



Two Vallejo, one Benicia elementary school cited as 'distinguished' *Wardlaw, Pennycook, Semple join state's distinguished ranks*

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Five Solano County schools, including three from Vallejo and Benicia, have been named 2010 California Distinguished Schools, it was announced Monday.

Benicia's Robert Semple and Vallejo's Pennycook and Wardlaw elementary schools were announced as three of the state's 484 honorees. Semple also was selected in 1998 and 2004.

"It is an honor to recognize the schools, and the students, parents, teachers and administrators who helped earn this most prestigious distinction," State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell said in a statement.

"The 2010 California Distinguished Schools have been selected because of their academic excellence and for narrowing achievement gaps. These schools have persevered despite state budget cutbacks that have cut deeply into the budgets of local school districts," O'Connell said.

Fairfield's Rolling Hills Elementary and Vacaville's Cooper Elementary were the other two Solano County honorees. One Napa County school - Mt. George Elementary in the city of Napa - also was a winner.

"I'm very proud of the school," Pennycook Principal Patricia Andry-Jennings said Monday. "The teachers and the students have worked so hard over the years."

Only about 10 percent of the state's 5,800 public elementary and K-8 schools were invited to apply for the honor based on their students' academic achievement. The awards are given to elementary and secondary schools in alternate years, with schools ineligible to reapply for four years after they win.

In the applications, schools were to designate two signature practices they've used to narrow the achievement gap and/or increase overall student achievement, one of O'Connell's stated priorities.

A state team then visited the sites to verify the programs spotlighted in the applications, such as Wardlaw's use of data to impact student instruction and Pennycook's **PeaceBuilders** program.

Those two schools are headed by two new principals this year - Coreen Russell at Wardlaw and Andry-Jennings at Pennycook - though the award is primarily based on prior years' work.

Robert Semple Elementary staff cited the campus' reading intervention and professional development programs in its Distinguished Schools application.

"Everybody on some level worked really hard for these kinds of things," Dias said.

Benicia Unified School District Superintendent Janice Adams said she was "very, very proud" of Semple's third award.

The Benicia school district has had five other campuses selected for the award since the competition began in 1986. The Vallejo City Unified School District has had four others besides this year's winners.

Wardlaw's principal, Russell, said last month that her school's culture, staff and parents are behind the site's success.

"They all work together to support what happens at the school that makes kids successful," Russell said about a week after the state team visited the school.

Russell was aided in the application process by the only principal Wardlaw had known before her - Dayle Kerstad.

"We're thrilled (about the award)," said Kerstad, who led the school for its first 18 years. Russell was a teacher at Wardlaw for the first five years after it opened.

Kerstad, along with good friend Polly McCall, Pennycook's former principal, retired last school year, though both can often be found on their school's campuses.

McCall described the award as "the icing on the retirement cake."

"I'm very excited, needless to say. ...It's a real affirmation," McCall said Monday.

Vallejo school district Superintendent Reynaldo Santa Cruz said the awards announcement was a nice change of pace for Vallejo schools.

"We are extremely happy to have some good news about our schools. They are to be commended for their hard work," Santa Cruz said, adding the school staffs would be invited to Wednesday's 5 p.m. board meeting for recognition.

All award winning schools will be honored at a June 4 ceremony at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim.

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