

Minnesota Association of School Administrators

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**P R E S S
R E L E A S E**

**Electronic versions of this press release and Dr. Helmstetter's photograph are available.
Please email Mary Law at MASA (mrlaw@mnasa.org) to request copies.**

Don Helmstetter is 2007 MN Superintendent of the Year



Dr. Don Helmstetter

(St. Paul, Minn.) — — The Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) has named Dr. Don Helmstetter, Superintendent for the Spring Lake Park Schools, the 2007 Minnesota Superintendent of the Year.

As the Minnesota honoree, Dr. Helmstetter is a candidate among other state winners for National Superintendent of the Year, to be announced at the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) convention, March 1 - 4, 2007 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Superintendent of the Year nominees are evaluated on how each candidate demonstrates:

- Leadership for learning—creativity in successfully meeting the needs of students in his or her school system.
- Communication skills—strength in both personal and organizational communication.
- Professionalism—consistently upgrading his or her administrative knowledge and skills, providing professional development and opportunities for other members of the education team, and motivating others.
- Community involvement—active participation in local community activities and understanding of regional, national, and international issues.

Dr. Helmstetter was selected for this honor by a panel of representatives from a variety of Minnesota education organizations. “Don Helmstetter is a skilled school leader. He has had experience leading school districts in both rural Minnesota and the metropolitan area,” says MASA Executive Director Dr. Charles Kyte. “Don knows how to motivate the community, teachers, and his administrative team to work together in the best interest of the children of his district. We are proud to have Don represent Minnesota’s super-

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intendents as the Minnesota Superintendent of the Year.”

Dr. Helmstetter has been superintendent for the Spring Lake Park Schools since 1997. With an enrollment of 4,500 PreK through 12th grade students, Spring Lake Park serves its suburban community from the cities of Blaine, Spring Lake Park and Fridley in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. The district considers itself and its school community to be “personal in size, extra-large in opportunity.” The mission of the Spring Lake Park Schools is “High expectations, high achievement for all. No excuses.”

Spring Lake Park School Board Members nominated Dr. Helmstetter for the Superintendent of the Year Award. “Don Helmstetter is one of the greatest role models in this school district, school community and state,” says the Jim Amundson, School Board Chairperson. “He is repeatedly described as (someone) with passion, professionalism, commitment, collaboration, hard work, vision, open communication, intellect, sensitivity, integrity and compassion. Noted scholar and futurist Joel Barker has said, ‘A leader is someone you choose to follow to a place you wouldn’t go to by yourself - the future.’ Don Helmstetter is such a leader and we have all followed as he has led us to a much brighter future.”

Dr. Helmstetter is especially noted for his ability to create and support an environment for learning. In the nomination process for this award, Dr. Helmstetter was asked how he has used research to strengthen public education in his district.

“It was through the use of effective schools research and a commitment to the principles of continuous improvement that (we) were able to make strides toward the strengthening of public education,” Dr. Helmstetter responded. “By creating a culture of collaboration...our district is able to ensure that students are not only taught, but that they are learning. According to Richard DuFour, this concept - ensuring that students learn - is the first of three “big ideas” that represent core principles of professional learning communities. This shift from a focus on “teaching” to a focus on “learning” has enabled our schools to respond to each student when he/she experiences difficulty in learning. A second big idea from DuFour’s model is a “culture of collaboration.” Time is provided within the teacher work day for staff to work together to analyze and improve classroom practices. The focus on results (what students learn) is DuFour’s third big idea for the successful implementation of professional learning communities.”

Dr. Helmstetter was asked what recommendations would he make to Congress on the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Law.

“The broad goal of NCLB is to raise the achievement levels of all students, especially under-performing groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class,” Dr. Helmstetter responded. “I agree with the goals of NCLB, however the law is altogether too prescriptive, which creates a one-size-fits-all approach. That said, I offer the following recommendations: NCLB should allow for flexibility for assessing the special education students that is consistent with each student’s Individualized Education Plan. NCLB should allow states more flexibility in determining “Highly Qualified” teachers. NCLB should also

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recognize all teachers as “Highly Qualified” only when they have completed a solid program of preparation. NCLB should provide financial and other incentives to recruit and prepare highly qualified teachers and to distribute them to the schools where they are most needed. Because of the size differences among school districts, NCLB should grant states more flexibility in determining a more realistic minimum student participation rate. NCLB should also provide states with more flexibility in determining sanctions against school districts. Finally, NCLB should be fully funded, to allow schools to accomplish all that leaders hoped and dreamed could be accomplished as a result of this important legislation.”

Dr. Helmstetter was asked what he sees as the barriers to public school reform and how has the pressure for reform changed his role as a superintendent.

“There are many barriers to reform: changing demographics, school-age readiness, limited staff development opportunities, and additional funding to fully support special education, early childhood, and all-day kindergarten programs,” Dr. Helmstetter stated. “While these barriers are significant, this fact remains: public schools throughout the nation have made gains to reduce or remove each of these barriers. They have demonstrated that, in spite of sometimes daunting political and social constraints, our public schools will always be successful. As our district’s mission states: ‘High expectations, high achievement for all. No excuses.’ *All children will learn.* There is no other option.”

Dr. Helmstetter also highlighted the most significant change he has observed during the last twenty years that has had a profound impact on the superintendency. “The most profound impact ... has been the ever-increasing demand for the superintendent to actively engage local, state, and national representatives and governing bodies.” Dr. Helmstetter continued, “Superintendents have led the efforts to improve the level of learning for all students. They have made progress on closing the achievement gap, provided more students with post-secondary education opportunities, and they have also overseen an increase in the test scores on virtually all of the myriad of success indicators established for schools. Public school students have become (remained) international competitors, public schools have grown stronger, and superintendents have helped to achieve all that while frequently spending more time interacting with the public than they have with members of their own families,” says Dr. Helmstetter.

Dr. Don Lifo of Springsted, Inc. says, “Don Helmstetter (excels) at all four of the National Superintendent of the Year criteria - leadership for learning, communication skills, professionalism, and community involvement. He has consistently embodied these qualities in both his professional and personal life. Don is an individual of exemplary character, consistently exhibiting high moral and ethical standards...a passionate and committed educator, contributing well beyond his role as a public school superintendent...and he possesses extraordinary communication skills through both the spoken and written words.”

Minnesota Assistant Commissioner of Education Dr. Mary Ann Nelson praises Dr. Helmstetter’s leadership. “Don Helmstetter is a recognized and highly respected state leader,” says Assistant Commissioner

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Nelson. "His study of leadership requirements and the resulting impact upon job stress generated significant interest amongst his peers. Don Helmstetter is a classy leader and one who would bring great honor to this prestigious award."

The Minnesota School Boards Association Executive Director Robert Meeks highly recommended Dr. Helmstetter for this award. "Dr. Helmstetter exhibits a true concern for and commitment to public education and has worked closely with his school board members to consistently offer their students the best education possible," says Mr. Meeks. "(He) is able to communicate with the public in a manner that reflects positively on his school district."

Dr. Helmstetter holds a doctoral degree in education administration from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities; a licensure in educational administration, a master's of education degree in secondary counseling and guidance and a bachelor of arts in English and Psychology from Mankato State University. Before becoming Superintendent for the Spring Lake Park Schools, he was Superintendent for the Blue Earth, Trimont and Martin County West Schools, a High School Principal with the Trimont Schools, a Counselor and Chemical Education Coordinator for the Fairmont Schools, and a High School Teacher and Coach for the Fairmont, Pipestone and Herman Schools.

MASA is a professional organization whose mission is to establish the statewide agenda for children, serve as the preeminent voice for public education, and empower members through quality services and support. MASA members are school superintendents, directors of special education, central office school administrators, regional administrators, and higher education administrators and professors from throughout Minnesota.

Springsted Incorporated, public finance advisors, is sponsor of the Minnesota Superintendent of the Year program. ARAMARK Education and the American Association of School Administrators are cosponsors of the National Superintendent of the Year award program. 2007 marks the twentieth anniversary of the National Superintendent of the Year award program.

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