



## **Ron DeSantis touted many top rankings for Florida in State of the State. We checked them out.**

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Gov. Ron DeSantis used his annual message to the state Legislature to leave voters in Florida — and maybe caucusgoers in Iowa, too — with an inescapable message: We're No. 1.

DeSantis whisked into Tallahassee from the campaign trail on Jan. 9 to mark the first day of Florida's 60-day session, six days before the Iowa caucuses.

DeSantis opened his State of the State address with rapid-fire statistics backing up his central campaign argument: He can do for the U.S. what he did for Florida.

DeSantis read off 10 broad topics in education, business and immigration where he said Florida is No. 1. They were as broad as talent acquisition and entrepreneurship and as specific as the top gross domestic product growth and lowest unemployment rate of all "large" states.

He did not specify the source of those rankings, and the governor's office did not answer our query for citations. We tracked down a number of the sources for DeSantis' assertions. Some of the assertions are accurate but unreplicated; some need additional context about contradictory evidence or the partisanship of the group making the assessment.

In the big picture, Florida's promotion of limited-government economic policies, such as low taxes and a relatively small state-government footprint, has happened for three decades, said Randall Holcombe, a Florida State University economist.

"This predates DeSantis, but he has largely kept Florida on that limited government track," Holcombe said.

Here's a rundown.

### **"No. 1 in education and public higher education"**

In its annual ranking, [U.S. News & World Report](#) placed Florida No. 1 for education overall. Florida was the top state in public higher education, but came in 14th for pre-kindergarten to 12th grade.

For the pre-K-to-12th grade rankings, U.S. News examined preschool enrollment, standardized test scores among eighth graders, high school graduation rate and college readiness.

The higher education rankings were based on several factors, including the share of citizens holding college degrees, college graduation rates, the cost of in-state tuition and fees and the

burden of student debt.

Critics of the rankings say the exercise is flawed.

"By reducing lots of different school quality factors to a single number, all U.S. News rankings oversimplify academic quality," wrote Harry Feder, executive director of the Center for Fair and Open Testing, in [The Washington Post in September](#), referring to different U.S. News rankings for schools and colleges.

Other groups, using other metrics, have ranked Florida education lower. In 2022, [SmartAsset ranked Florida 14th](#) on higher education, factoring in graduation rates, tuition, student-to-faculty ratio, 20-year return on investment and in-state attendance rate. [WalletHub's 2023 ranking](#) of states with the best school systems placed Florida ninth of 50 states and Washington, D.C., focusing on quality and safety.

The National Education Association, the U.S.' largest teacher's union, ranks states on metrics including student enrollment and attendance, and school revenue and expenditures. [In its 2022 report](#), the group ranked Florida third for average public school daily attendance, fifth for students enrolled per teacher in public schools, and 43rd in public school expenditures per student. The authors said no dataset tells a state's entire educational story.

"Consideration of factors such as a state's tax system, provisions for other public services, and population characteristics also are needed," the report said. "Therefore, it is unwise to draw conclusions based solely on individual statistics in this report."

### **"No. 1 in education freedom"**

The [governor's office](#) touts this ranking from an annual study by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, which [ranked Florida No. 1 overall](#) in "education freedom" in 2023. The annual report measures states across four categories — education choice, teacher freedom, transparency and return on investment. [The office](#) also cites a top ranking for Florida in the 2023 [ALEC Index of State Education Freedom](#), a nonprofit of conservative state legislators, that focuses on five categories of state education policy.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, [placed Florida third-highest for educational freedom](#) in its rankings of states personal and economic freedom. The group based its findings on requirements and restrictions for private and homeschoools, noting that Florida had adopted universal education savings accounts in 2023 and had a variety of school choice programs before then.

We did not find similar rankings by ideological organizations that may disagree with more of Florida's education policies.

### **"No. 1 for parental involvement in education"**

DeSantis' team made a similar claim in a December [press release](#) that cited Florida's No. 1

ranking in the Parent Power! Index from the Center for Education Reform, an advocacy group that supports school choice, such as charter schools.

The center says its index ratings are established after measuring "the extent to which" states have "policies in place that put students ahead of systems; values the diversity of need and condition of every family and provides vital accessible information." These criteria, the center says, allows parents to make "fundamental decisions" on how their kids are educated.

### **"No. 1 for talent development"**

"Talent development" is not a standard term, "so different analysts might come up with different measures" that could produce a different state leader, Holcombe said.

Florida ranked first overall in an annual survey from Lightcast, a labor market analytics company, for the second consecutive year.

The study factors in job growth, educational attainment and migration data. Florida ranked high for migration (second to Vermont) and "competitive effect" (second to Texas); Florida was 44th for job openings per capita.

### **"No. 1 for net domestic in-migration for the third consecutive year"**

DeSantis seems to be combining two different U.S. Census Bureau terms:

- Domestic in-migration: the number of people who moved from a different U.S. state to Florida in a year.
- Domestic net migration: the total population change Florida experienced in a year. This is reached by subtracting the number of people who moved out of Florida to another U.S. state from the in-migration.

PolitiFact's analysis of Census data found Florida ranked first for both metrics in 2019, 2021 and 2022. (The 2020 pandemic year data is not available.) That means out of all the states, Florida received the greatest number of people who moved within the country each year. That remained true when accounting for the number of people who moved out of Florida to a different state.

### **"No. 1 in new business formations"**

We did not find data, a report or a press release to support this statistic.

Holcombe pointed us to a common statistic that tracks business applications in each state, collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. In the first 11 months of 2023, Florida saw a greater percentage increase than the U.S. as a whole in six of those months, but it trailed the U.S. rate in the other five months.

### **"No. 1 in GDP growth amongst large states, and better than most countries in the world"**

DeSantis has a point: Looking at the most recent full years — 2022 and 2023 — Florida experienced the biggest increase in inflation-adjusted gross domestic product of any state, at 4.6%, beating out second-place Idaho with 4.2%.

According to the World Bank, the most recent annual data, for 2021 to 2022, showed a few larger countries exceeding Florida's growth rate, including Austria, Argentina, Greece, Ireland, Poland, Spain and Turkey. But the world's biggest economies all had smaller growth in that period, including the U.S., which was about 2%.

### **"No. 1 for entrepreneurship"**

As with talent development, entrepreneurship rankings don't have a standard methodology.

Florida finished first in a 50-state ranking by The Digital Project Manager, a website that offers training, podcasts, articles, advice and tools for digital projects. The site analyzed eight entrepreneurship indicators, including the percentage of the population that starts a new business, the percentage of startups still active after one year, the number of small businesses per 100,000 people, and the growth rate in business applications.

There were softer measures, too, such as "search interest on Google for 'how to start a business'" and people "who started a business by choice and not a necessity."

The company said Florida ranked highest in the country for starting a business, and "86% started their venture out of choice rather than necessity." The report did not show how it reached that conclusion.

### **"Lowest unemployment rate of all large states"**

His precise phrasing is accurate, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Florida's unemployment rate of 2.9% ranked ninth nationally in November, the most recent month available, but the states with lower rates were all smaller. Florida tied for ninth with two states that could be considered large: Virginia and Massachusetts.