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Wisconsin State Journal (**Madison**, WI)

October 5, 2000, Thursday, ALL EDITIONS

SECTION: Front, Pg. 1A**LENGTH:** 587 words**HEADLINE:** PRINCIPAL GAIN: \$ 25,000; **FRANKLIN** ELEMENTARY'S
DEBORAH **MERCIER** "BLOWN AWAY" BY STATE EDUCATOR AWARD;
-- AND \$ 25,000 CHECK.**BYLINE:** Doug Erickson Education reporter**BODY:**

Principal Deborah **Mercier** arrived at **Madison's Franklin** Elementary School on Wednesday knowing only that the state Department of Public Instruction wanted to commandeer her gym to give someone a top-secret award.

An hour later, she had tears of shock on her face and \$ 25,000 in her pocket.

Mercier was one of three public school employees in the state this year to receive outstanding educator awards from the California-based Milken Family Foundation.

Each winner gets a personal check of \$ 25,000 at a surprise ceremony that's part pep rally and part Publishers Clearing House Prize Patrol. There are no restrictions on how the money can be spent.

"I'm completely blown away," a stunned **Mercier** said moments after State Schools Superintendent John Benson announced her award.

"Who's Milken?" she later asked.

Who, indeed.

Since 1987, the foundation has awarded public school teachers and principals across the country more than \$ 41 million to encourage excellence in education and inspire young people to become teachers.

The foundation will give out 145 awards this year in 42 states; this is the second year in Wisconsin. Its president is Lowell Milken, brother of junk bond king and convicted insider trader Michael Milken.

Wisconsin's other winners this year are Jennifer Gaab, a fourth-grade teacher at Jefferson Elementary in Beaver Dam, and Marcy Levine, a first-grade teacher at Doty Elementary in Green Bay.

Winners can't apply for the award. Nominees bubble up through word-of-mouth, attracting the attention of a panel put together by the DPI.

"We find you," Benson said.

The foundation, which makes the final selections, said it emphasizes young educators because it wants to encourage talented people to

stay in the profession, not leave for better opportunities in the private sector.

Mercier was 28 years old when picked to lead **Franklin** Elementary four years ago. She entered a difficult situation, replacing a principal who resigned amid allegations he sexually molested female students.

"When she was introduced to us, we were all thinking, 'Who is this kid?' " said Lynn Legler, a **Franklin** teacher for 17 years. "But she was honest and open with us right from the start. She's become an awesome leader."

Franklin teachers, who led a standing ovation Wednesday, describe **Mercier** as someone who speaks her mind but respects others and learns from them.

"She listens to teachers," said veteran kindergarten teacher Julie Riewe. "She fought for reducing class sizes, and that was the first thing I told her we needed when she walked through the door."

Criteria for the award include outstanding accomplishment and strong long-range potential for professional and policy leadership. **Mercier** launched a strategic planning process at **Franklin** that resulted in a federal grant to reform the school's structure.

She has worked to minimize the times students are pulled from their regular classrooms for special programs, such as English as a second language. Instead, services are brought to the classroom. Supporters of that approach say students benefit from fewer disruptions and greater class cohesion.

Mercier, a former Milwaukee teacher, credited her staff members Wednesday.

"I am very proud of this school, and I am very proud of you," she told them.

She later said she views her job as "a big logic problem" that needs solving daily.

"It's the challenge of knowing things can be better that keeps me coming back," she said.

GRAPHIC: State Journal photo/John Maniaci

State Schools Superintendent John Benson congratulates a tearful Deborah **Mercier**, principal of **Franklin** Elementary School, shortly after he announced that she'd won a \$ 25,000 outstanding educator award. Students at **Madison's Franklin** Elementary School helped build suspense for the award Wednesday by gradually rolling out the size of the jackpot for the Milken Family Foundation outstanding educator award. They are, from left, Devonna Jackson, Kate Wellenstein, Dana Friske, Nico Borovsky, Alonte Tournai and Abby Payne-Meili.<

LOAD-DATE: October 6, 2000

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Capital Times (**Madison**, WI.)

October 4, 2000, Wednesday, SECOND EDITION

SECTION: Communities, Pg. 1B**LENGTH:** 475 words**HEADLINE:** **FRANKLIN** PRINCIPAL GETS BIG HONOR**BYLINE:** BY CHRIS MURPHY THE CAPITAL TIMES**BODY:**Deborah **Mercier's** jaw dropped when she heard the news.

The **Franklin** Elementary School principal was sitting in the gym in front of her staff and 360 students when state Superintendent of Public Instruction John Benson announced this morning that she had won a National Educator Award worth \$ 25,000 from the Milken Family Foundation of Santa Monica, Calif.

All the children and staff members got to their feet and cheered as **Mercier** received hugs from Benson and **Madison** Metropolitan School District Superintendent Art Rainwater.

With teary eyes, **Mercier** said into the microphone, "Boys and girls, I am really, really, really surprised, but I have to say something to your teachers first."

She told them that as she was waiting for Benson to announce the award, she thought of all the teachers in the school who might have won.

"I have no idea how I got selected for this award," she said. "But I am very proud of this school, and I'm very proud of you."

The National Educator Awards are intended to reward outstanding educators in K-12 schools. The foundation will give out 145 of them this year in 42 states.

Two other Wisconsin educators received the awards Tuesday, in Beaver Dam and Green Bay. All the awards are given as surprises, and there are no restrictions on how the \$ 25,000 can be spent.

Still shaking 15 minutes after the announcement, **Mercier** said she feels guilty that she won when there are many teachers at the south side school who have done so well.

She said she was so floored that she didn't even hear Benson say her name after she heard the word "principal." **Mercier** had been told that Benson was coming to the school to present some sort of districtwide award, and she joked that they picked **Franklin** because it is so close to the Capitol.

Mercier, 31, began her stint as principal at **Franklin** in January 1997. Before that, she had an administrative internship at Leopold Elementary School, and she was also a teacher for four years in Milwaukee.

Under **Mercier's** leadership, **Franklin** has received a federal

Comprehensive School Reform grant. After providing extensive training for staff members, the school eliminated most pull-out programs, including English as a second language.

ESL students still receive extra services from aides, but all their classroom teachers are trained to work with them as well. **Mercier** transferred the staff positions that had been used for the pull-out programs to the classroom, resulting in lower class sizes.

The changes at the school have been controversial in some quarters, but Rainwater praised **Mercier's** leadership after the ceremony and said things seem to be working well.

"If you visit classrooms here -- and this is what has really struck me here -- you see all the children in the classroom actively engaged in learning," he said.

EDITOR-NOTE:

A shorter version appeared in the first edition on page 4B. The headline was: **Franklin** school principal wins \$ 25,000 award.

GRAPHIC: MIKE DeVRIES/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Above: **Franklin** Elementary students hold up signs to show the award just before their principal got the news. Below: State Superintendent of Public Instruction John Benson hugs **Franklin** Elementary School Principal Deborah **Mercier** moments after his surprise announcement.

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