

# Happy in Happy Valley — school administrator wins top state honor

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Sentinel staff writer

**HAPPY VALLEY** — Cheryl Morris — the "principal, superintendent, business manager, cafeteria manager, teacher, custodian" of the one-school Happy Valley Elementary School District — has one more title to add to her list.

She's been named the top superintendent-principal of the year for 1993-94 by the Association of California School Administrators.

"It is an incredible honor to be recognized," said Morris of the Administrator of the Year Award, one of 17 given by the organization. "But it is a real tribute to everyone I work with. Happy Valley is such a collaborative effort, not by just parents, but by the community."

Over the past 12½ years, Morris, who is 47, has brought the school tucked away in a redwood-studded valley to statewide prominence.

Its 150 students score high on statewide achievement tests. From 1987 to 1990, scores in reading, math and language were in the 86th to 99th percentiles for third and sixth grade students. The school was ranked in "The Top 100: How Are They Doing?" 1990 user's guide to California public schools.

These achievements haven't gone unnoticed. The school has a waiting list with 150 children, including Morris' 6-year-old son, hoping to transfer to Happy Valley.

School board president Joe Allen has experienced first-hand Morris' dedication to her students.

His son, who will be attending Stan-

ford University this fall, showed a propensity for science and math that exceeded what Happy Valley could offer him in sixth grade, Allen recalled.

"Cheryl arranged every day to have someone take him to Branciforte Junior High and she even drove him one of the shifts. ... When a kid needs special attention, she has always been great at providing it."

Morris' philosophy is that all students are gifted in some way, Allen added. So when the district receives state funds for gifted and talented students, Morris spreads it out to all students.

She is known for her innovative approaches to financing, which have kept Happy Valley solvent while other neighboring districts cut staff and pro-

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Morris calls award 'tribute to everyone I work with.'

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## Morris

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grams.

For all these reasons, Nancy Giberson, assistant superintendent with the county Office of Education, nominated Morris for the award.

"Cheryl has proven to be an instructional leader in the county over many years and she has several hats to wear as a small-school administrator," Giberson said, noting Morris also finds time to publish the newsletter and serve on the board for the regional Association of California School Administrators.

Morris has spent nearly half of her 26 years in education heading Happy Valley. She came there on loan from the Pajaro Valley district when the former superintendent left in mid-year.

She had always wanted to be a teacher, she said, not an administrator. As a sixth grader at Anderson Elementary School, Morris wrote, "My dream is to be a teacher someday. I have always enjoyed school and have made good grades, so maybe this dream will come true."

Even though she had vowed never to use her master's degree in administration, Morris said, she fell in love with Happy Valley and applied for the position permanently.

She hasn't had to give up her dream. Part of her job is teaching one class period a day.

"I find that exciting," she said. "Children are what this is all about and I believe anyone involved in administration should be involved in the teaching process."

She's also the business manager, leading one of the most financially

healthy districts in the county.

When the state began distributing lottery money to school districts in 1985, Morris proposed saving 25 percent and spending only the interest earned. The district now has \$100,000 in this special fund, which is used for art and drama programs.

Two years ago, when it looked like a proposed parcel tax could pass but would split the community, Morris came up with another idea to raise funds.

The district set up an endowment fund with the goal of raising \$300,000 through such things as memorial contributions, grants and donations. So far, \$100,000 has been raised and, again, only the interest will be spent on classroom programs.

Of its \$788,000 budget for 1993-94, \$200,000 is in a special reserve from the lottery and endowment funds.

This is in one of the "poorest" districts in the county. During this last school year, Happy Valley received \$3,092 per student from the state, which was less than eight of the 11 districts in the county.

When the school needed a library, Morris brought the community together to build one for \$40,000. Under her guidance, the community also built a staff room.

"She is deeply committed to the school and to the community," said board president Allen.

"When anyone meets her, people wonder if anyone that bubbly and enthusiastic can be that real. I

know I did. And you quickly discover it is all that real. She has the ability to focus that energy and accomplish things."

Among her accomplishments are the adopt-a-school program, in which businesses and organizations have adopted the school, bringing it programs and financial resources.

Happy Valley was the first small school district in the state to start a Project Lifelab in which students learn science through growing plants and animals. And in typical Morris style, it was done without outside funding.

The Happy Valley Lifelab, Morris noted with pride, has been selected as a training site and is visited by teachers from all over the world.

She also has supported publication by fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students of "The Write Stuff," a magazine featuring students' writings and distributed to over 50 schools.

Teacher Jory Post, publisher of "The Write Stuff" credits her with keeping him in teaching.

"In 1981, when I was considering moving out of education and trying freelance writing, she convinced me to stay in and get my master's degree and administrative credential from University of San Francisco. She convinced me and I owe her a lot for that," Post said.

"Her enthusiasm rubs off on people. Everyone wants to help make Happy Valley a better place because of her enthusiasm," Post said.