Horace Mann and Illinois Principals Association Announce
2023 Illinois Elementary School Principal of the Year

Horace Mann and the Illinois Principals Association are pleased to announce that Cris Edwards, principal of Richland County Elementary School, Olney, has been named the 2023 Illinois Elementary School Principal of the Year. The award recognizes elementary school principals who have demonstrated a positive impact on their students and learning community. Criteria for the award include:

- Demonstrates a positive impact on education and advocacy for children
- Ensures the school climate is positive and reflects high staff and student morale
- Moves actively to implement the goals and objectives of the school
- Works collaboratively with teachers and other staff to improve the educational program and student achievement
- Involves the community in the life of the school and uses community resources for students.

Cris Edwards has served as principal of Richland County Elementary School for the past 4 years and was principal of Richland County Middle School for 4 years prior to that. She has served as a school principal and assistant principal at Richland County schools for a total of 16 years. Edwards has been an active member of the Illinois Principals Association during her leadership career and was recently elected President-Elect of the association. Edwards has served as a member of the IPA board for the IPA Wabash Valley Region since 2017 and Diversity & Equity Chairperson for the Wabash Valley Region since 2020. Edwards has been recognized by her peers in the Wabash Valley with the Reaching Out & Building Bridges award in 2021 and the Wabash Valley Herman Graves award in 2019. The Herman Graves award is considered the highest honor bestowed by the Illinois Principals Association, and honors former principal Herman Graves, who continually extolled the virtues of IPA.

Cris has served the Illinois Principals Association as a member of the policy committee, the WELL Summit planning committee (an event for women in educational leadership), served as a delegate to the IPA Congress, and was the first individual in Illinois to complete a micro-credential in leadership. Cris has also led her school through the pandemic and served on a focus group for the National Association of Elementary School Principals on “Principals in the Pandemic.”

Chris Simpson, Superintendent of Richland County Community Unit District #1 shared, “Cris has been a stabilizing presence at RCES for the students, teachers, support staff, and her administrative colleagues. She has developed a culture of learning at the school that extends beyond the students and instructional staff. The learning culture begins as she models the role of principal learner. Cris and her staff have embarked on a revamping of the reading curriculum with a focus on the science of reading. Everyone is learning about this with Cris leading the way.”

Evie H., a 3rd grade student at Richland County Elementary, shared “Mrs. Edwards is a great leader for RCES! She is nice, creative, funny, smart, fun, loving, and a hard worker. Our school mission statement is: ‘To develop respectful, responsible learners and leaders.’ Mrs. Edwards shows us how to do this every day. She
encourages us, supports us, challenges us, and prepares us to be the best we can be. Mrs. Edwards makes us better and is the best principal!”

The Elementary School Principal of the Year winner was selected from a pool of region nominees provided by the 21 Regions of the Illinois Principals Association. Edwards will be recognized at the IPA’s annual Education Leaders Annual Conference in October 2023.

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The Illinois Principals Association is a leadership organization which serves over 6,000 educational leaders throughout the state of Illinois. You can find out more about the IPA at www.ilprincipals.org. Visit http://www.ilprincipals.org/about-IPA/awards for more information about the IPA Principal of the Year Awards Program.

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