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Six projects that strengthen rural communities to be recognized

Ninth annual 'Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin Awards' to be presented Friday in Madison

MADISON — Activities that strengthen relationships in rural schools, libraries, and communities will be celebrated during the ninth annual Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin awards program at noon Friday in the State Capitol Rotunda.

“The schools, libraries, and communities receiving rural awards represent the best of what Wisconsin has to offer,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “The award recipients support and strengthen community relationships that help keep rural Wisconsin not just surviving, but thriving into the future.”

This is the ninth year that the Department of Public Instruction has recognized projects and activities that bring schools, libraries, and communities together. Through 2013, 75 programs have been recognized for their contributions to rural Wisconsin. The six projects receiving “Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin Schools, Libraries, and Communities” awards for 2014 were nominated by education and library professionals, district administrators, and community members. They are:

- Growing Your Own Food in the 21st Century, Northland Pines School District;
- Highland Community Schools, Highland School District;
- One Community — Two Libraries, St. Croix Falls School District and St. Croix Falls Public Library;
- Tomah Special Olympics Weekend, Tomah Area School District;
- Stockbridge Pre-School Library Story Time, Stockbridge School District; and
- Wise Guys and Wise(r) Guys, Clintonville School District.

“Across Wisconsin, people look to their schools and libraries with pride,” Evers added. “More than half of the state’s school districts have 1,000 students or less and those districts face unique challenges but also offer unique opportunities. These awards recognize the partnerships that advance opportunities for students in rural districts.”

Robin Indermuhle, science teacher at Northland Pines High School, developed **Growing Your Own Food in the 21st Century** as a project-based class to teach students how to garden and

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give them a new lifeskill. She partnered with Mary Ann Lambrecht, Vilas County Master Gardener volunteer, and Debbie Jircik, co-founder of the Seed to Seed Edible Garden Project, to expose the students to science-based gardening concepts. Started in the 2010-11 school year, Growing Your Own Food in the 21st Century now involves three garden sites: the school attached green house, four plots at the community garden, and the hoop house behind the community garden. During the winter months, students plant and tend seedlings in the hoop house and in the spring the young plants are sold to raise funds for the garden or are planted in the community garden plots. Students decide the types of plants, which include many types of greens, tomatoes, peas, green beans, and more. The harvest becomes in-class “Salad Day Fridays.” Students share their crops with the school food service, and a chef comes in and uses it in special featured recipes. During the summer months, produce is donated to the local food pantry.

Each year community elders and experts participate in students’ learning at **Highland Community Schools** through extensive field studies, place-based seminars, and workshops designed by faculty and the community experts. Projects have included a local history scavenger hunt created by historical society members working with teachers and local businesses; habitat restoration work with Trout Unlimited; food pantry drives by students; oral history videos for area families; and numerous agriculture, small business, and health-related junior and senior capstone projects.

St. Croix Falls Elementary School Librarian Rita Platt and St. Croix Falls Public Library Youth Librarian Cole Zrostlik work together on **One Community — Two Libraries** to plan and promote shared family and literacy programs. Joint activities have included “Pajama After-Hours” nights where teachers and librarians read with children and families. A “Parent Academy” teaches good reading habits and helps participants sign up for public library cards at school. The public library supports the school by leveling books according to school methods and promoting school services on its website, and the school teaches students to use the MORE online catalog, promotes public library programming, and works with children to use public library resources. Both summer reading programs support reading goals of having over 100 children reading for over 1,000 minutes each. A parent of four school-age children noted the community benefit of One Community—Two Libraries. “Our St. Croix Falls children are reading better than ever, thanks in part, to the wonderful partnership between the school and public libraries.”

The **Tomah Special Olympic Weekend** features fitness activities and entertainment during the last weekend in February. A Spin-a-Thon opens the activities with teams in a 10-hour fundraiser for Special Olympics. Basketball games on Sunday between La Crosse and Tomah include performances by the high school pep band, cheerleaders, and dance team. Community volunteers serve as referees, announcers, and scorekeepers. These events would not be possible without the collaborative effort of the school district, which provides facility usage and promotes the events; the Tomah Parks and Recreation Department, headed by Joe Protz, director, which organizes the weekend and develops all the promotional materials; and the Special Olympics organization and Linda Barta, Special Olympics volunteer, which provides transportation for the La Crosse athletes to come to Tomah and supports all the activities. The donation of food provided by the Ground Round and the financial assistance of the Sports Boosters Club make the event extra special.

Each week for 45 minutes storytime turns the Stockbridge School Library into a community library to serve families who have children not yet of school age. The **Stockbridge Preschool Library Storytime** provides library services via the school library to a community that doesn’t

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have its own public library. Preschool children hear stories based on a theme, complete a craft project, and conclude with music and movement. Each child has a library account, used to check out books to support family literacy at home. The Stockbridge Preschool Library Storytime is a true partnership among the school, library, and community. With a population density of just seven students per square mile and a 25- mile round trip to the nearest public library, Stockbridge Preschool Library Storytime makes a child's first library experience local, positive, and rewarding. Andrea Parish, district literacy specialist; Lori Knoepsel, library aide; and Jennie Zahringer, director of Small Beginnings, a private daycare center; collaborate on the project.

The **Wise Guys** club is an after-school program that was started in 2012 at Clintonville Middle School to expose middle school boys to new activities and opportunities to increase their engagement within the school and the community. Members of the community work with the Wise Guys. Activities have included knot tying, baking, fly fishing, trap shooting, photography, science experiments, ice fishing, team building, and farming. In addition to community members volunteering their time, local businesses have also been partners, providing tours of their facilities and teaching middle-schoolers about their products and services. At the conclusion of the first year of Wise Guys, the group decided that there should be a second iteration that would focus on the kids giving back to the community. **Wise(r) Guys** have assisted in the clean up of several vacant lots in town and volunteered at a local food pantry. The group has also planned an outing with a local Veterans Home, volunteered with the community winter holidays parade, and will be helping to put on a 5K community run to support the local school running clubs. Justin Zoellick and Annette Van Straten, teachers in Clintonville, coordinate the Wise Guys and Wise(r) Guys clubs.

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NOTE: More information about rural issues is available on the Advancing Rural Wisconsin website <http://rural.dpi.wi.gov/>. This news release is available electronically at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/files/eis/pdf/dpinr2014_10.pdf.