

# Q&A with Hallie Scheu on Saint Wendel’s National Blue Ribbon designation

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Hallie Scheu (Provided Photo)

**WADESVILLE, Ind.** - Saint Wendel Catholic School in Posey County and Oak Hill Elementary School in Vanderburgh County are among 16 schools in Indiana to be recognized as 2024 National Blue Ribbon Schools. Both schools were honored in the “Exemplary High-Performing Schools” category.

Saint Wendel Principal Hallie Scheu spoke with Inside INdiana Business about what the Blue Ribbon distinction means for the private school and offered advice to other schools seeking this recognition.

### **What is a National Blue Ribbon School?**

A National Blue Ribbon School is a school that has achieved exemplary status in either high performing schools—those are schools that have the highest achievement on state assessments or national normed assessments—or exemplary status in closing that achievement gap amongst groups of students or the overall school.

The second one is maybe those schools that are low performing but they're showing a large amount of growth with a particular group. That might be English as a Second Language group or a free and reduced lunch group. Saint Wendel earned this distinction from exemplary high performance with our assessment scores.

### **What does this distinction mean for Saint Wendel?**

There are 115,171 public or nonpublic/private schools in the United States. Out of that, 19,329 are private or nonpublic schools. Blue Ribbon only awards—through the [Council for American Private Education] organization—40 Blue Ribbon awards to nonpublic or private schools. So to know that we are in the top 40 of 19,000+ schools is remarkable.

Saint Wendel has always had a high achievement with the state assessments, with I<sub>L</sub>EARN and I<sub>R</sub>EAD. We know that our students work hard. To see their work shine through, even a national normed assessment, is remarkable for us. It's great that their achievement is being recognized.

### **What does this recognition mean for the community?**

Our community of Saint Wendel is in the northern part of Posey County. Our school sits on the Vanderburgh County/Posey County line. It's exciting for our community because we are a small, close-knit community that takes pride in our community and our students.

We have parishioners and community members who are truly invested in our students. If there's a new, innovative project or something that we would like to try, we have a great network of people to reach out to and be like, "Hey, we're thinking about doing this. What are your thoughts?" And they're like, "Oh my gosh, yes, let's do it. And let's do this and this."

We decided we were going to start a construction club this year. We put it out there to our community members and not only was it funded but it was also brainstormed and figured out, like different field trips and things like that to go on after school, to increase the learning and enrichment.

The community is excited for this. The amount of phone calls, text messages, people that have stopped by school to congratulate us. We're big into social media. The amount of shares and likes and comments is exciting from alumni and parishioners.

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### **What factors contributed to Saint Wendel achieving Blue Ribbon status?**

You have to have teachers and faculty who are willing to do what is best for students. That means taking on extra responsibilities. My teachers and staff are not an eight-to-three staff. They are here to do whatever the students need. If they need extra reteach, if they need to talk, whatever that might be. You have to have a staff that is willing to be selfless and dedicate themselves to the school and the community.

You have to have parents who are willing to support the initiatives that you as a school and your teachers want to do and try. We have a strong partnership with our parents, for the good, the bad and sometimes indifferent. They don't always like what we want to try and do, but they are always receptive to at least trying it.

Another characteristic is having a group of students with grit and perseverance. I explained to our students last week that when an open response question comes up, they don't just write one word answers. They are there to write the response. That response might be restating the question, answering it fully, correcting for grammar and spelling and punctuation, all that. They're a group of students that want to achieve. That does not come easy in this day and age.

We have a super supportive pastor of our church and school. He wants to do everything that he can to help support teachers who then help support students. Our community has invested in our students and in our school community. All that mixed together makes this a wonderful place for us all to work, grow and learn but also allows us to achieve great things.

### **You've been principal there for more than a decade. How has the school improved in that time?**

Saint Wendel's been awesome since before I got here. But you still have to carry out that greatness. We have been trying for this award ever since I got here. We've applied multiple times and never achieved it. So this is exciting for us because we know that we've had great work before. To see it rewarded is awesome.

Listening to your teachers, staff, students and parents and seeing where there's opportunities for growth, highlighting the things that we already do well and the things that we might not. What could we do and who can we pull in to try to make it the best that it is? We don't always get it on the first try, but myself and my staff in our community, we're willing to keep trying, pushing and persevering.

Our students are seeing that we don't stop, we don't quit. We keep pushing. Even on days when we're all tired, everybody is still here, ready to give it their best efforts.

**What other challenges have come up during your tenure?**

COVID was a big challenge. The recovery from COVID has been a real challenge. And not just academic challenge but the increase of anxieties and the lack of socialization. Mental health for our students, community and staff has been a challenge. Kids we educate now are experiencing so much more than what I ever experienced as a child.

**How do you plan to build upon the school's Blue Ribbon status in the coming years?**

We're going to keep celebrating. We're having a lot of fun celebrating the success. What we're going to keep doing is constantly evaluating the things that we're doing well and the things that we need to improve on. Having those difficult conversations, getting feedback from parents. You can only apply once every five years. We'll try to keep guiding the ship over the next couple of years to see if we can do it again.

**What advice do you have for other schools looking for Blue Ribbon recognition?**

You need to have a leadership team that's committed to working on this because it is a lot of work. The application process is not easy. It can be done, but it is not easy. You have to make sure that you're pushing your kids on all of these tests that they take so that they realize the importance of it.