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School Earns State Character Honor

Hilldale Middle School an Oklahoma School of Character

By Cathy Spaulding Phoenix Staff Writer

Good character shows up in all sorts of ways at Hilldale Middle School. "It's just helping out each other," said seventh-grader Caleb York.

It also is seen in fewer student visits to the principal's office and fewer reports of tardiness, said HMS Principal Darren Riddle.

Now, it's on paper. Hilldale Middle School has been named an Oklahoma State School of Character by the Character Education Partnership. School officials joined city, state and national dignitaries to present the honor to the school Wednesday morning.

"This is cool. This is way neat," said State Rep. Jerry McPeak. "Good kids and good people are everywhere. It still takes the same courage to be people of good character as it did 30 years ago. You can't measure the things you think are most vital. You can't measure the things your mom and dad think are most wonderful — and that's your character." McPeak said Oklahoma has all sorts of state champions in sports and other areas. "But there are only two state schools of character and you are one of them," he said as the students erupted in applause. "That's two in the whole state of Oklahoma, two in Texas, one in Kansas."



State School of Character announcement ceremony at Hilldale Middle School. Left to right: Dwayne Thompson (Field Rep for Congressman Markwayne Mullin), Tracy Fenton (Hilldale Counselor), Dr. Kaylin Coody (Hilldale Superintendent), State Representative Jerry McPeak, Gwen Coburn, Muskogee Mayor Bob Coburn, Principal Darren Riddle.

Oklahoma's other State School of Character is Sadler Arts Academy, five miles north of Hilldale Middle School. Sadler received its honor at an assembly Friday morning. Hilldale Middle School and Sadler are now in the running for the National School of Character, said Madison Tomlinson, a state coordinator for the Character Education Partnership. Tomlinson also is director of character education at Muskogee Public Schools. He said Character Education Partnership representatives will visit the schools in March.

Muskogee Mayor Bob Coburn said schools of character are one reason he ran for mayor. He read a city letter congratulating the school. "I wanted Muskogee to be different," Coburn said. "We are a great city. You are a great bunch of students."

Superintendent Dr. Kaylin Coody told the students "the award is really about you." "It's you students, it's the staff," she said.

Riddle said not only have referrals to his office and tardy reports declined, so have reports of bullying. He said a peer mediation program, instituted by counselor Tracy Fenton, helped reduce reports of bullying. “You guys are acting like you should,” Riddle said, adding that Hilldale is the state’s first middle school to receive a School of Character award. That prompted more applause.

Fenton said she is excited the school earned the honor. Hilldale Middle School received an honorable mention in 2013. “We have great students here, we have great teachers,” she said.

Riddle said schools of good character demonstrate core values such as honesty, compassion, respect and resourcefulness. “We see those things on a daily basis,” Riddle told the students. “You guys today — today — have shown you are the best.”