

# The Augusta Chronicle

## Scuttlebiz: What if Georgia's low education 'ranking' is wrong?

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The most complex obstacle to attracting talented professionals from other states to work in metro Augusta's burgeoning cybersecurity industry is actually quite simple.

They think we're stupid.

A community leader I've known and respected for many years has told me and others on several occasions that many cyberdefense contractors and federal employees in metro D.C. – soon-to-be former home of Army Cyber Command – consider everything in Georgia outside Atlanta to be “dirt roads and bare feet.”

The stereotypification, obviously, is patently absurd. And a tad annoying considering the Civil War ended 150 years ago, Jim Crow died in the 1960s and CBS pulled the plug on “The Dukes of Hazzard” in 1985.

Why then, in internet-saturated 2018, do many of these “smart” people we're trying to lure from Virginia and Maryland think we're knuckle-dragging hicks? I suspect it has a lot to do with widely publicized state-education rankings that consistently place Georgia near the bottom of the list.

U.S. News and World Report's [“Best States for Education”](#) list, America's most-widely cited barometer of brainpower, currently ranks Georgia 35th and South Carolina 43rd. Virginia and Maryland, where much of the nation's cyber-industrial complex dwell, are at No. 12 and 13, respectively.

Are you knuckle-draggers still with me? Good. Because I'm about to go Morpheus on you: What if I told you these rankings are horse pucky?

What if I told you Georgia was not really 15th *worst* in the nation, but the seventh *best*?

This glitch in the Matrix has been pointed out by Cato Institute researchers Stan Liebowitz and Matthew L. Kelly. Their policy-analysis paper, [“Fixing the Bias in Current State K–12 Education Rankings.”](#) identifies methodological flaws that consistently make Northeastern and Upper Midwestern states appear smart and Deep South states appear dumb.

The first flaw with the rankings, the researchers contend, is they put too much stock in metrics that don't measure actual K-12 student performance, such as pre-K enrollment, state education spending (which does not equate to knowledge) and graduation rates (38 states lack graduation proficiency exams).

The second problem is the rankings try to make apples-to-apples comparisons among states with vastly different student populations, as if California's student-body demographic is anything like, say, New Hampshire's. That's more like an apples-to-avocados comparison.

“Traditional rankings effectively reward states for not having many minority students,” the researchers wrote in a recent Reason magazine article. “States do well simply because they are populated by families from more socioeconomically successful ethnic categories – not because they are actually doing a good job educating their various categories of students.”

This is why small, mostly white states in the Northeast – such as Connecticut (No. 5 on the U.S. News list) and Maine (No. 6) – do very well in traditional rankings while states with large black and Hispanic populations, such as Texas (No. 33) and Florida (No. 40), do not.

Consider this example: Lilly-white Iowa (U.S. News' No. 8) falls to No. 17 once you disaggregate student performance by racial categories and strip out the aforementioned methodologies that *don't* measure student performance as tracked by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Comparing Iowa to Texas on that basis, one would find students in all racial categories actually test *higher* in Texas. In other words, white students in Texas academically outperform white students in Iowa. Same for blacks, Hispanics and Asians.

“And this example is no fluke,” their Reason article says. “Many other state comparisons similarly reverse if you account for student heterogeneity.”

Based solely on educational quality, only two states in U.S. News' top 10 – Massachusetts and New Jersey – would remain in the top 10, although they would fall from No. 1 to No. 2 and No. 3 to No. 4, respectively.

Supposedly smartypants states such as Maine would fall from sixth to 48th; Rhode Island from ninth to 39th; and Vermont from fourth to 27th.

Going in the opposite direction are the “underperforming” states of Florida, Texas and Georgia, which would jump, respectively, to third, fifth and seventh. South Carolina leaps from No. 43 to No. 28.

Though some Southern states would continue to rank low using the researchers' more-focused methodology (Alabama, No. 50; Louisiana, No. 46; and Mississippi, No. 33), the takeaway is clear: “The Northern monopoly on top rankings disappears,” the report says.

Which brings us back to the point of this week's column: Georgia is not Hicksville, and metro Augusta is not Jimbobwe. Idiots are everywhere, including the metro D.C. area (and inside the Beltway).

Are Augusta-area public schools perfect? Of course not. But I suspect that many transplants who have moved here in recent years because of the cyber buildup (I see an awful lot of Maryland and Virginia license plates on the streets) have discovered we do fairly well educating a racially diverse student population with a higher-than-average poverty rate.

In fact, the cost of our K-12 schools, as measured by what we spend educating children – \$9,769 per pupil in Georgia and \$10,249 in South Carolina (the national average is \$11,762) – is something we should be proud of, not embarrassed by.

Besides being No. 7 in quality, Liebowitz and Kelly's research ranks Georgia No. 5 on the efficiency scale, behind Florida, Texas, Virginia and Arizona. Not surprisingly, the five they say deliver the most bang for the educational buck are right-to-work states.

Union hotbeds such as New Jersey, which ranks fourth in their methodology, spends more than twice as much per student as No. 3 Florida. New York, the biggest spender of them all, ranks No. 30, right below No. 29 Tennessee, which spends nearly three times less.

"Surely, Florida achieves its student outcomes much more efficiently than New Jersey and Tennessee much more efficiently than New York," they write in Reason.

In case you were curious, Georgia's teacher-per-pupil ratio is virtually identical to the national average, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#): 15.55 to 15.97.

Conventional wisdom, promulgated by the media's annual reporting of U.S. News' rankings, is that big-spending, high-taxing states in the Northeast and Upper Midwest *care* more about teachers and students, while fiscally conservative Southern states such as Georgia are content with mediocrity.

Their research essentially flips the script on the narrative that students would be smarter if only taxpayers threw more money at teachers and administrators.

"It's well-known that teachers unions aim to increase wages, which might lead to better teachers and increased test scores," they write. "But apparently, other union goals that are harmful to student performance – such as protecting poor teachers from being fired or blocking merit-based pay – have a greater impact. This may come as a shock to those who think teachers unions are a recipe for educational success."

If you are unmoved by the Cato research and still ranking-obsessed, you'll be delighted to know U.S. News gives high marks to several metro area high schools. On the Georgia side, Davidson Fine Arts Magnet comes in No. 6 in the state, followed by Lakeside at No. 31; A.R. Johnson Magnet at No. 38; and Greenbrier at No. 41. On the South Carolina side, South Aiken scores No. 11 and Silver Bluff comes in at No. 34.

Several of those local schools, and others, also offer students a cybersecurity "track" through a multi-agency local partnership called the [Alliance for Cybersecurity Education](#) program.

In time, I believe, our region may find itself less worried about what other states think of us and more concerned with cranking out home-grown talent for our cyber economy, which some have speculated could morph into a \$1 billion-a-year industry.

Liebowitz, by the way, is the Ashbel Smith Professor of Economics and director of the Center for the Analysis of Property Rights and Innovation at the University of Texas at Dallas' Jindal School of Management. Kelly is a graduate student and research fellow at the Jindal School's Colloquium for the Advancement of Free-Enterprise Education.

Read their research for yourself. If you have a problem with their conclusions, take it up with them.

If you would rather harangue the messenger instead, my contact information is listed below. If you don't reach me immediately, I'm probably just out for a walk.

Down a paved street. In comfortable shoes.