

2005 Blue Ribbon Schools: What Works Today

This year's featured Blue Ribbon—No Child Left Behind schools, drawn from a group of high-achieving, low-income schools, share a number of strong qualities.

Each offers an education based on the best current thinking about schools. They are all led by strong, effective principals. Beacons of positive energy, they are described by their staff members as "can-do" and "yes/ yes" leaders who encourage and inspire staff members. Teachers reported high levels of camaraderie and cooperation.

All of these schools have created climates of emotional and physical safety, frequently described as "orderly chaos." Students have many opportunities to learn from each other, from school staff, and members of the community; the boundaries between school and life are more porous than usual in these schools.

High standards shape instruction in all the schools; if anything, these schools treat state standards as starting points and aim considerably higher. Teaching focuses on student learning and is adapted to meet students' needs. Small, heterogenous group learning is an intentional teaching and learning style in these schools, as are interdisciplinary approaches to subject matter. Team teaching is common.

Shorthand terms for what makes these schools work:

- differentiated instruction
- heterogeneous grouping
- small group learning
- data- and standards-driven curricula
- interdisciplinary learning
- job-embedded professional development
- inclusion
- variety of assessment modes
- a climate of respect instructional leadership

The schools have formed strong partnerships with community organizations; administrators continually apply for grants and raise funds for classroom resources and enrichment experiences for both students and teachers.

All new teachers are mentored, and teachers have "autonomy with accountability." Professional development programs grow out of staff needs and as such, support school priorities. Assessments include teacher- (and sometimes student-) created rubrics as well as standardized tests. Perhaps because the schools aim so high, students typically do well and don't "sweat" high stakes tests. Further, the schools stress metacognitive development—students reflect not only on what they learn, but on the kinds of learners they are.

If, metaphorically speaking, education were a forest and schools were tasked with reaching a clearing on the other side, we could say that all these Blue Ribbon—No Child Left Behind schools share the same goal and equip their students similarly

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(see box). They simply take different paths through the forest. Each of this year's schools has a slightly different theoretical orientation. Broadly speaking, those paths are:

Isaac Dickson Elementary School Asheville, North Carolina	"Foxfire," experiential learning
Madison Heights Elementary School Phoenix, Arizona	Data-driven instruction
CAMS High School Los Angeles, California	Math and science focus
Belle Isle Middle School Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	"Core Knowledge"
TH Rogers Elementary School Houston, Texas	Inclusion
Woodrow Wilson Elementary Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	Arts-infused curriculum

The profiles that follow offer glimpses of each school's journey.