

Preschool rings up a Golden Bell

State school board association honors Harper for inclusive special-education programs.

By Michael Miller

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Harper Preschool, one of the first preschools in the state to offer an extensive curriculum for special-education students, has won the Golden Bell Award this year for its inclusion program.

The Golden Bell Awards, currently in their 26th year, are presented by the California School Boards Assn. in 15 categories. Harper, which opened as a preschool just three years ago, was one of five recipients for 2004-05 in the special-education field.

"I really want to commend the parents and teachers who've worked there," said Supt. Robert Barbot. "More than anything, it's a validation of their quality programs. They [the California School Boards Assn.] are looking for quality programs that can be duplicated by thousands of other districts."

Harper will be honored along with other Golden Bell winners Saturday at the San Diego Marriott Hotel and Marina. The other special-education recipients this year are Aileen Colburn Elementary School in Atwater, the Berryessa Union School District in Santa Clara County, J. Marion Roynon Elementary in San Dimas and the Capistrano Unified School District.

"We're ecstatic," said Harper principal Gina Cataldo. "Both the staff and I are ecstatic. I'm personally proud of not only the program development, but also how it's been implemented by our teachers."

To be eligible for a Golden Bell Award, a program must have been in existence for at least two years. School districts and county education offices may submit up to three entries at a time, with a narrative description and photographs of each. This year, the Newport-Mesa Unified School District filed applications for three programs: the special-education program at Harper, the freshman seminar at Newport Harbor High School and the "Access for All" Palm Pilot program at Ensign Intermediate School.

Harper, located on the east side of Costa Mesa, offers integrated classes for general-education and special-education students. A combined classroom at Harper features one teacher for each group of students, along with an instructional assistant. Some classes at Harper are strictly for special education, but even those students join their peers for Friday cooking lessons or playground exercises.

"Inclusion is a belief that we all share here at Harper Preschool," Cataldo said.

This year marks the first time that Harper has applied for a Golden Bell. The deadline for entries was June 17, before former principal Katheryn Hofer retired. Cataldo replaced her this summer.

Harper has been an important factor in Newport-Mesa's special-education services over the last two years, offering summer training sessions for classroom aides.

Special education became a top priority for the district this year after it was hit with 73 legal cases in 2004-05, the third-highest total of any district in the state.

Newport-Mesa spokeswoman Jane Garland said the Harper program helped to smooth out differences between general and special-needs students.

"They see their peers doing things, so it's imitation," she said.