

The States with the Best Schools



As of 2011, total spending for all public elementary and secondary education in the United States surpassed \$630 billion per year, more than \$12,300 per student. The vast majority of that funding, roughly 88%, came from state and local governments. State governments have an especially important role: they maintain standards for curriculum, make sure that school districts with faltering local tax bases are adequately funded and assess the efficacy of public schools by administering statewide achievement tests.

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So which states are doing the best job of maintaining strong public school systems?

To answer that question, SmartAsset looked at ten across-the-board metrics of education, placing a special emphasis on how well states are [preparing students for college](#). For each state, we considered the percentages of students taking the SAT, ACT and AP tests, and the average scores for those tests. We also looked at the state-level funding-per-student, the student-teacher ratio, the high school dropout rate and the percentage of high school graduates attending college after graduation (read more about our methodology below).

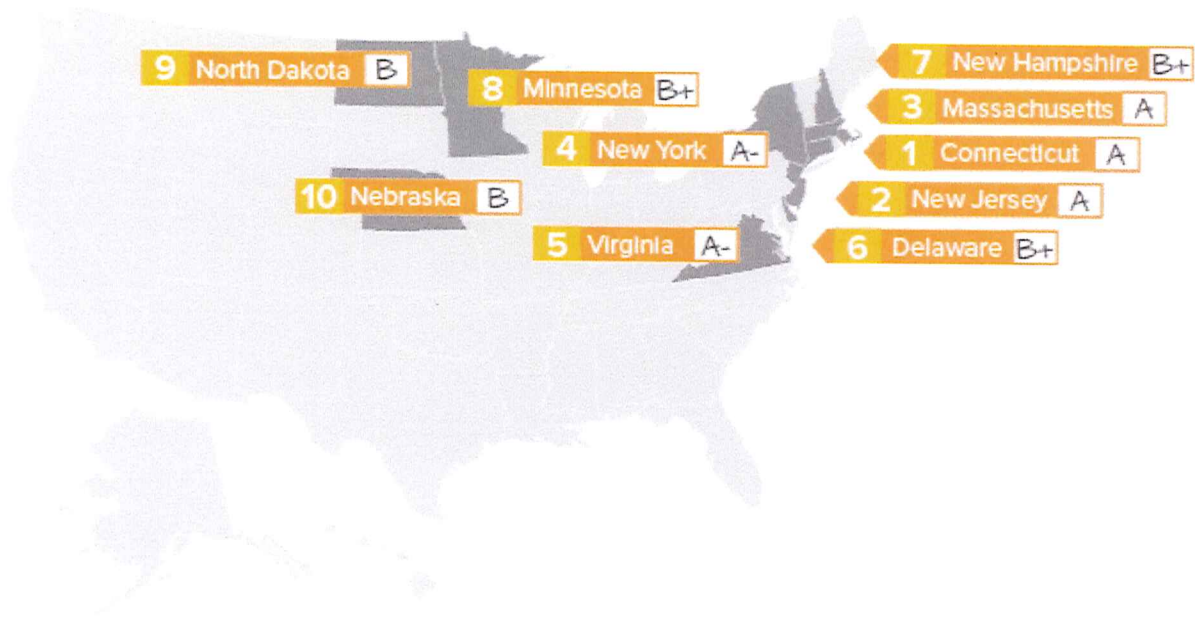
Key Findings

Good schools in the northeast. Led by Connecticut, each of the top four states in our study is located in the northeast, and seven of the top ten are on the east coast. Most notable among these states was the high rate of college-attendance. In New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Connecticut, over 70% of high school graduates attend college within 12 months of graduating.

The west can do better. The west is home to all four of the lowest-grading states in our study, and six of the eight states that received an overall F are west of the continental divide. Washington, Arizona, Oregon and Nevada all have below average college-attendance rates, below average per-student spending levels and higher-than-average student-teacher ratios.

TOP 10 STATES

FOR K-12 EDUCATION



Connecticut

In today's job market, the difference between a high school diploma and a college degree is vast (even when taking into consideration the [high cost of college](#)). For example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2013 the national unemployment rate for workers with a high school diploma was 7.5%, nearly double the 4% unemployment rate of workers with a bachelor's degree, and still well above the 5.4% unemployment rate of workers with an associate's degree. Additionally, it is far harder for workers without a college degree to land jobs with good benefits like health insurance [or a 401\(k\)](#).

That is why Connecticut's efforts to not just educate its k-12 students, but to also give them the opportunity to enroll in college is so important. Connecticut had the 3rd highest college-enrollment rate of any state in the country, with 76% of high school graduates enrolling in college within 12 months of graduation. Add to that the ninth lowest high school dropout rate of any state in the country, and it's easy

to see why Connecticut receives an “A” for its k-12 public education system.

New Jersey

The Garden State has long been recognized for its high quality schools. Business Insider’s 2014 ranking of the top public high schools in the country features three New Jersey schools, including the school ranked number one overall, High Technology High School in Lincroft, New Jersey. Our research found that New Jersey couples the second lowest dropout rate in the country with the eighth highest college attendance rate. It also rated in the top ten for its level of per-student funding, and its student-teacher ratio.

Massachusetts

Since the passage of a major statewide school reform bill in 1993, Massachusetts schools have improved markedly, and today they are among the best in the country. The state’s Advanced Placement Exam Fee Subsidy Program has helped pushed the rate of students taking AP tests into the top ten of all states, even while average scores on those tests remain high—4th highest in the country. Bay State students also had the highest average ACT Score of any state in the country, though just 23% of them took that test in 2014 (as compared with the 84% that took the SAT).

New York

The state of New York invests \$20,376 annually for every student in its public education system, second only to Vermont. That investment is paying off. It has the sixth-highest college attendance rate of any state in the country, with 71% of high school graduates attending college within 12 months of graduation.

Virginia

Virginia’s most famous native son, Thomas Jefferson, was a strong proponent of public education. In 1779, while governor, he wrote “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” which described a free public education system that was nearly unheard of at the time. While such a public education system would not come to Virginia until after the civil war, the groundwork was laid. Today, Virginia boasts the fifth lowest dropout rate of any public school system in the nation, and the third highest rate of students taking an AP exam. It is also one of the nation’s [top states for higher education](#).

Delaware

Education is important in Delaware. SmartAsset's recent state-by-state study of higher education systems ranked Delaware first overall for its public colleges and universities. Its k-12 public education system is nearly as meritorious. Indeed, the New York Times recently called Delaware a "Case Study in Lifting College Attendance." Juniors in Delaware public high schools are required to take the SAT, and seniors deemed eligible for college receive repeated prompts from counselors and state officials to apply to and attend college. Delaware is currently ranked 12th for its college attendance rate; expect that number to rise in coming years.

New Hampshire

New Hampshire's dropout rate of 1.3% is the lowest of any state in the country. It has achieved that admirable mark by keeping its schools well-staffed and well-funded: the Granite State has the fifth best student-teacher ratio of any state in the country, and the 11th highest level of funding per student.

Minnesota

The highest-ranked state outside of the Northeast and mid-Atlantic region, Minnesota boasts among the lowest dropout rates and highest college-attendance rates in the country. Some 71% of Minnesotan high school graduates attend a college or university within 12 months of graduating, the seventh highest rate in the nation.

North Dakota

North Dakota is one of several states that mandate ACT testing for juniors. By requiring participation in a college admissions test, the state removes one of several hurdles many students face in the college admissions process. That one hurdle may seem trivial, but for a student who is uncertain about attending college, it can make all the difference.

Nebraska

Nebraska's student-teacher ratio of just 9.8 to 1 is second highest in the nation. That means students in Nebraska's public schools can spend more valuable one-on-one time with teachers, which in turn can produce better academic outcomes.



BY THE 1-2-3 NUMBERS

K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Rank	State	SAT Testing Percent	ACT Testing Percent	College Attendance Rate	Dropout Rate	Funding per Student	Student-Teacher Ratio	Grade
1	Connecticut	88 %	29 %	76 %	2.1 %	\$ 18,512	13.19	A
2	New Jersey	79 %	25 %	71 %	1.4 %	\$ 19,601	11.97	A
3	Massachusetts	84 %	23 %	74 %	2.5 %	\$ 16,775	13.94	A
4	New York	76 %	27 %	71 %	3.8 %	\$ 20,376	12.01	A-
5	Virginia	73 %	28 %	68 %	1.9 %	\$ 12,097	12.33	A-
6	Delaware	100 %	18 %	69 %	3.5 %	\$ 17,348	14.25	B+
7	New Hampshire	70 %	20 %	65 %	1.3 %	\$ 16,657	12.09	B+
8	Minnesota	6 %	76 %	71 %	1.9 %	\$ 13,085	15.95	B+
9	North Dakota	2 %	100 %	66 %	3.0 %	\$ 12,516	12.22	B
10	Nebraska	4 %	86 %	69 %	2.2 %	\$ 10,545	9.80	B
11	Kansas	5 %	75 %	70 %	2.1 %	\$ 11,958	13.86	B-
12	Kentucky	5 %	100 %	67 %	2.5 %	\$ 10,805	15.78	B-
13	Illinois	5 %	100 %	62 %	2.4 %	\$ 13,064	15.94	B-
14	Mississippi	3 %	100 %	81 %	3.2 %	\$ 8,971	15.23	C+
15	South Carolina	65 %	58 %	69 %	2.5 %	\$ 12,152	14.26	C+
16	Arkansas	4 %	93 %	71 %	3.2 %	\$ 10,583	15.05	C+
17	North Carolina	64 %	100 %	67 %	3.1 %	\$ 8,780	15.13	C+
18	Rhode Island	73 %	16 %	68 %	4.2 %	\$ 17,693	13.37	C+
19	Vermont	63 %	29 %	52 %	2.5 %	\$ 23,485	9.17	C+
20	Louisiana	5 %	100 %	68 %	5.7 %	\$ 11,419	13.83	C+
21	Georgia	77 %	53 %	72 %	3.9 %	\$ 10,603	15.65	C
22	Missouri	4 %	76 %	64 %	2.9 %	\$ 12,949	13.20	C
23	Florida	72 %	81 %	67 %	2.1 %	\$ 9,210	15.83	C
24	Maine	96 %	9 %	56 %	3.2 %	\$ 15,000	12.42	C
25	Montana	18 %	100 %	63 %	4.1 %	\$ 11,301	13.37	C
26	Wyoming	3 %	100 %	57 %	4.3 %	\$ 18,661	12.41	C
27	South Dakota	3 %	78 %	67 %	3.1 %	\$ 10,310	13.85	C
28	Wisconsin	4 %	73 %	62 %	1.9 %	\$ 12,776	15.46	C-
29	Iowa	3 %	68 %	68 %	3.2 %	\$ 11,679	14.34	C-
30	Maryland	79 %	22 %	62 %	3.8 %	\$ 16,441	14.68	C-
31	Pennsylvania	71 %	19 %	61 %	2.8 %	\$ 18,317	14.58	C-

32	Tennessee	8 %	100 %	64 %	3.7 %	\$ 8,868	15.04	C-
33	Hawaii	63 %	90 %	66 %	4.7 %	\$ 15,042	15.85	C-
34	Indiana	71 %	40 %	66 %	2.1 %	\$ 11,531	18.62	C-
35	New Mexico	12 %	69 %	77 %	6.4 %	\$ 10,898	15.03	C-
36	Idaho	100 %	45 %	51 %	1.9 %	\$ 9,349	18.25	D+
37	Utah	5 %	100 %	55 %	1.5 %	\$ 8,549	21.59	D+
38	Alabama	7 %	80 %	60 %	1.4 %	\$ 9,715	15.89	D
39	West Virginia	15 %	65 %	60 %	2.7 %	\$ 13,093	14.30	D
40	Texas	62 %	40 %	62 %	2.5 %	\$ 9,958	15.45	D
41	Colorado	14 %	100 %	60 %	4.9 %	\$ 10,393	17.64	D-
42	Michigan	4 %	100 %	62 %	6.9 %	\$ 9,733	18.36	D-
43	Oklahoma	5 %	75 %	61 %	2.5 %	\$ 8,729	16.09	F
44	Alaska	54 %	37 %	50 %	7.0 %	\$ 19,627	13.30	F
45	California	60 %	29 %	65 %	4.0 %	\$ 11,662	24.87	F
46	Ohio	15 %	72 %	63 %	4.6 %	\$ 10,213	17.39	F
47	Washington	63 %	22 %	51 %	3.8 %	\$ 11,439	19.66	F
48	Oregon	48 %	36 %	47 %	3.4 %	\$ 11,566	21.80	F
49	Arizona	36 %	55 %	56 %	5.9 %	\$ 10,515	17.54	F
50	Nevada	54 %	36 %	48 %	3.9 %	\$ 7,507	18.10	F
	Averages	40 %	61 %	64 %	3.3 %	\$ 12,841	15.20	

Data & Methodology

To assess the quality of state k-12 public education, we looked at data from the College Board, the ACT, the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Education Association. Specifically, we looked at the following ten metrics:

High school dropout rate (double weight).

Percent of high school graduates who attend college within 12 months of graduation (triple weight).

Funding per student (full weight).

Student-teacher ratio (double weight).

Percent of high school juniors taking either the ACT or the SAT (double weight).¹

Percent of high school juniors taking a second admissions test (half weight).

Average SAT scores (quarter weight).²

Average ACT scores (quarter weight).

Number of students taking at least one Advanced Placement exam as a percentage of high school seniors (full weight)

Average A.P. test score (quarter weight).

For each of those ten metrics, we ranked all fifty states and applied a score from 0-100 based on that ranking. A school ranked first would receive a 100, while a state ranked last would receive a zero. After applying the weights listed above, we calculated an average score for each state. Grades were assigned on a curve, based on the percentile of each school's raw score.

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1. Since most colleges and universities only require applicants to take one admissions test, we rewarded states more heavily for having a very high percentage of students taking just one test than having a moderate percentage of students taking both. So, for example, in Wyoming, 100% of students take the ACT and 3% take the SAT; we weighted Wyoming's ACT percentage double, and the SAT percentage half. Overall, a state with a 100%-4% split, like Wyoming, would receive a higher score for testing percentages than a state with an 80%-20% split.

2. Scores for the SAT, ACT and AP tests have a strong inverse correlation with the percentage of students taking that test. The fewer students that take the test, the

higher the score, likely because students who are interested in attending top-flight schools likely make up a larger portion of the testing population. For that reason, we weighted the scores on these tests lightly.

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