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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS (CAS) NAMES 2007 ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS OF THE YEAR

CHESHIRE (CT) -- The Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS) is pleased to announce the selection of the 2007 Assistant Principals of the Year! Each year, nominations are solicited for the Elementary, Middle, and High School Assistant Principal of the Year awards. The winners are chosen by the CAS Awards and Recognition Committee, a selection committee consisting of active and retired principals and assistant principals. Congratulations to the following outstanding administrators.

- **Donna Cullen, Maloney Interdistrict Magnet School, Waterbury**
2007 Elementary School Assistant Principal of the Year
- **Jill Hale, Walter C. Polson Middle School, Madison**
2007 Middle School Assistant Principal of the Year
- **Donna Russo, Darien High School**
2007 High School Assistant Principal of the Year

Donna Cullen

Donna Cullen's seventeen years in education have all been spent serving the students of the Waterbury Public School District. She began her professional career in 1989 as a resource room and Grade 3 teacher at Michael Wallace Middle School and Margaret Generali Elementary School. In 2001, Cullen was appointed to serve as teaching vice principal at Wallace. After two years in this role, she became assistant principal of Maloney Interdistrict Magnet School, the position she now holds.

Maloney Principal Maryann Thompson calls Cullen a "21st-century leader" and lauds her ability to empower and motivate all those with whom she works. "Donna's passion for teaching, endless love of learning, and impressive leadership skills have made her an instrumental force within the district," says Thompson.

Though an assistant principal at Maloney for only three-and-a-half years, Cullen has had a tremendous impact on her students, staff, and community. She has been a catalyst for change in teaching, learning, and assessment; and her efforts have resulted in a multi-faceted educational program which allows all students to achieve at high levels. Cullen is credited with helping Maloney to achieve the prestigious 2006 Magnet School of Excellence Award from the Magnet Schools of America. This distinction is awarded to a select group of magnet schools that show a commitment to high academic standards, curriculum innovation, successful diversity efforts, and the consistent delivery of quality services to all school stakeholders.

Since joining the Maloney administration, Cullen has streamlined many of the school's day-to-day operations so that more time and resources can be directed to classroom instruction and to meeting the needs of individual students. She designed the Maloney Student Attendance Tracking System to better track absences and, ultimately, reduce truancy rates. She also developed the Maloney Student Discipline Referral Tracking System, an accountability system which helps to ensure that no child "slips through the cracks."

Diane Bakewell, supervising vice-principal of the Carrington School in Waterbury, praises Cullen for efforts in fostering a nurturing and supportive school climate with high staff and student morale. "Donna has a wonderful rapport with the students and staff, and this is reflected in the positive atmosphere in her building," says Bakewell.

Cullen leads by example, always exhibiting the characteristics of honesty, respect, and kindness that she works to instill in her students on a daily basis. “Mrs. Cullen teaches us how to be a leader by showing us how to always do the right thing,” says student Michaela Couture. “She helps the students at our school realize that they are in control of the choices they make.”

Donna Cullen is a leader of vision, a role model, and a passionate advocate for children. Her success as a building administrator is reflected in this telling statement by Jessica Haxhi, a teacher at Maloney and parent of a pre-K student: “I had a choice as to where my child would go to elementary school. Donna is one of the major reasons that I chose Maloney.”

Jill Hale

Jill Hale’s 25-year professional career includes eighteen years as a teacher and seven years as an assistant principal, all of which have been spent in Madison, CT. She began teaching in 1981, working as a grade 8 teacher at Our Lady of Mercy School in Madison before transitioning to the public schools in 1984. Prior to becoming an assistant principal at Jeffrey J. Milton Elementary School in 2000, Hale served in a variety of roles, teaching grades 1, 2 and 5 at the elementary level and History and Science at the middle level. In 2003, Hale was appointed assistant principal of Polson Middle School; and since November, 2006, she has been serving as the district’s interim special education director.

Polson Principal Frank Henderson describes Hale as “dedicated, committed, intelligent, caring, empathetic, and a person of high integrity and moral character.” He praises her personal and professional dedication to her work and her single-minded drive to ensure success for every child in her care. “She genuinely cares about the academic, social and emotional well-being of every student in our building,” says Henderson.

A tireless instructional leader, Hale keeps careful watch for new research and emerging trends in education and is always presenting new information for her staff to consider and digest. Her extensive knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy is surpassed only by her talent and generosity in sharing that knowledge with others. According to Mark Hershnik, Polson’s coordinator of English, Hale’s commitment to continued professional growth sets a powerful example for her staff and has a positive influence on instruction. Hale led a successful transition from homo- to heterogeneous grouping in English and mathematics; and her expertise in the area of special education has helped to maximize inclusive learning opportunities for special needs students.

One of Hale’s many strengths is her ability to work with staff to use assessment data as a tool to accelerate student learning. Her focus on data-driven decision making has helped teachers to identify and provide support to students who need additional help in a particular skill area.

The hallmark of Hale’s leadership is her unwavering belief in the capacity of all children to achieve at high levels. In each of her students, even the most challenging ones, she sees the potential for greatness and is insistent that every child is treated with compassion and respect. When handling discipline matters, she always seeks a resolution that is remedial rather than punitive, as she remains mindful of each student’s ability to change and to improve. Says Hershnik, “It is because of people like Mrs. Hale that education retains the potential to enhance and regenerate society – one child at a time.”

Hale’s leadership has been defined by her passion for learning, her irrepressible optimism, her human decency and her deep love for children. Her profound impact as an educator is best described by one of her former students, Marley Connor, resident of Madison and student at Daniel Hand High School. Says Marley, “It is Mrs. Hale’s ability to observe and celebrate each student’s strengths and achievements, and to acknowledge what each person has to offer, inside and outside of the classroom, that separate her from every other teacher or scholastic leader.”

Donna Russo

A 32-year veteran educator, Donna Russo is in her eleventh year as assistant principal at Darien High School (DHS). She began her career in 1975 as a Fine Arts teacher, first in Rochester, New York, and then in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. In 1984, after eight years in the classroom, Donna relocated to Connecticut to become the chair of the Fine Arts department at Bethel High School. In 1988, Russo took on the role of assistant principal at Bethel High, where she served for seven years before assuming her current position as assistant principal at DHS.

Darien First Selectwoman Evonne Klein calls Russo “a visionary and skillful leader,” one who is respected for her ability to juggle the increasing responsibilities of today’s busy assistant principal. While proficiently managing the day-to-day operations of the school, Russo still finds time to implement new programs, assist teachers in reviewing and revising curricula, and mentor young leaders in the district. Says Darien Superintendent Donald Fiftal, “Donna has demonstrated the ability to focus on instructional leadership, while doing justice to the relentless demands placed on assistant principals to manage daily school operations.”

DHS Principal Jerome Auclair, who nominated Russo for the award, describes her as a “patient, dedicated, effective, intelligent, clear-thinking leader” who is always ready and eager to take on a new role. During her tenure at DHS, Russo has been the driving force behind a number of successful initiatives. She spearheaded the *Big Brother/Big Sister Program*, a mentoring program which pairs upperclassmen with freshmen and transfer students to help ease their transition into a new school; and she designed and organized the school’s annual *Volunteer Fair*, a day-long extravaganza which brings the entire Darien community together to celebrate the values of citizenship and community service. Furthermore, under Russo’s leadership, DHS has established several afterschool clubs and activities that provide avenues to increase students’ sensitivity to the community and to one another. The *Buddy Club* assists emotionally and physically challenged students; *Weekend Alternatives Club* plans alcohol-free weekend activities for students; *Kids Giving Back* reaches out to people in need; and the *Culture Club* studies the cultures and customs of others.

As an educational leader, Russo is celebrated for her ability to create a culture of learning that is innovative and supportive and that allows all staff members to fully develop and explore their individual talents. As the district’s BEST facilitator, she has been instrumental in shaping the professional growth and development of every new teacher, not only at the high school, but at all of the Darien schools.

All those who work with Russo agree that her greatest strength is her collaborative leadership skills. She always strives to learn from those around her and invites others to take ownership and feel involved. In so doing, she has helped to create a supportive and collegial atmosphere at DHS which allows all stakeholders — teachers, support staff, parents, students, and community members alike — to enjoy a shared responsibility for the governance of the school. Says Barbara Simms, co-chair of the DHS Parent Association, “For the six years that I have known Donna, she has continually demonstrated collaborative leadership. She actively involves the students, parents and members of the community to achieve a wonderful environment for our high school and the teens of Darien.”

Russo has been selected by CAS to represent Connecticut in the National Assistant Principal of the Year Program sponsored jointly by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and Virco, Inc. Russo, along with assistant principals from each of the other fifty states, as well as the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity associations, will compete for the national honor. The national winner receives a \$5,000 award from Virco. For additional information about the National Principal of the Year Awards Program, please visit <http://www.principals.org/>.

The State Assistant Principal of the Year Program

In this new era of shared leadership, the assistant principal's role has become multi-dimensional. No longer does the assistant principal only deal with student discipline and attendance. Today's assistant principal is often responsible for curriculum and instruction, staff evaluation, community partnerships, public relations, technology, student activities, and many other crucial areas of operation.

The Assistant Principal of the Year Program, sponsored annually by the Connecticut Association of Schools, was established in 1990 to bring recognition to the assistant principalship and to spotlight the critical role that assistant principals play in the education of our youth. The program recognizes outstanding school assistant principals who have succeeded in providing high quality learning opportunities for students. These administrators have demonstrated excellent leadership commitment to staff and students, service to their communities, and contributions to the overall profession of educational leadership.

Each year nominations are solicited for an Elementary, Middle Level, and High School Assistant Principal of the Year. The winners are chosen by a selection committee consisting of active and retired principals and assistant principals.

State assistant principals of the year must demonstrate success in the areas of collaborative leadership; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and personalization.

All applicants must have been in an assistant principalship for 3 years or longer.

The Connecticut Association of Schools

Established in 1953, the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS) is a non-profit educational organization which supports the interests of Connecticut’s K-12 schools and works to improve educational opportunities for the students of our state. A leader in Connecticut’s education community, CAS represents well over 1,000 of Connecticut’s public and parochial schools. CAS is affiliated with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Middle School Association, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Federation of State High School Associations.

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one who is respected for her ability to find and build upon the strengths of her teachers and to generate community support for and involvement in school programs.

Working with parents - Student Life

engage in collaborative efforts to build a school climate that is conducive to learning, enrichment, improvement and progress.

Her focus on academic excellence and insistence upon high standards have earned her the respect of staff, students, parents and community members alike.

What Fiftal describes as “selfless dedication to the welfare of the school: is amply demonstrated
All who work with Donna agree that her greatest strength is her collaborative leadership skills.

All who worked with Shellie agreed that her strengths were her insistence on high standards and her single-minded drive to ensure success for every teacher and child in her care.

Skilled in the area of curriculum, Diane constantly challenges herself and her staff to rethink current practices and explore alternative paths. She vigilantly keeps abreast of emerging trends in education and is always presenting new information for the staff to consider and digest. Proffitt says, “A learner at heart, Diane dedicates herself to pursuing personal, professional growth opportunities to develop her skills as a leader.”

With an ever-present focus on teaching and learning, Diane has been the driving force behind a number of successful initiatives at Highland. She established the Learning Strategies program, the Professional Readings Book Club, and the “Looking at Student Work” committee. All three programs utilize different resources and channels to achieve the same objective: improve student learning.

Brian’s love of technology, which was so amply displayed during his years as a computer science teacher, has continued undiminished despite his transition into administration. He has engaged in directed and creative efforts to use technology to improve classroom instruction and facilitate building management. He almost single-handedly led his school through the implementation of the Copernicus Educational Portal System, a system of high-quality, organized Internet resources and tools. This was no small task, considering that it involved “making the leap from a school of 30 computers to a school of 600.” Remarks Diane Hoover, a teacher at Smith, “His gentle, yet persuading leadership has encouraged Smith teachers to risk the challenges technology brings, always showing us the great rewards that can result for ourselves and, and especially for our students.”

Brian has made significant inroads in working with special needs students. He has developed and implemented specialized learning programs –including on-line instruction – which have allowed some special education students to remain in the classroom rather than be out-placed. Says Dr. Russo, “He is first and foremost a teacher, and he has applied this talent as an assistant principal working with students who need extra attention. His constant desire to be connected to students of all abilities has made him an incredible instructional leader.”

She is lauded for her ability to generate community support for and involvement in school programs and to foster a positive school climate with high staff and student morale. Cullen has created an collegial atmosphere in which the staff feel both supported and appreciated.

She fosters an open, supportive and collegial atmosphere where teachers are encouraged to take risks and to think creatively, as long as their focus remains on the academic enrichment of their students.

While skillfully managing the tasks of student discipline and staff development, Cullen still finds time to implement new

school improvement initiatives, assist staff in reviewing and revising curricula, and engage in everyday acts of kindness which foster a positive school climate with high staff and student morale.

South Windsor Superintendent Dr. Joseph Wood calls Sally a “tremendously committed and upbeat administrator, with excellent leadership abilities.”

Sally was the driving force behind the high school’s transition to the “Ninth Grade Academy” model, which involved dividing the freshman class into five smaller, integrated learning communities. As chair of the School Community Committee, which was charged with finding ways to make students and staff more “connected,” Sally was instrumental in both the conception and implementation of the Academy model. The Academy also has a mentoring component, which allows members of the junior and senior classes, with the guidance of faculty members, to serve as mentors for 9th grade students.

Recognizing that the key to successful leadership today is encouragement, not authority, Sally has created a supportive and collegial atmosphere which allows all stakeholders — teachers, support staff, parents, students, and community members alike — to enjoy a shared responsibility for the governance of the school. She strives to learn from those around her and invites others to take ownership and feel involved. “As a teacher on her staff, Sally has always made me feel that I work with her, not for her,” says Marsha Meegan, a Spanish teacher at the high school. “She is a true leader without being a boss.” According to John Dilorio, principal of South Windsor High School, “Sally is a conscientious leader committed to the well-being of every member of the South Windsor High School Community.”