

2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Tips for Completing the Application

The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program is providing the following suggestions to help schools complete the 2021 application. They include general tips, as well as a deeper explanation of what NBRS would like to see addressed in each question.

General Tips

Audience: NBRS applications become public and are posted on the program’s website if a school wins the award. Please keep in mind that your eventual audience will likely include many people who are unfamiliar with your school. Readers may include the media, parents (from your school and other schools), and other education professionals.

Grammar/Spelling: NBRS strongly recommends first writing your responses in Word or another word processor, then cutting and pasting your responses into the online application. This will assist you with proofreading since not all internet browsers have a built-in spell check.

Formatting: Do not copy and paste directly from a word processing program into the online form. Word and other word processing programs replace real characters, such as quotation marks, with proprietary “curly” quotation marks that can only be read by the specific word processing software. These characters show up on web pages as little boxes or nonsensical characters such as ““”. **To avoid this problem, please use a standard text editor** such as <https://notepad-plus-plus.org> or [windows notepad](#) to “translate” your word processing document into plain text. Copy any text from a word processing program into one of these notepads, then copy the text from the notepad into your online application. This will allow you to print out your application without strange characters or missing material.

Previously Winning Applications: While it can be helpful to read applications from previous years to see how schools responded, the application changes each year. Older applications should be used for reference only, not as guides for how to respond to a given question. This is especially true for the 2021 application which has been revised significantly from previous years to provide schools the opportunity to address the unique set of challenges COVID-19 has imposed.

Process and Timing: Consider if one person or multiple people will respond to questions. If multiple people will be writing, allow extra time for each section to be edited so the application reads smoothly. Consult the provided pacing chart for help setting deadlines and ensuring each section is complete and proofread.

Style Sheet: Use the attached style sheet for assistance with commonly misspelled and/or misused words.

Word Counts: All word counts in the application are approximate. You will not be penalized for going over the limit by small amounts, but you will be asked to rewrite if you are under or over significantly. Please try to be succinct and to the point.

Additional Notes:

- Questions must be answered in narrative format. **Bulleted responses are not acceptable.**
- School personnel should always be referred to by their roles, rather than by their names.
- Avoid duplicating responses from one topic section to another.
- Acronyms must be spelled out the first time they are used.

The NBRS Program strongly encourages schools to **have an outside reader with excellent grammatical skills edit and proof** the final application before it is submitted, especially if several people contributed to writing application sections.

As always, if you have questions or need assistance in accessing the online application, please contact the NBRS technical assistance team for help.

Email: ContactUs@NationalBlueRibbonSchools.com
Phone: 800-258-0802 or 603-422-8888

Tips by Application Section

Part II – Demographics

- **District information for charter schools ONLY:** If a charter school operates within a public school district/LEA include all schools within the district. If it is considered a separate district/LEA, include only your school. If it operates within a charter school network/LEA, include all schools within the network.
- **Prekindergarten enrollment:** Schools should only include prekindergarten students if the school is responsible for the program. If a district-wide prekindergarten program is housed at the school, but it is administered separately, it should not be considered part of the school.
- **Racial/ethnic composition:** If exact percentages are unknown, the school should do its best to estimate. If the school believes some students do not fit into the provided categories, the best available fit should be chosen.
- **Number of FTE staff:** Read the examples provided in the application for assistance with choosing the most appropriate category. If it is still unclear which category a staff member belongs in, the school should choose the category that seems like the best overall fit.

Part III – Summary

- Address each of the bullet points identified in the question, providing a thorough overview of your school, its educational philosophy, and what makes it successful.
- Place the school in a geographical context. This includes an overview of student and community demographics, and the challenges or opportunities they provide.
- Highlight what makes your school special, especially any innovations or unique programs offered. When possible, provide examples of how the school helps students develop in all aspects of their lives.
- You are NOT required to address the school's response to COVID-19 as this will be addressed later, but you may choose to do so if it contributes to the overall picture of the school.

Part IV – Curriculum and Instruction

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

- Provide an overview of the school's core curriculum and instructional approaches, plus specific descriptions for reading/ELA, math, science, and social studies. This includes content and learning standards, instructional techniques and interventions, and how assessments/data are used to improve student learning. Even if social studies and/or science are taught within the reading curriculum, the content, instruction, and assessment still need to be addressed individually.
- NBRS is especially interested in learning how schools are transitioning to remote learning (full or hybrid), including how they are adapting curriculum, instruction, and assessments in light of these challenges. You may do this by focusing your response on specifically what the school is doing for the current year, or you may compare/contrast the current year with a more typical school year.
- The response should NOT describe a commercial curriculum, although mentioning one by title is okay.
- **Secondary schools** (middle and/or high school grades) must make connections between the core curriculum and college/career readiness.
- **Schools with prekindergarten** (see note in Demographics) must discuss the pre-K curriculum, alignment with elementary grades, and impact on school readiness.

2. Other Curriculum Areas

- Provide a general overview of your school's non-core subjects. At a minimum that includes the arts, PE/health/nutrition, foreign language(s) if offered, and technology/library/media.
- For each subject, include which grades take the subject, how often, and how the course supports the acquisition of essential skills.
- Include information on how each area has been adapted for dealing with the challenges posed by COVID-19. If a class needed to be dropped for the current school year, you may mention that as well as how it was typically taught.

3. Academic Supports

- Provide a comprehensive overview of how the school meets the needs of diverse learners, including instruction, interventions, and assessments.
- At a minimum, every school should discuss the needs of students who are performing below and above grade level.
- Special education students, English language learners, migrant students, or students with unusual/exceptional needs (e.g., a highly mobile military population) should be addressed when they form a significant part of the student body. Determination of how many students represent a significant portion is up to each school, but the NBR program suggests 10 percent as a minimum.
- Achievement gaps of more than 10 points between all students and the populations must be addressed.
- Address how the school has risen to the challenge of meeting the needs of diverse learners during remote or hybrid learning situations.

Part V – School Climate and Culture

1. Engaging Students

- Provide the key strategies (you may include specific examples) of how of the school keeps students engaged and motivated, not just academically but also socially and emotionally.
- Include information on how the school has adapted the strategies to deal with remote or hybrid learning, and/or describe what new strategies have been implemented.
- Make a clear connection between a positive environment for students and how the environment makes the school successful.

2. Engaging Families and Communities

- Include clear examples of family and community engagement, and make the connections between those examples and student achievement. Communities may include businesses, organizations, and/or education partners.
- Describe any new or adapted strategies for dealing with COVID-19, including any new community or business partnerships for helping families or students.

3. Creating Professional Culture

- Provide an overview of how the school supports teachers and other professional staff. This should include professional development, but also how the school creates an environment that values teachers overall.
- When discussing professional development, do not include just a list of activities. Demonstrate the thoughtfulness of the approach and how it contributes to student learning and school culture.
- Highlight any supports or professional development opportunities that were provided to teachers or other staff during the transition to remote or hybrid learning.

4. School Leadership

- Explain the school's leadership philosophy and how it relates to success.
- Outline the overall leadership structure, including the principal's role as well as additional teams or roles.
- Describe how the administration has worked together to ensure student success during COVID-19 challenges (e.g., new responsibilities or the formation of a remote learning team).
- The response should NOT be a biography of the principal and should NOT use names to identify people.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning

- Describe the school's overall approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Especially for schools that serve students, families, and staff from diverse backgrounds, describe how the school ensures a welcoming environment that is culturally sensitive and responsive.
- Describe how current social and cultural events have been addressed, particularly if they have a direct impact on the school community.
- Describe any academic, socio-emotional, or tangible supports provided to the school community.

Part VI – Strategy for Academic Success

- Describe the single practice that stakeholders believe has been the most influential in how the school has successfully addressed COVID-19 *since closures began at the end of the 2019-2020 school year*.
- Focus on how the practice has been used and draw connections between the practice and student success.
- Adaptions or refinements to the process are expected, but please explain them.
- Consider that your audience for this question will be other schools who are looking for ideas and guidance, and share what schools would need to know or do to adopt a similar practice.

2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Application Style Sheet

Grammar/Punctuation

Capitalization: Course titles are capitalized (e.g., Algebra I), but subjects are not capitalized (e.g., math).

First grade students have 90 minutes of reading practice each day. High school students take American Literature in tenth grade.

Numbers: Should be written out if the first word in a sentence. Numerals can be used elsewhere.

One hundred percent of the staff agreed to stay late. In reading, 90 percent of students are proficient.

Quotation marks: Place periods and commas inside closing single or double quotation marks.

Spacing: One space after a period.

Serial (Oxford) commas are preferred. Commas should separate each element in a series of three or more.

The school offers reading, mathematics, and science.

Semicolons: Link two connected sentences. They do not precede lists; that's a colon (:).

Word Choice

affect versus effect

Affect: to influence (verb); emotion (noun)

Effect: to cause (verb); result (noun)

after-school: adjective

after school: preposition

assure, ensure, insure

Assure: to promise

Insure: to guarantee against risk

Ensure: to make certain or protect

center around: a center is a point; by definition nothing can be *centered around*; use *centered on*

course work: two words

curricula: plural of curriculum

districtwide: adjective and adverb, one word

evidence-based: adjective

home, hone

Home: to return or target, as in *home in*.

Hone: to sharpen, as in *honing a skill*

impact: only a noun; never a verb

kindergarten: lower case, except in pre-K or K-12

multimedia: one word

online: one word

schoolwide: one word

website: one word, lowercase