



**MEDIA RELEASE**  
**Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association**  
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**For immediate release**

**Jessica Cabeen, Austin Public Schools Principal, Named Minnesota National Distinguished Principal**



(jpeg of photo attached to this media release)

(St. Paul, MN, May 10, 2017) – Jessica Cabeen, principal of Woodson Kindergarten Center in Austin Public Schools, and a member of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA), is Minnesota's 2017 National Distinguished Principal (NDP). MESPA and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) present the prestigious award.

The National Distinguished Principal program was established in 1984 to recognize and celebrate elementary and middle-level principals who set high standards for instruction, student achievement, character, and climate for the students, families, and staffs in their learning communities. The program highlights the fundamental importance of the school principal in achieving educational excellence for pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade students and reinforces their continued leadership in helping children develop a lifelong love of learning. One NDP principal is chosen annually from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

“My mantra this year has been, *‘If serving is beneath you, leading is beyond you,’*” said Cabeen. “This mantra provides the motivation to ensure my day is balanced with opportunities to serve and lead.” Dewey Schara, principal at Neveln Elementary in Austin Public Schools, describes how Cabeen lives her leadership mantra: “Transformational leadership is rarely demonstrated so seemingly effortlessly in public education. However, Jessica Cabeen exemplifies a true transformational leader. She not only directly improves those who work with her, she indirectly elevates those around her. As a peer

principal, I can personally attest to this. The hallmarks of a transformational leader are the abilities to: create a shared vision, communicate it effectively with collaborative efforts, and motivate those involved to accomplish the vision.”

“The four years that I worked for Mrs. Cabeen were the best four years I have had in education,” said Lisa Bergstrom, Kindergarten Teacher at Challenger Elementary School in Thief River Falls, MN. She echoed Schara’s sentiments about Cabeen’s leadership qualities: “While Mrs. Cabeen has numerous skills that make her an excellent leader, there are three specific areas that I would like to tell you about based upon my experience working for her.... Mrs. Cabeen has a strong capacity to develop processes in the work that she does...[she] is also a true visionary when it comes to her leadership...[and] finally, I believe that one of Mrs. Cabeen’s greatest strengths is her ability to positively work and support the people around her.” Bergstrom summed up her appreciation of Cabeen by stating, “In my 26 years as an educator, I have never known anyone with more leadership skills than Mrs. Cabeen. She has incredible vision, as well as being an extremely dynamic person who I admire and respect.”

“As transitions in the early years can be a challenge, I work with preschools and the elementary schools in our community to ensure there is open and timely communication to bridge supports for families,” said Cabeen. “For example, I visit all preschools to meet with teachers and gain information on their students entering kindergarten in the fall. I also meet with elementary principals monthly to ensure that I am building a strong academic and social foundation in which they can build upon for future years.”

“She positively impacts the district through her collaboration, yet never seeks credit for her efforts,” said Cabeen’s principal peer, Dewey Schara. “Unless you are closely paying attention, you may not even notice she was behind the effort the whole time because her desire isn’t recognition, it is simply to ensure the students in our district have the best possible education. Her efforts expand beyond the district, as she is also called upon often to be a leader within the state for pre-K education as evidenced through her work with MESPA.”

Cabeen not only works in the community, she also brings the community into her school. “One of my proudest accomplishments at Woodson has been establishing the only outstate *Everybody Wins MN!* Program,” said Cabeen. “*Everybody Wins MN!* is an organization dedicated to building partnerships with corporations and elementary schools which result in a reading buddy program. Each week we have Hormel Foods Corporation volunteers read with students while building relationships with each

other. This work sets a positive foundation for learning and future dreams for our students, and supports our vision that we continue to dream BIG for our LITTLEST learners.”

In addition to connecting with businesses in the community, Cabeen makes connecting with her students’ parents a priority. Marianne Pollock, parent of a former Woodson Kindergartener, said of Cabeen, “Jessica listens to the parents, children, and I see she really knows how to build strategies and actions that work. I appreciate how Jessica has developed many videos: Kid Principal, Polar Express, and their school dance sessions. As a working parent, it helps us stay connected and have conversations with the children about these activities in school.”

Ojoye Akane, Emerging Markets Officer for Three Rivers Community Action, said of Cabeen, “She highly cares about the success of her students to the point that she goes beyond her normal role as a principal to reach parents and their children, even to their homes...Parents whose children are helped by Mrs. Cabeen have now become like family friends to her.”

“As a lifelong learner, Mrs. Cabeen is always motivated to explore, initiate, and follow through on ideas that will bring successful programming and unique learning experience to kindergarteners,” said Ellen Verdoorn, Kindergarten Teacher at Woodson Kindergarten Center. Cabeen shared her motivation for developing these programs: “Through these ever-evolving systems we are moving forward to ensure we are providing a high-quality learning environment for ALL students who enter our school and leave prepared for first grade without falling through the cracks.”

“Jessica is passionate about the work she does and is always striving to improve,” said John Alberts, Executive Director of Educational Services in Austin Public Schools. “However, parallel to this passion is a passion to give back...to engage in conversation in which she is just not listening, but also participating, be it at the local, state, or national level; you will not find a greater advocate for early learning. But most importantly, it is the way in which Jessica engages in her work that makes her a distinguished principal. She is genuine, positive, collaborative, inclusive, and forward-thinking. She constantly considers what is best for the students and families she serves, but with a balance to the needs of the overall system as well. That balance is unique among building administrators.”

Verdoorn summed up Cabeen’s leadership at Woodson Kindergarten Center best when she said, “Jessica Cabeen leads by showing her enthusiasm for learning and growth in ways that staff and families can fully appreciate. She inspires all educators to see their best, do their best, share their best, and always continue to strive for more. As John Quincy Adams stated, ‘If your actions inspire others

to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.’ Mrs. Jessica Cabeen is a distinguished and dedicated leader who truly deserves to be honored with this prestigious award.”

Cabeen’s most significant accomplishments include:

1. Leading efforts in Minnesota and nationally to equip school leaders with foundational understanding and application of leading within the preK-3 context. This includes facilitating the Minnesota PreK-3 Principal Leadership Series (three cohorts), co-moderating #ECEChat on Twitter, and writing for publications such as NAESP.
2. Creating technology integration opportunities in the primary years and establishing equitable foundations of practice for all PreK/K teachers, including creating and teaching a coding club for kindergarten students.
3. Creating and implementing a successful year-long district wellness initiative that partnered with community agencies, businesses, and featured a nationally known author and presenter—Dr. Adam Saenz.

Cabeen began her career in 2000 as a Special Education Teacher/Music Therapist at Benjamin E. Mays Elementary in St. Paul, MN. She served for a year as the Due Process Teacher on Special Assignment for St. Paul Public Schools before becoming the Secondary Special Education Coordinator for Austin Public Schools. She served as the Assistant Principal of Ellis Middle School in Austin Public Schools for three years and has been the Principal of Woodson Kindergarten Center since 2012.

Cabeen’s professional activities include Board Member and Communications Director for Minnesota Chapter of the Council of Exceptional Children (2008-2016); Assisted in development and facilitation of two MESPA/MDE P3 Principal Leadership Series (ongoing); guest speaker on Kids Deserve It! (2016); Co-Moderator of Voxer and Twitter group for #ECEChat (ongoing); MN PBIS Exemplar School Award (2014-15, 2015-16); NAESP/VINCI Digital Leader of Early Learning (2016); and many other presentations and publications within the education community. In addition to her professional activities, Cabeen serves her community as YMCA of Austin Board of Directors Treasurer (2014-present); Kiwanis of Austin Member (2009-2014); Arc of Mower County Board Member (2009-2014); Faith Church Musician (2007-present); Faith Church African Ministry Member (2016-present); United Way “Dancing with the Stars” Champion (2014); Hormel Cancer Institute Site Coordinator (2014-present); YMCA Swim Referee (2016-present); and Austin Youth Soccer Assistant Coach (2016-present).

Cabeen received a Principal Licensure and Director of Special Education Licensure from Hamline University in St. Paul, MN; a MA in Special Education from St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN; and a BA in Music Therapy from University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire in Eau Claire, WI.

**The other finalists for this honor** were Lisa Carlson, principal of Woodland Elementary in Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Public School District, and Nancy Antoine, principal of Bridgewater Elementary in Northfield Public Schools.

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**MESPA works to: Improve** education for Minnesota students through collaboration and advocacy; **Unite** current, past, and future licensed elementary and middle level principals; **Encourage** and support a cooperative relationship between MESPA and other state/national organizations; and **Advocate** for the professional ethical, economic, and social welfare of its members.

**MESPA Mission:** The Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association strives to be the premier leadership resource for elementary and middle level principals and a strong leading voice for public education. MESPA is committed to ensuring a high quality education for all children through strengthening and enhancing the principal's role as educational leader in our schools.