

How good are schools in your district?

Quality Index

EXCLUSIVE:

New Quality Index goes beyond test scores to evaluate success

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What are the elements that make up a good school?

Ask children, parents or educators, and they'll list a host of factors: teachers and administrators who care about their students; children and parents who take pride in the community; high quality instruction and an array of extracurricular activities. Don't forget the cafeteria food.

When parents research the best schools for their children, though, that isn't the sort of information they usually get. Instead, they'll see what proportion of students were judged proficient on various state tests, or how many graduated high school in four years, or whether the school has made "adequate yearly progress."

Those are very important things to know, but they're not the whole picture.

The New York School Quality Index — exclusive to the USA Today Network — attempts to capture measures of a school's environment that don't necessarily show up in test scores or graduation rates. The best schools, by this measure, are not

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Marshall Knibbs waits with classmates after finishing 6th grade at School 23. Out of thirty nine students in the class, 20 finished the year with honors. MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF

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those with the highest passage rates on standardized tests, but those that both children and adults find to be pleasant places to spend their weekdays.

There's no easy way to measure that, but putting together some of the data collected by the New York State Education Department makes a good approximation. Are there many fights or other disruptive incidents — and when they do occur, are teachers and administrators able to address them without resorting to harsh discipline? That's reflected in the suspension rate.

Research has shown the benefits of small class sizes; of having both novice and experienced teachers; and of a diverse mix of races and ethnicities. The state collects data on all of those indicators, as well.

You can search online at schoolqualityindex.com.

The New York School Quality Index combines those considerations for all 4,742 public and charter schools in New York state and assigns each one a score, from 0 to 100. The median score is 77.5; schools in the 90th percentile got a score of 88.7 or higher, while the bottom 10 percent of schools are at 58.2 or lower.

Eight schools in the state, all of them in New York City, rated a perfect 100 in 2015-16, the most recent data available. The school with the worst rating is also in New York City — Research and Service High School, which enrolls high school students off track for graduation, earned only 13.5 points.

Any attempt to encapsulate a school in a single number will inevitably miss a lot of detail, and the New York School Quality Index is no different.

There are several factors — parental involvement, for instance, or teacher turnover, or how much homework kids get — that aren't available statewide, and the state data is not universally reliable to begin with. "All ratings are subject to criticism, but you're creating a perspective, not an exact science," said Steve Uebbing, a professor at the University of Rochester's Warner School of Education. "The fallacy is thinking there's one right way to look at schools."

It wouldn't be advisable to pick a school without some knowledge of its academic performance. Judgments on schools based solely on academics, though, are incomplete as well. Until now, though, there's been no easy way to look at 'the other stuff.' A quick glance at the New York School Quality Index's top schools and school districts in any given region will likely be jarring to those accustomed to seeing rankings by test score and graduation rate. Some of the top-achieving academic districts are in the middle of the pack, while some low-scoring schools are at the top here.

Across New York, there is a fairly strong correlation between academic rankings and poverty levels — the wealthier a school is, the better its students do on tests and graduation rates.

The New York School Quality Index, though, is designed to reflect school quality in a way that doesn't dovetail with wealth. It has a much weaker correlation with student poverty, and also with the percentage of black students, or those who have disabilities or don't speak English well.

The ratings in every district, county or region contain interesting stories, but a few statewide trends emerge.

█ Elementary schools do better than secondary schools.

That makes sense, as older students tend to have worse attendance and higher suspension rates than younger children. The average score for primary schools is 78.7, compared to 66.7 for high schools.

█ Urban schools are best — and worst. Collectively, schools in New York’s largest cities have a bad reputation, but that masks some bright spots. The New York School Quality Index shows that the best schools in Erie, Monroe and Onondaga counties are in the cities of Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse, respectively, with both district and charter schools scoring very high. On the flip side, the worst schools in those counties are traditional and charter schools in the cities as well.

█ New York City has the top schools. The same divide in upstate schools is also true in New York — some are very good, and some are very bad. Overall, however, of the 70 schools that scored 95 or higher, 57 are in New York City, and another 10 are on Long Island or in the Hudson Valley.

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First-graders wave at principal Brian Hill as they take a tour during their first day of school at Crane Elementary School in

First-graders wave at principal Brian Hill as they take a tour during their first day of school at Crane Elementary School in Henrietta. CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Third grader Clover Lapoma enjoys some exercises to loosen up at a music class with teacher Sheila Buck in her first day of school at Crane Elementary School in Henrietta. CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Cason and Myles Weaver arrive with their mother, Sarah, and sister Clarah for the first day of School at Crane Elementary School in Henrietta. CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Jaelyn Jones Coleman and Monty Belle celebrate moving up from 6th grade at School 23. Out of 39 students in the class, 20 finished the year with honors.

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