



Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association

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Dr. Fatima Tanni Lawson, 2024 MN National Distinguished Principal,
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Dr. Fatima Tanni Lawson of Highwood Hills Elementary, a Polytechnic Program School, Honored as the 2024 NAESP National Distinguished Principal®

(Roseville, MN - May 6, 2024) The Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association (MESPA) proudly announces the recognition of Dr. Fatima Lawson, Principal of Highwood Hill Polytechnic Elementary School, as the recipient of the prestigious 2024 National Distinguished Principals' Award. This award is presented by the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and MESPA. Dr. Lawson's outstanding leadership, innovative initiatives, and unwavering commitment to educational excellence have earned her this esteemed accolade.

Dr. Lawson's remarkable journey as a principal is characterized by transformative accomplishments that have significantly impacted the educational landscape and the lives of countless students, educators, and community members. Among her most notable achievements, Dr. Lawson spearheaded a remarkable turnaround at Highwood Hill Polytechnic Elementary School, leading the school out of corrective action and achieving notable success in student achievement. She did this by having intentional conversations with the three major groups of families that represented about 90% of the student population. The Somali families,

representing about 40% of the student body, wanted their students to become doctors, lawyers or engineers. The Karen families, representing about 30% of the student body, wanted their students to learn the science of agriculture and animal husbandry. The Latinx families, representing about 20% of the student body, wanted their students to learn something more hands-on, hoping their students would go into the trades and eventually take over family businesses. After this input, Dr. Lawson and her leadership team came up with a three-track program, called, "The Polytechnic Program." The tracks include technology, engineering and agriculture.

"This award means a lot to not only me, but to the entire generation of African immigrants, and those who believe that earning such a recognition is far-fetched, regardless of one's hard work and dedication," reflected Dr. Lawson. "Coming from a very humble background educationally, who would have thought that I would one day be named among America's top educational leaders? I am certainly humbled and do not take this recognition for granted, as this validates the hard work and dedication that many people have put into making this day happen. Together, we are shaping tomorrow's leaders, innovators, and changemakers. This award is certainly for all of us. I am only the guardian of the trophy."

Duane Dutrieuille, principal of Hazel Park Elementary School, and the person who nominated Dr. Lawson, commented, "Dr. Lawson's advocacy and proactive measures to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion have resulted in tangible and positive changes," said Dutrieuille. "She has worked tirelessly to ensure that every student, regardless of their background, has access to a high-quality education. Her work in this area is not only commendable but serves as a model for other educational leaders to follow."

Bret Domstrand, principal of Lake Marion Elementary, NAESP state representative and chair of the National Distinguished Principal selection committee maintained, "I am immensely proud of the caliber of leadership demonstrated by all three finalists. Each candidate presented exemplary qualifications and a profound commitment to educational excellence. Ultimately, Dr. Fatima Lawson's exceptional achievements, innovative initiatives, and unwavering dedication set her apart,

earning her the well-deserved honor of the 2024 NAESP National Distinguished Principals' Award."

Dr. Fatima Lawson's commitment extends beyond her exemplary leadership in her building; she has also been an invaluable member of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association (MESPA) for 23 years. Throughout her long standing membership, Dr. Lawson has been a steadfast advocate for the advancement of education and the empowerment of educational leaders across the state. For the past 3 years, she has served as the Legislative Chair, leveraging her expertise and passion to shape legislative priorities and advocate for policies that support the needs of students, educators, and schools. Dr. Lawson's unwavering commitment to MESPA's mission has been instrumental in driving positive change within the educational landscape, embodying the spirit of leadership and service that defines the association's members.

Michelle Krell, MESPA's executive director affirmed, " Dr. Fatima Lawson exemplifies transformative leadership, demonstrating unwavering dedication to fostering meaningful connections, fostering innovation, and championing the future of every student and family under her care. Fatima has been an active and supportive member of MESPA (Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association) and has gained high respect from her colleagues. This acknowledgment signifies Fatima's exceptional leadership qualities and notable achievements as a principal. We take great pride in her representation of MESPA as our National Distinguished Principal."

Dr. Lawson extends her gratitude, "...From my staff colleagues at Highwood Hills, to the families, students, and community members that make this award possible; to our district leadership, Dr. Joe Gothard, our outgoing superintendent; to Dr. Adam Kunz, Assistant Superintendent and my supervisor, whose leadership has been instrumental in encouraging and supporting me to dream big things for Highwood Hills; to my principal colleagues at SPPS and across the state that supported me and actually showed great examples of leadership to emulate; to the MESPA Leadership; and last but certainly not least, to my beloved family: Roger Lawson, my dear husband, friend, cheerleader; my four daughters, my sons-in-laws, and my six granddaughters. To all of you, I say a very big thank you! I could not have come this

far without your love, understanding, collegiality, guidance, mentoring and support!"

Dr. Lawson's exemplary leadership serves as an inspiration to educational leaders across the nation, exemplifying the transformative power of collaborative leadership, innovative thinking, and a steadfast commitment to student success.

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About MESPA

The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association is the premier leadership resource for elementary and middle level principals, dedicated to connecting, developing, and providing resources for principals, and serving as a leading voice for Minnesota education. The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association is the premier leadership resource for elementary and middle level principals, dedicated to connecting, developing, and providing resources for principals, and serving as a leading voice for Minnesota education.