



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 that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement for 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. Since its inception in 1982 by Secretary Terrel H. Bell, the U. S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Schools Program has honored many of America's most successful schools. 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.

Initially, this paper provides a history of the Department, and secondly, places the Blue Ribbon Schools Program in [historical context](#), [describes how it works](#), and offers some [suggestions](#) for how schools and state departments of education can use the award to disseminate best educational practices to a wider audience.

A Brief History of the U.S. Department of Education

The Constitution is silent on education. The 10th Amendment, claiming, as state rights any powers not explicitly claimed by the federal government, is the legal basis for the presumption of local control of education. Federal interest in education, however, predates the Constitution and has never really gone away. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 mandated that in settling the "western territories" (Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan), a section of each township be reserved for "maintenance of public education." Twenty-three years later, in 1820, Congress authorized the collection of state education funds through the sale of public lands.

Although a small education bureau tasked with gathering education statistics was created in 1837 under President Andrew Jackson, the federal role in education did not expand significantly until the Civil War. Through the Morrill Act of 1862, a newly assertive federal government made a massive investment in public education by donating 30,000 acres of land to each of the (then 34) states to create land-grant colleges and universities for the promotion of a "liberal and practical education" for citizens. While the Morrill Act focused on post-secondary education, many of the new colleges would professionalize teaching through schools of education. A formal National Bureau of Education was created in 1867 and two years later was made part of the Department of the Interior.

High school graduation rates skyrocketed in the new century, climbing from about 6% in 1900 to 60% by 1950. The federal government made numerous investments in public education, beginning

with the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which granted states money to establish vocational education programs. In the 1930s, numerous school buildings were built as part of the federal Work Progress Administration. As the Second World War ended, the GI bill underwrote college educations for thousands of veterans, nearly a quarter of a million of whom trained to be schoolteachers. In 1953, Education moved from the Interior Department to the newly created Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Two forces animated federal interest in education in the 1950s. The first was civil rights, an issue that had been building since Emancipation, moved to the forefront of national consciousness. The *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* decision of 1954 overturned local and state educational decisions based on race, and when President Eisenhower commanded the Arkansas National Guard to intervene in Arkansas to ensure the lawful de-segregation of Central High School in Little Rock it was clear that educational equity would require federal might.

Second, the successful 1957 launch of Sputnik by the USSR quickened federal involvement in education once more. Scientists and educators were brought together to develop rigorous curricula and harness the new medium of television to stimulate science teaching. The generation of scientists and engineers who followed would go on to invent the computer and the Internet, among other products of scientific knowledge and education. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 made significant federal investments in science, mathematics, and foreign language education and also created a student loan program for promising but needy students who wished to pursue post-secondary education in mathematics and science.

Education became the hope on which much of the succeeding Great Society depended. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) aimed to redress social inequities through direct grants to schools serving low-income students (Title I) and by preparing low-income children for success in school (Head Start). With these measures a role for the federal government in ensuring equal educational opportunity and advancing professional knowledge through research appear to have been accepted as arguably fair uses of federal dollars,

Under President Johnson, money was allocated for a research effort that ultimately became the Regional Education Laboratories. The National Diffusion Network (NDN), initiated under President Nixon in 1974 as part of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, sought to disseminate “best practices” throughout the country. A federal NDN panel reviewed demonstration projects and underwrote efforts for developers of winning projects to offer professional development in the use of the projects. A state facilitator network served to match schools and programs.

Education Gains Cabinet Status

After a little more than a century of debate, education earned a full Cabinet seat in 1979, the fulfillment of a campaign promise made by President Jimmy Carter. With Carter's loss in the 1980 election, however, President Ronald Reagan sought to remove education from federal control. Specifically, his administration hoped to close down the Department of Education by instituting block grants to the states and gradually ending the practice of categorical grants begun in the 1960s. He charged his Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, with the task of dismantling the Department—or at least reducing it once more to a statistics-collecting institution. Instead, Bell spearheaded an education reform movement that continues today and initiated a program to highlight successful U.S. schools. The Department of Education's budget from 1981 to 1988 shows the struggle. In 1981, the president proposed \$14.1 billion in education; \$14.7 billion were appropriated. The next year, the president proposed \$13.2 billion; Congress appropriated \$14.7. In 1983 the President proposed \$10.5 billion; Congress gave the Department \$15.3 million. In 1984 the proposed budget was \$13.3 billion; \$15.3 billion were appropriated. From that point forward, the President's education budget never dipped below \$15 billion. By 1988, the last year of Reagan's presidency, the federal education budget topped \$20 billion.

Indeed, in his second presidential campaign, Reagan gave dozens of speeches on school reform. The value of education was apparent, although by the end of the Reagan Administration, many federal programs, including Title I, had taken heavy budget cuts, and funding for block grants for special programs had been reduced by 28% over the eight-year period. Federal involvement in education was reduced overall, but Bell managed to keep it from returning to statistics gathering by retaining such controversial research programs as the Nixon-era National Institute of Education (NIE).

Bell advanced the notion that the federal government's role was to build the capacity of state governments to produce high-quality public education, leaving room for federal financial assistance, if not outright control. He asked Reagan to appoint a commission on education and when Reagan declined, established his own commission. After 18 months, the commission concluded in its landmark report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Educational Reform*, that "a rising tide" of mediocre education threatened to render its citizens unfit for the future. While the report did not directly generate any legislation, it began a powerful reform effort that continues to this day, *A Nation at Risk* is sometimes credited with ending the long-standing threat to dissolve the department. Certainly by 1984 the Administration ceased to champion the dissolution of the Department of Education,

Recognition Programs for Great Schools and School Leaders

In 1982, to showcase the success of some outstanding schools to an Administration wary of education spending as a federal concern, Terrel H. Bell, President Reagan's Secretary of Education, launched two recognition programs to bring the best U.S. schools to public attention. The Blue Ribbon Schools Program and the National Distinguished Principals Programs—products of work with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)—both highlight outstanding models of American schools and school leadership.

The first 1982 cohort of Blue Ribbon Schools comprised 152 public high schools from 42 states and the District of Columbia. The Program was initially designed to honor public secondary schools, but after the first year, the program was opened to private schools, Private schools applied through the Council for American Private Education. Within three years of its founding, a pattern of alternating secondary and elementary Blue Ribbon Schools, aided by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), was in place. Beginning in 2003, the Blue Ribbon was awarded to both secondary and elementary schools in the same year.

The Blue Ribbon Schools program served both as a means of annually recognizing outstanding schools and as a school improvement process. Originally, schools nominated themselves for Blue Ribbon awards through their state departments of education. Eligible schools had to have been in existence for at least five years and not won a Blue Ribbon award for five years. Schools applied for Blue Ribbon recognition through a self-evaluation process that brought teachers, students, parents, and community representatives together to assess the school's strengths and weaknesses and develop improvement plans. This process might take a few years before a school formally submitted its application to the state Blue Ribbon liaison.

Coordinated by the U. S. Department of Education, written applications from state liaisons went to a national review panel of more than 100 respected educators, many of them previous Blue Ribbon principals. The panel used a research-based rubric to score applications in eight categories with 47 individual questions, choosing the most promising schools for site visits by experienced educators to substantiate the claims made on Blue Ribbon Schools applications. After considering the detailed site visit reports, the review panel made recommendations to the U.S. Secretary of Education, who announced the schools selected for Blue Ribbon recognition.

The number of Blue Ribbon Schools a state could nominate was originally based on a state's Congressional representation. In the mid 1990s the formula for determining nomination numbers began reflecting a state's school-age population. Some states worked hard to solicit schools to apply for the Blue Ribbon and offered assistance in the application process. A few states took the Blue Ribbon Schools nomination extremely seriously, running rigorous internal competitions for Blue Ribbon nominations,

Applying for the Blue Ribbon as a Transformative Process

The criteria by which Blue Ribbon Schools were evaluated were based on the effective schools research in the 1980's stimulated by the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. Those criteria were 1) student focus and support, 2) school organization and culture, 3) challenging standards and curriculum, 4) active teaching and learning, 5) professional community, 6) leadership and educational vitality, 7) school, family, and community partnerships, and 8) indicators of success. Blue Ribbon School applications had to demonstrate how a school met these criteria comprehensively and non-prescriptively, and used them in conducting a self-assessment,

Each criterion fit into a larger concept of school improvement. Student focus and support, challenging standards and curriculum, and active teaching and learning were understood as key elements of the critical relationship among students, the teacher, and content. School organization and culture, professional community, and leadership and educational vitality were understood as key elements of the school context, culture, and interpersonal relationships. Indicators of success looked at results—both the use of data to refine educational practice and evidence of student success. In the years before states required testing, schools reported grade-level scores on nationally norm-referenced or state or district criterion-referenced tests. Schools applying for Blue Ribbon status could demonstrate consistent high achievement, or significant growth over time (about half a standard deviation's growth in test scores over five years),

The program saluted exemplary schools and, through the process of self-nomination and application, often shifted cultures and improved schools, "Holding [our] work up to standards of excellence, getting the entire faculty involved, getting parents involved, getting the community involved—that in itself is such a tremendous tool for school improvement." recalled one principal in *The Blue Ribbon Challenge*, a 1999 brief documentary on Blue Ribbon Schools.

Applying to become a Blue Ribbon School involved a great planning and organizational effort to gather and synthesize information about a school; many schools applied more than once before winning. Many described the application process, including feedback from the national review panel, as one of their most profound professional development experiences. Principals described earning the Blue Ribbon as less an end point than a journey.

The process, though daunting—involved everyone associated with the schools from faculty and students to parents, staff, and community members in gathering information that exposed both strengths and weaknesses—was validating. Noted a principal, "We proved so much more than was in the report to begin with because we believed in ourselves and we saw the kids could do it and we wanted to fly with it." Others took notice of Blue Ribbon Schools; "Businesses and

foundations love ... excellence" said one principal, explaining how it was easier to obtain grant money, and another noted with pleasure that "Schools that had kind of ignored [our] school began to come to see and look at what we were doing and replicate that for their own schools."

Blue Ribbon Schools were encouraged to share their best practices with other schools; after 1994, schools reapplying for Blue Ribbon were required to demonstrate how they had shared their knowledge with other schools. States and the federal government were expected to facilitate such sharing. Two volumes of *Best Ideas from America's Blue Ribbon Schools: What Award-Winning Elementary and Middle School Principals Do* were published in 1994 and 1998.

Changes to the Blue Ribbon Schools Program

The program's focus shifted somewhat under each federal administration. Under President George H. W. Bush, the nation's governors took up the call issued by *A Nation at Risk*, and developed a set of national education goals which were ultimately picked up by Bush's successor, Bill Clinton, and recast as Goals 2000. The next reauthorization of ESEA in 2001, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), initiated perhaps the most profound exercise of federal involvement in education to date.

The Administration of President George W. Bush reorganized the Office of Education Research and Improvement (OERI) into the Institute of Education Sciences. After some discussion of eliminating the Blue Ribbon Schools Program entirely—countered by many letters of support for the program from Blue Ribbon Schools—the Program was moved from the OERI to the Office of Communications and Outreach. The renamed No Child Left Behind-Blue Ribbon Schools Program received several key modifications. Under NCLB, the Blue Ribbon Schools Program focused more explicitly on schools in low-income neighborhoods, requiring states to nominate at least one-third of their schools from those with 40% or more of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e., eligible for free or reduced-price meals). By highlighting schools that "beat the odds," the NCLB-Blue Ribbon Program directly addresses equity issues,

The NCLB-Blue Ribbon Program also paid much closer attention to academic outcomes, making test scores on state achievement tests the primary indicator of eligibility. In the current program, "high-achieving" schools must be in the top 10% of their state's schools as measured by state assessments in both reading and mathematics. "Dramatically improved" schools must have at least 40% of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds, show improved student performance over the last five years, and be in the top 40% of schools in their state as measured by state assessments in both reading and mathematics. All public schools must also make Adequate Yearly Progress, an NCLB educational benchmark, during the school year in which they

are nominated. In another change, schools no longer nominate themselves to their state liaisons; today the state liaisons and state accountability officers coordinate the nomination of high-achieving schools that are in the top 10% and the dramatically improved schools in the top 40%. Due to the complexity of the current nomination process, the U.S. Education Department provides more technical assistance to the state liaisons.

The push to identify schools that have high or dramatically improving percentages of proficient students has had mixed results. Some argue that differences in state definitions of proficiency are problematic: Blue Ribbon Schools may not have similar academic standards from state to state. To be sure, it is no longer possible for a school to meet high standards in the first seven Blue Ribbon categories (student focus, school culture, challenging standards and curriculum, active teaching and learning, professional community, leadership and educational vitality, and school-family-community partnerships) but do poorly in the eighth: indicators of success.

At the same time, the focus on state assessment results has diminished the professional development and school community self-assessment experience the earlier incarnation of Blue Ribbon Schools provided. Indeed, today only a handful of site visits take place, and after schools are chosen. These visits document the variables that are working in the Blue Ribbon Schools, while previous site visits were a rigorous look at whether a school's reality confirmed its positive self-assessment. However, identifying schools that are academically excellent or have gone from academic inferiority to academic excellence offers new opportunities to learn from the practices of successful schools.

During its 26 years, -from its inception in 1982-1983 through the 2007-2008 award year-, the Blue Ribbon has been awarded approximately 5,850 times. About 5,150 different schools have been recognized; some schools have been selected two or more times. Of the nation's 133,000 public, charter, private, and parochial schools serving grades K-12, approximately 4.3 % have been recognized as Blue Ribbon Schools,

A Near-Term Retrospective: 2004 to 2008

For the past six years, the current annual quota for Blue Ribbon School nominations has been 413 schools, The number of possible public school applicants from each state ranges from a minimum of three to a maximum of 35; the total number of private schools is limited to 50. In the last six years, as the U.S. Department of Education has lent greater support and technical assistance to state Blue Ribbon School liaisons, the numbers of nominated and recognized public schools have increased. Last year 319 public schools submitted applications and 279 received the Blue Ribbon

award. This was the greatest number and the highest percentage (87%) of nominated schools in recent history. The number of participating states remains fairly constant at 44 states.

As indicated in the four summary tables below, more middle, high, and charter schools have applied in recent years, and the 2008 numbers represent the highest percentage of urban schools recognized. In earlier years except 2003, rural and suburban schools were more prominent. The tables also show that states are consistently nominating more than the minimum one-third of schools with students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Table 1: National Participation of Public Schools in Blue Ribbon Schools Program, 2003-2008

	Nominated	Recognized	% Recognized	# of States
2008	319	279	87%	45
2007	322	239	74%	43
2006	309	242	78%	42
2005	311	246	79%	45
2004	316	239	76%	44
2003	306	187	61%	42
Total Schools	1883	1432	76% (average)	43.5 (average)

Table 2: Types of Public Schools Recognized by Blue Ribbon Schools Program, 2003-2008

	Elementary	Middle	High	K - 12	Charter	Recognized
2008	165 (59%)	40 (14%)	56 (20%)	3 (1%)	15 (5%)	279
2007	168 (70%)	25 (10%)	38 (16%)	1 (0%)	7 (3%)	239
2006	156 (64%)	31 (13%)	48 (20%)	4 (2%)	3 (1%)	242
2005	194 (79%)	12 (5%)	38 (15%)	2 (1%)	* (0%)	246
2004	172 (72%)	30 (13%)	33 (14%)	4 (2%)	* (0%)	239
2003	148 (79%)	18 (10%)	19 (10%)	2 (1%)	* (0%)	187
Total Schools	1003	156	232	16	25	1432

*Data not gathered.

Table 3: Geographic Distribution of Public Schools Recognized by Blue Ribbon Schools Program, 2003-2008

	Rural/Small Town Settings	Suburban Settings	Urban Settings	Recognized
2008	97 (35%)	87 (31%)	95 (34%)	279
2007	81 (34%)	98 (41%)	60 (25%)	239
2006	88 (36%)	85 (35%)	69 (29%)	242
2005	96 (39%)	84 (34%)	66 (27%)	246
2004	96 (40%)	67 (28%)	76 (32%)	239
2003	54 (29%)	58 (31%)	75 (40%)	187
Total Schools	512	479	441	1432

Table 4: Assessment Criteria and Percent of Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds in Public Schools Recognized by Blue Ribbon Schools Program, 2003-2008

	Public schools in the top 10% in their state with at least 40% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds	Public schools with dramatically improved student performance with at least 40% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds	Public schools in the top 10% with less than 40% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds	Recognized
2008	67 (24%)	62 (22%)	150 (54%)	279
2007	48 (20%)	58 (24%)	133 (56%)	239
2006	48 (20%)	70 (29%)	124 (51%)	242
2005	54 (22%)	66 (27%)	126 (51%)	246
2004	43 (18%)	115 (48%)	81 (34%)	239
2003	19 (10%)	94 (50%)	74 (40%)	187
Total Schools	279	465	688	1432

Celebrating Blue Ribbon Schools

Each year, the Blue Ribbon Schools process culminates in a recognition ceremony in Washington. This national ceremony is truly a big deal for Blue Ribbon School winners. This celebratory event has often included White House participation and on several occasions the ceremony was held at the White House. Over the years, Congressional representatives have called the schools in their district to announce the award. Currently, the principal, one teacher, and often the principal that served the school at the time of the application are invited to the two-day national ceremony, although schools often bring others to join in some of the festivities. A few years ago, a small rural school in New Mexico came to the ceremony with an entire busload of teachers and parents. For some attendees this may be their first, and perhaps only, visit to the nation's capitol. Frequently they visit Congress and tour Washington by night on a special Blue Ribbon Schools bus trip.

Expenses to attend the ceremony are absorbed by the schools, but they rarely decline attendance to the national ceremony. Schools are invited to submit proposals to present workshops at the ceremony, and the series of selected Blue Ribbon workshops is well attended. The ceremony also includes an address by the National Teacher of the Year and previous Blue Ribbon winners have also been invited to discuss the benefits of the award for their schools and communities. Because leadership has been documented as a critical factor in Blue Ribbon Schools, beginning in the mid 1990s principals have been recognized through the Terrel H. Bell Award for School Leadership; sixteen principals have won the Bell Award since 2000. The Blue Ribbon Schools Program's partner associations, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Middle School Association, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, hold a leadership breakfast to present the Bell award. Each year, some banquet celebrations for Blue Ribbon events are underwritten by a host of generous corporate sponsors, including AIGVALIC, GlaxoSmithKline, Riverdeep Interactive Learning, AT&T, American General Financial Group, United Parcel Service, UPS Foundation, Chrysler Fund, and Daimler-Chrysler Corporation Fund.

The Blue Ribbon School teams return from Washington with an honorary plaque and a Blue Ribbon flag that is hung prominently in their school. Schools, districts, and states often hold their own Blue Ribbon Schools celebrations before or after the national ceremony. These events receive press coverage from local and national media, and schools regard them as an important milestone in their progress toward meeting the needs of all of their students.

The Impact of Blue Ribbon Schools

Blue Ribbon Schools continue to be beacons of school effectiveness and school leadership and the effect of the award on schools and local communities remains powerful. As one educator said, "Blue Ribbon begins a process you cannot stop." A Blue Ribbon School becomes a real estate

sales pitch for a neighborhood or town, and Blue Ribbon Schools report success in gaining business partners and other private financial assistance. 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,” a student reported. The award re-energizes staff and parents; teachers talk time and time again of a renewed commitment to exchanging new ideas with one another. A principal credited the Blue Ribbon award with generating student pride and staff confidence. With the award, her students began to believe in themselves, she said, “And when you believe in yourself you can do things you never thought you could.”

The program offers valuable information on successful schools through its presence on the U.S. Education Department Website, where interested schools can read profiles of winning schools and study winning applications. In an informal survey of profiled schools, more than half had received inquiries from other school leaders who had seen the Website profiles. The profiled schools have welcomed visits from other school leaders, given telephone and email consultations, and used their profiles in presentations to legislators, institutions of higher education, and at professional conferences. Several states are sponsoring dialogues about “significant or signature” practices at Blue Ribbon Schools. For example, Texas includes the Blue Ribbons Schools as part of its Best Practices Clearinghouse. California is developing a visitor’s guide to high-performing schools with Blue Ribbon Schools in mind. Ohio is using Blue Ribbon practices as part of a diagnostic review process with poorly performing schools.

Initiated by a beleaguered Secretary of Education as a way of “countering the harsh criticism of education and educators,” as Terrel Bell put it in a 1993 retrospective of *A Nation at Risk*, today the Blue Ribbon Schools Program has inspired principals and staff at schools across the country. Many principals place winning the award on their list of goals for their schools, and since 1982, some 5,000 principals have raised the Blue Ribbon flag at their schools. The program represents both a high aspiration and a potent resource of practitioner knowledge.

Blue Ribbon Schools are frequently profiled in the Department’s publication *The Achiever*, on its award-winning satellite TV show, “*Education News Parents Can Use*,” and on the Department’s Institute of Education Sciences’ *What Works Clearinghouse* Website. More locally, Blue Ribbon Schools often give presentations at state and regional meetings about their successful educational practices, such as formative assessments, teacher mentoring, and approaches to teacher recruitment and retention. Other opportunities for leveraging the effective teaching and learning that take place in Blue Ribbon Schools include working with state-level educators to use Blue Ribbon Schools as mentors to work with schools with similar demographics to replicate

accountability systems, provide tips on centralized and distributive leadership, and offer ideas on motivating and engaging students. Blue Ribbon Schools could also take advantage of free digital technology (e.g., twitter, wikis, blogs, social networks, etc.) to facilitate online conversations among Blue Ribbon Schools and interested others about successful programs and practices.

#