2027 AMERICA'S BEST 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

AMERICA'S BEST SCHOOLS AWARD

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OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR URBAN SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION'S AMERICA'S BEST 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 Schools Award recognizes outstanding public schools and public charter schools where students from every demographic group achieve exceptional academic success and are well prepared for college, careers, and life.

Across the nation, schools are demonstrating that high levels of achievement are possible for all students, regardless of background or circumstance. NCUST seeks to identify these schools, celebrate their accomplishments, and highlight the leadership, instructional practices, and schoolwide systems that make their success possible.

Although many private schools provide outstanding educational opportunities, **the America's Best Schools Award is limited to public schools and public charter schools.** Likewise, **the award recognizes schools that serve students without selective academic admissions practices**, ensuring that honorees demonstrate success with the students they are called to serve.

NCUST shares the lessons learned from award-winning schools through research, publications, professional development programs, district partnerships, and the annual America's Best Schools Symposium. By showcasing the strategies and practices of exceptional schools, NCUST seeks to inspire and support educators nationwide in improving outcomes for every student group.

WHO SHOULD APPLY?

Before beginning the application, **carefully review the items marked with an asterisk (*).** These questions identify the non-negotiable eligibility criteria found on pages 3–7 of this application.

Schools should apply only if they meet every non-negotiable criterion.

If you are uncertain whether your school meets a specific eligibility requirement, please email ncust@sdsu.edu and include your anticipated response to the item in question. NCUST will gladly provide guidance before you invest time completing the full application.

To ensure broad national representation, each public school district or charter school organization may submit applications for no more than five schools. For organizations operating multiple districts, regions, or local education agencies under common governance, the five-school limit applies to the organization as a whole, not to each individual district or region.

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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 2-14)
c. Certification Page with Original Signatures (Page 15)
d. Photograph and Media Permission Form (Page 16)
e. At least 15 high-resolution JPG photographs (see Page 16)
f. Supporting state documentation for the data reported in the non-negotiable eligibility criteria found on pages 3–7 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 (items marked with an asterisk on pages 3–7). 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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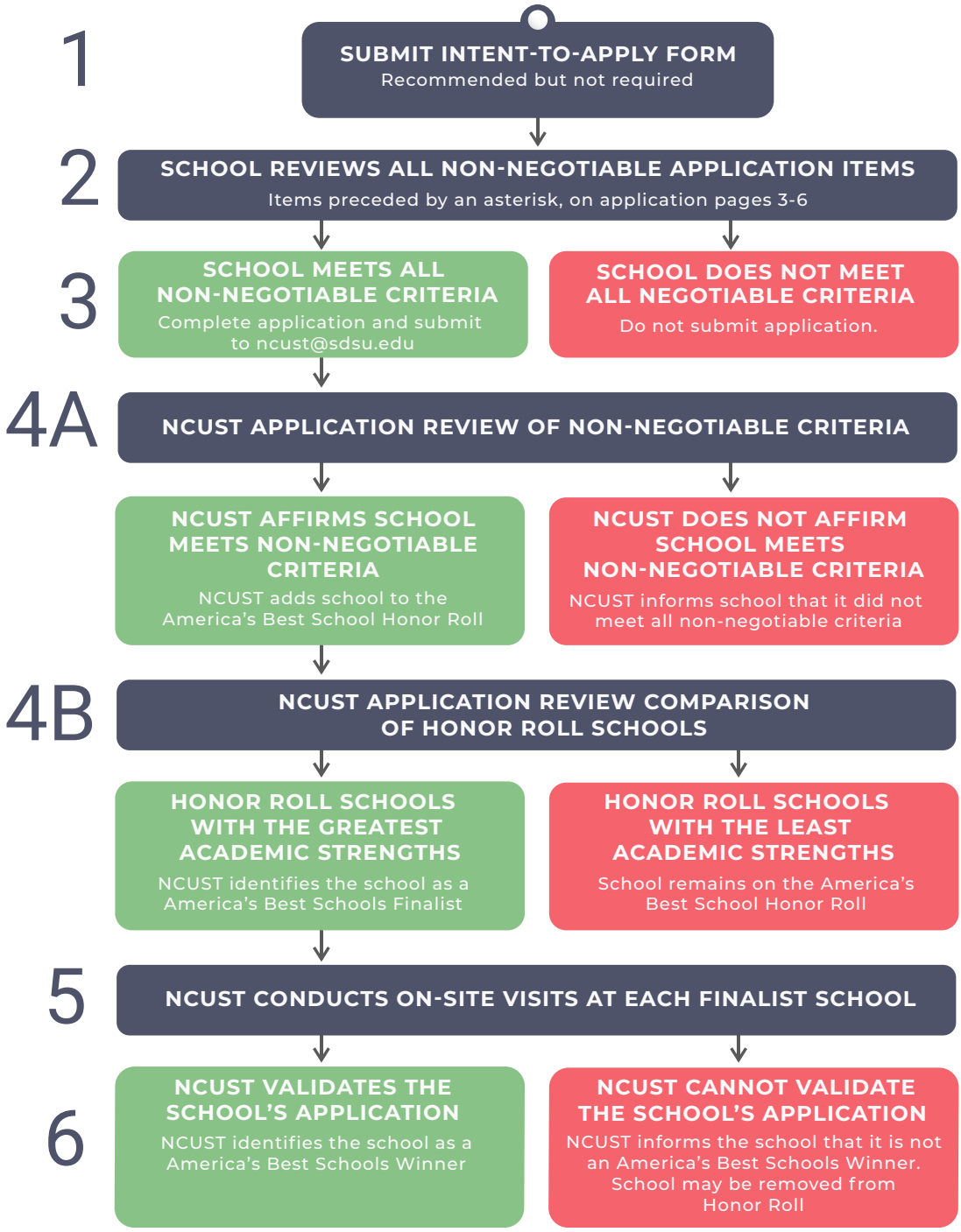
4. **Award Selection:** Schools whose applications are validated during the on-site review will be recognized as 2027 America's Best Schools Award Winners. If significant discrepancies are identified during the validation process, a school may be removed from the Honor Roll.

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.

ABS 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 Schools Award Application.

SCHOOL INFORMATION

School Name

School District or Charter Organization

City State

Grade Levels Served (2026–27) School Website

State Education Agency or District Data Website

Application Category ○ Elementary ○ Middle ○ High ○ other

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 Charter Organization

School Address

City

State

Zip Code

Main School Phone

School Website

State Education Agency Website

Grades Served

Current Enrollment

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Principal

Principal's Email

Principal's Phone

Superintendent (or Chief Executive Officer)

Email

Phone

PRIMARY CONTACT INFORMATION

Name

Title

Email

Phone

SCHOOL PROFILE

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1. SCHOOL INFORMATION

School Classification ○ Traditional Public School ○ Public Charter School

2. ENROLLMENT HISTORY

School Year	Student Enrollment	Grades Served
2026–2027		
2025–2026		
2024–2025		

3. 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		

4. 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:

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

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1. 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.

✱ 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.

2. 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.

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3. ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT *

a. Report the percentage of eligible students who participated in the state's accountability assessments during the most recent school year. %

b. State Assessment Performance: For each tested grade, report your school's percentage of students who achieved Proficient or Advanced (or the equivalent achievement level identified by your state) and the corresponding statewide percentage. Leave rows or columns blank if they do not apply to your school.

TABLE A: STATE ASSESSMENT PERFORMANCE FOR 2025-26

Grade	Assessment	School % Proficient	State % Proficient
Grade 3			
Grade 3			
Grade 3			
Grade 3			
Grade 4			
Grade 4			
Grade 4			
Grade 4			
Grade 5			
Grade 5			
Grade 5			
Grade 5			
Grade 6			
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Grade 12			
Grade 12			

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✱ Eligibility Requirement

A school meets this requirement if **at least 75% of its grade-level assessments meet or exceed the corresponding statewide percentage of students performing at the proficient or advanced level.**

- ○ I have attached the official report used to complete Table A: State Assesment Performance for 2025-26
- ○ The attached report demonstrates that the school meets this eligibility requirement.

4. ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENT GROUPS *

State Assessment Performance by Student Group

For each student group with 10 or more students tested, report the percentage of students who achieved the Proficient level (or your state's equivalent achievement level) on each official state accountability assessment administered during the most recent school year. List each assessment used by your state's accountability system across the top of the table.

TABLE B: Disaggregated State Assessment Data for Demographic Groups for 2025-26

Student Group	Students Tested	Assessment 1	Assessment 2	Assessment 3	Assessment 4	Assessment 5
Assessment						
Asian						
Black/ African American						
Filipino						
Latino/ Hispanic						
Multiracial						
Native American						
Pacific Islander						
White						
Students Meeting Low-Income Criteria						
English Learners						
Students with Disabilities						
Other (Specify)						
State Average for All Students						

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✱ Eligibility Requirement

Each racial or ethnic student group with **10 or more students tested** must meet or exceed the **statewide average for all students** on **at least one** official state accountability assessment.

Students meeting the state's low-income criteria must also meet or exceed the statewide average for all students on **at least one** official state accountability assessment.

English Learners and **Students with Disabilities** are **not** required to meet this eligibility requirement. Their achievement results will be considered during NCUST's holistic review of applicant schools.

- ○ I have attached the official state report used to complete Table B: Disaggregated State Assessment Data for Demographic Groups for 2025-26
- ○ The attached report demonstrates that the school meets this eligibility requirement.

5. STUDENT DISCIPLINE *

Out-of-School Suspensions

For each student group, report the number of enrolled students, the number of students suspended or expelled at least once during the most recent school year, the percentage of students suspended or expelled, and the total number of instructional days lost due to out-of-school suspensions or expulsions. Modify the student groups below, if necessary, to align with your state's reporting categories.

Table C: Out-of-School Suspensions in 2025-26

Student Group	Enrollment	Suspended/ Expelled at Least Once	Percent Suspended/ Expelled	Total Days Lost
Asian				
Black/ African American				
Filipino				
Latino/ Hispanic				
Multiracial				
Native American				
Pacific Islander				
White				
Students Meeting Low-Income Criteria				
English Learners				
Students with Disabilities				
Other (Specify)				
State Average for All Students				

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✱ Eligibility Requirement

For each student group with **more than 20 enrolled students**, the school must meet **both** of the following requirements:

- The **total number of instructional days lost** due to suspensions or expulsions must be **less than or equal to the number of students enrolled** in that student group.
- The **percentage of students suspended or expelled** must be l**ess than or equal to the statewide suspension rate for all students.**

○ I have attached the official state report used to complete Table C: Out-of-School Suspensions in 2025-26
○ 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.

6. ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER SUCCESS

What percent of English language learners advanced to a higher level of proficiency on the most recent state English language development assessment? %

7. ATTENDANCE AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Average daily attendance of students in 2026-26: %

Chronic absenteeism rate in 2026-26: %

8. TEACHER ATTENDANCE

Percent of teachers absent more than 15 school days during the most recent school year: %

High School Applicants Only

9. STUDENT PERSISTENCE

a. In 2025-26, how many students started the year as first-year students?

b. In 2026-27, how many students started the year as second-year students?

10. GRADUATION RATE

a. Number of 9th-grade students enrolled at the beginning of the 2022–23 school year:

b. How many students graduated by the end of the 2025-26 academic year?

c. What is the school's official current 4-year graduation rate?

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High School Applicants Only

11. COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

a. In 2025-26, how many students earned at least one college credit through concurrent enrollment or dual-enrollment courses?

b. How many students completed at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course during the 2025-26 academic year?

c. In 2025-26, how many students earned an industry certification through a CTE program?

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12. 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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13. 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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14. 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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15. 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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16. 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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17. 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