

CONNECTICUT POST (April 5, 2007)

Bridgeport finalist for national award

By Linda Conner Lambeck

Apr. 5--BRIDGEPORT -- For the second year in a row, Bridgeport's public schools beat the odds to be named one of five finalists for the national Broad Prize for Urban Education.

For college-bound seniors in the city's Class of 2008, it means a minimum of \$125,000 in scholarships will be coming their way. Should the district be awarded the top prize in a Sept. 18 ceremony at the Library of Congress in Washington, that scholarship pool will increase to \$500,000.

"Frankly, to be in the mix once is an absolute honor. Twice is a thrill. We're just absolutely thrilled," said Supt. of Schools John Ramos.

The Broad (pronounced "brode") Prize recognizes large urban school districts that have made the greatest gains in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among ethnic groups and between high- and low-income students.

Bridgeport, using the Broad methodology, outperformed other Connecticut districts serving students with similar income levels in reading and math at all grade levels in 2006, said Erica Lepping, a spokeswoman for the award program.

"We do a ton of fact-checking, run comparisons, do the analysis," Lepping said.

Armed with all the data, a review board of 14 education leaders from across the nation, including school superintendents from districts that won in the past, meet to pick semi-finalists.

Lepping said the group checked Bridgeport students' scores on state exams in reading and math, looking at the percentage of students scoring at proficient levels, and an overall average score. Those scores were then compared to other school districts.

Between 2003 and 2006, Bridgeport improved in reading and math at all grade levels, compared with districts such as Hartford and New Haven. Bridgeport's low-income, black and Hispanic subgroups also improved in reading and math at all grade levels compared with Hartford and New Haven.

Bridgeport reduced achievement gaps between Hispanic and white students in high school reading and math, as well as in elementary school reading. It reduced achievement gaps for black students in high school math.

Graduation rates and SAT scores were also factors.

"None of these finalists are at top level but in terms of districts with a large percentage of low-income and minority students, Bridgeport is off the charts," Lepping said.

Bridgeport was the only district in Connecticut in the running among 100 nationwide. Broad officials couldn't explain why Hartford, similar in most respects to Bridgeport, was not in the mix.

Other 2007 finalists are Long Beach, Calif.; Miami-Dade, Fla.; New York City and San Antonio.

"These five urban school districts have proven that with hard work, it is possible to raise student achievement in our inner cities," said Eli Broad, 73, founder of the Broad Foundation, in a written statement.

Last fall in New York City, when Boston received the 2006 award, Broad told finalists his idea is to encourage dramatic improvement in urban public education.

The next part of the competition involves a visit by a group of judges to the city's schools in May.

Lepping said since a Broad visiting team has previously been to Bridgeport, it will be able to delve more deeply into the record of student achievement.

Ramos said that to be selected as a Broad semi-finalist for a second year running confirms the school district is headed in the right direction.

"It begs the question what can we do with adequate resources -- Why couldn't we accomplish what is set out for us in our strategic plan if we had the resources?" Ramos said.

The \$125,000 that Bridgeport received last year will be carved into scholarships for seniors in the Class of 2007 in May. Officials said 152 seniors have applied for the scholarships. Educational Testing Service in Princeton, N.J., selects the winners.