

March 8, 2021

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For Immediate Release

Illinois Principals Association Awards 2021 Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award to Richland County Elementary Principal and Mentor Richland County

Cris Edwards, Principal for Richland County Elementary School, Olney, and Dana Baker, Director of Mentor Richland County, have received the 2021 Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award from the Illinois Principals Association, sponsored by Horace Mann Companies, for their partnership to provide a school-based one on one youth mentoring program.

The Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award was created to recognize an IPA principal or assistant principal, and an agency, association, or community member displaying an outstanding effort in creating partnerships between schools, principals, associations, and organizations for the betterment of all.

According to Edwards, the school-based, one on one youth mentoring program currently serves 60 children in Richland County who face adversity and are in need of individual attention. Mentors are high school juniors/seniors, college students, and adults from the community. The mentors have a thorough background check, go through an interview and training process, and are matched with a student. They spend an hour a week helping with homework, playing games, and getting to know the students.

Chris Simpson, Richland County Superintendent, echoed the positive impact of this program on his district, "Based on the end-of-year survey data and anecdotal information, children connected with a mentor through Mentor Richland County have improved academic performance, improved attendance, improved relationships with adults and peers, and improved self-image."

"Richland County Elementary School Principal Cris Edwards and Director Dana Baker have taken a long-standing program and made it better than ever!" shared Marilyn Holt, former Superintendent of Richland County. "They have reimagined, reinvigorated, and reenergized the partnership. They have reinforced and extended a bridge that has made a difference for the community, school and children."

Retired Principal of Richland County Elementary School, Suzanne Hahn, agreed, "Students have an outpouring of positive experiences when asked to evaluate the program. Their voice is the most important one. It is a win-win! Students have an influential role model that helps them improve attitudes, expectations, behavior, attendance, and performance. Community and high school mentors visit the school regularly building support and positive public relations."

Edwards and Baker will be recognized at a special ceremony during the IPA Education Leaders Annual Conference in October 2021.

The Illinois Principals Association serves over 5,800 educational leaders statewide and whose mission is to develop, support, and advocate for innovative educational leaders. The Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award is supported by Horace Mann Companies of Springfield, IL. For more information about the IPA, please visit www.ilprincipals.org.

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