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JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Principal Donna Marshall reacts to her Milken award.

Rock-star principals at Seattle schools

THE news that the principal of a struggling Seattle high school has won a prestigious \$25,000 national award places a much-needed spotlight on the academic gains occurring throughout the city schools.

Academic efforts can be likened to a sort of educational alchemy. When a strategy works, the results are visible. For Donna Marshall, principal at Cleveland High School, a combination of rising student achievement — notably gains on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning — and a student body of 800 worshipping her like a rock star, garnered the attention of education advocates in search of excellence. The result, a prestigious Milken National Educator award, puts not just Marshall on the map but Cleveland High, too, a school that in the past has faltered under the weight of sagging test scores and unhappy parents. Enrollment had declined at the school and some had suggested the building be shuttered.

But positive change has been in the wind at the school lately. The Milken award recognizes the connection between principal quality and student achievement. It is a point that cannot be overstated. At no other time in the history of public schools have the academic stakes been higher than they are currently. For principals, this means a job in which success is the only option.

Everything about schools — from a push for outstanding teachers, to an engaged community and a strong instructional vision — begins with a quality principal. Principals must navigate politics, raise money and be on the cutting edge of technology. They must be savvy enough to manage the feisty politics of public education, including keeping good teachers and jettisoning poor ones.

Most districts have enough principal candidates; it is the quality principals that are often a challenge to find.

Marshall at Cleveland High shows quality principals are out there. In addition to congratulating her and the 40 other rock-star principals in Washington state who have won a Milken in the past decade, we ought to be figuring out how to duplicate them.

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