

A+ School of Excellence application deadline is **August 27, 2027**. Applications are due online by 5:00PM (MST).



Arizona Educational Foundation

A+ School of Excellence™ Application Guide 2027-2028 School Year

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A+ SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE PROGRAM:

The A+ School of Excellence™ program began in 1983 as a way to identify, celebrate, and recognize educational excellence in schools throughout Arizona. In addition to showcasing exceptional public schools, the A+ program provides school teams with an outstanding comprehensive framework that serves as a basis for school self-assessment and planning. The A+ School of Excellence® Award is a powerful energizer for increasing public confidence in recognized schools, often resulting in greater parent and community involvement and even serves as an economic driver for some communities. A+ Schools are celebrated and recognized as exceptional. Earning the highly prestigious and coveted A+ designation spotlights the positive successes happening in Arizona public schools.

“The A+ School of Excellence is a worthy pursuit for all schools. It is a purposeful process of self reflection for identification of strengths and goal setting for continuous growth.”

~ Dr. Manuel Valenzuela, Superintendent, Sahuarita Unified School District

Schools that ultimately earn the A+ School of Excellence® designation consistently share the following traits:

- Model quality and opportunity for all students.
- Demonstrate a strong commitment to academic excellence.
- Respond successfully to the changing environment of education.
- Cultivate learning-centered, safe school environments.
- Encourage innovative instruction by supporting teachers.
- Actively address the social, emotional, mental health, physical, and intellectual needs.
- Demonstrate superior ability to go above and beyond the norm in providing services to children, families, and the local community.

A+ SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE PROCESS:

To be considered for the A+ School of Excellence Award, schools begin by submitting an online written application. Application submissions are reviewed by a panel of experienced judges comprised primarily of A+ school principals along with superintendents and other district administrators. Panels may also include teachers from A+ Schools, higher education personnel, and other Pre-K-12 professionals. *Applications should center around what makes your school exemplary.*

- Step 1: Eligible schools submit a written application using AEF's on-line application platform.
- Step 2: Written applications are reviewed by a "pre-screening" A+ School of Excellence panel.
- Step 3: If the written application is successful, schools are granted a Site Visit. Schools who do not receive a Site Visit are provided with written feedback and encouraged to incorporate that feedback in submitting a new application for the next cycle.
- Step 4: Schools receiving Site Visits are visited by a team of Judges who vet the programs and activities described in the written application. Site Visits are a day and a half.
- Step 5: Schools who have successful Site Visits are granted the A+ School of Excellence Award. Schools who are unsuccessful are encouraged to reapply and are provided with written feedback and encouraged to incorporate that feedback in submitting a new application for the next cycle.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR SCHOOLS SEEKING THE A+ SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE AWARD:

To be considered for the A+ School of Excellence™ award, the following criteria must be met:

The school must be an Arizona state-accredited public school, Arizona state-accredited public charter school, Arizona state-accredited, and Arizona State Board of Education approved public Arizona Online Instruction (AOI) school, or school operating under the Bureau of Indian Education, with some combination of grades Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade.

To be eligible for and maintain an A+ School of Excellence award status, a school must be rated "A" or "B" by the Arizona Department of Education based on the most recent available school letter grades and demonstrate sustained high levels of student academic achievement and growth for all students through multiple measures.

If, **during the four-year A+ School of Excellence award term**, an A+ school obtains a letter grade of "C," the school **may submit an appeal** to the Arizona Educational Foundation (AEF). The appeal must include a concise, two-page summary with supporting charts and/or graphs presenting quantitative and qualitative data that demonstrate continued academic success. Appeal evidence may include benchmark assessment data, DIBELS, Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment performance indicators, CCRI data, student proficiency outcomes aligned to Arizona's Academic Standards, and data from distinctive programs highlighted in the school's A+ application. **All "C" letter grade appeals must be submitted to brett@azedfoundation.org upon the Arizona Department of Education's annual school letter grade public release and within 30 calendar days thereafter.**

The school must be in at least its **fifth full year** of operation in its current (or similar) grade configuration when the application is submitted. Schools that are unsure about this requirement may contact AEF to discuss.

The school's principal must have completed at least **TWO consecutive full years** as leader of the applicant school when the application is submitted. **Exceptions:** An exception may occur for schools who are renewing for a *consecutive* A+ Award if the following conditions are met: A renewal school may have a principal who has completed one full year at the time of application if the principal was already an administrative member at the school when the most recent A+ Award was granted **AND** was a member of the A+ application writing team for the most recent award.

The school or school district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.

The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district, concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the Civil Rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.

The US Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district as a whole has violated one or more Civil Rights statutes or the Constitution's equal protection clause.

Current A+ School of Excellence schools may not reapply before the end of their current application cycle. Please refer to the A+ School of Excellence guidelines and resources at <https://azedfoundation.org/>

Arizona Educational Foundation (AEF) reserves the right to revoke an A+ Award at any time if a school no longer meets the eligibility criteria.

Any questions about the A+ School of Excellence eligibility criteria or with extenuating circumstances, may contact the Arizona Educational Foundation at **(480) 421-9376** or email brett@azedfoundation.org

DEADLINE, TIMELINE, AND AWARD TERMS:

APPLICATION DEADLINE for the 2027-2028 school year: Friday, August 27, 2027. Applications are due by **5:00PM (MST)**. No exceptions. Applications submitted after 5:00pm MST will be disqualified.

Application Timelines: 2027-2028 Application Cycle Timeline

- Application deadline is 5:00PM (MST), Friday, August 27th, 2027.
- Late September 2027: Applications are reviewed by a panel of A+ School of Excellence judges.
- October 2027: Schools are notified if a Site Visit will be conducted.
- November 2027 – February 2028: Site Visits are conducted.
- Mid-February 2028: A+ School of Excellence™ winners are announced/Award ceremonies occur.

Schools selected for the award receive \$500 and a banner for display on campus. A school retains the A+ designation for **four years** as long as they remain an "A" or "B" school and continue to exhibit the exceptional qualities that are the hallmark of A+ Schools of Excellence. Schools that earn the award agree to comply with AEF™ authorized logo and name usage requirements related to the A+ School of Excellence™ designation.

LENGTH OF AWARD TERM:

A school retains the A+ designation for **four years** as long as they remain an "A" or "B" school and continue to exhibit the exceptional qualities that are the hallmark of A+ Schools. Schools renewing their A+ designation will reapply at the beginning of their fourth year. NOTE: A "renewal school" is a school applying for another consecutive term as an A+ School of Excellence. ***Schools with a lapse in years are not considered renewals.***

Renewal School Timeline:

Schools renewing their A+ designation will reapply at the beginning of their fourth year. NOTE: A "renewal school" is a school applying for another consecutive term as an A+ school. ***Schools with a lapse in years are not considered renewals.***

- 2023 Awarded Schools reapply Friday, August 27, 2027 (notified Spring 2028).
- 2024 Awarded Schools reapply Friday, August 25, 2028 (notified Spring 2029).
- 2025 Awarded Schools reapply Friday, August 31, 2029 (notified Spring 2030).

- 2026 Awarded Schools reapply Friday, August 28, 2030 (notified Spring 2031)

Note: The renewal timeline above reflects a change in award term made in 2020, allowing schools to keep their A+ status for 4 years; rather than the previous 3 ½ years.

New Applicant Schools Timeline:

A school earning the A+ School of Excellence award in **SPRING 2028** will have the award as follows:

- August 2028-August 2029 – YEAR ONE.
- August 2029-August 2030 – YEAR TWO.
- August 2030-August 2031 – YEAR THREE.
- August 2031-August 2032 – YEAR FOUR. Renewal schools may have their new application submitted in August 2031 and a Site Visit (if granted) during Winter/Spring of their Year Four. Renewals will be awarded in the Spring semester of your school's FOURTH year.

APPLICATION WRITING TIPS:

Schools who earn the A+ School of Excellence Award designation go above and beyond the everyday practices that all schools are expected to implement. Applications should center around what makes your school exemplary. As the application is being compiled, consider the following:

What makes your school unique from other schools in your district or community?

- Tip 1: Applying for A+ should be an inclusive process involving a variety of perspectives and voices from different stakeholder groups. The application should not be driven by a small group of individuals or be solely principal-written.
- Tip 2: Designate your A+ application writing team. Consider including building administrators in addition to the principal; teachers; librarians and guidance counsellors; caregivers; and any other stakeholders whose voices may add value to your application.
- Tip 3: Start early! Most school leaders consider the A+ application process one of the best strategic planning experiences their school undertakes. This is a time to reflect what you do well and how your school shines. Allow ample time for the writing team to explore, discuss, compile, and fine-tune.
- Tip 4: Upload the Word version of the A+ application to Google Docs or another document-sharing site and allow stakeholder groups to research and write in small teams initially. Set deadlines for when sections should be completed, shared, and read by the rest of the team to allow time for further research and revision.
- Tip 5: Work collaboratively throughout the entire process but, when you think you are ready to submit, designate one final writer to unite each section of application into one unified story. The final application should be cohesive in vision, thought, and voice. It is evident to Judges when an application has been *wordsmithed* and written by one final voice.
- Tip 6: Be specific and support the claims made in your application with rich, relevant, and meaningful data and evidence. Keep the following in mind when preparing and writing your application:
 - The prompts throughout the application are intended as useful tools for self-assessment, strategic planning, ongoing reflection, and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in a common school improvement process.
 - It is important for the school's principal to play an active role in the self-evaluation process and application writing to ensure that the entire school has been thoroughly

assessed and analyzed. Not doing so usually results in a weak application that lacks the depth that true self-assessment and analysis provide.

- The A+ School of Excellence program examines schools in a comprehensive manner: Questions and prompts are intended to address important internal and external aspects of school operations, be broad enough to suit diverse school contexts, and accommodate new or changing goals and strategies within any particular school.

- Tip 7: Highlight the excellent and unique programs and practices that set your school apart from other schools and point to your successes. **Do not focus on examples of activities, strategies or programs that are expected or common among schools.** For example, having a safe campus is not unique. Safety is a concern that all schools address. When asked to highlight a unique curriculum program, highlight something that may not be commonplace in many schools or highlight how you might have adapted a widespread program but are implementing it in a unique or unexpected way. For example, Project-Based Learning is a very commonly used and popular curriculum among schools. While it may be worth mentioning, making this a focal point of the application would not set the school apart, unless your school was implementing it in a truly unique way.
- Tip 8: Shy away from sterile writing. Reviewers want to hear your story. Give your application heart and soul. Paint a picture of your school, your community, your students, etc. This is an opportunity to showcase your school's uniqueness. Discuss your data in a human-centered way. Your application should make reviewers want to visit your school.
- Tip 9: Word limits are designated for each question. Applicants are strongly advised to fully utilize word limits assigned to each section of the application. Underutilization of word limits might not provide sufficient evidence that a school is going above and beyond basic requirements and expectations.
- Tip 10: Regardless of how many times your school has earned A+ or how great your school's test scores are, do not assume that your school is "entitled" to the award. A+ Schools are more than test scores; they are complete and wholistic ecosystems where all aspects of a school community demonstrate excellence. It is the school's responsibility to ensure their application responses thoroughly satisfy the information requested. For renewal schools, "copying and pasting" responses from a previous application is highly discouraged.

EXAMPLES OF EVIDENCE SCHOOLS MAY WISH TO INCLUDE:

Academic and non-academic activities, programs, and practices; school-wide function:

- Purpose, goals, outcomes as related to vision, mission, values, strategic plan, and goals.
- Evidence of effectiveness and success as related to vision, mission, values, strategic plan, and goals.
- Participation rates (raw numbers or percentages) compared to class size, grade level, overall student population, etc. disaggregated by grade levels, gender, other demographics.
- Well-documented, continuous, ongoing and sustainable assessment and improvement.
- Qualitative feedback including satisfaction surveys, participant feedback, anecdotes, engagement surveys.

Awards/Honors:

- Date received, by whom, and community members affected.
- Significance and relevance.

Meetings:

- Purpose of groups/committees as related to vision, mission, values, strategic plan, and goals.
- Make-up of groups/committees and how that is determined.

- Meeting frequency and attendance.
- What transpired, outcomes.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

- The A+ School of Excellence application must be submitted online by the specified deadline. Paper copies will be disqualified.
- Applications are compatible with both PC and MAC operating systems.
- The online application has a “save and continue later” option. If you choose to finish later, the principal will receive an email with a link that can be used to access the application at a later date. ***Note: This email often gets diverted to school spam or junk folders. Please check these folders before contacting AEF.***
- It is the responsibility of the applicant school to track and comply with word counts for each section of the application; note that the system will NOT allow submissions to exceed the word limit stated under each question.
- Responses must be in narrative format. The online formatting used to complete and submit an application does NOT allow for pictures, graphs, charts, bullet points, bolding, italics, etc.
- Spellcheck before you submit.
- Proofread before you submit.
- All applications are time-stamped upon submission. Any entry received at the stated time and date deadline will NOT be accepted.
- If using **Google Docs**, do not try to copy and paste from Google Docs directly into the application as it will impact spacing and text formatting. You must download the Google Doc as a Word document and copy and paste from that.

ONLINE APPLICATION:

The link to the official online application may be obtained on the AEF website at:

<https://azedfoundation.org/programs-and-initiatives/a-school-of-excellence/>

While schools are encouraged to use the *Word* version of the application for collaboration and preparation, **only the online application will be accepted.**

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