

# Six named Blue Ribbon Schools

One from city, one from Baltimore County and two from Howard among those winning honor

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When Susan Burgess came to Baltimore City's George Washington Elementary - an impoverished school where 89 percent of the population receives free or reduced-price meals - four years ago, she immediately initiated changes.

The first-time principal revived the school's PTA; she became a fixture in the school, regularly working 12-hour days and popping in on weekends; and she encouraged professional development among her staff.

The changes paid off, the school's scores began to climb, and yesterday, the West Baltimore school was one of six in the state to be named a 2006-2007 Blue Ribbon School of Excellence.

Hereford Middle in Baltimore County, Burleigh Manor Middle and River Hill High in Howard, Heather Hills Elementary in Prince George's and Winston Churchill High in Montgomery also enjoyed the distinction.

Each school will represent Maryland in the National Blue Ribbon School Competition and vie for national distinction.

City schools Interim Chief Executive Officer Charlene Cooper Boston said she expects George Washington's honor to inspire others throughout the school system.

"It gives the community pride," she said. "It's reaffirming for staff. It shows that urban schools with a high number of free and reduced lunch can perform well. It gives us all hope."

This year's honorees, among more than 1,400 schools, were picked for the distinction based on the 2005-2006 Maryland School Assessment. Schools must have scored in the top 10 percent of all schools on the MSA or must serve economically disadvantaged communities whose test scores show improvements over three years. Their scores must be in the top 40 percent of all schools in the state.

"When people worry about the state of public education we can point to you," said state Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick, as she presented a multicolored flag to each school yesterday during a presentation at the Maryland State Department of Education. "There are no barriers when you examine these six schools."

The honor is accompanied by perks that include \$2,000, books valued at \$500, a technology package that includes equipment and computer programs and a schoolwide pizza party.

Schools also will be honored during a ceremony in March in [Annapolis](#) that includes a banquet and a tribute by the Maryland General Assembly.

"I really feel it is a daunting responsibility," Grasmick said to a room full of representatives from the honored schools. "You are being held to the highest possible standard in this selection."

George Washington pupils increased their Maryland State Assessment scores three consecutive years; and at least 92 percent of them achieved proficient status or above in math and reading.

Burgess, who has worked in city schools for 35 years, also attributed the success to small class sizes (the school has a pupil-to-teacher ratio of 17 to 1), low teacher turnover, team teaching and a community school concept, which offers social services on campus.

"We have a family feeling," she said of her 233-pupil school. "Everybody takes responsibility for the children here. No matter what they do here. Everybody is here to help support the kids."

At Hereford Middle School in Monkton, 91.6 percent of students are reading at a proficient level or above, and 90.8 percent are proficient or above in math. And 98 percent of the school's eighth-graders who took the algebra 1 or 2 exam passed.

Howard County had two honorees, a feat last accomplished by Baltimore County and Baltimore City in 2003, and had the first high school honored.

Burleigh Manor Middle School in [Ellicott City](#) was honored for having 95.8 percent of its pupils reading at the proficient level or above and 93.4 percent recording at least a proficient level in math.

River Hill High in Clarksville recorded the state's top scores on the High School Assessment tests with 92.7 percent of students passing English and 97.7 percent passing math. This was the first year high schools were named Blue Ribbon Schools in Maryland because assessment test data for high schools were not available to analyze earlier, state officials said.

River Hill teachers analyzed data and began to prep students with quizzes and mock examinations in the months leading up to the test, a strategy later adopted by other system schools. The school also kept parents abreast of the preparation through a series of informative letters, said Principal William Ryan.

"This really reflects positively on our staff," Ryan said. "We had a tremendous amount of support and students who are concerned" about their academic success.

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