



About those “Great Schools” Rankings

Why GreatSchools’ school ranking numbers should NOT drive your decisions about whether a school is worth considering

A common question PEN hears from parents is, *Why should I look at a school that’s ranked average or below?* When parents ask about rankings or ratings, they’re talking about the 1-10 rating system developed by GreatSchools.org. The short answer is that these single-digit ratings are just not terribly useful for evaluating the quality of instruction at a school.

Briefly, a school's rating is based on the percentage of students who scored "proficient" or above on the state's annual standardized English Language Arts (ELA) and Math tests, as compared with statewide average proficiency by grade level. The two main caveats are these:

- 1. What standardized test scores measure best is the education level of the parents of students attending a school.** Other things being equal, schools serving students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds will perform better on these tests. The state of California used to provide both a state ranking based on schools' California Standards Test (CST) scores, AND a "similar schools" ranking that compared schools serving similar students. A school that ranked low in absolute terms but "above average" compared to similar schools could have a stronger instructional program than a school with a higher absolute ranking but a "below average" similar schools ranking.
- 2. The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) is still a new test, and results not as well validated as the old CSTs.** In keeping with the new Common Core standards, CAASPP attempts to measure depth rather than breadth of knowledge, using a complex online testing methodology completely unlike most standardized tests. The first school CAASPP scores were released in 2015, and they were all over the map: a few schools saw "proficiency" percentages comparable to what they had been getting previously on the California Standards Test (CST); most dipped significantly, many tanked, a handful went up. While the old CST scores had a high degree of validity - they measured what they purported to measure - the new testing system (at least in California) is a bit more wonky.* The Calif. Dept of Education has a new "[dashboard](#)" that provides a lot of data, but no longer assigns schools an Academic Performance Index or rankings for schools based on the CAASPP scores as they used to do with the CSTs.

** Testing methodologies do tend to drive instruction, and the new direction in testing reflects the Common Core's focus on depth of knowledge and understanding, which is a good thing. But it's a more difficult thing to measure, and more difficult still to reduce that measurement to a single-digit ranking scale - which is why California no longer issues state rankings, and GS' 1-10 rankings are more "easy to use" than truly useful.*



In states where only student achievement is used to calculate ratings [*most states, including California*], the overall GreatSchools Rating is an *average* of how well students at a given school do on each grade and subject test. For each test, ratings are assigned based on how well students perform relative to all other students in the state, and these ratings are averaged into an overall rating of 1 to 10. The distribution of the GreatSchools Rating in a given state looks like a bell curve, with higher numbers of schools getting ratings in the “average” category (4-7), and fewer schools getting ratings in the “above average” (8-10) or “below average” (1-3) categories.

Note that an average tells you little about the distribution of student achievement for a given grade, subject test, or school. For example, a school consisting of a group of high achieving students and a group of low achieving students would look – on average – like a school where all the students are just meeting the standards.

You can find a more detailed description of Great Schools' [methodology](#) here. Briefly, "Test Score Rating is computed based upon the percent of students scoring proficient or above on their state's standardized assessment in each grade and subject. This process includes the computation of both overall school-level test score ratings and test score ratings for subgroups of students within each school." *Note that while GS makes a big deal about looking at more than just test scores - academic progress, college readiness, equity - the data they are using for these more comprehensive ratings are available only for some states, not including California.*