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Canonsburg Middle School has been redesignated as a “School to Watch,” and it will again join the ranks of about 340 highly rated schools across the country.

The rigorous application process is divided into 37 subcategories in the areas of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and

organizational support and processes. In Pennsylvania, eight schools met the criteria this year. At a school board meeting last week, middle school Principal Greg Taranto said the Canon-McMillan community, teachers, students, board members and administrators were all to thank for the accomplishment.

“It’s something that needs to be celebrated, not just in the middle school, but across the district and the community,” Taranto said. “We’re proud to be a part of it.”

The statewide initiative, named after former Upper St. Clair principal Don Eichhorn, is hosted by a consortium of

educational groups and universities in Pennsylvania. The national program was developed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform in 1999. Canonsburg Middle School was first designated as a School to Watch in 2011, and schools are eligible for redesignation every three years. Taranto said he has seen the middle school change and grow a great deal over the last 15 years. “The middle school is very different than it was when I joined as an administrator,” Taranto said last week, “... and because of a series of things that occurred – community support, board support and a focus with our instructional staff and administration – we were able to turn things around and really do some special stuff.”

What was once a middle school “only by name” has evolved to include programming and instruction specifically tailored to middle school-aged children, Taranto said.

He said school administrators made a concerted effort to hire teachers with a passion for teaching middle school students and handling the unique set of experiences that come with that age group.

“It’s really made a difference,” he said. “We’ve had great support from our school board in that regard and giving us the autonomy of hiring.”

In addition to tweaking the hiring qualifications, Taranto said the school’s programming is “dynamic and ever-changing,” and teachers focus on a broad range of goals rather than fixating on standardized test scores. Paul Scarmazzi, president of the school board, said it has been a privilege to see positive growth at the middle school over the past four years under the direction of Taranto and Assistant Principal Kenneth Schrag. “Dr. Taranto and Mr. Schrag approach educating children and working with their team in a holistic manner that is inspirational to me,” he said in a news release. “The school board is so proud of this redesignation, but it comes as no surprise based on the exceptionally strong leadership at CMS.”

Middle school faculty members will make presentations at a Pennsylvania Association for Middle Level Education state conference in State College Feb. 23. A national award also will be presented to school officials this summer in Washington, D.C.

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