



Education in Maine is worse than you think

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It's no secret that Maine's public K-12 education system needs work. Bloated bureaucracies keep money from flowing to the classroom. Powerful teachers' unions stymie efforts to make educators accountable for their performance. Maine's once-exalted standing in national rankings has sharply eroded.

But a [new paper](#) by the Cato Institute shows just how poorly Maine's public schools are performing. The paper reveals that popular state rankings — like those created by *U.S. News & World Report* and *Education Week* — use a flawed methodology that inflates Maine's position relative to other states. For example, state rankings reported by news organizations frequently include more than just achievement scores. Often, the rankings are also based on variables like per-pupil funding levels, pre-K enrollment figures, and graduation rates, that have no direct connection to student learning.

Rankings reported by *U.S. News & World Report* and *Education Week* also make the mistake of aggregating achievement scores across all races and ethnicities without taking into account the unique heterogeneity of the student population of each state. Since whites generally outperform blacks and Hispanics on standardized achievement tests, simply averaging across all students — without adjusting for their racial and ethnic composition — can be highly misleading.

The Cato Institute corrects these errors, comparing state scores for each of three subjects (math, reading, and science), four major ethnic groups (whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islanders) and two grades (fourth and eighth) in each state. The researchers exclude factors (like pre-K enrollment and graduation rates) that don't measure how much students have learned; instead, they rely solely on data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), also known as "the nation's report card."

Once these adjustments are taken into account, Maine's ranking drops from 6th according to the *U.S. News & World Report* to 49th, ahead of only West Virginia and Alabama (which are

tied for 50th place). In other words, while widely used rankings place Maine's K-12 education system among the best in the country, its true position is virtually at the bottom.

As the study's authors explain:

“the aggregated NAEP scores overstate what [Maine's] students have learned; Maine's [adjusted] ranking is a full 25 positions below that. On the 10 achievement tests reported for Maine, its rankings on those tests are 46th, 45th, 48th, 37th, 41st, 40th, 34th, 40th, 41st, and 23rd. It is astounding that *U.S. News* could rank Maine as high as 6th, given the deficient performance of both its black and white students (the only two groups reported for Maine) relative to black and white students in other states. But since Maine's student population is about 90 percent white, the aggregated scores bias the results upward.”

The study also looked at the educational “efficiency” of every state — a measure of the bang received for taxpayers' education dollars. States whose students scored well on the NAEP despite low levels of public spending are considered highly efficient, while states that spent lavishly on K-12 education but achieved mediocre results on the NAEP are considered highly inefficient.

By that measure of educational efficiency, Maine ranks 50th in the country. That's right — dead last. Put differently, every other state in the nation does a better a job with its investment in its public schools.

As Democrats get ready to take control of Maine's government, they should acknowledge that their standard approach to education — pumping more taxpayer dollars into schools — has failed in Maine. It's time to try something new.

There's one good thing about being last; we've got nowhere to go but up.