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Electronic versions of this press release are available. Please email Dave Christians at MASA (dchristians@mnasa.org) to request copies.

Karen Orcutt Receives MASA Polaris Leadership Award

(St. Paul, MN) – The Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) has named Dr. Karen Orcutt, Superintendent of Schools for the Orono Public Schools, the recipient of the 2017 MASA Polaris Leadership Award. Superintendent Orcutt will be honored for her exemplary school leadership and a lifetime of achievement in education and the wider community at a statewide recognition ceremony at the 2017 MASA Fall Conference, October 2-3 in Duluth, Minnesota.

Polaris, the “North Star,” themes this award because, just as exemplary administrators serve as definitive leaders, Polaris is constant and unmoving in the sky. A navigator’s benchmark, the star marks “true north,” the fundamental direction that defines east, west and south. With this award, Dr. Orcutt is recognized for qualities such as professional courage, creation of a legacy of excellent leadership, fostering innovation, contribution through example and mentoring, exemplary conduct reflecting integrity and bearing emulation, and significant tenure in each position supporting district vision and affecting positive change.

Dr. Orcutt has been the Superintendent of Schools for the Orono Public Schools since 2004. She also served the Orono district as the Assistant Superintendent for Programs from 2000 to 2004, and as Director of Special Services from 1982 to 1998.

Throughout her career, Dr. Orcutt has dedicated her life to helping students maximize their potential in life. In addition to her 34 years of serving students in Orono, she has worked as a speech pathologist in St. Peter Public Schools, a Coordinator of Early Childhood and Speech Services for the Minnesota Valley Special Education Cooperative, and as a speech pathologist at Hennepin County Medical Center.

Her research in resiliency has identified when and how educational leaders need to be positive, communicate with optimism, and recover following difficult times. Even a brief look at her tenure as superintendent demonstrates that she “practices what she preaches.” There will be challenging times, but perseverance, strong communication and community engagement will bring the desired results.

In 2005, a “vote no group” defeated a referendum with four questions. With perseverance and a strategy, each element of that referendum was approved in subsequent elections. The district’s most recent community survey (June 2016) found that 97 percent of respondents rated the quality of Orono Schools as “good” or “excellent.”

In 2008, Dr. Orcutt was named a Richard Green Scholar by the Minnesota Association of School Administrators for her research, “Characteristics of Resiliency in Leadership: Implications for Personal and Organizational Coping and Adapting Abilities.”

“We know the critical nature of sustained, high quality leadership on behalf of students and our communities,” says Gary Amoroso, MASA Executive Director. “Dr. Orcutt is an exemplary leader who models everything we want to see in every Minnesota school leader. We are proud to name her a Polaris recipient because she embodies the very essence of this award.”

Dr. Orcutt holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership from St. Mary’s University, a specialist’s degree in Educational Administration from St. Cloud State University, a master’s degree in Speech Pathology and Audiology from Mankato State University, and a bachelor’s degree in Communication Disorders from the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

Each year, MASA recognizes members for their contribution to public education. MASA is a professional organization of Minnesota’s school leaders whose members include over 900 public education and non-public superintendents, directors of special education, curriculum and technology leaders, other central office administrators, service providers, business partners and retirees.

MASA is grateful to Ehlers for their ongoing support of the Polaris Award. Ehlers is an independent municipal financial advisory company that has served public sector clients since 1955.

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