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## Tiny school garners major attention

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**MONTEREY** — Things happen at Highland High School that don't happen in other districts.

The student in the back of the classroom who is about to fall asleep snaps to attention when he realizes he is the one of the last to select an answer to a practice quiz using a remote control that instantly shows the class results on a projection screen.

When a boy is sent to the principal's office for in-school suspension he is reading a book of his choice, because since the age of 5 it has been drilled into his head that whenever you have free time you read.

Despite being the smallest district in the state and having a 53 percent rate of reduced and free lunch, Highland High School is in the 90th percentile for both math and reading — an almost impossible feat for an upper level school as concepts become more difficult and students who have slipped through the cracks continue to be passed in many schools.

These are just a few of the reasons Highland High School might have been nominated for a Blue Ribbon award.

The No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools Program allows states to nominate public kindergarten through 12th grade schools that are either academically superior or demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement.

Highland County High School is one of seven schools in Virginia nominated for the award. Only 4.3 percent of schools are recognized as Blue Ribbon schools and Highland is the only middle and upper high school being considered for the award.

"It looks real good. It looks very good," said Principal Kelly Wilmore. "We're really enthused."

Last year Wilmore and Superintendent Percy Nowlin were a part of the district for the first time — Wilmore cracking down on discipline and using data to gauge student progress and Nowlin magically moving budget numbers so everything Wilmore needed was possible.

Teachers use and analyze data gained by testing periodically to determine strength and weaknesses of students. Required, in-school remediation has been put into place.

For example, a specific group of five or six boys had never passed a math Standard of Learning test. If their assessments during extra help were good, they were allowed to bring their Play Station or X-Box and play for 15 minutes.

"You get a little bit more out of them in school rather than if you keep them after. It seems like everybody is more committed," Wilmore said.

Discipline was increased, but rewards for good behavior were offered.

Students know that if Wilmore receives a referral slip from a teacher notifying him of a discipline problem, then they won't get an extra 15 minutes of lunch on Friday. Suddenly, students are better behaved. It's almost a self-policing situation. Students warn each other not to misbehave because they don't want to ruin it for everyone else.

Because of Wilmore's connections at Virginia Military Institute, VMI donated 100 computers to the schools. As a result, every student who wanted one was able to get a computer for home last year.

"You can do really cool things in a small school," Wilmore said, with a wry grin.

In addition to the emphasis on data, technology, remediation and positive reinforcement, teachers have stepped up, changing their curriculum whenever needed, reaching out to students and constantly searching for new ways to engage classes.

"It's small. You know everybody," said Charlie Burns, 17. "You know all the teachers. You are more connected with them. If you have any questions you can just go to them."

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