2027

AMERICA'S BEST ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AWARD APPLICATION

DUE DATE: NOVEMBER 20, 2026

National Center for Urban School Transformation
3910 University Avenue San Diego, CA 92105
619-594-7905 | ncust@sdsu.edu | ncust.com

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OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR URBAN SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION'S AMERICA'S BEST ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AWARD PROGRAM

Thank you for your interest in the 2027 America's Best Schools Award. This overview introduces the purpose of the award, eligibility requirements, and the application process.

PURPOSE OF THE AWARD PROGRAM

The America's Best Alternative Schools Award recognizes outstanding public alternative schools and public charter alternative schools that successfully serve students whose academic, behavioral, or social needs may not be adequately met by traditional schools. These schools may serve students who have struggled in traditional settings, students whose academic achievement has fallen below their potential, or students and families seeking different approaches to teaching and learning.

The award celebrates schools that use innovative curricula, instructional practices, and learning environments to help students achieve academic proficiency, develop a love of learning, and prepare for success in postsecondary education, careers, and their communities. NCUST seeks to identify and celebrate alternative schools that demonstrate that students with diverse needs and backgrounds can achieve outstanding results in school and in life.

The award is limited to public alternative schools and public charter alternative schools that do not exclude students with greater academic needs from admission.

By identifying and studying successful alternative schools, NCUST seeks to understand the leadership practices, instructional approaches, and schoolwide systems that contribute to their success. Through publications, professional learning, leadership development, courses, and partnerships, NCUST shares these practices to help alternative schools improve outcomes for every student group they serve. NCUST also seeks to inform traditional schools as they work to better meet the needs of students and families they have not historically served well.

WHO SHOULD APPLY?

Alternative schools should apply only if they meet the required eligibility criteria and can provide substantial evidence of success toward ambitious goals for their students. Applicants should carefully review the eligibility requirements before beginning the application. If you are unsure whether your school meets a requirement, contact NCUST at ncust@sdsu.edu with your question and relevant information about your school.

A school district, local education agency, or charter school organization may submit applications for no more than two alternative schools.

The application provides opportunities for schools to document student progress and success across seven important goals and to describe, through brief narratives, how schoolwide practices and systems contribute to student outcomes.

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HOW TO APPLY

1. **Submit the Intent-to-Apply Form (Page V) by Tuesday, November 3, 2026.** While not required, **submitting this form is strongly encouraged and helps NCUST prepare for the application review process.**
2. **Submit your completed application** so it is received by NCUST no later than **5:00 p.m. Pacific Time on Friday, November 20, 2026.**

Please email the following materials to ncust@sdsu.edu:

a. Application Cover Page (Page 1)
b. Completed application (Pages 2-18)
c. Certification Page with Original Signatures (Page 19)
d. Photograph and Media Permission Form (Page 20)
e. At least 15 high-resolution JPG photographs (see Page 20)
f. Supporting state documentation for the data reported in the non-negotiable eligibility criteria found on pages 4-5 of this application.

SELECTION PROCESS

1. **Application Confirmation:** Once an application is received, NCUST will send a confirmation email to the primary contact listed in the application.

2. **Eligibility Review:** NCUST will review each application to determine whether it meets all non-negotiable eligibility criteria. Schools meeting every required criterion will be named to the **2027 America's Best Schools Honor Roll**. Honor Roll schools will be announced on December 15, 2026.

3. **Finalist Selection:** NCUST will conduct a comprehensive review of all Honor Roll applications to identify the schools demonstrating the strongest evidence of outstanding academic achievement for all student groups. Selected schools will be named 2027 America's Best Schools Award Finalists and notified by January 15, 2027.

4. **On-Site Validation Visits:** Each finalist school will receive an on-site visit from an NCUST review team that may include NCUST staff, former award-winning principals, administrators, teachers, and other accomplished educators. Visits will take place February through April 2027 and are designed to validate the information presented in the application.

   During the visit, the review team will observe classrooms, meet with educators, students, and families, and evaluate the school's implementation of the practices described in its application. Particular attention will be given to:

   - The effectiveness of school leadership and leadership teams
   - A positive, transformational school culture
   - Rigorous curricula for all students
   - Engaging and effective instruction
   - Systems for monitoring, confirming, and enhancing learning
   - Intervention and enrichment practices that support the success of every student group

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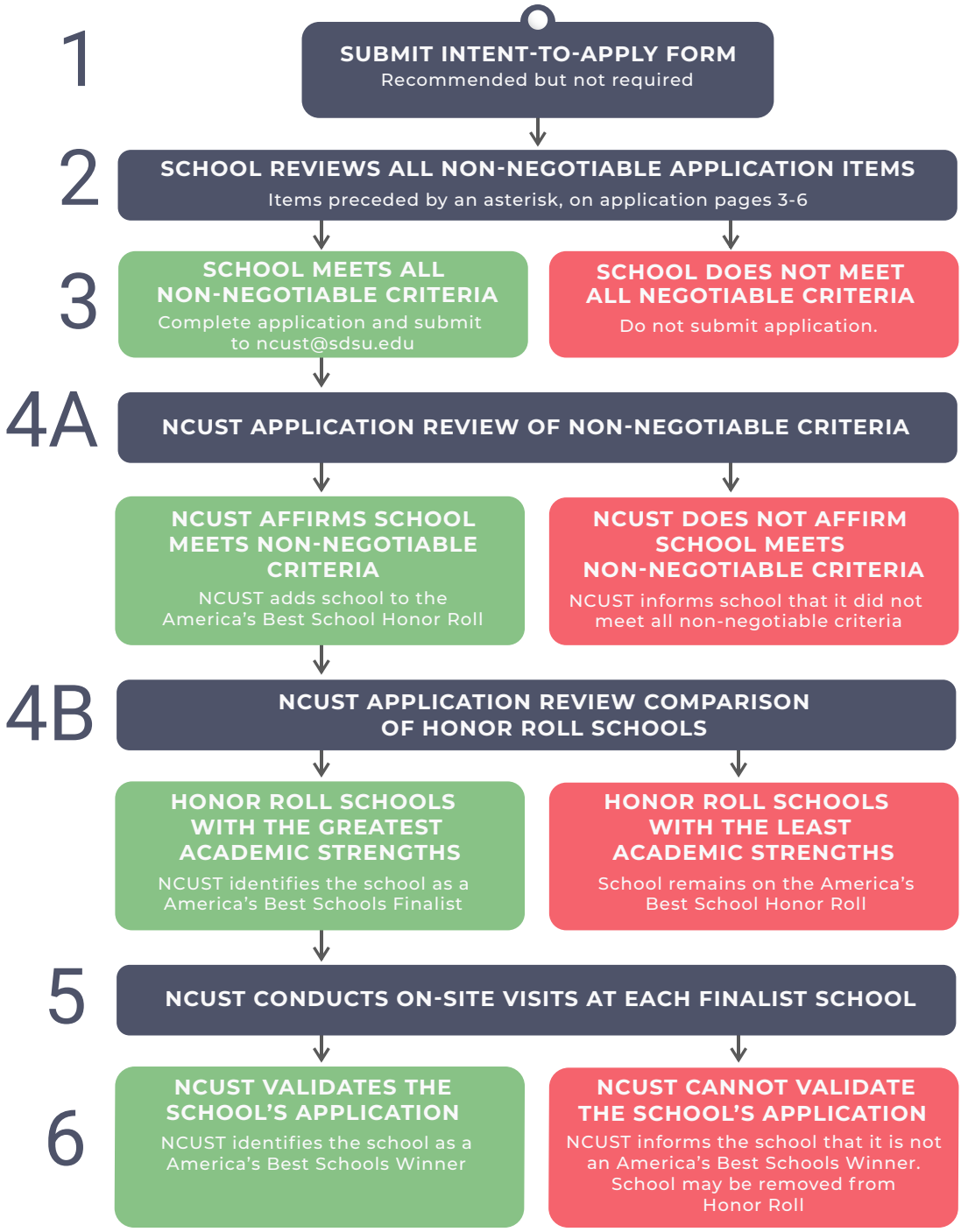
4. **Award Selection:** Schools whose applications are validated during the on-site review will be recognized as 2027 America's Best Schools Award Winners. If significant discrepancies are identified during the validation process, a school may be removed from the Honor Roll.

Award winners will be notified by May 1, 2027.



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AWARDS

Schools selected as 2027 America's Best Schools Award Winners will receive national recognition for their outstanding commitment to ensuring high levels of achievement for every student group they serve.

Award winners will be formally recognized during the 2028 NCUST America's Best Schools Symposium. Each winning school will receive an America's Best Schools Award banner and a commemorative plaque honoring its achievement.

Each winning school will also have the opportunity to present a featured symposium session highlighting the practices, systems, and leadership that have contributed to its success. These presentations provide educators and school leaders from across the nation with practical strategies and insights that can be adapted in their own schools. Presentation guidelines and a presentation template will be provided by NCUST.

Each winning school will receive one complimentary registration to the symposium. Additional members of the school's leadership team are encouraged to attend and may register at the standard symposium registration rate.

NCUST will also recognize winning schools through its website, newsletters, social media channels, and other professional learning opportunities, helping to share exemplary practices with educators nationwide.

ABAS AWARD INTENT-TO-APPLY FORM

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Submission Deadline: November 3, 2026

Submitting this form is strongly encouraged, but not required. It helps NCUST anticipate the number of applications to be reviewed and prepare the award review process.

Schools that do not submit an Intent-to-Apply Form may still submit a complete application by the application deadline.

By submitting this form, we affirm that we believe our school meets the non-negotiable eligibility criteria and intend to submit a completed 2027 America's Best Alternative Schools Award Application.

SCHOOL INFORMATION

School Name

School District or Authorizer:

City State

Grade Levels Served (2026–27) School Website

State Education Agency or District Data Website

This school serves the following populations: (Choose all that describe the students served.)

- ○ Students who have not succeeded behaviorally or socially in traditional schools
- ○ Students who have not succeeded academically in traditional schools or have succeeded at levels substantially below their academic potential
- ○ Students who seek (or whose families seek) an approach to learning that is substantially different from the approaches provided by traditional schools

PRIMARY CONTACT INFORMATION

Name

Title

Email Phone

Please email this completed form to ncust@sdsu.edu

AWARD APPLICATION COVER PAGE

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SCHOOL INFORMATION

School Name

School District or Authorizer

School Address

City

State

Zip Code

Main School Phone

School Website

State Education Agency Website

Grades Served

Current Enrollment

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Principal/ Director

Email

Phone

Superintendent (or Chief Executive Officer)

Email

Phone

PRIMARY CONTACT INFORMATION

Name

Title

Email

Phone

SCHOOL PROFILE

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1. WHO DOES THE SCHOOL SERVE?

	2024–2025	2025–2026	2026–2027
Grade Levels Served			
Approximate Average Number of Days Each Student Was Enrolled			
Number of Students Enrolled Following a Suspension, Expulsion, or Court Action			
Number of Students Who Had the Option to Attend a Traditional Public School			

2. STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS (2026–2027)

Student Group	Number	Percentage
Asian		
Black or African American		
Filipino		
Latino or Hispanic		
Multiracial		
Native American		
Pacific Islander		
White		
Other (Specify)		
English Learners		
Students with Disabilities		
Students Meeting Low-Income Criteria		

3. HOW DID YOU LEARN ABOUT THE AMERICA'S BEST SCHOOLS AWARD?

○ NCUST America's Best Schools Symposium ○ NCUST Website ○ Email from NCUST
○ Recommendation from School District ○ Recommendation from State Education Agency
○ Colleague or Previous Award Winner ○ Social Media ○ Other:

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4. STUDENT TIME USE DURING A TYPICAL SCHOOL WEEK

Use the table below to describe how students typically spend their time in school-related activities during a school week. Estimate the percentage of students who follow each of the three most common schedules and the approximate number of minutes per week students spend in each activity.

	Most Common Schedule	Second Most Common Schedule	Third Most Common Schedule
Percentage of students following this schedule			
Face-to-face group instruction (minutes per week)			
Virtual group instruction (minutes per week)			
Face-to-face one-to-one instruction (minutes per week)			
Virtual one-to-one instruction (minutes per week)			
On-site independent learning activities (minutes per week)			
Virtual independent learning activities (minutes per week)			
Internships or other work experiences (minutes per week)			
Other school-related activities (minutes per week). Briefly describe:			

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1. DOES NCUST CONSIDER THIS SCHOOL AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL?*

A. Student Population
(Select all statements that describe the students served by your school.)

- ○ Students who have experienced behavioral or social challenges in traditional schools.
- ○ Students who have experienced academic challenges in traditional schools or whose academic achievement has been substantially below their potential.
- ○ Students who, or whose families, seek an approach to learning that differs substantially from the approaches offered by traditional schools.

B. Student Eligibility

What percentage of students enrolled during the 2025–2026 school year did not fit any of the three descriptions listed in Item 1A?

Percentage: %

✱ Eligibility Requirement

To qualify as an alternative school for this award, no more than 50% of enrolled students may fall outside the student populations described in Item 1A. If more than 50% of students do not fit any of these descriptions, the school is not eligible for the America's Best Alternative Schools Award. The school may wish to apply for the NCUST America's Best Schools Award using the standard application.

2. SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS *

Which of the following enrollment criteria determine which students may attend your school?
(Check all that apply.)

- ○ Address (Students are enrolled only if they live in the school boundary or attendance zone.)
- ○ Age and/or Grade (Students are enrolled only if they are at ages/grade levels served.)
- ○ First-come/First-served (Students are enrolled until the grade/school is filled to capacity.)
- ○ Academic Criteria* (Some students may not be enrolled because of their prior grades, test scores, or other academic criteria.)

  If academic criteria is selected, are academic criteria used only for admission into a choice or magnet program? ○ Yes ○ No

  If yes, approximately what percentage of the school's total enrollment is admitted through the choice or magnet program? %
- ○ Other enrollment criteria (please describe)
- ○ Students may lose enrollment because of declining academic performance.

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✱ Eligibility Requirement

A school is **not eligible** if:

- academic criteria are used for general admission (except for a choice or magnet program serving 10% or fewer of the school's enrollment);
- other enrollment criteria discourage or prevent students with greater academic needs from enrolling; or
- students may lose enrollment because of declining academic performance.

3. STUDENTS MEETING LOW-INCOME CRITERIA *

Report the percentage of students who met your state's low-income eligibility criteria during each of the following school years.

Based on 2026–2027 enrollment data?	%
Based on 2025–2026 enrollment data?	%
Based on 2024-2025 enrollment data?	%

✱ Eligibility Requirement

Schools must meet the following minimum percentages **during all three school years**:

- **Elementary Schools:** 60% or higher
- **Middle Schools:** 50% or higher
- **High Schools:** 40% or higher

- ○ I have attached the official state report used to complete question 2
- ○ The attached report demonstrates that the school meets this eligibility requirement.

You've completed the eligibility review section. The remaining sections allow you to share the practices, systems, and leadership that make your school exceptional.

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4. GOAL 1: SUPPORT STUDENTS IN DEVELOPING LITERACY SKILLS FOR SUCCESS IN WORK, CIVIC LIFE, DAILY LIVING, AND POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Required Goal: Applicants must provide evidence of student progress or success toward this goal.

Evidence of Progress/Success

Select and describe the types of evidence that demonstrate progress or success during the **2025–2026** school year. Include results for relevant student groups, including racial and ethnic groups, English learners, and students with disabilities, as applicable.

A. Literacy Growth and Mastery
Describe evidence of student growth in literacy skills, such as gains in Lexile levels or other literacy measures, mastery of specific literacy objectives, or progress toward literacy goals in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

B. Literacy Assessment Results
Describe student progress or achievement on state or other literacy assessments, including movement to higher performance levels or meeting literacy requirements for postsecondary coursework, where applicable.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

C. Additional Evidence
Describe any other evidence demonstrating student progress or success in developing literacy skills.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

Describe the practices/strategies that have influenced the successes related to this goal:

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5. GOAL 2: SUPPORT STUDENTS IN DEVELOPING NUMERACY SKILLS FOR SUCCESS IN WORK, CIVIC LIFE, DAILY LIVING, AND POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Applicants must provide evidence of student progress or success toward this goal.

Evidence of Progress/Success

Select and describe the types of evidence that demonstrate progress or success during the 2025–2026 school year. Include results for relevant student groups, including racial and ethnic groups, English learners, and students with disabilities, as applicable.

A. Numeracy Growth and Mastery
Describe evidence of student growth in numeracy, such as mastery of specific math objectives, development of practical math skills, or progress toward math goals in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

B. Math Assessment Results
Describe student progress or achievement on state or other math assessments, including movement to higher performance levels or meeting math requirements for postsecondary coursework, where applicable.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

C. Additional Evidence
Describe any other evidence demonstrating student progress or success in developing numeracy skills.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

Describe the practices/strategies that have influenced the successes related to this goal:

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6. GOAL 3: SUPPORT STUDENTS IN DEVELOPING THE SOCIAL, SELF-REGULATORY, AND BEHAVIORAL SKILLS NEEDED TO SUCCEED IN SCHOOL, THE WORKPLACE, AND SOCIETY

Applicants must provide evidence of student progress or success toward this goal.

Evidence of Progress/Success

Select and describe the types of evidence that demonstrate progress or success during the 2025–2026 school year. Include results for relevant student groups, including racial and ethnic groups and students with disabilities, as applicable.

A. Attendance and Behavior
Describe evidence of positive student attendance, low rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, and reductions in incidents requiring disciplinary action.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

B. Social, Emotional, and Physical Well-Being
Describe evidence of student progress in developing healthy behaviors and positive self-regulation. Examples may include participation in programs that promote physical, emotional, and social well-being or reductions in documented drug- or alcohol-related incidents.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

C. Leadership and Community Involvement
Describe evidence of student participation in positive leadership roles at school or in the community, as well as involvement in community service.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

D. Behavioral Goals and Additional Evidence
Describe student progress toward behavioral goals specified in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), where applicable, and any other evidence demonstrating progress or success toward this goal.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

Describe the schoolwide practices, instructional strategies, or other factors that contributed to student progress or success toward this goal.

7. GOAL 4: SUPPORT STUDENTS IN PROGRESSING TOWARD AND ACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION AND GRADUATION

Applicants serving high school students must provide evidence of student progress or success toward this goal.

Evidence of Progress/Success

Select and describe the types of evidence that demonstrate progress or success during the 2025–2026 school year. Include results for relevant student groups, including racial and ethnic groups, English learners, and students with disabilities, as applicable.

A. Credit Accumulation and Grade-Level Progress
Describe evidence that students earned sufficient credits to advance toward high school completion, including results for relevant student groups.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

B. Graduation Outcomes
Describe evidence of student graduation rates, including the percentage of students who entered the school year as seniors and graduated by the end of the school year. Include results for relevant student groups, as applicable.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

C. Additional Evidence
Describe any other evidence demonstrating student progress toward proficiency in two or more languages.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

Describe the schoolwide practices, instructional strategies, or other factors that contributed to student progress or success toward this goal.

8. GOAL 5: SUPPORT STUDENTS IN ADVANCING TOWARD PROFICIENCY IN TWO OR MORE LANGUAGES

Optional Goal: Applicants may choose not to submit evidence related to this goal.

Evidence of Progress/Success

Select and describe the types of evidence that demonstrate progress or success during the 2025–2026 school year. Include results for relevant student groups, as applicable.

A. English and First-Language Proficiency
Describe evidence of growth in English proficiency among students whose first language is not English and growth in first-language proficiency among these students, where applicable. Consider gains in speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

B. Second-Language Proficiency and Biliteracy
Describe evidence of growth in second-language proficiency among students whose first language is English, as applicable. Include the percentage of graduates earning a State Seal of Biliteracy or a comparable recognition of proficiency in two or more languages, where applicable.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

C. Additional Evidence
Describe any other evidence demonstrating student progress toward proficiency in two or more languages.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

Describe the schoolwide practices, instructional strategies, or other factors that contributed to student progress or success toward this goal.

9. GOAL 6: SUPPORT STUDENTS IN EARNING INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CERTIFICATIONS FOR CAREER PATHWAYS

Optional Goal: Applicants may choose not to submit evidence related to this goal.

Evidence of Progress/Success

Select and describe the types of evidence that demonstrate progress or success during the 2025–2026 school year. Include results for relevant student groups, including racial and ethnic groups, as applicable.

A. Career Exploration
Describe evidence of student participation in and completion of career exploration courses designed to help students investigate and consider different career pathways.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

B. Career Pathways and Industry-Recognized Certifications
Describe evidence of student enrollment in courses or programs leading to industry-recognized certifications for careers that offer living wages and benefits. Include the percentage of graduates who completed a career pathway and earned an industry-recognized certification, where applicable.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

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C. Additional Evidence

Describe any other evidence demonstrating student progress or success in exploring career options, completing career pathways, or earning industry-recognized certifications.

Evidence and results

How were these results documented?

Describe the schoolwide practices, instructional strategies, or other factors that contributed to student progress or success toward this goal.

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10. PROMOTING A POSITIVE, TRANSFORMATIONAL SCHOOL CULTURE

Describe the culture of your school and the practices that contribute to a positive, transformational environment for students and staff. In your response, address the following:

- What evidence suggests that students from all demographic groups feel cared for, valued, respected, and capable of success?
- What evidence suggests that school personnel feel valued, respected, and supported?
- What would visitors likely observe about relationships, expectations, student engagement, and the overall school climate?

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11. ENSURING ALL STUDENTS ACCESS TO RIGOROUS CURRICULA

Describe how your school ensures that all students (including students performing below grade level, at grade level, above grade level, English learners, and students with disabilities) have access to rigorous, challenging curricula. In your response, address the following:

- What evidence suggests that students across all demographic groups are engaged in rigorous, grade-level learning?
- How does the school ensure that rigorous curricula are accessible to students with diverse learning needs?
- What would visitors likely observe about the rigor, relevance, and quality of the curricula experienced by students throughout the school?

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13. PROVIDING ENGAGING, EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

Describe how your school ensures that high-quality instruction results in strong levels of student understanding and learning. In your response, address the following:

- What evidence suggests that classroom instruction consistently results in high levels of student understanding?
- How does the school support teachers in delivering effective lessons when new concepts and skills are initially introduced?
- What would visitors likely observe about the quality of instruction, student engagement, and learning throughout the school?

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14. MONITORING, CONFIRMING, AND ENHANCING LEARNING

Describe how your school continuously monitors student learning and uses the results to improve teaching and learning for all students.

In your response, address the following:

- What evidence suggests that educators, students, and families regularly monitor and confirm student understanding of important concepts and skills?
- How do educators use formative and summative assessment results to refine instruction and enhance student learning?
- How are students involved in monitoring their own progress and understanding?
- What would visitors likely observe about the effectiveness of checking for understanding, formative assessments, summative assessments, and the use of assessment data throughout your school?

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15. INTERVENTION AND ENRICHMENT

Describe how your school ensures that students receive timely intervention and enrichment that addresses their specific learning needs and promotes high levels of academic success.

In your response, address the following:

- What evidence suggests that intervention and enrichment efforts help students master essential concepts and skills?
- How does the school ensure that intervention and enrichment are timely, targeted, and responsive to student needs?
- How do intervention and enrichment opportunities support real-world application, deeper learning, or advanced achievement?
- What would visitors likely observe about the effectiveness of intervention and enrichment throughout your school?

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16. ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE OF EXCELLENCE

Describe any additional accomplishments, recognitions, or outcomes that demonstrate the success of your students, staff, and school community.

In your response, address the following:

- What accomplishments, awards, recognitions, or distinctions has the school earned that have not been described elsewhere in this application?
- What evidence suggests that students are excelling academically, artistically, athletically, socially, or in career and technical education programs?
- What accomplishments or recognitions highlight the excellence of your educators, programs, or school as a whole?
- What would visitors likely observe that reflects the unique strengths and accomplishments of your school?

Examples may include student achievement awards, academic growth, completion of rigorous coursework, college and career readiness outcomes, fine arts achievements, athletic accomplishments, career and technical education successes, educator recognitions, schoolwide awards, community partnerships, or other indicators of excellence.

REQUIRED FORMS

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PLEASE SEND THIS COMPLETED PAGE ALONG WITH THE APPLICATION

School Name

School District or Charter Organization

Address

City State Zip Code

Collectively, we, the undersigned, nominate the above-named school for the NCUST America's Best Schools Award. We affirm that, to the best of our knowledge, the school meets all of the required eligibility criteria specified in the application form and all of the information contained in this application is accurate. We believe that this school is transforming teaching and learning in a manner that is leading to excellent results for all of the students served.

PLEASE PROVIDE ORIGINAL SIGNATURES OF THE INDIVIDUALS LISTED BELOW

CONTACT PERSON FOR APPLICATION		DATE:
PRINCIPAL		DATE:
SUPERINTENDENT		DATE:
SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT		DATE:
TEACHER		DATE:
TEACHER		DATE:
TEACHER		DATE:
PARENT		DATE:
PARENT		DATE:
PARENT		DATE:

REQUIRED FORMS

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PHOTOGRAPH AND MEDIA PERMISSION FORM

Please submit at least 15 high-resolution digital photographs that represent various aspects of your school, including students engaged in learning and school activities. Photographs should be submitted in .jpg format at the highest available resolution.

Please do not add text, graphics, borders, or other edits to the photographs. Please send images and this signed permission form to NCUST, along with a complete copy of the application.

School Name

I certify that the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) has permission to use the photographs submitted by our school.

I further certify that:

- Appropriate permissions have been obtained for all students appearing in submitted photographs.
- Appropriate permissions have been obtained for all adults appearing in submitted photographs, including employees, volunteers, parents, and community members.
- NCUST may use these photographs in its publications, presentations, website, social media channels, symposium materials, and other communications consistent with its mission.

Principal Name

Principal Signature