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School in national spotlight for merit in music education

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By Christopher Neely

AVON-BY-THE-SEA – The local elementary school community recently received news pertaining to one of its programs, and it is music to their ears.

Last month, Avon-by-the-Sea Elementary School was recognized as one of seven schools in the state, and one of 120 in the country, to receive the National Association of Music Merchants' [NAMM] Support Music Merit Award [SMMA].

The award is given to schools [elementary, middle and high] that have a proven support for school-based music education programs. Schools are chosen based on the school's commitment to music education programs. It is not about the size of the program, but rather, how much is offered and how much of the student population participates in the program.

According to NAMM spokesperson Lora Bodmer, schools are entered into the selection by administrators, teachers or members of the community. Once entered, NAMM looks closely at the schools' commitment to music education through what programs are offered by the school, the participation in these programs and the school's desire to promote music education in the school community.



To be honored by NAMM with this award puts Avon-by-the-Sea Elementary School atop of a national pedestal of music education.

“The schools who are chosen for this award are part of a select national group, they now have bragging rights in this area of education,” Lora Bodmer, a spokesperson for NAMM, said. “The award is also a powerful tool for the school to use in promoting and protecting their music education programs.”

According to Ms. Bodmer, the timing of the award's presentation is strategic. With most districts right in the thick of budget discussions, the spring is an important time in the school calendar to advocate for different programs.

“The award coming out during budget season allows the school to ensure that administrators understand the value of their music education program,” Ms. Bodmer said. “These schools are making big investments and showing the value of music education in school. I hope the award allows them to protect their music education programs.”

The seven schools honored in New Jersey were Avon Elementary School, East Hanover Middle School, East Hanover Township Central School, Medford Memorial Middle School, Pitman High School, Rosa International Middle School in Cherry Hill and Winfield Scott School No. 2 in Elizabeth.

The designation of the award takes on a weighted significance this year, as new research shows a keen relationship between music education and overall student success. Published at the start of the school year, researchers at Northwestern University say that participation in music education programs helps to close the opportunity gap, improves brain function and sparks language development.

“The new research validates the relationships between student success and access to music education,” said Mary Luehrsen, executive director of the NAMM Foundation. “Ensuring that every child has access to music in schools requires commitment by students, teachers, and those who determine school budgets. We commend the districts and schools that have earned the Best Community designation this year. They join with so many that believe, as we do, that there is a vital link between ‘Do-Re-Mi’ and the ABCs.”

Avon Elementary School is currently on spring recess and administrators could not be reached for comment. However, it is important to note that Avon Elementary School, last year, began its after school, pay-to-play music instruction program. The idea expanded and school officials decided to pilot an in-school music instruction program. To further assess student interest, school officials also surveyed students from fourth to eighth grade to gather more data on

interest in the music instruction program.

The results showed overwhelming interest in the program. According to Principal and Superintendent Chris Albrizio, 30 students out of roughly 80 showed interest in joining the program.

The school district's board of education, in November, voted unanimously to expand the in-school music instruction program. It became obvious that sentiment behind the music program did not only come from school officials, but parents and students in the community, as well.

Back in the fall, when the board of education discussed the music instruction program's expansion, it was pitched to the board of education, by Mr. Albrizio, that 50 percent of the program would be funded by the school budget, while the other 50 percent would be funded by a donation from the Avon Education Foundation.

The Avon Education Foundation is a third-party, nonprofit organization founded by parents and citizens in the borough to advance educational opportunities in the community. The organization provided money for the school to begin its after school program, as well as a donation for the expansion of its in-school program. The importance of music education seems to resonate throughout the town.

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