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McDermott, MacArthur rate Standard of Excellence in both reading, math for three years running

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Daily Leader

Since No Child Left Behind was mandated in 2002, schools have been striving for excellence in order to make adequate yearly progress.

Each year, the requirement for reading and math is a little higher than the year before. The ultimate goal is to have all children proficient by the year 2012. Is this a pipe dream?

Two Liberal elementary schools are meeting the challenge. Third grade scores at McDermott and MacArthur met the Standard of Excellence in both reading and math for the last three years.

In addition, the students at McDermott earned the Confidence in Education Task Force Challenge Award, and both schools earned the Governor's Award for being in the top 5 percent of the state's elementary schools in 2008 (four awards).

Last year, McDermott students earned the Confidence in Education Task Force Challenge Award in both reading and math (four awards). The year before, the students earned the Governor's Award for being in the top 5 percent of the state's elementary schools (three awards).

The Standard of Excellence is given for meeting the AYP requirements in all subgroups in each tested subject (reading and math). It is given out by the Kansas State Board of Education.

The Confidence in Education Task Force awards its Challenge Award to those schools that are making a notable difference in student achievement despite facing significant challenges in their school population.

This award recognizes schools for outstanding achievement and uncommon accomplishment based on Kansas assessment results, the sample size and the socio-economic status of those taking the test.

Of the 1,365 schools in Kansas, 51 were recognized for 2008.

The Governor's Achievement Award is given to the top 5 percent of elementary schools in Kansas. To receive this prestigious award, qualifying schools must have: (1) achieved the Standard of Excellence in both reading and math; (2) made AYP in both reading and math; (3) made AYP in one additional measure (i.e. attendance); and (4) scored in the top 5 percent using a combined score in reading and mathematics based on the state assessments.

McDermott Principal Kathy Fitzgerald said she and other school officials went to Junction City last week to accept the school's Certificate of Merit award in math. She added on Wednesday, school officials were notified the school was recognized by the governor as being in the top 5 percent of all elementary schools in the state of Kansas.

"There are several," she said of the awards McDermott received. "They all intertwine because they're all based on the same data. They're different awards."

So what is McDermott doing differently? Fitzgerald said the school has always had teachers with a relentless belief that all students will be successful.

In 2006-2007, McDermott became part of a national research project.

That research, Fitzgerald said, required educators to implement the school-wide reform program, 'Success for All.'

"SFA has helped teachers develop their reading program to contain a strong phonics and comprehension base through cooperative learning and increased accountability," she said. "Its multi-tiered intervention system for struggling learners, tutoring system, parent program and kindergarten curriculum have all contributed to the success of the school."

In addition, Fitzgerald said the program requires a reading facilitator who coaches the teachers and leads quarterly testing.

"When making a visit to McDermott, it is exciting to watch children as they identify words they don't know and use SFA's clarification strategies to figure them out in a team setting," she said. "The children are actively in charge of their own learning, and they love every minute."

Third grade teachers lead the afterschool program McDermott Extended Learning Time and Saturday School.

"Students who show up for Saturday school are a mix of past and current students," Fitzgerald said. "The third grade teachers just smile and pull out another snack and some more books for everyone to read."

MacArthur Elementary also made Standard of Excellence and received the Governor's Award, according to Fitzgerald, who said the Certificate of Merit McDermott received is given to schools that have a high population of low socio-economic students.

“It’s also based on the number of second language learners that you have,” she said. “That award is given to schools that have greater academic challenges.”

MacArthur Principal Shawna Evans said her school received the awards for third grade state assessments students took last spring.

“We had 100 percent pass in reading and all but one in math,” she said.

Evans contributes much of MacArthur’s success to a unified staff at the school.

“We talk about it on a regular basis of how we can start in kindergarten to prepare them,” she said. “We have regular discussions on that. We’re trying to build more of a community here, where it’s not just my students are in my classroom only. Everyone’s responsible for all students.”

MacArthur also uses Saturday school as part of its success program.

Evans said classes take place in January and February, and all third grade students are invited to come.

“We usually have a really good turnout with the kids that decide to come,” she said. “They’re excited to come. At first, the parents think we’re crazy for having it on Saturday morning, but the kids are so excited. They bring them.”

As part of Saturday school, MacArthur teachers have special lessons which go on for a couple of hours every Saturday, according to Evans.

“We get parent involvement,” she said. “We have a big breakfast of champs before they actually

test, where the parents are invited and try to get the parents to encourage their students as well.”

Evans added MacArthur educators try to make assessments a positive experience. She added the Saturday school is something the students at the school love, and they are not required to come.

“It is totally voluntary,” she said. “If they want to come, great. If they don’t, so be it. There’s several kids involved in basketball, and there’s a lot going on with families. If they want to come, they’re invited. It is not mandatory. It is just for third graders, so they think they’re special.”

Evans said during the week of testing, students in grades kindergarten through third are encouraged in a variety of ways, including good luck cards, cheers and pep assemblies.

“We do various things to encourage them, but again try to make it a positive experience and stress to them that they’re basically telling us what they already know,” she said. “This is your bragging time to brag about what you already know.”

McDermott and MacArthur staff will attend the USD No. 480 Board of Education meeting on Monday to accept the plaque for the Governor’s Award.

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