

**Please direct inquiries to:**  
Jon Bales, 608-242-1090



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## **Royall School District's Mark Gruen Named WASDA Superintendent of the Year**

The [Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators](#) has named Mark Gruen as the 2020 Wisconsin Superintendent of the Year.

Since 2010, Gruen has led the [Royall School District](#), a rural southwest Wisconsin district made up of the communities of Elroy and Kendall. At one time, there was a third community, Wilton, that also had children attending Royall.

Like most rural districts, Royall has experienced declining enrollment over the past several decades, culminating in the closure of an elementary school in Wilton and subsequent detachment of the Wilton community from the district. This put Royall into a financial freefall, leading to the closure of an elementary school in Kendall in 2011.

When Gruen became district administrator, Royall had approximately \$200,000 in its fund balance. Gruen's team and the school board members at the time made the necessary cuts and tough decisions to get the district back on a strong financial path while maintaining and increasing academic programs. This work resulted in more than \$8 million in improvements over the past seven years, while growing and maintaining a healthy fund balance of \$1.4 million.

Gruen has led the district in applying for and receiving a number of grants totaling more than \$3 million, including a \$2.4 million Physical Education Program grant. He has also leveraged his relationship-building skills to secure approximately \$1 million in donations, including \$360,000 to upgrade Royall's outdoor athletic facilities and \$50,000 to create the [Royall Fitness Center](#). These community partnerships have also resulted in 12 new scholarships.

Over the past six years, Royall has doubled its Advanced Placement course offerings, added dual credit English for seniors through UW-Platteville and provided eight transcribed credit classes through Western Technical College. The district has also added a required servant leadership course and numerous opportunities through its membership in the [Northern Wisconsin Educational Communication System](#) of distance learning.

When Gruen started at Royall, the graduation rate was 78 percent; in the past six years, the district has graduated 100 percent of students who attend Royall for all four years of high school.

Gruen has also formed a committee composed of parents, community members, teachers and students to create a new Royall Mission Statement: "Achieving Excellence, whatever it Takes". The committee studied and implemented strategies to reach students of poverty, followed by a commitment to develop strategies for identifying and reaching homeless students. Currently, the

district is focused on student mental health and identifying early signs of mental illness among youth.

“Gruen has led Royall on a total transformation academically, fiscally, and structurally over the past 10 years,” said Ryan McKittrick, a nine-year member of the Royall School Board. “We would not be where we are today without his relentless work ethic and deep commitment to our students’ success.”

Gruen is known for taking on all tasks big or small. In his first year at Royall, he filled ice cube trays and ice bags for the athletes before and after school. During the outdoor athletic field upgrade, he personally met the cement truck and led the cement crew on more than 25 occasions. When the new football stadium bleachers arrived, he was able to get 52 volunteers to show up on a hot July weekend to help assemble them.

As a Royall alumnus, Gruen has a true commitment to the Royall community. He helped start the Royall Alumni Association, which spawned the Royall Hall of Recognition. Gruen is the chair of the committee that recognizes Royall Alumni on an annual basis.

“I am incredibly humbled and honored to accept this award from WASDA on behalf of the entire Royall School District community,” Gruen said. “The success we have had at Royall has been a team effort. We have sensational teaching and support staff helping our administrative and supervisory teams. Our parents and community members are very supportive of our schools. Together, we have led the district from a low point to a spot where we all feel very good about the quality of the Royall experience.”

Gruen holds a specialist degree in Educational Leadership from Winona State University, a master's degree in Education from Viterbo College and a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from UW-La Crosse. Prior to his work at Royall, he served as district administrator and high school/middle school principal in the Eleva-Strum School District. He was also a principal in the Onalaska School District and activities director in the La Crosse School District.

“We are very pleased to recognize Mark Gruen with the Superintendent of the Year Award,” said Jon Bales, executive director of WASDA. “When he began serving as district administrator in Royall, the district was in a tough situation—just like so many rural districts have been. Through his exceptional leadership, the district is now in a much better financial position and the community has truly rallied around its local schools. Mr. Gruen exemplifies how strong leadership can have an enormous and positive impact on a school district like Royall.”

Since its inception more than 30 years ago, WASDA’s Superintendent of the Year program has become widely acknowledged as the most prestigious honor a Wisconsin school system leader can attain. Applicants are measured on criteria that include successfully meeting the needs of students, personal and organizational communication, professionalism, participation in local community activities and an understanding of regional, national and international issues.

Gruen will represent Wisconsin in the National Superintendent of the Year program at AASA’s National Conference on Education in February 2021. He lives in Elroy with his wife, Sarah, and children Emma (18 years old), Bryce (17), Marah (15) and Bria (12) .

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