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KENAI PENINSULA BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

Principal Denise Kelly is the Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals National Distinguished Principal for 2022!

Soldotna, May 2, 2022—Presented with the award at a surprise assembly on May 2, 2022, with her family, school community, AAESP board members, and Kenai Peninsula Borough School District leaders in attendance, Principal Kelly entered the full gym for the surprise announcement and celebration. She was nominated and selected by her fellow principals for this distinguished recognition through a statewide search process conducted by the Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals.



“Sterling Elementary is a special place,” said KPSBD Superintendent Clayton Holland during the surprise award assembly. “When you walk into the building, you can feel the positive school culture and climate that exists in Sterling Elementary. You can tell that Sterling Elementary School is a place that staff and students want to be and that parents want to be a part of. Ms. Kelly has worked alongside her staff and school community to create this feeling. She will do anything and everything for her students and staff. ... Ms. Kelly will represent the entire state of Alaska very well as their Nationally Distinguished Principal. We are all very proud of her and Sterling Elementary School.”

Principal Kelly said a favorite aspect to her work each day is to welcome students every morning when they arrive to school. “They are always so excited to see us, have stories to tell about their night, morning or weekend, and I get to be the first person at the school to call them by name and welcome them back to learning.” An important concern at Sterling Elementary is to “become as close to a zero waste school as we can.” She explains, “We recycle paper, cardboard, plastics and aluminum. We separate our food waste in our lunchroom so that less waste goes to the landfill. I believe that it is important to teach our students about preserving our community and ensuring that we leave it better than we have found it. We try to do our small part in preserving the world.”

Principal Kelly said, “This award makes me think of all of the hard work and dedication that all of our staff put into our school, students, and families every day. It makes me think of all of the times that we have been short staffed, particularly over the last three years and how there is always someone, or

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The mission of the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District is to empower all learners to positively shape their futures.
ANCHOR POINT COOPER LANDING HOMER HOPE KACHEMAK SELO KENAI MOOSE PASS NANWALEK NIKISKI NIKOLAEVSK NINILCHIK PORT GRAHAM
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many someones who step up to fill voids. It is this community of learners and educators that have given me the ability to become who I am as an administrator. I am honored and humbled by this award. We never do what we do in education for recognition, but when one of us is recognized for our work, all of us are recognized! The Kenai Peninsula Borough School District has world class educators at all of our schools!"

In 1998 Mrs. Kelly graduated from Northern Arizona University with a Bachelor of Arts Degree with a dual major in elementary education and special education. She earned a Master of Arts Degree in Education Administration and Supervision from the University of Phoenix, and later received a Graduate Certificate in Restorative Practices from the International Institute of Restorative Practices in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She began her administrative career as an interim principal at Kilohana Elementary School in Kaunakakai, Hawaii, in 2009, she worked in Coeur d'Alene School District #271 in Idaho, and Tempe Elementary School District #3. After moving to Alaska in 2011, she started her career in the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District as a districtwide Special Education program coordinator, then became the Sterling Elementary in 2014. She is currently in her eighth year as the principal at Sterling Elementary.

"This year alone, Ms. Kelly has stepped in to be the Intensive Needs Special Teacher, worked with all the support staff, and run meetings to meet the needs of all students," said Superintendent Holland during the assembly. "She fills in everywhere needed. She has been seen early in the morning at school moving snow, or bringing her family in to clean the building when the custodian was out. Mrs. Kelly never complains about all that she has had to do, but rather jumps in and models for all of us to do what it takes to keep the school running and meet the needs of the entire school community. She does all of this while maintaining a focus on academics, meeting the social emotional development needs of her students, and providing support to her staff. In regard to her staff, one of her biggest accomplishments is working to surround herself with great staff!"

Principal Kelly believes in balancing leadership and management to make sure her students are surrounded by effective and caring people. She believes that the crux of leadership is motivating people and that leadership is shared amongst her school, and the larger, community. Assistant Superintendent Kari Dendurent said, "An important area is Denise's character and community commitment through her dedication to the Social Emotional Learning for her students and staff demonstrated by earning her certification in Restorative Practices. This practice brings individuals to a cooperative and productive state through empowerment."

Mrs. Kelly was a finalist for the Kindness Experience Award from the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation in 2019 and received a Human Dignity Award from the Victory Over Violence Organization in 2010. She said, "I take pride in everything that I do. And everything that I do, I do for our students. There is not a student that I have had pass through Sterling Elementary that hasn't stolen my heart. I love this community, and I cherish my position at our school." Mrs. Kelly has volunteered at the Sterling Senior Center and Community Center.

Principal Kelly said, "I would like to thank so many people. I wish that my mom were alive to see how she has inspired me to think about kindness and compassion first. I would like to thank my family for always being supportive of the work that I do for Sterling Elementary—the time that I am away from home and the times that they have come to help at the school. I would like to thank our staff and students who are the heart of our school and the Sterling community. I would like to thank the families of Sterling for trusting me with their children every day. So many people to thank!"

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Commissioner Michael Johnson reached out to say, “Congratulations Principal Kelly and thank you for being an example of citizenship for your students.” He added that Principal Kelly is, “not just a school leader, she also serves her community.”

Principal Kelly will travel to Washington D.C. in October 2022 for two days of activities planned to honor and bring well-deserved recognition to the elementary administrators selected by their respective states.

AAESP believes that Denise Kelly is well deserving of the National Distinguished Principals’ Award. We are proud to acknowledge her leadership and commitment to Alaska’s children representing Alaska’s elementary principals.

Links

- [Sterling Elementary School website](#)
- [Sterling Elementary School Facebook page](#)



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