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NJ school report cards: How does yours rank?

Mike Deak, Bridgewater Courier News Published 10:10 a.m. ET March 17, 2019

We're obsessed with numbers and rankings.

A quick scroll through the Internet finds postings such as "[5 best NJ towns for millennials](#)" ([/story/things-to-do/2018/04/05/best-towns-millennials-central-jersey-go-jenna-intersimone/469932002/](#)) or "[Best high school marching band in Central Jersey](#)." ([/story/sports/high-school/2018/12/18/somerville-high-school-marching-band-best-somerset-county/2333212002/](#)) We are suckers for websites that promise 20 ways to lose 15 pounds in 30 days.

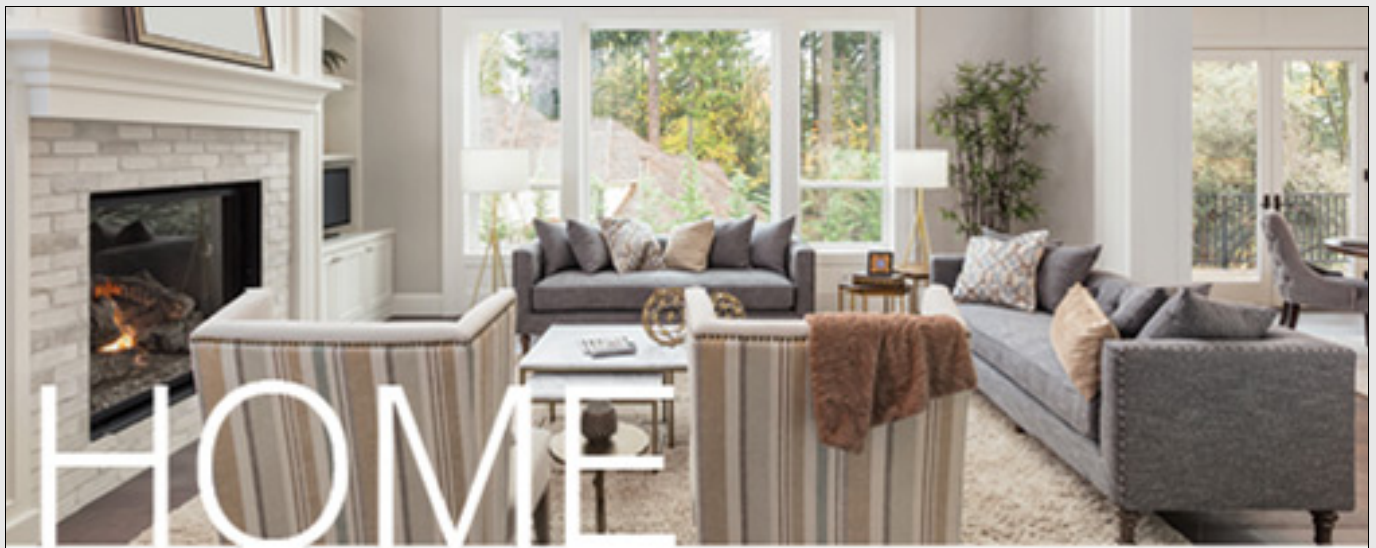
The obsession for rankings has led to development of convoluted formulas that may produce positive results, but their validity is questionable. It's nice to know that [Central Jersey has 10 of the safest towns](#) (<https://www.safewise.com/safest-cities-america/>) in the entire United States (congratulations to Bernards (5), Monroe (12), Westfield (15), Milford (20), Cranford (21), Readington (22), Warren (40), Hillsborough (51), Raritan Township (54) and Montgomery (69)) and it gives them something to boast, but does it really mean anything?

School report cards

For more than a decade, the state Department of Education (DOE) has released annual report cards for all public schools in New Jersey.

The report cards are now called "school performance reports" and the information for each public school can be found on the DOE's website at www.njschooldata.org. (<https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/>)

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READ: [NJ school funding: Here's how Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Union County schools could get \(/story/news/education/2019/03/08/nj-school-funding-heres-how-middlesex-somerset-hunterdon-and-union-county-schools-could-get/3104742002/\)](#)

READ: [Hillsborough school referendum defeated by voters \(/story/news/local/somerset-county/2019/03/13/hillsborough-millstone-voters-defeat-school-referendum/3149572002/\)](#)

The reports contain a mass of statistics, including demographics, academic achievement, college and career readiness (for high schools), graduation rates, absenteeism, disciplinary actions, police calls, bullying incidents and staff experience. The reports also contain a summary narrative in which a school district can list highlights and achievements that do not show up in the numbers.

“The School Performance Reports are a tool designed to inform and empower entire communities,” Education Commissioner Lamont O. Repollet said in a news release about the reports. “Not only can they be utilized by parents, educators and the general public, but school leaders can use the reports to help identify areas in which they can better meet the needs of students.”

In the last two years something new was added to the school ranking reports. Like a spelling test, each school received a numerical grade from 0 to 100. With this number, called a “summative score,” parents and community members could see at a glance, without wading through the data, how their schools compared with others.

States are required by federal law to come up a scoring mechanism with the goal of identifying the lowest performing schools, so they can receive necessary supports from the state, according to a statement from the DOE.

Results

This year's results were good news for some districts and “puzzling” for other districts.

For example, in reviewing the ratings for Central Jersey high schools, the highest-ranking schools were three Union County Vocational-Technical schools: Allied Health (96.28), Information Technology (95.84) and Performing Arts (94.86).

“We’re very proud of our educational system here in Union County,” said Freeholder Chair Bette Jane Kowalski. “The Freeholder Board has made it one of our highest priorities to properly fund our Union County College and Vocational Technical School system to ensure they provide the very highest quality of education to our residents.”

On the other hand, Plainfield High School scored 7.42, one of the lowest in the state.

The school district did not respond to request for a comment before deadline.

In Somerset County, the rankings were good news for Hillsborough, with the high school registering 75.60, third-highest in the county behind Ridge in Bernards and Montgomery, but ahead of its neighbors Bridgewater-Raritan (64.46), Franklin (65.92), Somerville (56.89) and Manville (45.89).

In addition, Hillsborough had the highest-ranking elementary school in Somerset County – Hillsborough Elementary (90.61). Two other district schools were in the county's top 10 elementary schools – Sunnymead (84.71) and Woods Road (80.04) – and Woodfern (78.10) was in the top 15.

"It is always great news when a Hillsborough school is recognized for the wonderful work that occurs in its classrooms," said Superintendent in Schools Jorden Schiff.

But Schiff also realizes that columns of statistics may not tell the whole story of what happens inside a school.

"Ratings such as these are never able to fully paint a picture of the amazing work that is done on a daily basis by the dedicated teachers, staff, students, and administrators of this district," Schiff said.

Highland Park Superintendent of Schools Scott Taylor would agree.

Taylor, who was Middlesex County's school superintendent of the year in 2018, said he was "puzzled" over the state's score for Highland Park (47.10) which placed it in the middle of county high schools.

U.S. News and World Report ranked Highland Park as 17th in New Jersey and gave it a Gold Medal Award. Niche.com gave Highland Park an A+ grade.

"I do not believe the report cards are an accurate reflection of the schools' effectiveness," he said, adding that the scores are based on "limited" criteria.

One of the factors affecting Highland Park scores, Taylor said believed, was the inclusion of PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) results into the formula to determine the school's final score.

But only 85 percent of high school students took the test, with 15 percent opting out of the controversial exam. That skewed the result.

"There are certain things that can't be quantified," he said.

The multitude of rankings that appear each year are confusing, Taylor said.

"Which one do you believe?" the superintendent asked.

See how your school did in the data below.

Central Jersey Schools Ranked

The New Jersey State Department of Education released its 2017-18 school performance report, ranking every public school throughout the state based on multiple factors, including graduation, test scores, absenteeism, school violence and more. The higher the summary score, the better the ranking.

County	District	School	Summary score
CHARTERS	ATLANTIC COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL	ATLANTIC COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL	4.41
UNION	PLAINFIELD CITY	PLAINFIELD HIGH SCHOOL	7.42
CHARTERS	UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS CS	UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS CHARTER SCHOOL	7.87
UNION	ELIZABETH CITY	ADMIRAL WILLIAM F. HALSEY JR. HEALTH & PUBLIC SAFETY ACADEMY	8.24