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Ohio's No. 1 elementary school succeeds in an area better known for hardship

By Catherine Candisky

STEUBENVILLE, Ohio — For those driving into town on the “Dean Martin Highway,” old steel mills and run-down houses along a sliver of land between the freeway and the Ohio River are bleak reminders of the city’s economic woes.

But decades of lost jobs and declining population are Steubenville’s past. The city has a new story to tell.

It’s a tale of determination and commitment, and it starts anew each morning at Wells Academy, an elementary school housed in a first-floor wing of Steubenville High School on the northern edge of downtown.

Colorful bulletin boards line the classroom walls where attentive boys in the school uniform of khaki pants and polo shirts and girls in plaid jumpers work on math problems.

More than half the students come from poor households, but the trappings of high unemployment and poverty have not slowed them in school. Wells Academy was named Ohio’s No. 1 public elementary school in the state’s first school ranking based on student test scores.

Last year, every third- and fourth-grade student at Wells passed state assessments in math and reading, and more than 70 percent performed at “advanced” levels. The school has earned a 100 percent mark on the tests every year since 2006 after falling just short in a few previous years.

“Why are you here?” Principal Joe Nocera asks students during announcements each morning over the public-address system.

“To learn!” they respond.

“Who is responsible for your learning and your behavior?”

“I am!”

Wells will earn another distinction on Feb. 7 when Gov. John Kasich delivers the annual State of the State address from the school auditorium. The Republican governor is breaking with the traditional Statehouse venue for the speech to highlight the top-rated school, bringing state legislators and other dignitaries to visit one of the most economically distressed areas of Ohio.

Story continued here: <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2012/01/29/steubenvilles-finest.html>

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