

# Diverse Leadership for Learning honorees share a message

Focus. Focus. Focus.

The 2003 AASA Leadership for Learning Awards, given during the President's Awards Ceremony Thursday night, share this theme, which works equally well for school systems that range from less than 600 students to more than 55,000 students. The message of the awards is that size does not matter as much as strategic use of resources to focus on improving student achievement.

Reviewers of the applications for this recognition of innovative programs were looking for initiatives that had started within the past four years and were making a significant impact on how students learn and how much they learn. The reviewers looked at the challenges to be overcome and at the achievement outcomes. The reviewers selected awardees in three categories—urban, suburban and rural.

The Leadership for Learning Award has been underwritten since 1994 by TIAA-CREF. Each honoree received a Steuben glass sculpture at the awards ceremony and a \$4,000 check to be turned over to the district's board of education.

Beverly Hall, superintendent in Atlanta, received honors for Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), which began in 2000 in the Atlanta Public Schools in one cluster—a high school, two middle schools and nine elementary schools. This was a big undertaking, affecting 7,000 students and 500 teachers.

Project GRAD brings multiple resources to the effort to raise student achievement in low-performing schools. Its five components, phased in over several years, include the Success for All reading program in grades K-8, Move it Math through the middle grades, Com-

munities In Schools of Atlanta to provide family support, the Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline program to help students take responsibility for classroom organization and climate and up to four years of college scholarship support for students who maintain good grades and graduate on time.

Scores of students in this 55,000-student district are improving gradually on the state's criterion-referenced test, and some of the most dramatic progress has been made in the first GRAD cluster, especially in the elementary grades. According to Hall, who was on hand to pick up her honor Thursday in the urban schools category, students in the GRAD clusters (now in three high schools and



*Receiving Leadership for Learning honors for 2003 are (from left) Mary Anne Rhine, John Conyers, and Beverly Hall. Rhine filled in for her superintendent, Steve Vak.*

their feeders) are improving academically and teachers are enjoying the use of quality teaching resources.

"Motivated by the scholarship opportunities Project GRAD offers," she said, "families are encouraging their children to stay in school, to study hard and to prepare for the future."

Now in 29 schools and affecting 16,000 students, Project GRAD has done more than provide hope for students. The

private sector in Atlanta is so impressed that it has contributed \$9 million to the program.

In Palatine, Ill., an upper-middle-class suburb, the board of education for Community Consolidated School District 15 set a high goal for its students. All those entering kindergarten in the 13,000-student school district would be reading at or above grade level by the end of 2nd grade. In a district with 25 percent of the students from non-English-speaking families, that was a tall order.

Rather than focus resources on remedial work, leaders in the suburban district researched the best programs and developed a multi-faceted program that stresses intervention and acceleration instead of remediation. In kindergarten and 1st grade, the lowest 7-10 percent of students receive daily help on reading from specially trained reading assistants. In 2nd grade, the same percentage of students takes part in daily, small-group reading sessions. In grades 3-6, small-group sessions focus on reading comprehension four or five times a week.

Every aspect of the program is aligned to classroom instruction, according to W. Christine Rauscher, assistant superintendent for instructional and special services. Pre- and post-testing show that the reading intervention/acceleration program has closed the reading gaps in kindergarten and 1st grades. Further data indicate that the mean scores of a random sample also have risen, showing that the program is raising the bar for all students in the district.

Because reading problems are caught early, fewer students are being identified as at risk when they enter 2nd grade, said Superintendent John G. Conyers, who at-



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tended the awards ceremony to receive the honor in the suburban category.

Some of the special attention will continue, he said, because some students need further support and student mobility is high, but still reading specialists in the future will be freed up to spend more time helping classroom teachers enhance reading skills at all grade levels.

In rural Pennsylvania, a project called Vandergrift's Vision took a demoralized 500-student elementary school in the rural Kiski Area School District to a peak of performance and community support in less than four years. Teachers at Vandergrift Elementary School realized major changes needed to be made, but instead of imposing their ideas, the plan was to conduct surveys of parents, students and faculty.

From the data collected, the school community decided it needed to act in several areas: student behavior, school attendance, parent education, homework completion, home/school communication and school-community involvement. Committees were formed to address each of these issues. They researched and adopted a student behavior program, started afterschool homework and math clubs, developed strategies to deal with absenteeism, set up monthly work ses-

sions for parents and students, started a school newspaper and garnered various community resources.

Superintendent Stephen Vak, who was unable to attend the awards ceremony but sent the school's principal as a stand-in, especially noted the reaction of teachers who left the school because of its environment. When they return for a visit, he said, "they are astounded at the difference in the building, its character, its cleanliness, its orderliness and the manner in which its students behave and perform academically."

Student achievement on the Pennsylvania state assessment and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills has risen. Absenteeism is down, as are behavioral referrals. The school's improvement has earned it \$50,000 in Pennsylvania state incentive grants. Most of all, said Principal Mary Anne Rhine, "the program has changed the culture of the building from one in which the economically disadvantaged students and their families were used as a reason for poor test scores, inappropriate behaviors and poor attendance to one in which no excuse is acceptable for anything but one's best effort in all endeavors."

—Anne C. Lewis