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A boost for charter schools

School teachers sometimes seem split into two camps. The master teachers bring lofty expectations about their students' potential.

Then other teachers talk about the obstacles in teaching students from difficult family backgrounds.

The California-based Milken awards are designed to honor the first group of super-teachers. They have that magical ability to get students excited about the most boring points of grammar or the brilliant maneuvers of Gen. Oliver Cromwell in the 1600s English Civil War.

They even motivate the at-risk students who seem likely fail. Every student can learn.

Herron High School teacher Greg Lineweaver was one of two Indiana teachers to win the \$25,000 Milken honor this week. North Central High School teacher Ed Coleman also received the award.

Lineweaver, who pioneered a classical curriculum at the four-year-old charter school, was cited for general excellence. He led his first class through three years of English achievement, just in his first year at the school.

The Milken Family Foundation designed the National Educator Awards to boost teacher stature. "We think teachers should be just as famous as Hollywood stars," said Jane Foley, a foundation senior vice president who won the award while she was running a school in Valparaiso.

Lineweaver is the first Indiana charter school teacher to win a Milken award.

Lineweaver's honor gives the charter school movement another political boost as Mayor Greg Ballard and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett want more charters, free of union contracts, to compete with traditional schools. Bennett joined Foley at the Herron school convocation where Lineweaver was surprised with the award.

Bennett praised Herron for having 40 percent of the students in advanced placement classes, beating the state standard of 25 percent. "You are hitting it out of the park," Bennett told the convocation. "Here is a school that accepts no excuses."

Herron board member Andrew Hart thinks Lineweaver thrives in response to Herron's classical curriculum. "He motivates his students supremely well. He's convinced of the effectiveness of classical education," said Hart, who is principal of the nearby Oaks Academy. "Greg is committed to the dialogue method -- he teaches Socratically. He puts the students in a position where they are doing the learning."

Everyone can learn and everyone will talk in class.

"His approach speaks to his high opinion of his students' capacity to learn," Hart said. Lineweaver went from a traditional public school to Herron in order to focus on more than academic achievement, though. "I wanted to be part of a school culture that was concerned about the development of character."

Lineweaver is obviously a very gifted teacher and likely would thrive in any school. But Herron may be showing a key to real educational reform. It doesn't focus just on the problems of their at-risk students. It assumes they can learn and doesn't listen to excuses.