

# Forbes

## Sorry, Massachusetts: Florida Is #1 In Education ... Maybe

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People love ranking stuff and poring over rankings, from best beaches to worst public restrooms. State elementary and secondary education systems are not immune to the obsession, with the education news outlet *Education Week*, and the king of rankings *U.S. News and World Report*, furnishing two high-profile examples. But new rankings from University of Texas at Dallas professor Stan Liebowitz and graduate student Matthew Kelly, published by the Cato Institute, challenge those assessments. While other rankings may give credit for achievement scores without considering important differences in state populations, or seem to assume that greater inputs necessarily mean better education, Liebowitz and Kelly compare achievement for similar groups across states, and how efficiently those levels are achieved. They aim to be more apples-to-apples, and bang-for-the-buck.

The table below is the papers' ultimate ranking. It is based first on how several racial and ethnic groups compare to each other across states, which is more fair to states with greater populations of people who have suffered discrimination, or who might have higher concentrations of non-native English speakers. It also accounts for spending adjusted for state cost of living. The goal is to identify the best outcomes per dollar spent rather than assume that spending more taxpayer money must be good. This vaults largely southern states, including top-three Florida, Texas, and Virginia, into the highest slots. In *Education Week*'s most recent "Quality Counts" ranking, in contrast, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut are the top states, and Florida, Texas, and Virginia place 26<sup>th</sup>, 41<sup>st</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup>. In the 2018 *US News ranking* Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New Jersey take the top slots, with Florida 40<sup>th</sup>, Texas 33<sup>rd</sup>, and Virginia 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Table 2**  
**State rankings adjusted for student heterogeneity and expenditures**

COL* efficiency	State	Efficiency rank**	COL* efficiency	State	Efficiency rank**
1	Florida	1	27	New Hampshire	32
2	Texas	2	28	Ohio	21
3	Virginia	7	29	Nebraska	22
4	Arizona	4	30	Oregon	38
5	Georgia	3	31	Kansas	19
6	North Carolina	5	32	Missouri	23
7	Indiana	6	33	Delaware	30
8	South Dakota	8	34	New Mexico	27
9	Colorado	10	35	Minnesota	33
10	Massachusetts	24	36	Iowa	28
11	Hawaii	41	37	Wyoming	34
12	Utah	9	38	Connecticut	44
13	Maryland	25	39	Pennsylvania	39
14	California	29	40	Illinois	36
15	Idaho	11	41	Michigan	35
16	Montana	13	42	Rhode Island	46
17	District of Columbia	37	43	Vermont	45
18	Washington	17	44	Wisconsin	42
19	Kentucky	14	45	Arkansas	40
20	Tennessee	12	46	New York	49
21	South Carolina	18	47	Louisiana	43
22	New Jersey	31	48	Alaska	51
23	North Dakota	20	49	Maine	50
24	Nevada	26	50	Alabama	47
25	Mississippi	15	51	West Virginia	48
26	Oklahoma	16			

\*COL = cost of living.

\*\*Using nominal dollars.

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017 NAEP Mathematics and Reading Assessments, [https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_2017\\_highlights/](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2017_highlights/); and Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, Cost of Living Data Series 2017 Annual Average, [https://www.missourieconomy.org/indicators/cost\\_of\\_living](https://www.missourieconomy.org/indicators/cost_of_living).

State ranking adjusted for student heterogeneity and expendituresCATO INSTITUTE

So should all Americans pack up their belongings and run, not walk, to Florida, Texas, and Virginia to get great k-12 education? Not so fast. As the authors note, rankings are, frankly, blunt instruments that mask wide variation among districts within states, and among schools within districts. You could move into a “good” district in a “bad” state, or a “bad” district in a “good” state. And I use scare quotes not to frighten but to highlight that there is also widespread disagreement about what constitutes “good” or “bad” education. There seem to be appreciable limits to what test scores tell us, for instance; increasing research suggests higher scores don't necessarily correlate with other desired outcomes such as high school graduation, or college completion. And some families may value things like a school fostering critical thinking, or strong morals, more than standardized test numbers, or how many grads are admitted to Ivy League institutions.

State rankings are, frankly, of limited value. But if we're going to have them—and alas, we love them so!—at least one set ought to focus on more fair comparisons, and efficient use of hard-earned taxpayer dollars. These rankings do those things.

*I am the director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of the book "Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education." I also coedited "Educational Freedom: Remembering Andrew Coulson, Debating His Ideas" and maintain Cato's Public Schooling Battle Map, an interactive database of values and identity-based conflicts in public schools. I have published studies and papers on state funding of higher education, national curriculum standards, cyber charter schools and other education topics. I have an undergraduate degree from Georgetown University, where I double-majored in government and English, a master's degree in political science from Rutgers University, Newark and a Ph.D. in public policy from George Mason University, where I focused especially on education and social cohesion.*