

News Release

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2018 Principals of the Year recognized

MADISON – State Superintendent Tony Evers and Association of Wisconsin School Administrators Executive Director Jim Lynch recognized three Wisconsin principals for their excellence in school leadership.

Wisconsin’s 2018 Principals of the Year are Mike Kruse, principal at Stoughton High School; Justin Szews, assistant principal at Lakeland Union High School in Minocqua; and Scott Walter, principal at Riverside Elementary School in the Menomonee Falls School District.

“School leaders know the importance of creating a school climate that empowers teachers and supports student learning,” Evers said. “Congratulations to our 2018 Principals of the Year for their service to their students, colleagues, and community.”

“School leadership has an enormous impact on student success,” Lynch said. “These leaders represent what is great about Wisconsin school principals and their importance to our communities.”

Secondary School Principal of the Year

When Mike Kruse arrived at Stoughton High School in 2008, he saw a school ready for change. He led efforts among school staff members to use an Integrated Comprehensive Services model that provided accommodations, modifications, and differentiation of lessons to keep special education students in regular classes. The changes addressed Office of Civil Rights criteria and moved the school off of the statewide disproportionality watch list.

Kruse also helped staff address academic rigor, which led to increased graduation requirements, Advanced Placement offerings, and college-level courses taught at the high school. Improved behavior and academic expectations, as well as the full inclusion effort, contributed to a graduation rate well above 90 percent, an “exceeds expectations” ranking on state report cards, an inaugural Award of Excellence from the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association, and a Spirit of Excellence Award from the Wisconsin Association of School Councils.

Stoughton High School opened a FAB lab for students in fall of 2013, and offers Academic Homeroom, Service Leadership, Learning Academy, and Academic Study as supports for student achievement. “Very seldom do I ever say ‘I did this or I did that’ on how our school operates,” Kruse said in his application materials. “I always say, ‘we did this or we did that which led to our students’ success’.”

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In a letter of recommendation, School Counselor Ann Cook said that Kruse transformed Stoughton High School. “He has increased staff morale and school spirit exponentially,” she said. Cook attributed the turnaround to Kruse’s ability to get the most out of staff and students. “He demands the best, but does so in a way that is motivating and affirming.”

Kruse holds degrees in science education and education administration from Northwest Missouri State University. He also earned an educational specialist degree from the University of Wisconsin in educational leadership and policy analysis. Prior to becoming principal in Stoughton, he was an associate principal in Verona Area High School.

Assistant Principal of the Year

Justin Szews was tapped to help turn around Lakeland Union High School’s vital signs: discipline referrals, physical altercations, truancy, absenteeism, and graduation rate. Szews worked with students, faculty, administration, local community members, and representatives from all three truancy court jurisdictions to develop and implement an action plan to improve school attendance. He made home visits and evening presentations to the community to share expectations, and after two years, the high school met its attendance goals. Szews noted that student achievement and graduations rates improved as well.

The Lac du Flambeau Board of Lake Superior Chippewa presented the school the Eagle Staff in April 2017 in recognition of the cooperation, trust, and collaboration that erased graduation gaps between Native American and White students. Underlying the 90 percent plus graduation rates for both groups, is the work to reduce absenteeism, truancy, and physical altercations on campus.

A teacher noted that Szews makes sure the academic, co-curricular clubs are designed to enhance the academic experiences of students. His leadership is focused on making “sure what’s best for kids is taking place in our classrooms.” A student noted that Szews “does a phenomenal job embracing school spirit and doing the best he can to make this high school a comfortable environment.” Both teacher and student cited his efforts at active cultural awareness in making the school welcoming to all students.

A fellow administrator called Szews a “servant leader” who gets into the trenches. “He builds relationships with all our students and coaches them up if they are not reaching their potential. He earns their respect by being fair and consistent with school expectations.” With teachers, Szews is artful in giving feedback that encourages higher levels of performance. As a colleague, Szews is a “role model of integrity and grit with our administrative team.”

Szews is one of three finalists for the 2018 Assistant Principal of the Year named by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. He holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. His principal licensure is through Marian University, where he is also earning a superintendent’s license.

Elementary School Principal of the Year

Riverside Elementary School hosts hundreds of educators each year to showcase its continuous improvement efforts. Scott Walter, a Six Sigma Green Belt, focuses staff on analysis and problem solving, partnerships, and a strong culture for learning. Through those efforts, the school “exceeds expectations” on 2016-17 school report cards and has gained the trust of parents and the community. One parent found herself becoming a leader of the school’s Parent Teacher Organization so she could be a part of the “amazing school environment” Walter has created.

Students learn on their first day the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) process. According to Walter, students design their learning, set personal goals based on common classroom assignments, and let their teachers know which instructional strategies are working for them. Teachers then make adjustments based on student input.

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School staff know that they are learners right along with students. “We are fully aligned and focused. We cannot improve outcomes for students if we cannot clearly measure our own progress. All staff apply the PDSA process to assess their personal learning and student performance,” he said in his application materials. Walter noted that staff input impacts school-wide professional development and aligns resources to the greatest needs.

Walter has invited students in the alternative high school to serve as tutors, changing the outlook of struggling students and showing elementary students that everyone can contribute and deserves respect. Teachers have formed partnerships with universities to bring the “college going” belief to elementary students. “We share ‘why’ being college and career ready early matters,” he said. The school also works with the future educator club, local food pantry, and senior volunteer network to build relationships that foster school success.

The Menomonee Falls School District is a Carnegie Foundation Spotlight District, one of just six in the nation. Walter holds a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education and a Masters in Administrative Leadership from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Prior to his position at Riverside, he was an associate principal at the district’s Ben Franklin Elementary School.

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