclusive, positive culture for his staff. “I try to balance leadership and management duties with a servant-mindset,” said Dr. Gustafson in his NDP leadership statement. “This provides perspective, vision, and balance. I ask for help when experiencing difficulty, and create conditions where our team is empowered to manage a safe and productive learning environment. By cultivating a sense of shared responsibility, those who are closest to the work become key contributors to the collective effort.” He describes the foundation of a positive school climate by saying, “Building climate starts with people. I approach my work with passion and positivity because I’m thoroughly in love with our students and staff. Modeling what it looks like to be grateful for the opportunity to serve is one way to cultivate a child-centered climate.”

Ashley Drill, third-grade teacher at Greenwood Elementary, echoed Dr. Gustafson’s efforts in her letter of recommendation, “Dr. G is a passionate, driven, positive, enthusiastic, and articulate principal and leader. He provides his staff with many opportunities to succeed, grow, and above all encourages authentic teaching and learning. Dr. G values student voice and encourages our staff to invest in students as people first. The relationships we establish are the foundation of learning.”

Speaking to one of his school’s most significant accomplishments, Dr. Gustafson cited:

Our school has created a child-centric culture that models the importance of relationships, innovation, and personalized learning (for students and staff). I’m proud of the work our team is doing to put people first while infusing relevance into the student learning experience. We started a school-wide character education program several years ago to further invest in the relational underpinnings and “heart work” that must occur before any child puts pencil to paper…or finger to touchscreen.

Armed with the understanding that teaching and reaching students requires a relationship, our team has established a culture that inspires new levels of learning using a connected pedagogy. We value innovation and nurture 21st century skills in all students. I believe part of our school’s identity involves a
willingness to see failure as a catalyst to growth. We are constantly learning. We are collaborative, curious, and we disregard what some might say is “impossible.” These are all characteristics that I see manifesting in our students as well. For example, when our students presented to the School Board they encountered a couple different failures (e.g. difficulty with Bluetooth syncing). Instead of looking to their teachers, they instinctively huddled together to collaborate and problem-solve.

We’ve given students more control over how they are learning by injecting choice throughout the school day. Students interact with state standards and district curriculum using cutting-edge technology like educational drones and robotic droids. Whether students are immersed in Genius Hour, MakerSpaces, coding, or collaborating with schools on other continents; they are experiencing a connected pedagogy that amplifies their voice in the learning process.

Dr. Gustafson first served as a principal in 2008 at Tracy Area Elementary in Tracy, MN. In 2010, he became the principal of Greenwood Elementary in Wayzata, MN where he currently serves. Prior to becoming a principal, Dr. Gustafson was a second-grade teacher and soccer coach in North Branch, MN.

Dr. Gustafson’s professional activities include roles within Minnesota Elementary School Principals’ Association (MESPA) as Division President & Institute Co-Chair (2014-2015) and his current role serving on the Educational Advisory Committee. His community service has included volunteering as an Art Night instructor in his children’s school, helping with his kids’ PTA Fun Run, and coaching. He served on the Tracy Area Chamber Board and Box Car Planning Committee during his tenure in Tracy, MN.

Dr. Gustafson received a Doctorate of Education from Bethel University in St. Paul, MN; a Specialist Degree in Educational Administration from Minnesota State University in Mankato, MN; and his Master of Science and Bachelor of Science in Education from St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, MN.

The other finalists for this honor were: Tim Bell, principal at Five Hawks Elementary, Prior Lake-Savage Public Schools; and Dr. Joey Page, principal at Richfield STEM School, Richfield Public Schools.
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.

**Purpose:**
- **Improve** education for Minnesota students through collaboration and advocacy.
- **Unite** current, past, and future licensed elementary and middle-level principals.
- **Encourage** and support a cooperative relationship between MESPA and other state/national organizations.
- **Advocate** for the professional, ethical, economic, and social welfare of its members.