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In the Age of Accountability, A Blue Ribbon Means a Lot

By Alan Richard

Every year, about the time the cherry blossoms bloom creamy pink, dozens of educators gather at a Washington hotel to decide which schools will earn the National Blue Ribbon Schools award, and which ones won't.

The group is called the national review panel, and although its roughly 80 volunteers decide which schools win Blue Ribbons, not a member of the panel has ever set foot in the nominated schools, nor have the panelists ever spoken to the principal or a teacher or a parent or child.

Instead, they rely on the eyes and ears of a person who actually visited one of the nominee schools, who then filed a written report about the visit. The national panel reviews those reports, then decides: Does the school deserve a Blue Ribbon?

The National Blue Ribbon Schools program, launched by the U.S. Department of Education in 1983, has evolved from a simple recognition effort into a detailed self-analysis that some say is a valuable

tool to help schools improve. Nearly 4,000 U.S. schools have earned the Blue Ribbon, including 198 winners announced this week. (See *Honors & Awards*, Page 48.)

In an age of accountability, when principals and schools are facing new pressures to show improvement, and parents and policymakers are placing a greater emphasis on school rankings, the Blue Rib-

Continued on Page 16



Cathy Damm teaches at a Blue Ribbon middle school in Duncan, S.C.

Fred Hollison

'Blue Ribbon' Awards Can Help Schools Turn the Corner

Continued from Page 1

bon designation is increasingly coveted as a badge of distinction. Visit a school that has won it, and you'll likely see the presidential-looking seal placed atop the sign in the front yard, or a banner hung in the lobby, or you'll hear about it on the school's telephone answering system.

At its best, educators and Education Department officials say, the award process can be a valuable tool to help a school examine itself, then find ways to battle its weaknesses.

At its worst, the temptation to apply for the Blue Ribbon can be so heavy that schools ignore weak spots and emphasize their success in specific areas rather than improvement in all.

"If you want to be a Blue Ribbon School, you have to be doing a really good job in a lot of areas. It doesn't mean that you're perfect," said Stephen O'Brien, a division director in the Education Department who oversees the program.

Reputation vs. Reality

When considering the applications to decide which schools will receive the award, the members of the review panel almost always say yes.

This year, 198 out of 202—or 98 percent—of the schools to receive a site visit won the award. Last year, 97 percent of those visited won. The awards are given to different types of schools in alternating years—elementary and middle schools one year, high schools the next. This year, Blue Ribbons were given to high schools.

Half the schools that apply each year never get a site visit. The national review panel meets several months earlier and cuts about half the schools from the list on the basis of their written applications. If they pass the first round, though, schools are almost



Photos by Fred Polson



D.R. Hill Middle School adopted an array of new activities to win the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon award. Teacher Cathy Damm, above, shown looking over the school's yearbook with some of her students, says the award process provided a framework for the school's rebirth. At left, Principal Steve Gambrell, Spartanburg District Five Superintendent Sid Crumpton, and former Principal Gary Burgess stand outside the school.

guaranteed a Blue Ribbon.

But the process is not without its imperfections.

One aspect of the program that can gloss over a school's weaknesses is the dependence on the opinion of a single person charged with visiting the school and verifying the application in-

formation. If the site visitor—usually an experienced principal or senior administrator—doesn't carefully examine test scores or student programs or special education, a school could win that shouldn't.

That can blur the line between exceptional schools working to im-

prove and schools that rely on strong programs for some children but rarely bend the status quo. "It's not a perfect process," said Robert David, a national review panelist from Pittsburgh and an education professor at California University of Pennsylvania. "We try to be fair," he said of the school visits. "We spend hours and hours on them."

Marcia Klenbort, a national review panelist, said the award is most appropriate when it recognizes a school that has identified its problems and shows proof they were solved.

"The story isn't that they got there," said Ms. Klenbort, a former high school teacher who now works for the Southern Regional Council, a civil rights group based in Atlanta. "The story is how they got there."

Making It a Mission

Sid Crumpton is convinced that the Blue Ribbon process can help revive his schools. As evidence, the superintendent of District Five of Spartanburg County in South Carolina points to what happened at a school he once called his worst: D.R. Hill Middle School in the town of Duncan.

Six years ago, the school's principal, Gary Burgess, began showing a slide transparency at faculty meetings, counting down the years to when D.R. Hill would be-

come a model middle school. The fifth year, the school applied for the Blue Ribbon, and won.

Along the way, Mr. Crumpton says, the school has undergone a dramatic transformation. He wants to spread the spirit of revival to the six other schools in the 5,700-student district, located in the western part of the state between Greenville and Spartanburg.

He wants them all to qualify for the Blue Ribbon in the next few years. "It does not matter to me if we ever get the plaque," he said. "What matters is the constant improvement."

During its renaissance, D.R. Hill adopted many of the hallmarks of successful middle schools, including team teaching, and a broader array of student activities.

Since beginning the process, test scores have risen above the state averages for the first time, and the sterile environment of five years ago has been replaced by what teachers say is an inviting place to work and learn.

Cathy Damm, a 7th grade language arts teacher, helps her students learn about the cadence of poetry by having them rewrite popular songs they hear on the radio. She makes them use daily calendars. They write often.

She lets her students dig through piles of books and sprawl on the floor, if they want, while they're reading "It's time to fly," she tells them.

Ms. Damm said the Blue Ribbon process had provided a framework for the school's rebirth, and then a welcome reward.

But, she added, an application can't tell an outsider truly how its staff educates and treats children. As an example, she recalled one of her students who tearfully explained how her family was moving away.

"I just hugged on her, and hugged on her, and hugged on her," Ms. Damm said. "We don't put that on the paper."

Complete Assessment?

Twenty miles across town from D.R. Hill Middle School stands the nation's only four-time winner of the Blue Ribbon.

Many of the programs offered at the 1,700-student school are indeed impressive. Spartanburg High offers one of South Carolina's best science programs, which allows students to perform the kind of research normally reserved for college students. The orchestra has played in many countries, and the state-champion football team attracts larger crowds than many colleges do.

But the school's African-American students, many of whom come from disadvantaged families, continue to lag behind their white classmates.

Nearly half the school's black female students—who represent a quarter of the student body—failed the reading portion of the state's basic-skills graduation exam two years ago. Almost every



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Evolution of a Program

white student passed.

One of the school's hallmarks, strong Advanced Placement offerings, also shows disparity: Only 12 of the more than 554 AP exams taken in the 1997-98 school year were by black students—even though they represent half the school's enrollment.

None of those problems kept the school from winning its record fourth Blue Ribbon two years ago.

"Those are legitimate questions about what the school is doing to make sure poorer students—especially in this case, that minority students—don't fall through the cracks," said Mr. O'Brien, who oversees the national program.

Joe Clarke, the principal of Spartanburg High since 1989 and a 28-year employee of the school, acknowledges his school has struggled with minority achievement.

"It's going to take time, and we have problems," Mr. Clarke said. "There are potholes in the road. We didn't ignore the problem. We attacked the problem, and I think that's very promising."

Mr. Clarke said his staff had worked to improve the academic courses that are taken mostly by students interested in jobs or technical college rather than four-year degrees. The school also ended the process of grouping students by ability, eliminating "general" courses about five years ago.

The way Blue Ribbon Schools are selected has changed significantly since the program began 17 years ago. The review panelists' knowledge of what test scores mean in various states has helped verify facts that in earlier days might have gone unchecked.

"Data analysis is now more rigorous," said Jill Hearne, a panelist from Seattle and a former director of assessment for that city's schools.

Winners also face more-stringent criteria that emphasize improvement.

Efforts to upgrade the process began in 1996, when the Education Department invited about 200 educators to Washington to offer advice on improving the program, which has an annual budget of \$1 million. In 1998, the department hired a private company to analyze the program, pointing out possible weaknesses.

Mr. O'Brien said those inventories produced stronger criteria and a greater emphasis on schools that are improving—including some urban and rural schools that previously never had a chance.

Blue Ribbon Schools are "clearly different than something like ... 90 percent of schools in the nation," said Evelyn Ogden, the deputy superintendent of the 7,800-student East Brunswick, N.J., schools, and the author of two books on the Blue Ribbon program.

Through all the changes, the program still relies heavily on the written reports by site visitors—lending a dose of subjectivity. She and other experts remain concerned about the reliance on the

written reports from site visitors.

"I have visited schools where I thought what they did was extremely embellished. Hopefully, the site visits ferret out those kinds of things," said Robert Hendricks, an assistant dean of education at the University of Arizona in Tucson and a member of the national review panel.

What the Mission Means

Last month, educators from across the country attended a three-day conference in South Carolina for aspiring award-winners. They heard the former D.R. Hill principal, Mr. Burgess, who is now a high school principal in nearby Anderson County, S.C.,

and his replacement and former assistant, Steve Gambrell, thank the many people who helped D.R. Hill Middle School improve.

Then, students described how their school had changed. "There was less teaching the class, and more teaching the student," said Taurean Davis, now a senior at Byrnes High School in Duncan.

Ninth-grader Cortez Crosby, who was the student-body president at D.R. Hill last year and traveled to Washington with local educators to receive the award, told the audience that the Blue Ribbon showed how far his school had come.

The students knew they were better, he said. "Now, we had proof."

Going for the Blue

The National Blue Ribbon Schools awards began in 1983 as a way for the U.S. Department of Education to recognize schools with many good programs. It has evolved into more of a school renewal model.

The application includes written answers to questions about many aspects of a school's operations, such as teacher training, extracurricular activities, the use of technology, and parent involvement; plus extensive test-score data. About half the schools that apply pass the application round, earning a site visit from Education Department representatives. Most schools that are visited receive the award.

Nearly 4,000 schools have won the award, or about 3 percent of U.S. schools. Some have won it more than once. Every part of a school's program must receive high ratings as defined by the Blue Ribbon guidelines.

More information is available online at the U.S. Department of Education's Web site: www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/BlueRibbonSchools

NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS

New Mexico. Mountain View Middle School, Rancho; **New York.** Ardsley Middle School, Ardsley; Commack Middle School, Commack, H. Frank Carey Junior Senior High School, Franklin Square; Pleasantville Middle School, Pleasantville, Shaker Heights.

Connecticut. Antonella Maria Bona-Gallo, secondary science, Windham High School, Willimantic; Arlene Staro Cassello, elementary science, Alice Peck School, Hamden; John G. Ciochine, secondary mathematics, North Branford Institute, North Branford, Delaware; Jillian Curick Hounsell, secondary

Mississippi. Carol Akers Burton, elementary mathematics, Hernando Elementary School, Hernando; Peggy Jane Carlisle, elementary science, Poindexter Elementary School, Jackson; Miriam Burt Clark, secondary mathematics, Pontotoc City Schools-Pontotoc High School, Pontotoc; Geraldine

Tennessee. Emily Camp Gaude, secondary mathematics, Gresham Middle School, Knoxville, Tennessee; Mary King, elementary science, West Elementary School, Mount Juliet; Karen Reed-Wright, elementary mathematics, George Washington Elementary School, Kingsport; Colleen Goss Wallace, secondary science, Cumberland County High School, Crossville.

Eastside Elementary School, Sun Prairie
Wyoming Anna Denardi, secondary mathematics, Guernsey-Sunrise Junior/Senior High School
Guernsey, Mary Ellen Krsko, secondary science
Worldland Middle School, Worldland; Gail Johnson
Moravet, elementary science, Fremont County
School District #24, Shoshoni, Tammy Beth Needham,
elementary mathematics, Sundance Elementary School, Sundance

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