

KE LIFE

Second to none

Celt principal takes statewide honor

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

At the end of the school day on Friday, April 23, McNary principal Erik Jespersen thought he was going to the gym to help athletic director Scott Gragg move some chairs.

Instead, he was met by a litany of teachers, district administrators, student-body leadership and stalwarts of the Keizer community to present him with a surprise.

Unbeknownst to him, Jespersen was named the Oregon 2021 High School Principal of the Year by the Oregon Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA) and the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA). Salem-Keizer Public Schools (SKPS) Superintendent Christy Perry presented Jespersen with the award.

"I am just blown away. I have a lot of emotions right now. I am so thankful for our staff, our community and our leadership. My heart is touched," Jespersen said.

Jespersen is in his seventh year as the McNary principal. He previously served as an assistant principal, instructional coach and social studies teacher at McNary and McKay High School.

"Erik was chosen because he stands out. To run a large, 6A high school under construction and in a pandemic and still seeing the enthusiasm and the commitment to being world class, that's why he was recognized," Perry said. "I see his vision and how he has, over time, built that vision into a reality. He is an all-around great guy, super personable, and cares about the kids and the community."

Graduation rates have grown exponentially since Jespersen took over at McNary, rising from 82% in 2014 to over 91% in 2020. The Latino graduation rate at the school also rose nearly 10% in the last six years while the rate for students on an Individualized Learning Plan (IEP) has improved by over 30% since 2014.

"You are the most profound principal I have ever had the opportunity to see engage children's lives and I am so grateful for you and this is so deserving," said Salem-Keizer School Board Zone 6

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representative Danielle Bethell.

"Erik leads the team and expects everyone to be world class. He sets the example," Keizer Mayor Cathy Clark said. "During 2020 when our world was turned upside down, McNary landed on its feet."

Along with increasing graduation rates during his tenure, Jespersen has created a "1-1-1 Initiative," encouraging all students to participate in at least one club, one sport or one activity every year and has channeled a Nike School Innovation Fund grant into a remodel of McNary's College and Career Center, creating a hub to ensure students have a plan after graduation — McNary 2020 graduates earned more than \$10 million in scholarships.

In 2018, McNary was named an AVID Site of Distinction, providing staff with the tools needed to reach all students while using an equity lens. Jespersen has a goal of making McNary into an AVID Demonstration School in the near future.

"I have had the pleasure of working with Erik on an accreditation team and facilitated an AVID training with Erik and his staff. His balanced dedication to instruction, achievement, and relationships is what we look for in exceptional leaders in Oregon," said Majalisse Tolan, OASSA President.

Jespersen's leadership has been especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. When schools were required to operate via distance learning, high schools all over the country had a much greater number of students failing classes — in the beginning of November, it was estimated that nearly half of the nearly 13,000 high schoolers in SKPS were failing at least one class.

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Christy Perry, superintendent of Salem-Keizer Public Schools, congratulates McNary High School Principal Erik Jespersen in a ceremony Friday, April 23. Jespersen was named the Oregon 2021 High School Principal of the Year by the Oregon Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA) and the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA).

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