

Green

This toolkit includes recognition award overview, outreach, and selection materials to assist state officials in implementing U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools in their state.

U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools

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State Implementation
Toolkit



Overview

U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools (ED-GRS) is a public engagement initiative structured as a federal recognition award for school sustainability. It helps to facilitate state and local collaboration around school facilities, health, and environmental education. By highlighting schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions' cost-saving, health promoting, and performance-enhancing sustainability practices, ED-GRS celebrates these schools and brings more attention to their work. The schools are invited to a summer ceremony in Washington, D.C. where they receive a sustainable plaque; are the subject of media attention; and feel their efforts celebrated. Other schools, in turn, learn about and adopt their practices.

Schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions do not apply to ED for this award, but to their state education authorities, whether K-12 or postsecondary. State participation in the award is voluntary and not all state education authorities choose to nominate.

ED-GRS nominees must show progress in each of the following areas: 1) reducing environmental impacts, such as waste, water, energy, greenhouse gases, and transportation in the areas of facilities, grounds, and operations; 2) improving health and wellness through coordinated school health, with consideration to air quality, contaminant control, acoustics, daylighting, thermal comfort, school nutrition, and outdoors physical activity; and 3) offering effective environmental and sustainability education that emphasizes hands-on, real-world learning, civic engagement, STEM connections, and green career preparation.

Participating states have considerable autonomy on how they select their nominees to ED. For instance, they may designate a lead who forms a committee. These committees might include representatives from state education agencies, including facilities, health, and curriculum personnel; natural resources, energy, or agriculture agencies; and non-profits working with school sustainability in the state, such as state affiliates of North American Association for Environmental Education, U.S. Green Building Council, Project Learning Tree, and National Wildlife Federation Eco-Schools USA. These partners can help to identify candidates to nominate.

Many states use an application to select nominees, but do not have to offer a distinct application for this award. They may already know of good candidates and work with them to document their achievements. In other cases, states already have programs that ask that schools document their sustainability work and re-purpose those program applications for this nomination. In addition, ED offers an example application format to states.

States submit their nominees to ED by February 1. They set their own state-specific application deadlines to allow them time to review and select nominees. ED announces national honorees in spring. States are encouraged to offer additional state recognition titles and events, and to partner with private sector to offer cash prizes, amplifying the impact of their award implementation.



Criteria

Purpose

The aim of U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools (ED-GRS) is to inspire schools, districts and institutions of higher education (IHEs) to strive for 21st-century excellence by highlighting promising school sustainability practices and resources that all can employ. To that end, the award recognizes schools, districts, and IHEs that:

1. reduce environmental impact and costs;
2. improve the health and wellness of schools, students, and staff; and
3. provide effective environmental and sustainability education

Combined progress in ALL three of these areas, known as Pillars, serves as the basis for recognition. ED-GRS aligns with the U.S. Department of Education's (Department's or ED's) cross-cutting goals for education, including improving student, staff, and facility performance and increasing efficiency at federal, state, and local levels.

Another key function of the award is helping to facilitate state and local collaboration around school facilities, health, and environmental education.

Eligibility

The Secretary of Education invites [Chief State School Officers](#) (CSSOs) and [state higher education executive officers](#) (SHEEOs) from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, as well as the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) ("Nominating Authorities"), to nominate schools, districts, and IHEs that they have determined as meeting the criteria to be an ED-GRS.

Participating states have considerable autonomy on how they select their nominees to ED. For instance, they may designate a lead who forms a committee. These committees might include representatives from state education agencies, including facilities, health, and curriculum personnel; natural resources, energy, or agriculture agencies; and non-profits working with school sustainability in the state, such as state affiliates of North American Association for Environmental Education, U.S. Green Building Council, Project Learning Tree, and National Wildlife Federation Eco-Schools USA. These partners can help to identify candidates to nominate.

For postsecondary nominees, state selection committees may include input from the governor's office, postsecondary offices, and/or associations of higher education, as appropriate.

ED Green Ribbon Schools and District Sustainability Awardees. Each authority is permitted as many as five pre-K-12 school or district nominations. If a state or comparable authority wishes to nominate more than two schools or districts, at least one must serve at least 40 percent of students from a disadvantaged background. ^{1,2} No more than one of the five nominees in this pre-K-12 category may be a private school. A school or district may be selected as an honoree only once. School nominees from previous district awardees must document achievements that differentiate the school's work from that already honored districtwide. Authorities are



encouraged to consider a school's or district's academic achievement, success in closing achievement gaps, and diversity when selecting school nominees. Early learning institutions are eligible in this category.

Postsecondary Sustainability Award. In addition to a total of five school and district nominees, each state may nominate one IHE³ for progress in all three Pillars. For this award, state selection committees are encouraged to consider diverse types of institutions. An IHE may be selected as an honoree only once. While ED is not bound to selecting particular numbers of honorees, the final national cohort will be reflective of the full range of types of IHEs, including two- and four-year institutions and public and private institutions.

Program Requirements

State education authorities, including both CSSOs and SHEEOs, working with governor's offices, higher education officials, and other partners, as appropriate in each state, must submit documentation of school, district, and postsecondary nominees' progress under the Pillars and Elements, listed below. They are encouraged to reference a variety of widely accepted sustainability standards, certifications, ratings, and programs. Nominating authorities, district officials, and principals (where applicable) must certify compliance with all applicable civil rights, student aid, health, environment, and safety statutory and regulatory requirements.

Nominating authorities are encouraged to engage state health, environmental, and safety authorities; nonprofit experts in these areas; and federal agency field offices with appropriate technical expertise. In addition to providing valuable subject matter expertise, these partners can make the task of recruiting applicants and selecting nominees to the Department less cumbersome.

Review Criteria Used by the Authorities to Select Nominees

Each authority is invited to nominate up to five schools or school districts and a single IHE that it assesses to be the highest performing in their jurisdiction, based on the authorities' evaluation of applicants' progress in all Pillars and every Element.

Authorities should take into account demographic and geographic diversity and success in closing achievement gaps in their selections. ED will do the same in the federal review, aiming for a diverse cohort, representative of the full spectrum of schools, school districts, and IHEs across the nation.

ED-Green Ribbon Schools Pillars and Elements

I. Reduced Environmental Impact and Costs

- o Reduced or eliminated greenhouse gas emissions, using an energy audit or emissions inventory and reduction plan, cost-effective energy efficiency improvements, conservation measures, and/or on-site renewable energy and/or purchase of green power
- o Improved water quality, efficiency, and conservation
- o Reduced solid and hazardous waste production through increased recycling and composting, reduced consumption, and improved management, reduction, or elimination of hazardous waste
- o Expanded use of alternative transportation, through active promotion of locally available, energy-efficient options and implementation of alternative transportation supportive projects and policies



II. Improved Health and Wellness

- o High standards of [Whole School Whole Community, Whole Child health](#), including health, nutrition, and outdoor physical education; health, counseling, and psychological services for both students and staff; family community involvement; and
- o an [integrated school environmental health program](#) that considers occupant health and safety in all design, construction, renovation, operations, and maintenance of facilities and grounds, including cleaning and maintenance; mold and moisture; chemical and environmental contaminants; ventilation; and pests and pesticide.

III. Effective Environmental and Sustainability Education

- o Interdisciplinary learning about the key relationships between dynamic environmental, energy, and human systems
- o Use of the environment and sustainability to develop STEM content knowledge and thinking skills to prepare graduates for the 21st-century technology-driven economy
- o Development of civic engagement knowledge and skills and students' application of such knowledge and skills to address sustainability issues in their community

Technical Assistance

ED-GRS provides program administration support to states, including samples and regular communications. Schools looking to improve in these areas can find resources on [Green Strides](#) school sustainability resource hub.

Notification, Recognition Ceremony, and Benefits

Honored schools, school districts, and IHEs are announced each spring. The selectees are invited to a summer ceremony in Washington, D.C. where they receive a sustainable plaque; are the subject of media attention; and feel their efforts celebrated. Other schools, in turn, learn about and adopt their practices. States are encouraged to offer additional state recognition titles and events, and to partner with private sector to offer cash prizes, amplifying the impact of their award implementation. The federal recognition award conveys no ED funding to states, districts, schools, or IHEs.

Statutory Authorities

ED is responsible for administering U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools. ED-GRS is authorized the Department of Education Organization Act, 20 U.S.C. 3402 (2) and (3).



Outreach Materials

Sample Correspondence Inviting Schools, Districts, and/or Postsecondary Institutions to Apply

Dear schools/districts/postsecondary institutions,

Thank you for your interest in applying for the [state name] nomination to U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools (ED-GRS). For years, your institution has implemented practices, procedures, and programs that promote a healthier, more sustainable learning environment, foster wellness, and offer effective environmental learning. Your work has made positive environmental and health impacts in your school community, along with improving students' sustainability literacy.

Because of your efforts, we invite you to document your achievements in what are known as the three Pillars of ED-GRS: 1) Reduced Environmental Impact and Costs; 2) Improved Health and Wellness; and 3) Effective Environmental and Sustainability Education.

Attached to this message is the [state name] application for nomination to ED-GRS. When your application is complete, please submit it [link/location] to [contact].

You can find [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about the award and common [misconceptions dispelled](#) online. Samples of the Summary Narrative requested in the application are available in past [Highlights Reports](#). The award criteria with the three Pillars are available [here](#). Examples of past submissions are available [here](#). It is very important that you document progress in every Pillar of the award, as it is not sufficient to be high-achieving in one area. You can find resources to advance in all three Pillars on [Green Strides](#).

Note that, if selected for nomination, your school will also be asked to complete the attached certification statements in the Nominee Presentation Form and provide 3-5 photos of your school sustainability work. I will work with you on that after we have selected [your state name] nominees.

Application Timeline for [Year]

[Ideally, states' applications go out in the summer or fall, but it has been done on a much briefer timeframe]

Date	Process
December 31 or the date you select	Deadline for schools/districts/IHEs to submit applications to the [your state name] education authority <i>This deadline is flexible, so long as states have enough time to review, select, and submit.</i>
February 1	Nominees from the [state name] selection committee forwarded to the U.S. Department of Education by this date
Month	[State name] recognition events



Spring [exact date TBD]	ED will announce national honorees
Summer [exact date TBD]	Honorees will send representatives to a national recognition ceremony in Washington, DC

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding the application. We look forward to learning more about your school sustainability work.

Sincerely,

[State education agency program administrator name]



Sample Application

[Many states use an application to select nominees, but do not have to offer a distinct application for this award. They may already know of good candidates and work with them to document their achievements. In other cases, states repurpose existing programs that recognize schools' sustainability work. This sample is provided to assist state officials but is not required. You can see more examples of different state application formats [here](#).

Note: Some states distinguish between application and nomination to ED. That is, they submit a summary, rather than the actual application completed by institutions.]

Background

Thank you for your interest in completing the [state name] application for nomination to U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools (ED-GRS), District Sustainability Award, or Postsecondary Sustainability Award. ED-GRS recognizes schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions taking a comprehensive approach to sustainability, incorporating environmental learning with improving environmental and health impacts. You must show progress in each of the following Pillars:

Pillar I: Reducing environmental impact and costs;

Pillar II: Improving the health and wellness of students and staff; and

Pillar III: Offering effective environmental and sustainability education.

Schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions demonstrating progress in every area will receive highest scores. It may help to assemble a team with expertise across these areas to complete the application. You may also wish to consult [Green Strides](#) for programs related to each Pillar.

Applications are due by to [state contact] by [date]. [State name] will send nominations to the U.S. Department of Education by xyz date. Please contact [contact name] if you have questions.

Nominee Information

School, District, or Postsecondary Institution Name:

Category of Nomination (School, District, or Postsecondary):

Address: City: State: Zip: Twitter: Facebook:

Top official (School=Principal; District=Superintendent; IHE= President): Title (Mr./Ms./Mrs./ Dr.): First Name:
Name: Last Name: Position/Role (Principal/ Superintendent/ President): Email:
Phone:

Lead Applicant (if different) Title (Mr./Ms./Mrs./ Dr.): First Name: Last Name:
Position/Role (Teacher/ Sustainability Director/ Facilities Director): Email: Phone:

Check all that apply:

Early Learning

Middle

Public

Elementary

High

Charter



Magnet
Non-Public
Two-Year

Four-Year
Community College
Career and Technical

Urban
Rural
Suburban

Provide percentages, if any are relevant to your school, district, or institution:

Pell Recipients: Special Education:
Free and Reduced Price Lunch: Graduation Rate:
Minority: Attendance Rate:
Limited English Proficient:

Provide the following:

Total Enrolled: Number of Schools: Buildings: Campuses:



Documentation of Sustainability Achievement

Narrative for Pillar 1: Your Efforts to Reduce Environmental Impact and Costs

Use 1-4 pages to describe how your school, district, or postsecondary institution is reducing environmental impact and costs by reducing or eliminating greenhouse gas emissions; improving water quality, efficiency, and conservation; reducing waste production; and using alternative transportation. Identify your energy-efficient facilities and practices, ecologically and educationally beneficial uses of grounds, and methods of disposal for solid and hazardous wastes. Use supporting data and reference participation in pertinent benchmarking programs to demonstrate progress where possible.

Narrative for Pillar 2: Your Efforts to Improve the Health and Wellness of Students and Staff

Use 1-4 pages to describe how your school, district, or postsecondary institution improves the health and wellness of students and staff by integrating an environmental health program and promoting sound health and wellness practices. You should discuss cleaning and maintenance; mold and moisture; chemical and environmental contaminants; ventilation; pests and pesticide, as well as nutrition and outdoors physical activity. Other components you may include are health education, health services, counseling, psychological and social services, sun safety, staff health promotion, and family and community involvement. Incorporate metrics and include program participation where possible.

Narrative for Pillar 3: Your Efforts to Ensure Effective Environmental and Sustainability Education

Use 1-4 pages to describe how your school, district, or postsecondary institution ensures effective environmental and sustainability education throughout the curriculum. Provide examples of interdisciplinary learning about the key relationships between dynamic environmental, energy, and human systems. Demonstrate how your institution uses the environment and sustainability to develop STEM content, knowledge, and thinking skills, and teach all subjects in context. You should discuss how your school, district, or postsecondary institution develops and applies civic knowledge and skills to environmental and sustainability education. All STEM and civics work should be described as it relates to environmental and sustainability learning. Detail any environmental or sustainability literacy standards, show how these concepts are integrated into assessments, and describe environmental and sustainability literacy professional development. Include co-curricular opportunities such as field trips, study abroad, clubs, and service learning. This section should describe hands-on, place-based, project-based, authentic learning across the curriculum, not limited to one subject, such as science courses.

Summary Narrative: An Overview of Your Work Encompassing All Three Pillars

Use 2-3 pages to provide a summary narrative describing your school, district, or postsecondary institution's efforts to reduce environmental impact and costs; improve student and staff health and wellness; and provide effective environmental and sustainability education. This overarching summary should highlight the best of your work in every ED-GRS Pillar and Element. You view examples of summary narratives in past [Highlights Reports](#). The summary that you submit should be what you would like to see appear in a future Highlights Report, if your institution is selected. Be sure to include concrete sustainability achievements, supporting data, unique partnerships, program participation, awards, and certifications. It may be helpful to pull from your previous three narratives to write the summary.



Photos: Please submit 5-10 photographs with brief descriptions including who, what, when, and where. Photos should be action shots, not posed. By sending these photos, you are giving [state name] and the U.S. Department of Education permission to use them in our newsletter and social media.



Sample Checklist for State Evaluation of Nominee

Reduced Environmental Impact and Costs	Score 1-5 or indicate whether demonstrating progress (Y/N)
Reduced or eliminated greenhouse gas emissions, using an energy audit or emissions inventory and reduction plan, cost-effective energy efficiency improvements, conservation measures, and/or on-site renewable energy and/or purchase of green power	
Improved water quality, efficiency, and conservation	
Reduced solid and hazardous waste production through increased recycling and composting, reduced consumption, and improved management, reduction, or elimination of hazardous waste	
Expanded use of alternative transportation, through active promotion of locally available, energy-efficient options and implementation of alternative transportation supportive projects and policies	
Improving Health and Wellness	Score 1-5 or indicate whether demonstrating progress (Y/N)
High standards of Whole School Whole Community, Whole Child health , including health, nutrition, and outdoor physical education; health, counseling, and psychological services for both students and staff; and family and community involvement	
Integrated school environmental health program that considers occupant health and safety in all design, construction, renovation, operations, and maintenance of facilities and grounds, including cleaning and maintenance; mold and moisture; chemical and environmental contaminants; ventilation; and pests and pesticide	
Effective Environmental and Sustainability Education	Score 1-5 or indicate whether demonstrating progress (Y/N)
Interdisciplinary learning about the key relationships between dynamic environmental, energy, and human systems	
Use of the environment and sustainability to develop STEM content knowledge and thinking skills to prepare graduates for the 21 st -century technology-driven economy	
Development of civic engagement knowledge and skills and students' application of such knowledge and skills to address sustainability issues in their community	



Uploading Your Nominees for Submission

1. State education authorities must submit nominees to the U.S. Department of Education by February 1. All nominees must be submitted online as an uploaded PDF through www.greenstrides.org.
2. Indicate to ED (andrea.falken@ed.gov) that your state will be submitting a nominee this year and who will be doing that. She will provide an account for that person to upload the nomination. If the person submitting nominees in your state has changed, please advise ED to create a new account. If you submit early learning-12 and postsecondary nominations separately in your state, we can provide accounts for both elementary/secondary and postsecondary colleagues and those can be submitted independently.
3. You'll be prompted to upload up to five early learning to high school or district nominees and up to one postsecondary nominee. You do not have to complete all nominations in one session, but it is best to have the nomination packages that you intend to upload in a session finalized, so that you do not need to replace a given submission with revised versions within the system.
4. Please make sure that your nomination package is handicap accessible in its entirety. We will have to ask you to resubmit any inaccessible nominations. Signing and scanning the first two pages of your package, the Nominee Presentation Form, will always result in inaccessible pages. Here is one alternate method for creating an accessible signed document:
 - a. Make a JPEG of each certifying signature and then copy and paste the signature into appropriate place on the Nominee Presentation Form.
 - b. Once you have compiled your documentation and pasted signatures into your Nominee Presentation Form in the appropriate places, insert the Nomination Presentation Form as the first page of your intended submission package.
 - c. If your application is created in Word, save it as a PDF in order to transmit it. If you scan your Word document to convert it to a PDF, it will not be accessible.
 - d. For guidance on creating accessible PDFs, visit the [U.S. Access Board's resources, Health and Human Services checklist for accessible PDFs](#) or World Wide Web Consortium's [techniques for creating accessible PDFs](#).
 - e. Some states have found it helpful to connect with colleagues in IT and special education programs, who tend to have experience with document accessibility.
5. You will be prompted to specify the type of nominee and to enter each nominee's contact information (both a lead applicant and a top official, if they differ), social media handles, and basic demographic data for each institution.
6. Ensure that the name of the honoree is printed exactly as it should appear on a plaque, and that all addresses, name spellings, and emails are accurate. The word 'School' should be included, if it is part of a school's official name.
7. Upload the PDF with a simple name that does not include special characters or spaces.
8. You will be asked to submit between three and five photographs for each nominee and to enter descriptions. You must enter at least three in order to finalize a nomination. *Photos should be action shots, not posed.* Having quality photos allows us to share the nominee's story, if selected. By sending these photos, you are giving the U.S. Department of Education permission to use them in our newsletters and social media.



9. Each submission, including the Nominee Presentation Form, the summary narrative, and documentation of a nominee's progress in all three Pillars *must not exceed 20 pages PDF*. You should use standard fonts and margins. This may require synthesizing information from your state's application intake. You are welcome to intake as much information at the state level as you need to evaluate your applicants.
10. Your nomination package should have the Nominee Presentation Form as its cover sheet; then the Highlights Report-ready summary narrative; then additional documentation, *in that order*.
11. If you are asked to make changes, you will need to resubmit the entire PDF with the changes included, rather than revised pieces of the submission. The entire package goes on our website when selectees are announced.
12. Use a nomination format that presents a clear, succinct picture of a nominee's successful practices in each Pillar. Consider orthographical and grammatical correctness. Work with your nominees to put their best foot forward.
13. Provide a narrative that summarizes a nominee's work in all three Pillars. Direct your applicants to [past Highlights Reports](#) for examples of this overview summary. We suggest allowing them at least two pages for this summary. It should not be a bulleted list, but rather a coherent narrative. The summary that you submit should be what you would like to see appear in the final Highlights Report.
14. Ensure that the nomination materials cover all three Pillars. Common reasons for not confirming a nominee:
 - a. Nominees are weak in one or more Pillars.
 - b. Nominees do not connect STEM and civics education to environmental and sustainability learning, especially when detailing their efforts in Pillar III.
 - c. School nominees have already been recognized as part of a district award, and cannot differentiate themselves from the districtwide effort.
15. Confirm the compliance of your nominees with all applicable civil rights, Federal Student Aid, health, safety, and environment statutory and regulatory requirements.
16. ED will confirm receipt of nominees and contact you with any questions.