

Introduction: Shared Qualities

Every Blue Ribbon School is measured against the U. S. Department of Education's high standard for excellence in education. At the same time, every Blue Ribbon School is the unique, though winning, combination of a specific set of people, vision, community, and program. There is no "Blue Ribbon formula" that can be applied wholesale to a struggling school and turn it around. There are, however, certain features all Blue Ribbon Schools seem to share. All the Blue Ribbon Schools observed had strong organizational structures. Their teaching practices were aimed at high standards and grounded in student needs. The school philosophy valued all students and expressed the belief that all students can and will learn. All Blue Ribbon Schools shared a spirit of cooperation; as one teacher put it, "all the students belong to all the teachers and all the teachers belong to all the students."

Tenacity: A Blue Ribbon Quality

Their individual expressions vary, but perhaps the most powerful common factor in all Blue Ribbon Schools is **tenacity**. These schools not only hold together (one meaning of tenacity), they are persistent. Blue Ribbon Schools don't give ground on high standards and don't give up on any student.

At a more instrumental level, Blue Ribbon Schools all share the qualities of:

- **Coherence.** The curricula in a Blue Ribbon School are consistently aligned with state and district standards. Students are assessed according to these standards, and instruction is adapted according to data from student assessments.
- **Leadership.** The school leadership, primarily the principal, so clearly sets a school's tone that few schools can succeed, much less excel, in the absence of strong leadership. The principal is a school's North Star. A Blue Ribbon principal creates a culture of respect for students and teachers, holds high expectations for both students and teachers, values and rewards achievement, and takes responsibility for ensuring that the whole school works and all students progress. Blue Ribbon principals see their goal as making themselves expendable, of setting systems and processes in motion that will outlive their tenure. Where principals are supported by parents, community members, and education leaders at the district and state level, sustaining one principal's success seems more likely.

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- **Organization.** Blue Ribbon Schools use time and money efficiently. Materials are available when they are needed, reporting systems for teachers are clear and consistent, and the school environment is safe, clean, and orderly.
- **Collegiality.** Teachers and other staff members regard each other as team mates, willing to meet conflict head on, and to share success and failures alike. Blue Ribbon teachers seem eager to discover talents among themselves and drawn on them; they are committed to furthering their own learning, and hold themselves and their students accountable for high achievement.

Metaphors for School

In interviews, teachers, parents, and other school leaders offered metaphors to describe their schools, such as “an accurate watch,” a laboratory, a garden, a butterfly, and a family. Each metaphor highlights some features of a good school and hides others.

The **watch** metaphor envisions a school as a well-oiled machine whose parts all work together to create something of value (an educated student, a reliable measure of time). Despite its mechanical heritage, a watch as a metaphor suggests an organic entity where each part performs its duties very well—a metaphor that has been applied to the universe itself. This metaphor neglects, however, the irreducible singularity of each person. Our unpredictability and idiosyncrasies make us anything but interchangeable parts of a machine; our complexity belies the metaphor’s implication of super-specialization.

The **laboratory** metaphor highlights the often messy and experimental place a school can be. It speaks to the rigor essential to a good school—the commitment to think and act with precision, to cultivate the habits of careful observation, to plan future experiments on past results, and to put ideology aside. In many cases, schools are literally laboratories, and scientists conduct experiments with students to determine the effects of a curriculum or an instructional style. As is the case with the watch, however, the laboratory metaphor downplays individual characteristics and self-determination. People will never be as experimentally tractable as bacteria in Petri dishes, or even rats.

The **garden** metaphor is more natural and organic. It reflects reality insofar as a gardener is only as good as soil, climate, and weather allow. It highlights the nurturing that is so vital in young people’s lives. Like plants in a

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garden, students grow and unfold in their own time. And the metaphor reminds us that most plants, except for certain hothouse plants, cannot be forced. The best gardeners are “constant” in the sense of attentive, but are rarely intrusive. Finally, a garden is intentional; it benefits from a coherent design and careful planning: the gardener should know in advance whether he or she is growing a bed of cheerful annuals or arranging a group of trees and shrubs. The garden metaphor still under-emphasizes, though less than the other two metaphors, students’ incredible variety and drive to self-determination.

By far the most commonly cited metaphor was that of **family**. Schools mimic families in important ways, not least of which in their structure of adult authority over and responsibility for children and young people. Like families, schools are usually associations of people of different ages and roles bound together through ties of affection as well as obligation. This is the sense of family schools draw on when they stay open for children who need extra help, when teachers spend their own time and resources to get students what they need, and when school staff members hold the same high aspirations for their students that they hold for their own. Familial relationships extend far beyond the merely contractual; great schools seem to embody this deeper caring as well.

To capture some Blue Ribbon School stories, two-person research teams visited six 2003 Blue Ribbon Schools winning schools in March 2004. The research team chose the schools based on high numbers of students eligible for free and reduced lunches, high state test scores, and a diversity of size, grade levels, and geographic locations. Eight researchers all keenly aware of current school reform issues participated in the visits. They used a common interview protocol but drew on their own “eyes and ears” to gather the information and photographs for the school profiles that follow. These profiles are not meant to list math or reading and English curriculum materials, nor do they describe step by step how to carry out a specific instructional program. The purpose of these Blue Ribbon School profiles is to “unlock the doors,” look inside an exemplary school, and investigate how and why it works so well.

Please enjoy these school profiles; we hope you will take away some new ideas and hopes that will make a difference for all children in your school and community. The 2003 Blue Ribbon Schools visited in March 2004 are:

Brentwood Elementary School, Victorville, CA
Charter Oak Primary School, Peoria, IL
Frank T. Simpson-Waverly Elementary School, Hartford, CT
Joseph Rodman West Elementary School, Washington DC
Skidmore-Tynan Elementary School, Skidmore, TX
Turtle Hook Middle School, Uniondale, NY