IECA Laurel Awards

Character & Community Award

K-12 Day and Boarding School · Application Guide

About this award

The Character & Community Award recognizes schools that build character and a strong sense of belonging — places where students are genuinely known and cared for. It celebrates the culture and relationships that help students grow as people, not just as scholars.

Eligibility & how to enter

This award is open to organizations that work with IECA members, in the United States and internationally. Entries are submitted by the organization (self-application) and supported by one or more letters of recommendation from IECA member consultants. There is no fee to apply, and the full scoring rubric is published below detailing how your entry will be evaluated.

Key dates

- **Applications open:** November 2, 2026
- **Applications close:** January 31, 2027
- **Winners selected:** February 2027
- **Winners recognized:** IECA Annual Conference, May 2027
- **Withdrawal of any individual example:** by March 1, 2027

What you'll need to prepare

- Your narrative responses (see the prompts below)
- One or two brief, anonymized examples that show your culture in action
- Any belonging or climate feedback/data you collect
- Supporting evidence: testimonials, recognition, media (up to 5 files or links)
- One or more IEC letters of recommendation (here is a template)

Your application, step by step

1. **Character & belonging (up to 600 words).** How does your school intentionally build character and a sense of belonging?
2. **Students known & cared for (up to 500 words).** Give concrete evidence — advising, mentoring, small-group structures — that all students are seen and supported.
3. **Illustrative examples (up to 500 words).** Share one or two brief, anonymized examples that bring your culture to life.
4. **Belonging feedback (up to 300 words).** Describe any climate or belonging data and attach it.

5. **Attach evidence.** Upload a supporting files or provide links, including to an IECA member letter of recommendation.

Protecting privacy: anonymization & consent

Winners are named and celebrated publicly, but students, clients, and families are always kept anonymous. Follow these steps for any individual example:

1. **Consent first.** Before you submit, obtain written informed consent — including guardian consent and the minor's assent where applicable — for anyone featured.
2. **De-identify to a defined standard.** Replace names with pseudonyms or role labels; generalize details (an age range not an exact age, a region not a town, no school/provider names or exact dates); remove anything that could reveal identity.
3. **Composite option.** You may submit a clearly labeled composite that combines details from several real cases.
4. **IECA verifies.** Staff confirm consent and de-identification before any reviewer sees the entry; reviewers see only the anonymized version.
5. **Two-track recognition.** Public materials feature your organization and staff — never an identifiable student or client.
6. **Right to withdraw.** Any individual example may be withdrawn before publication, no later than March 1, 2027. IECA coordinates with you on anonymization and may edit materials to protect privacy.

How your entry is scored

Every entry is screened for eligibility and then scored by the IECA Board of Directors against the rubric below. Three board members score each entry independently on a 1–5 scale; scores are calibrated and one winner is selected per award at the board's February meeting. Conflict-of-interest recusals apply, and IECA may choose not to grant an award if no entry meets the bar.

Scoring rubric — Character & Community Award

Criterion (weight)	Score	What this level looks like
Culture of belonging 25%	5	Belonging is embedded school-wide and confirmed by consistent student, family, and climate evidence; students clearly feel they matter and the culture is intentional and sustained.
	4	Strong, visible belonging practices across most of the school, supported by positive feedback, though not yet fully systematic.
	3	A generally welcoming community with some concrete belonging practices and mostly positive anecdotal feedback.
	2	Belonging is stated as a value but shows up only in pockets, with limited evidence it is felt broadly.
	1	Little evidence of an intentional belonging culture; claims are aspirational and unsupported.
Character & values development 20%	5	A coherent, well-articulated character program shapes daily school life, with clear examples and outcomes; character is lived, not just taught.
	4	A defined character approach is active across the school, with good supporting examples.
	3	Character education is present through some programming and school traditions.
	2	Character appears mainly in mission statements, with few concrete practices.
	1	No discernible approach to character development.
Students known & cared for 20%	5	Advising, mentoring, and small-group structures ensure every student is genuinely known, with compelling evidence individuals are seen and supported.
	4	Strong systems know most students well, with good examples of individualized care.
	3	Reasonable advising and support that knows students adequately.
	2	Support exists but many students could go unseen; care is inconsistent.

Criterion (weight)	Score	What this level looks like
	1	Students are largely anonymous; no meaningful individual attention.
Evidence & outcomes 15%	5	Strong evidence from multiple sources converges into a compelling, well-substantiated narrative.
	4	Solid evidence from more than one source supports the narrative.
	3	Some supporting evidence, mostly testimonial or anecdotal.
	2	Thin evidence; claims rest largely on assertion.
	1	No supporting evidence provided.
IEC & family endorsement 10%	5	Enthusiastic, specific endorsements from IECs and families with firsthand detail.
	4	Clear, positive endorsements from IECs and/or families.
	3	General endorsement with limited specifics.
	2	Minimal or lukewarm endorsement.
	1	No evident family support.
Story & profile-raising potential 10%	5	A vivid, quotable story with strong media appeal that would elevate both the school and IECA.
	4	A compelling story with clear PR value.
	3	A usable story that needs shaping.
	2	A weak or generic story with limited appeal.
	1	No compelling narrative.

Score scale: 5 = exceptional / national model; 4 = strong; 3 = solid, meets the bar; 2 = developing; 1 = does not yet meet the bar. Weighted total = sum of (criterion score × weight), out of 5.

Tips for a strong entry

- Lead with evidence, not adjectives — specific examples and data beat general claims.
- Show, don't tell: concrete stories and structures score higher than mission statements.
- Anonymize carefully and secure consent early; incomplete or unconsented entries are not considered.
- Mind the word limits, and use your IEC letter(s) to add firsthand, credible endorsement.

Questions? Contact info@IECAonline.com. Ready to apply? Complete your entry online before January 31, 2027.