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Evergreen Middle School honored for improvement

By [Eric Stevick](#), Herald writer

EVERETT -- Evergreen Middle School changed -- and improved -- steadily over the past six years, and the state has noticed.

Last week, the Everett school received a statewide honor for its efforts in increasing student achievement. Evergreen was one of 86 schools in Washington to be named a School of Distinction by the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. It joined only three other schools in Snohomish and Island counties to be honored: Elger Bay Elementary School on Camano Island, Terrace Park Middle School in Mountlake Terrace and the Sky Valley Education Center in Monroe.

Schools of Distinction aren't necessarily the highest scoring schools, but they can be. They represent the top 5 percent of elementary, middle and high schools whose students have shown outstanding growth in both reading and mathematics skills during a six-year period. The winning schools included 51 elementary schools, 20 middle schools and 15 high schools -- out of nearly 2,500 schools in the state.

To be considered for the award, each school had to meet this year's state learning targets on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning for students in both reading and mathematics.

"The Evergreen way of doing things is based on three principles," Principal Joyce Stewart said. "Student performance comes first, do whatever it takes and no excuses."

During that six-year stretch, the percentage of students passing the reading WASL improved from 43 percent to 81 percent and in writing from 49 percent to 77 percent. Both are above the state average. The math passing rate has climbed from 21 percent to 51 percent. That compares with a statewide pass rate of 54 percent.

"What I think we really do best at Evergreen is we personalize the learning experience for each student in a large school," Stewart said.

For instance, the more than 900 students aren't placed in classes by computer. Rather, an administrative team reviews each student's records individually over a three-week period during the summer before determining that student's schedule.

Stewart tries to keep staff meetings to two half-hours over the course of the year, figuring frequent contact with teachers individually and more time for them with their students is time better spent.

There are other day-to-day expectations as well.

Students write daily in all classrooms to become more proficient in writing. That's why Stewart believes the school's music and PE teachers deserve just as much credit for the school's recognition.

Sixth-graders are given specifically targeted lessons, and seventh-grade students keep three different

composition books in writing, science and math to chronicle their thinking and learning.

When students need more help, a late after-school bus makes it easier for them to get extra help with academics.

Teachers are working in teams and say they are collaborating more than they did in the past, talking about how to help individual students succeed.

"I think that Joyce and the school in general have really come together as a team," said LaRae Marks, who taught at Evergreen for eight years before taking a job at the district office this fall. "We see more power in numbers. We all work together for student achievement."

"We're talking nonstop, all day long about what is working and what is not," said Nancy McPeak, a seventh-grade math teacher.

Schools that met the reading and mathematics targets were then evaluated for six-year gains based on a formula. Independent research and analysis to establish criteria for the awards and to identify the schools with the greatest improvement was conducted by Greg Lobdell of the Center for Educational Effectiveness in Redmond.

Many Evergreen students didn't know all the details of why their school was honored, but they say they can tell the school is helping them improve.

"The teachers, if you don't have their work done, they make sure the students come in after school or during lunch" said Ethan Harbo, 13, who said he went from an undisciplined sixth-grader who often ignored homework two years ago into a conscientious eighth-grader today. "I'm better organized. I get my work done and in on time. Whenever I do need help, I go in or get it after school."

The school also helped eighth-grader Tanner Hoidal, 13, get his priorities straight. He, too, got the after-school help when he fell behind early in middle school and feels confident today.

"I realized this is important," he said. "I better start doing it and I started getting my work in on time."

Debreka Eubanks, 13, an eighth-grade student, said she's getting effective instruction. "The teachers are specific about things," she said. "Their goal is to make sure by the time we leave school we really know what we have just done today."

As she returned from receiving the state award in Burien last week, Stewart thought the recognition was nice.

Then, she started reflecting on the students who continue to struggle.

"You can celebrate for a minute, but you can't stop working," she said. "You just can't stop."

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