
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

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SHUWAN CHIU, NBRS LIAISON, ILLINOIS

A NOMINATION PROCESS THAT GETS TO THE HEART OF THE STORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ILLINOIS STATE LIAISON, SHUWAN CHIU

“I just love the program.”

Although Shuwan Chiu wears many hats at the Illinois Department of Education, she sees the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program as a highlight of her work. In this interview excerpt, she shares her thoughts and perspectives on what makes the program so valuable and how she approaches the state nomination process.



“I have been involved with the National Blue Ribbon School program since 2005. I analyze the data, I also help the state with accountability and I also do the school report card.” While Illinois follows the protocol from the US Department of Education guidance, she explains that in some cases, the differences between schools based on performance results can be difficult to determine and that’s when she calls school districts directly to understand the story behind the numbers.

“When I interview the school district, I tell them the purpose – that they are being considered for nomination for the National Blue Ribbon schools program. I ask them, what makes you so successful? You are at the top 15% of the state in terms of performance, but what is your story?” Shuwan shares that there are several benefits to the interview process to the state in terms of making a decision to nominate, but also to the local school as they move through the application process. She tells them, “you have to tell USDE how good you are” and by talking through their successes and telling their story, they are in a better position to complete the USED application.

Although she is a statistician by training, she says “I really love my interview experience” because it helps schools think more deeply about what makes them stand out and then share that story with others nationally.

“We want school districts that truly care about education and that care about children.” “We are finding the best of the best. When I interview them, they tell me how successful their program is, how devoted the teachers and students are.”

Using the State Nomination Process as a Motivator

As a National Blue Ribbon School State Liaison, Shuwan sees her role not only to follow the guidance for nominating schools, but also to motivate and provide guidance to help schools reach their full potential. “We have a school district that came to me for three consecutive years because they want to be nominated.” Shuwan encourages schools to document how they are working to improve student performance so she can support their efforts. “The benefit is that you encourage your schools to do better. To go above and beyond.” Schools often reach out to learn more about

how to become a National Blue Ribbon School and the answer Shuwan often gives is that it takes the whole school community. “The school board will contact me and they talk about how well their school is doing. The parents, the teachers, the principal, and the students work together, and they finally reach it and it’s such a big deal.”

Beyond the National Blue Ribbon Award

When schools are highly interested and are still working to meet the nomination criteria, Shuwan provides additional support and guidance to help them the next time around. She talks with striving schools about why they didn’t make it and shares the stories from successful schools based on the interviews she conducted with the nominated schools or she connects them with winning schools to visit or just to reach out and talk about what made them successful. She stresses the importance of this for disseminating best practices across the state.

“I also work on [school] report cards which helps a lot. I have schools call me and say, ‘hey, you cannot just say we failed. I know we are not doing good. How can you help us?’ I said, that’s easy, I contact my Blue Ribbon Schools and I know they are doing very well. I ask them to talk to them to help.” Shuwan leverages past successful schools with similar student demographics and school structures to help schools in need of support.

Shuwan reminds Illinois’ National Blue Ribbon School winners of their role in the state. “I always tell them, you are going to be a model school. You’re going to be a successful story. We will use you as an example so other schools will follow. And they all say, yes, we are willing to share our successful story.”

“In the end, to me, the Blue Ribbon School is the school that demonstrates how successful they are. They are the model school. They carry the pride, they are willing to help, they are willing to share their story. It’s a very big deal in Illinois.”