



A 2017 National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence

Principal's Post

What is the National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence ?

On September 28, 2017, St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish School was named a 2017 National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos recognized 342 schools as National Blue Ribbon Schools for 2017. The recognition is based on a school's overall academic performance or progress in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups.

The National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award is an elite and distinct honor. Based on latest available data, (2016) the total number of elementary and secondary public schools in the United States is 119,702. A total of 292 public schools were named.

St. Maximilian Kolbe's recognition as a National School of Excellence is even more notable when you consider that there are 33,619 private schools in the United States but each year only 50 private schools are designated as Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence.

In addressing the newly named schools at the awards ceremony in Washington, DC on November 7, Mrs. DeVos said,

"National Blue Ribbon Schools are active demonstrations of preparing every child for a bright future..." "You are visionaries, innovators and leaders. You have much to teach us: some of you personalize student learning, others engage parents and communities in the work and life of your local schools and still others develop strong and forward-thinking leaders from among your teaching staff."

Eighteen Pennsylvania schools were named this year. Among them, four National Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence are located in Chester County:

- St. Joseph's in Downingtown
- St. Maximilian Kolbe
- St. Simon & Jude
- West Chester East High School

In addition to the 3 Catholic schools named from Chester County, a fourth school of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, St. Teresa of Calcutta in Montgomery County, was named. This school is led by Miss Anita Dixon, the previous St. Max Principal.

Exemplary High Performing Schools

Since 1982, the United States Department of Education has acknowledged schools of excellence. These schools serve as the "inspirational model" for US schools. The United States Department of Education recognizes these **Exemplary High Performing Schools** in 9 major categories of critical performance. The categories are:

- Student Focus and Support
- School Organization and Culture
- Challenging Standards and Curriculum
- Active Teaching and Learning
- Technology Integration
- Professional Community
- Leadership and Educational Vitality
- School, Family, and Community Partnerships
- Indicators of Success

The Blue Ribbon Application Process

Prior to applying for the Award, a study was conducted to evaluate our school's eligibility. We looked at what St. Max had already achieved, and initiated programs and practices for continuous achievement such as tailored learning, English Language Arts Enrichment, Genius Hour, and Middle School Seminar.

- Tailored learning – "student focused" planning and implementing lessons, where considerations are given to knowing how each individual child in the class. Knowledge of the learner is an important component in planning and teaching. The essential question in planning is "How will *this child* learn this content?"
- English Language Arts Enrichment is a program designed to offer students opportunities to extend learning beyond the core curriculum. The goal of enrichment is to challenge students who are excelling in ELA within the regular classroom.
- Genius Hour is class time set aside for students to dig deeper into an area that interests them. Students research the topic and then present this new-found

knowledge to the their class.

- Middle School Seminar is a series of special topic mini courses offered to 6th, 7th and 8th graders. Each mini course is conducted in 3 sessions where students explored the different topics.

Once our eligibility was assured, St. Max began the Blue Ribbon application process in October, 2016.

The Nation Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award application is a series of steps with explicit directions and a strict timeline. A narrative that provides clear evidence of achievement along with supporting data is required. Descriptions of the school's practices in each of the nine categories are written. The school must adhere to specific instructions regarding the narrative style, content and word limits. At St. Max, a team of teachers worked together to write each section of the document. The document was written, re-written, edited, then edited again.

St. Max's Blue Ribbon application was completed, reviewed by Monsignor Carroll, and Debra Brillante, the Archdiocesan Superintendent of Elementary Education at the time, and was submitted in November, 2016.

The United States Department of Education partners with the **Council for American Private Education(CAPE)** for the initial, first round selection of National Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence candidates. All private schools submit their applications to **CAPE**. **CAPE** evaluates applications from private schools because private schools have unique features and serve different purposes than the public schools.

CAPE notifies those schools whose applications will go forward to the United States Department of Education to be evaluated with the public school submissions. We were notified on January 25, 2017 that St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish School's Blue Ribbon application would be sent to the United States Department of Education. We had made the first cut!

In June, 2017, Ms. Aba Kumi of the United States Department of Education sent an email that *seemed to indicate* that St. Max would be named a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. In replying to that email, I asked Ms. Kumi to confirm whether we would definitely be awarded the Blue Ribbon. In her response, Ms. Kumi said she *was very confident* St. Max would be named but did not want us to make any formal announcement. Rather, she said we would receive more specific information later.

SHHH!

It was important for the Advisory Board and the Home & School Board to begin

planning the celebrations, as well as to devise the marketing strategies necessary to capitalize on this special award. So in July St. Max's Advisory and Home & School Board members were given the news but instructed to "keep it close to the vest". Tim Irvine, an Advisory Board member said, "Geez, you're telling us we won the Super Bowl, but we can't tell anybody!"

In August, 2017, St. Max received official confirmation that we would be recognized as a 2017 National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence on September 28! Mrs. Betsy DeVoss, US Secretary of Education, would officially name 342 National Blue Ribbon Schools via live video feed. Our teachers and staff, and Home & School members worked behind the scenes to have the celebrations, banners and signs, the TV news, and the Daily Local ready to go as soon as our school was named.

On September 28 the students, teachers and entire St. Max community erupted in joy when the announcement was made. The celebrations continued with a night of fun sponsored by the Home & School on October 7, then on November 7, I had the honor and privilege of accepting the official Blue Ribbon plaque and flag at a ceremony in Washington, DC. It was a proud moment for St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish School.

The Next Steps

The National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence designation is an earned accolade. We must work to maintain the high standards of achievement that distinguished St. Max as a School of Excellence. Our task now is to continue to strive for excellence every day, for every student. So that in 2022, when we are again eligible to apply, our Blue Ribbon status will be assured!

