

Esther Dennis celebrates Excellent state rating

HEREABOUTS VIRGINIA BURROUGHS



Eight years ago, Esther Dennis Middle

School in Northridge was one of only five failing middle schools statewide. But, on Sept. 30 of this year, students, parents, community members and staff celebrated the school's recent state designation as Excellent.

"For the first time ever, a Northridge school earned the designation of Excellent on the state report card," school counselor Jeri Fox said.

"Esther Dennis Middle School earned this recognition by meeting five of eight indicators on the state report card and by boosting student achievement above state expectations for the past three years," she said.

Fox attributes the school's exciting turnaround in large part to prin-



Esther Dennis Middle School students and staff unveil the Excellent banner Sept. 30 in Northridge. Contributed photo

incipal Tim Whitestone, who has been at the school five years.

"Obviously, it's a team effort — teachers, students, parents and community," Whitestone said. "We have special education, the economically disadvantaged — we have it all, but

just decided that all of our students would learn. Our staff has been very consistent in delivery, and we've changed the learning environment."

Whitestone, who taught at Trotwood-Madison for nine years, came to Esther Dennis after a 10-year stint

as principal at Lebanon's Dixie High School.

"We have two elementary schools that feed the middle school, and we do a great job of transitioning our sixth-graders. We've built trust with our parents.

"Some of our students and parents have not

always had great experiences with people in authority, but we've broken the barriers down with clear behavior expectations, and we model that behavior. Our process and expectations are very transparent."

When Whitestone arrived, "We were in Academic Watch, but we improved each year by educating each child above average," he said.

"Everyone's worked very hard. Each year, our staff examines what the kids need, and then we change our strategies.

"Parents are very aware of our expectations, and they do their best to reinforce them at home. It's all about relationships."

When seventh-grader Chelsea McLaughlin started at Esther Dennis as a sixth-grader last year, "I paid attention, worked harder and asked more questions because the teachers helped me more. I decided I was going to learn."

According to Fox, Chel-

sea's reading score went up 30 points and her math score 50 points from fifth to sixth grades. "She's an example of a student who was an underachiever and is doing quite well now."

Chelsea observed that "other students are working harder here, too, and I was excited for our school this year when we were called Excellent."

At the celebration, students and staff spoke about their experiences, the Excellent banner that will grace the school was unveiled, and 500 biodegradable balloons were launched.

Northridge Superintendent Dave Jackson was present at the celebration.

"Our middle-school students' progress these past five years, from Academic Watch to Excellent, is truly remarkable," he said. "The efforts of the EDMS family are evidenced by their success."

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