

Minnesota Association of School Administrators

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News Release

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Superintendent Gerald Ness Receives MASA Polaris Leadership Award

(St. Paul, MN) – The Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) has named Gerald Ness, Superintendent of the Fergus Falls Public Schools, the recipient of the 2019 MASA Polaris Leadership Award. Ness will be honored for his exemplary school leadership and a lifetime of achievement in education and the wider community at a statewide recognition ceremony at the 2019 MASA Fall Conference, October 7-8 in Duluth, Minnesota.

Polaris, the “North Star,” themes this award because, just as exemplary administrators serve as definitive leaders, Polaris is constant and unmoving in the sky. A navigator’s benchmark, the star marks “true north,” the fundamental direction that defines east, west and south. With this award, Ness is recognized for qualities such as professional courage, creation of a legacy of excellent leadership, fostering innovation, contribution through example and mentoring, exemplary conduct reflecting integrity and bearing emulation, and significant tenure in each position supporting district vision and affecting positive change.

“Fairness, responsibility and integrity are key features of Superintendent Ness’ conduct. He is decisive and a forward thinker. He is practical and inclusive. He has fun at work, but that does not diminish his role as leader of our district,” said Melanie Cole, Chair of the Fergus Falls Public Schools School Board. “‘Excellence’ is a strong word, but it is what our community expected and what Superintendent Ness is providing.”

Ness has almost 30 years of administrative experience. He has served for the past 13 years as the Superintendent of the Fergus Falls Public Schools. Prior to his time with Fergus Falls, he was the Executive Director of the Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA). Ness held the role of Superintendent and Principal of the West Central Area Schools and he began his administrative career at an Assistant Principal for the Kenosha Unified School District No. 1 in Wisconsin.

Ness began his tenure at Fergus Falls Public Schools in 2006, a time when the district saw low test scores, lacked vision and direction, was in need of a new high school, was in statutory operating debt, and students were open enrolling out of the district. Over the past 13 years, the district has seen an increase in more than 300 traditional students and more than 600 students enrolled in their online school program. During that time, the district moved from a statutory operating debt to a 20% fund balance and test scores have increased in all areas.

Ness led the district towards the passage of two successful bond referendums. The first bond was to complete major remodels of the grades 5-8 middle school and the grades 9-12 high school. The second bond was the installation of new outdoor facilities including: bleachers for the soccer/football field, recreational green space, tennis courts, and an eight-lane track. Private donors also contributed \$1 million to install an artificial turf field.

Under Ness’ leadership, the district is currently implementing a Long-Term Facility Plan, which includes remodeling a facility to house all of the district’s preschool programming including their partner program with Children’s Corner, a local childcare provider. This partnership will be a model facility in the region where parents have the ability to have their children attend both preschool and childcare in the same facility. Fergus Falls Public Schools is also seeking to expand overnight childcare for shift workers within their community.

Ness is an involved member of MASA and its national affiliate, AASA. He has been a member of the MASA Board of Directors, Legislative Committee, which he chaired, Legislative-Finance sub-committee, and the mentoring program. He is also a member of MREA.

Ness’ community involvement includes the Executive Committee of Forward Fergus Falls (FFF), Center for the Arts

Board of Directors, Kiwanis International, Fergus Falls Chamber of Commerce, Lake Region Community Partners, and the Lake Region Healthcare Board of Directors.

Ness received a master's and bachelor's degrees from Bemidji State University. He earned a 6th year certificate from North Dakota State University.

Each year, MASA recognizes members for their contribution to public education. MASA is a professional organization of Minnesota's school leaders whose members include over 900 public education and non-public superintendents, directors of special education, curriculum and technology leaders, other central office administrators, service providers, business partners and retirees.

MASA is grateful to Ehlers for their ongoing support of the Polaris Award. Ehlers is an independent municipal financial advisory company that has served public sector clients since 1955.

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