



THE BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS PROGRAM RECOGNIZING EXCELLENT AMERICAN SCHOOLS

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program honors public and private elementary, middle and high schools that are either academically superior or have made dramatic gains in student achievement to high levels, especially among disadvantaged students. The program is part of a larger Department of Education effort to identify and disseminate knowledge about best school leadership and teaching practices.

Each year since 1982, the U.S. Department of Education has sought out schools where students attain and maintain high academic goals. Using standards of excellence evidenced by student achievement measures and the characteristics known from research to exemplify school quality, the Department celebrates schools, including those that beat the odds.

For many schools, attaining the Blue Ribbon School award and recognition is a realization of a long-held dream. There is much excitement in the school community and the local media eagerly profiles schools that have attained the recognition. The schools are honored at an awards ceremony in Washington, DC, where each Blue Ribbon School receives a plaque and flag to signify its Blue Ribbon School status. These schools serve as models for other schools throughout the nation and details of their achievements are shared on the U.S. Department of Education's website.

I. Background

This program dates back to 1982, when then Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell commissioned a study of American education. The report, called *A Nation at Risk*, described a "rising tide" of mediocre schools that threatened the nation's future. In part, it galvanized the extraordinary energy that has been devoted to educational research over the last quarter century.

Secretary Bell created the Blue Ribbon Schools Award to bring the best U.S. schools to public attention and to recognize those schools whose students thrived and excelled. Working with the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Bell launched the Blue Ribbon Schools and the National Distinguished Principals Programs. Both highlighted outstanding models of American schools and school leadership.

Since then, the U. S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Schools Program has honored many of America's most successful schools. The Blue Ribbon Schools Program sets a high standard that should be a goal for all improving schools and schools striving for high levels of achievement. A Blue Ribbon School flag waving overhead has become a mark of excellence, a symbol of quality recognized by everyone from parents to policy-makers in thousands of communities.

In 2002, the program was renewed to bring it in line with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and giving recognition to those schools whose students achieve at very high levels or make significant progress in closing the achievement gap.

II. Nomination Process

For public schools, the Secretary of Education invites Chief State School Officers (CSSOs) including the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), to nominate schools that meets the criteria for recognition. For private schools, the Secretary invites the Council for American Private Education (CAPE) to nominate private schools that also meet the criteria for recognition.

In submitting the list of nominated schools, the CSSO of each state, DoDEA, and BIE, must certify that the nominated schools meet the minimum requirements established by the Department and describe any other criteria used to nominate the schools. States must rely on their state assessment systems to identify schools for submission to the Secretary. The nomination criteria, including assessments, must pertain equally to all schools nominated from the individual state. Each state is assigned a number of possible applicants based on the number of K-12 students and the number of schools in the state. The number of possible state applicants ranges from a minimum of 3 schools to a maximum of 35. CAPE may nominate up to 50 private schools. The potential total for all nominations is 413 schools each year.

At least one-third of the schools nominated by each state must have at least 40 percent of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the current school year; whether these schools show dramatic improvement to high levels or are high performing. Nominated public schools must meet AYP two years in a row prior to nomination and also make AYP in the current year.

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program accepts both public and private elementary and secondary schools that meet either of two assessment criteria:

- *High performing schools:* Schools, regardless of their demographics, that are in the top 10 percent of schools in their states as measured by state tests in both reading (English language arts) and mathematics or that score in the top 10 percent on assessments referenced against national norms in at least the highest grade tested in the last year tested.
- *Dramatically improved schools:* Schools that have at least 40 percent of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds and have dramatically improved student performance to high levels in reading (English language arts) and mathematics on state assessments or assessments referenced against national norms in at least the highest grade tested in the last year tested.

A student from a “*disadvantaged background*” is defined by the CSSO of each state. The definition must include students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals and may include students who are limited English proficient, migrant, in need of special services, or receiving services under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

III. Criteria for High Performing Schools

Public Schools:

- Regardless of the school's percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the school is high performing. "*High performing*" means that the achievement of the school's students in at least the highest grade tested in the latest year tested places the school in the top 10 percent of schools in the state on state assessments of reading (or English language arts) and mathematics. Disaggregated results for student subgroups, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, must be similar to the levels of all students tested.
- The school must have made AYP as defined by the state for the past two years, including the year the school is nominated. The school must also make AYP in the year it receives the award.

Private Schools:

- Regardless of the school's demographics or percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the school is high performing. "*High performing*" means that the achievement of the school's students in at least the highest grade tested in the last year tested places the school in the top 10 percent of schools in the nation in reading (English language arts) and mathematics as measured by an assessment referenced against national norms or in the top 10 percent in its state as measured by a state test. If a private school administers both state tests and nationally normed tests, the school must be in the top 10 percent in both. Disaggregated results for student groups, including disadvantaged students, must be similar to the levels of all students tested.

IV. Criteria for Dramatically Improved Schools

Public Schools:

- At least 40 percent of the nominated school's students are from disadvantaged backgrounds and student achievement has dramatically improved to high levels. "*Dramatically improved to high levels*" is defined by the CSSO of each state but at a minimum means (a) for at least the highest grade tested, the school has demonstrated a positive trend in test results from the earliest to the latest year reported, and (b) in at least the highest grade tested in the latest year tested, the achievement of the school's students places the school in the top 40 percent of schools in the state on state assessments of reading (or English language arts) and mathematics. Disaggregated results for student subgroups, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, also show improvement similar to that of all students.
- The school must have made AYP as defined by the state for the past two years, including the year the school is nominated. The school must also make AYP in the year it receives the award.

Private Schools:

- Schools with at least 40 percent of the student body from disadvantaged backgrounds, and have dramatically improved student performance in reading (English language arts) and mathematics to high levels. "*Dramatically improved*" is defined as an increase of at least one-half standard deviation over at least five years and includes disadvantaged students as shown by disaggregated data.

“High levels” means that the achievement of the school’s students in at least the highest grade tested in the last year tested places the school in the top 40 percent of schools in the nation in reading (English language arts) and mathematics as measured by an assessment referenced against national norms or in the top 40 percent in its state as measured by a state test. If a private school administers both state tests and nationally normed tests, the school must be in the top 40 percent in both.

V. Other requirements for any school to be able to qualify:

- The nominated school has some configuration that includes one or more grades from K-12. (Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.)
- The school has made adequate yearly progress each year for the past two years and has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
- To meet final eligibility, the school must meet the state’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement in the 2008-2009 school year. AYP must be certified by the state and all appeals resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
- If the school includes grades 7 or higher, the school must have foreign language as a part of its curriculum and a significant number of students in grades 7 and higher must take the course.
- The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2003.
- The nominated school has not received the Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, or 2008).
- The nominated school or district is not refusing OCR access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
- OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
- The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
- There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school

or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

VI. Timeline for the 2008-2009 Blue Ribbon Schools Program:

- November 2008: The Secretary sends a letter of invitation to the Chief State School Officers (CSSOs), the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), and the Council for American Private Education (CAPE) requesting the submission of information for nominated schools.
- December 3: Public school nominations from CSSOs, BIE, and DoDEA are due to the Department.
- December 5: The Department invites schools recommended by CSSOs, BIE, and DoDEA to apply for recognition as Blue Ribbon Schools.
- January 2009: CAPE reviews and selects up to 50 private schools for nomination.
- February 18: Completed public and private school (from CAPE) applications are due to the Department.
- March 1-6: Applications are reviewed for completeness and accuracy.
- April 26-29: An Assessment Panel, an invited team with expertise in state assessments, reviews the applications and verifies the eligibility of the schools according to the state test data.
- August 31: States certify that nominated public schools have met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).
- September 15: The Secretary announces the 2009 No Child Left Behind–Blue Ribbon Schools.
- November 2-3: Two people from each school, the principal and a teacher, are invited to a ceremony in Washington, DC, where each school will receive a plaque and a flag signifying its Blue Ribbon status.

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