
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

2017 National Blue Ribbon Schools Ceremony

November 7, 2017

Congratulatory Remarks from Secretary Betsy DeVos

Speaker: Ladies and gentlemen. Please welcome Blake Myles Hopkins, 12th grade student, George Mason High School.

Blake Myles Hopkins: Good afternoon. My name is Blake Myles Hopkins. I am a senior at George Mason High School in Falls Church, Virginia. It is my honor and privilege to introduce United States Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos. Secretary DeVos was nominated by President Donald J. Trump and confirmed by the United States Senate on February 7, 2017 as the 11th Secretary of Education. A lifelong advocate for children and a voice for parents, Secretary DeVos has been a leader in the movement to empower parents. She is especially passionate about reforms that help underserved children gain access to a quality education. Secretary DeVos saw first-hand the work that leaders in her home town were doing to increase educational opportunities for students and choices for parents, and she has been involved in the fight to provide better educational options across the nation ever since. Secretary DeVos has worked to support the creation of new educational choices for students in 25 states and the District of Columbia.

Secretary DeVos' interest in education was sparked at an early age by her mother, a public-school teacher. It grew when she sent her own children to school and was confronted with the reality that not every child in America is granted an equal opportunity to receive a great education. For 15 years, Secretary DeVos served as an in-school mentor for at-risk children in Grand Rapids Public Schools in Michigan. According to Secretary DeVos, her interactions with students, families and teachers, changed her life and her perspective about education forever. As secretary, she is working to advance equal opportunities for a high-quality education for all students. Secretary DeVos firmly believes that neither the zip code in which a child lives, nor a child's household income should determine his or her opportunity to receive a world class education. She is advocating for return of control of education to states and localities, giving parents greater power to choose the educational settings that are best for their children, and ensuring that higher education puts students on a path to successful careers.

In addition to her leadership in the education arena, Secretary DeVos has also served on the boards of numerous national and local charitable and civic organizations, including the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Kids Hope USA, Art Prize, Mars Hill Bible Church, and the Kendall College of Art and Design. Secretary DeVos is a graduate of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is married to entrepreneur, philanthropist, and community activist Dick DeVos, and together they have four children and six grandchildren. Ladies and gentlemen... please join me in welcoming United States Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos.

Secretary DeVos: Well good afternoon. It's great to be here today. Thank you, Blake, for that very kind introduction, and if you haven't yet had the privilege of meeting Blake in person, you know, however, he is a talented senior from George Mason High School in Falls Church. From performing with Harry Connick, Jr., and Andrea Bocelli, to being selected to perform at Carnegie Hall, Blake has developed quite the impressive resume in his young, but promising, lifelong learning

journey. So, thank you again, Blake, for that very kind introduction. I also want to thank Adam Honeysett, Aba Kumi, Frances Hopkins, and all the dedicated staff at the department who played a role in bringing this year's honorees together. It wouldn't have happened without their help.

And of course, the primary reason I am here today is to congratulate you – this year's National Blue Ribbon School award winners.

You all represent a wide variety of schools, coming from 44 states, the District of Columbia and Department of Defense schools in Japan, Germany and West Point, New York. Of more than 130 thousand schools in the United States, you have been recognized as the cream of the crop.

Since the program's inception 35 years ago in 1982, only 8,500 schools have been recognized as National Blue Ribbon Schools. You are truly in rare company.

National Blue Ribbon Schools put students at the center of everything. You recognize that a world-class education is the surest way for students to achieve their individual goals and dreams.

America's students are more diverse than ever, and we all know that no child is the same as another. National Blue Ribbon Schools recognize that different students in different places have different needs. We recognize a wide array of schools for this award precisely because of this reality. The unique needs of each and every student aren't met by a one-size-fits all approach.

This is why I continue to urge everyone involved in education to "rethink school" – to thoughtfully question and challenge everything through one clarifying lens: How does this improve individual student achievement?

Each of your schools is admired because you have a deep and positive impact on students. Principals, teachers and support staff at National Blue Ribbon Schools work hard to ensure that students get what they need to learn. Late nights, early mornings, long weekends or through the summer – whether you're conducting home visits, hosting new learning opportunities or reaching out to community partners – in every situation you're present for your students.

A school is just a building. Your work, your care and your love makes what goes on there something really special.

Yet even National Blue Ribbon schools must continually do better for their students because excellence is not a destination.

That's why more schools should embrace innovative approaches like personalized learning programs, place-based learning or hands-on, interactive project learning opportunities.

I was inspired throughout our recent Rethink School Tour, including a visit to Lincoln Children's Zoo in Nebraska. There, students from Lincoln Public Schools' Science Focus Program have the opportunity to learn in an interesting environment that enlivens their curiosities and brings textbooks to life.

Each Blue Ribbon school is a standout on its own, so I hesitate to highlight any. But I do so in the hope that you will each draw inspiration from others with whom you share this award, and that you will all learn from one another.

Faculty and staff at Calvert Elementary School in Auburn, Nebraska, personalize student learning with differentiated and supportive instruction. Students are able to learn and advance at their own pace. Those who need additional time on any given subject get it, while those who are ready to move on, can do so. When we focus on the needs of each child, success can then be measured by what he or she learns and masters, not by how long one sits at a desk.

Oakwood Elementary School, in Plymouth, Minnesota is driven by a set of key values to help students realize their abilities: Personalized learning; academic choices; community; and building strong relationships. Oakwood employs a "My Way" initiative to prepare students for a rapidly

changing global society. Students are given state-of-the-art tools to help broaden the academic content they can access and to facilitate new forms of expression.

Project-based learning has been instrumental in student success at Alabama's Tuscaloosa Magnet Middle School. Students gain independence, learn time management and use personal- and peer-assessments to evaluate their projects. Projects have included a soap opera in Spanish and an amusement park built to simulate systems of the human body.

At Doral Academy of Technology, a middle school in Florida, a rigorous college-prep curriculum begins in sixth-grade. Students take seven courses per year in levels ranging from Intensive Support to Pre-AP. Students engage in project-based learning that encourages them to apply content knowledge to real-life problems.

California Academy of Mathematics and Science in Carson is a four-year high school on the campus of California State University, Dominguez Hills. There, the focus is on increasing STEM college graduates. The Academy offers students transferable university credits in grades 11 and 12; on average, CAMS students earn 22 units of college credit by graduation.

Each National Blue Ribbon School embodies that kind of excellence. You are helping others to rethink school. Your vision for meeting students' needs and guiding them toward achievement is inspiring.

For all the representatives of schools here celebrating with us today, you have invested wisely and carefully in your students. And with support from dedicated teachers, leaders, and parents, that means improved educational outcomes for students across America. Your graduates will impact their families and their communities in a positive way. You're proud of your students, and so are we.

So again, on behalf of everyone at the Department of Education, thank you for your extraordinary commitment to meeting the unique needs of your students every day.

Before we get to the honorees, I would like to take a moment to recognize two people, Joe and Trish McTighe, who are retiring from the Council for American Private Education. Joe and Trish, will you please come up and join me a moment? Yes, we succeeded in surprising you. For 21 years, Joe and Trish have promoted this award by helping to identify and nominate National Blue Ribbon Schools. Thanks to their dedication and commitment, many private schools have been recognized each year as National Blue Ribbon Schools. Joe and Trish, come on over. Thank you for your tireless efforts and congratulations on your pending retirement.

Trish McTighe: We have to stop meeting like this.

Secretary DeVos: Make sure Paul gets that picture.

Finally, please know I appreciate all of you, I wish you the very best and I hope the rest of your stay in our nation's capital is wonderful. Again, congratulations to all of you. Thank you very much.