

## **About the Blue Ribbon Schools Program**

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program honors public and private elementary, middle and high schools whose students achieve at very high levels or have made significant progress and helped close gaps in achievement, especially among disadvantaged and minority students. The program is part of a larger Department of Education effort to identify and disseminate knowledge about best school leadership and teaching practices.

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program sets a standard of excellence for all schools striving for the highest level of achievement. Each year since 1982, the U.S. Department of Education has sought out schools where students attain and maintain high academic goals, including those that beat the odds. To be named a Blue Ribbon School is to join an elite group. Of more than 138,000 in the United States, just over 6,000 of America's schools have received this honor over the past 28 years.

Blue Ribbon Schools have always represented the full diversity of American education. They are urban, suburban, and rural, large and small, traditional and innovative. They serve students of every social, economic, and ethnic background. At the same time, they share a handful of qualities. Their leaders not only articulate a vision of excellence, they stay close to the real action of teaching and learning. Teachers, students, and administrators are all held to high standards. Data are used diligently to adapt teaching and learning to support every student. Mutual respect and trust run deep in their cultures.

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. Blue Ribbon Schools are honored at a national awards ceremony in Washington, DC, where each receives a plaque and flag to signify its exemplary status. These schools serve as examples for other schools throughout the nation and details of their achievements are shared on the U.S. Department of Education's website.

## **Background**

The Blue Ribbon School Program was the brainchild of the second Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, named by President Reagan. Best known for commissioning the study of American education that resulted in *A Nation at Risk*, Bell created the Blue Ribbon Schools Award. The Blue Ribbon Schools Award is designed to bring public attention to the best school in the United States and recognize those schools whose students thrived and excelled. Its purpose has always been threefold: (1) To honor and bring public attention to American schools that achieve high academic standards or have shown significant academic improvement over five years; (2) To make available a comprehensive framework of key criteria for school effectiveness that can serve as a basis for participatory self-assessment and planning in schools; and (3) To facilitate communication and sharing of best practices within and among schools based on a common understanding of criteria related to success.

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 in 1982. Since then, the application criteria have been aligned with the educational priorities of the Department while keeping to its essential purposes.

## **Nomination Process**

Public schools are nominated by the Chief State School Officers (CSSOs) and by officials at the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). Private schools are nominated by the Council for American Private Education (CAPE). The number of possible applicants from each state is based on the number of schools and K-12 students, ranging from a minimum of three schools to a maximum of 35. CAPE may nominate up to 50 private schools. The potential for all nominations is 413 schools each year.

All nominees must qualify as either (1) **high performing**—schools in their states as measured by state tests in both reading (English language arts) and mathematics or assessments referenced against national norms —or (2) **improvement to high levels**—schools that have at least 40 percent of their students from disadvantaged

backgrounds and have improved student performance to high levels in reading (English language arts) and mathematics on state assessments or assessments referenced against national norms. *Disadvantaged* is defined by the CSSO of each state; it must include students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals and may include students who receive Title I services, are limited English proficient, migrant, or in need of special services.

### **The Impact of Blue Ribbon Schools**

The Award's effect on schools and communities is powerful. As one principal recalls, "Blue Ribbon begins a process you cannot stop." The Award becomes a selling point for local realtors, and many Blue Ribbon Schools find they more easily attract business partners, financial assistance and volunteers. Principals and teachers add the Blue Ribbon Award to their resumes. If school choice is an option, student applications to Blue Ribbon Schools increase. Less quantifiably, the Award inspires students: "You have pride, knowing your school worked so hard to reach that goal," one student says. The Award re-energizes staff and parents; teachers talk time and time again of a renewed commitment to exchanging new ideas with one another. Student pride and staff confidence grow.

Selected stories of schools are featured and winning applications are posted on the U.S. Education Department's Blue Ribbon website <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/index.html>. Blue Ribbon Schools are frequently profiled in the Department's newsletters and journals and on the Department's Institute of Education Sciences' *Doing What Works* website <http://dww.ed.gov/>. Blue Ribbon School leaders are called upon to give presentations at state and regional meetings about the practices at their schools that have made a difference. District and state school faculty visit Blue Ribbon Schools to learn about effective leadership and instructional strategies.

A Blue Ribbon School flag overhead has become a mark of excellence, a symbol of quality recognized by everyone from parents to policy-makers in thousands of communities. The Program is both a high aspiration and a potent resource of practitioner knowledge. It sets a high standard for all schools striving to be great.