

## Hastings Middle School principal sent off in style

ESSINK FIRST NEBRASKAN  
TO BE FINALIST FOR  
NATIONAL AWARD

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Within seconds Dave Essink went from being blindfolded and gingerly escorted into the back of a BMW convertible to flapping his cape and waving to a cheering crowd.

The Hastings Middle School principal — one of six finalists for the 2015 National Association of Secondary School Principals National Principal of the Year — was sent off in style at the end of school Friday with a surprise celebration.

He leaves today for Washington, D.C. He and the other finalists will be interviewed by a separate panel of judges during the State Principals of the Year Institute. Assistant Principal Brooke O'Neill and building counselors spent the last week plotting a way for the school to honor Essink. The students weren't notified of the surprise until Thursday, but all of the school's 800 students lined the drive around the building, holding handmade signs and blowing noisemakers.

"Some kids said good luck and things like that but to see a great big parade like that was so shocking because I hadn't heard anything and normally I feel like I'm pretty well on top of things," Essink said.

Each finalist will receive a \$1,500 grant with the national winner receiving an additional grant of \$3,000. The grants will be used to improve learning at each principal's school.

The winner will be announced during National Principals Month in October.

The award is given to one principal who exemplifies the characteristics research has shown to be most effective in school leadership.

Among the people cheering Friday were Essink's son Bryant and his wife, Jodi.

"It's crazy. It's amazing what the staff and kids are doing, so exciting, touching. I think he's going to be blown away," Jodi said before her husband was led out of the building, blindfolded, by counselors Michele Kimle and Marje Little.

In addition to the cape, they also placed a crown on his head and helped him into Little's convertible.

"He was being a very good sport," Kimle said. "He was a little bit nervous. We asked him if he trusted us and he said yes."

Jennifer Carey and Patti Sass, mothers of middle school students, were waiting to pick up their children after school and saw the student body's show of support.

"It was so awesome to see our kids come out and cheer on their principal," said Carey, who was there to pick up her daughter Alyssa and son Andrew. "It's this huge honor for our school."

Sass, who was picking up her daughter Dorielle and son Noah, said Essink does a good job connecting with students.

"They respond to him," she said.

"My daughter was really excited yesterday because she's so proud of him."

Superintendent Craig Kautz, who was on site for the festivities, said Essink, is the first Nebraska principal to ever be a finalist for the award.

"All of Nebraska should be proud of him," Kautz said.

O'Neill said it was important during planning to come up with an activity that would involve all of the students.

"They've talked about the we of the building rather than the I," she said.

"We knew any sendoff we did would be the most meaningful if we had all of the kids involved."

The activity just shows how thoughtful middle school students can be, she said.

"The thing about middle school is we basically sent the entire middle school population outside and we had no issues whatsoever," O'Neill said. "They bring the signs and the things they made and they yelled their heads off and it's all in celebration of a principal that some of them don't know very well. The middle school's great about that." Essink was pleased to see his family members at the celebration, but he also was surprised that he didn't pick up any clues from them or any of the students.

"It's a little scary," he said with a smile. "Especially middle school students, they don't keep secrets very well. To have something like, well, planned out, to be a secret. I'm impressed they could hold to that and not let it slip out."



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**Hastings Middle School students cheer Principal David Essink as he is paraded through the school's driveway Friday.**