

Governor's Blue Ribbon Schools Program

Frequently Asked Questions

Why isn't there a public application for the Governor's Blue Ribbon Schools program?

As with the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program in past years, schools do not apply directly for the Governor's Blue Ribbon honor.

Each year, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) identifies a limited number of schools that are invited to apply based on statewide data and established eligibility criteria.

- **This year, 50 Illinois schools were invited to apply.**
- From those invited, **16 schools will ultimately be honored** as Governor's Blue Ribbon Schools this fall.

This invitation-only process ensures the program remains a recognition of demonstrated performance and improvement over time, rather than a competitive or self-selected application process.

How are schools identified as eligible?

Illinois uses eligibility criteria that closely mirror those historically used to nominate schools for the U.S. Department of Education's National Blue Ribbon Schools Program.

Each year, statewide assessment, graduation, and participation data are reviewed to identify schools that meet one of two qualifying pathways:

- Exemplary High Achievement
- Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing

Typically, about 160–180 schools statewide meet at least one of these eligibility pathways.

From that broader eligibility list, ISBE selects a smaller group of schools to invite to apply.

What are the two eligibility pathways?

1. Exemplary High Achievement

This pathway recognizes schools that demonstrate consistently strong academic outcomes over time, not just in a single year.

In simplified terms, schools qualifying under this pathway:

- Show high levels of proficiency in English language arts and mathematics
- Meet participation requirements for state assessments
- Meet graduation rate requirements (for high schools)
- Demonstrate strong performance for all students and, when applicable, for student subgroups
- Have a pattern of performance and improvement over multiple years

Eligibility is not based on accountability rankings alone and is not determined by rank-ordering schools from a single year of data.

2. Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing

This pathway honors schools that are making extraordinary progress in closing performance gaps between student groups.

Schools qualifying under this pathway:

- Show significant improvement over time for identified student groups
- Demonstrate that student performance is improving faster than statewide averages
- Meet key participation, graduation (when applicable), and data stability requirements
- Reflect Illinois' commitment to educational equity and opportunity

This pathway focuses on growth and progress, not just overall achievement levels.

How many schools were invited under each pathway this year?

Illinois has an unwavering commitment to reducing performance gaps across student groups.

All 22 schools statewide that qualified under the Achievement Gap Closing pathway were invited to apply this year.

The remaining 28 invited schools met the Exemplary High Achievement criteria.

When selecting schools from the high-achievement group, ISBE prioritized:

- Geographic balance
- A mix of grade configurations (elementary, middle, and high school)
- Recognition of different communities across the state

Why wasn't my school invited even though it performs well?

There are several reasons why a strong school may not have been invited in a given year:

- The Blue Ribbon program is not based on accountability rankings
- Eligibility looks at patterns of performance and improvement over time, including subgroup performance
- The criteria value progress and consistency, not single-year results
- ISBE seeks to honor a wide variety of schools over multiple years, not the same schools repeatedly

It is possible that:

- A school did not meet one of the specific eligibility criteria used for Blue Ribbon identification, even if it performs well under other systems
- A school met eligibility criteria but was not selected this year to ensure recognition is distributed across regions, grade levels, and communities

Not being invited does not mean a school will not be invited in the future.

Does this process mean some schools are “better” than others?

No. The Governor's Blue Ribbon Schools program is intended to recognize different types of excellence.

The criteria are designed to:

- Value both high achievement and meaningful improvement
- Highlight schools that demonstrate success with diverse student populations
- Recognize schools on different improvement journeys

The program is not a ranking system, and invitation decisions should not be interpreted as a comparative judgment among schools.