

National Blue Ribbon Schools Ceremony:  
*NETWORKING SESSION HIGHLIGHTS*  
*“WHAT’S WORKING”*



About 100 educators gathered for an exchange of ideas before the official start of the 2012 National Blue Ribbon Schools Award Ceremony on November 12. Aka Kumi, Director of the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program, introduced the session, which focused on “what’s working”—successful practices in use at National Blue Ribbon Schools—and strategies for promoting these practices to relevant audiences. USDE Senior Policy Analyst Dennis Bega, USDE Region III Communications Director Elizabeth Davidson, and USDE Region VIII Communications Director Helen Littlejohn facilitated the session. Participants engaged in robust conversations and posted their ideas on a wall.

**What’s Working?**

More than 200 sticky notes attested to the many effective practices in National Blue Ribbon Schools, from creating safe and strong school cultures and involving families to collaboration, high expectations, and embedded professional development.

By far the greatest number of notes identified school culture. Although high expectations garnered the most frequent mentions, participants also offered:

*“Doing what is right for kids FIRST, not what the schedule or past practice or administration dictates.”*

*“We have one thing in common—what is best for the child!”*

*“Every child matters”*

*“Part of our mission states: ‘where parents are partners and children succeed’”*

*“We embed leadership and character education.”*

*“We love kids and work them hard! We love them enough to work them hard!”*

*“We feel like a team and the students feel like family—and they say this!”*

*“Multi-generational culture”*



*Reviewing participants’ ideas at the networking session.*

*“A safe haven”*

One comment simply stated: *“LOVING STAFF!”*

Second to school culture was the number of notes identifying instructional practices. Differentiated, small group instruction, in general, and RTI, in particular, received many mentions. Other ideas included:

*“Curriculum-based instruction, aligned with standards, guided by what is best for our kids”*

*“Hands-on inquiry-based instructional strategies”*

*“Implemented three student assessment meetings/year”*

*“Developed an educational plan for every student”*

*“Yearlong interdisciplinary themes to teach social studies and science”*

*“Personalized tutorials”*

*“Specialized teaching in content areas”*

Within instructional practices, a few participants identified a focus on student writing and schoolwide reading incentives such as 100-Book and Summer Reading Challenges.

Leadership, not surprisingly, also garnered a high number of notes, for example:

*“Bright spots identified and valued”*

*“Enact consistent research-based solutions”*

*“Have a vision of ‘the next level’”*

*“Research the practices of top performing schools”*

*“A student leadership team”*

*“Stability, top to bottom”*

Amid multiple mentions of professional learning communities and professional development, participants also noted mentoring, teacher empowerment, and staff diversity as key to their success. A number of comments also addressed collaboration and communication, such as:

*“Shared decision-making teams”*

*“We work collaboratively—not in isolation.”*

*“Keep the school personnel updated with current practices to address the ever-changing needs of our students”*

*“We keep parents informed in all areas of curriculum”*

*“We partner with families and communities”*

*“Teachers and principals work together on common goals”*

Last but not least, participants also mentioned financial and community support as part of what is working in their schools, noting corporate partnerships, grants, donations, and increased support from families.

## Getting the Word Out

Participants were effusive about the many parties in a position to benefit from knowing what the National Blue Ribbon Schools have done and are doing. A handful of notes echoed this one: *“The Public! Everyone but the family dog!”* while others identified five key audiences: 1) any schools that could learn from National Blue Ribbon School successes, 2) legislators, local businesses and communities, 3) school boards, 4) colleges and universities, and 5) alumni. Participants suggested reaching these audiences through a diversity of means, from school visits—by legislators, school board members, district administrators, and other schools—to the use of Twitter, the creation of a National Blue Ribbon Schools Speakers’ Bureau, and developing professional learning communities that bridge individual school buildings and exchange ideas within districts and beyond.



*Participants had an opportunity to meet each other while exchanging ideas about best practices.*