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Norfolk school receives national education award

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Norfolk School District was one of four schools nationally recognized for its success in educating low-income students.

Arrie Goforth Elementary was chosen for The Education Trust's Dispelling the Myth Award, which honors schools that have been successful in educating low-income students and students of color to high academic levels, according to The Education Trust.

As a result of the award, school officials have been invited to speak to a House of Representatives education committee this month.

"I think it's an incredible honor to be chosen," said elementary principal Vicki Hurst, adding in the six years the Dispelling the Myth award has been given, Norfolk has been the only school in Arkansas to receive the award.

Among the school's achievements this year were high sixth-grade scores. The students scored a 96 percent proficiency in math, with 67 percent of those students scoring advanced, said elementary principal Vicki Hurst. In literacy, 95 percent scored proficient with 57 percent scoring advanced.

In the fourth, fifth and sixth grade, about 50 percent of the students scored advanced in math and literacy, Hurst said.

Other achievements included high math scores last year. All 40 sixth-graders met the state's new, higher math standards and achieved 100 percent proficiency.

The district itself also ranked fourth academically in the state during the 2007-2008 school year, up from 11th place the previous school year. Based on its top-10 ranking, the district received the Golden Apple award from the Little Rock-based TV channel KTHV.

The school district has about 80 percent of the students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, according to The Education Trust.

"We spend a lot of time examining test scores and doing individualized instruction," Hurst said. "We work one-on-one or in small groups to get them where they need to be."

Before the school was chosen for the award, Karin Chenoweth, senior writer for The Education Trust, spent a few days at the school observing and talking to Hurst, as well as students, teachers and parents.

"They're really teaching at high levels for everybody," Chenoweth said, adding the school has helped Arkansas improve its overall math scores.

In 2000, Arkansas fourth-graders scored near the bottom of the country in math, and last year the state scored near the national average, she said.

"We take a lot of pride in being able to turn out the test scores we've been able to," said Norfolk Superintendent Mike Seay. "The size of our district allows us to focus on the individual needs of the child."

In the school's favor are small class sizes. A ratio of one teacher to about 11 students allows teachers to focus on students' individual needs, Seay said.

Hurst and elementary teachers Betty Horton and Anne Beard attended The Education Trust National Conference in Washington, D.C., last month to accept the award. Travel expenses were paid by the nonprofit group, Seay said. Hurst and the teachers also gave a presentation on the school's strategies in identifying children's needs and how the school forms plans and programs to address students' needs, Seay said.

Others who attended the conference included Dr. Charity Smith, assistant commissioner of the Division of Public School Academic Accountability with the Arkansas Department of Education and Arkansas state representatives. School districts also attended the conference to learn from the presenters.

Other schools chosen for the award were Graham Road Elementary School in Falls Church, Va.; Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Roxbury, Mass.; and Wells Elementary School in Steubenville, Ohio.

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