

## Why We Shouldn't Care About National High School Rankings

*“Can you really say with any precision that Princeton is “better” than Columbia? That the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (No. 6) is better than the California Institute of Technology (No. 10)? That Tufts (No. 28) is better than Brandeis (No. 33)?*

*Of course not. U.S. News likes to claim that it uses [rigorous methodology](#), but, honestly, it's just a list put together by magazine editors. The whole exercise is a little silly. Or rather, it would be if it weren't so pernicious.*

*Magazines compile lists because people like to read them. With U.S. News having folded its print edition two years ago, its rankings — not just of colleges, but law schools, graduate schools and even high schools — are probably what keep the enterprise alive. People care enough about its rankings [to pay \\$34.95](#) to seek out the details on the U.S. News Web site.*

*And they imbue these rankings with an authority that is largely unjustified.”*

*“The Silly List Everybody Cares About,” Joe Nocera, The New York Times, Sept. 28, 2012*

Each year, we receive questions about Scarsdale High School's ranking on the *U.S. News and World Report's* "Best High Schools" list or on the plethora of other lists like it.

Joe Nocera's column provides a useful context for this discussion. Although some high schools clearly do offer a stronger education than others\* (see below), there is no legitimate way to say that one is so many points better than another, any more than anyone can seriously claim that Princeton is “better” than Columbia in some objective sense.

Part of the reason is that America's public high schools are so diverse. For example, high scoring schools on the magazine lists often serve middle income children and are selective. That is, they only admit some of the people who apply, or they screen out low performers after they've been admitted. You can't legitimately compare their results with those of non-selective schools, particularly ones that serve children from low-income backgrounds.

Even among schools that could look similar on the surface — a Scarsdale High School and a Newton or New Trier, for example — differences in programs, approaches and school cultures make numerical rankings problematic. Let's use the 2012 *U.S. News* rankings as an example.

The rankings are based on four factors: student/teacher ratio; passing rates on state math tests and on state English tests; percent of students taking AP tests; percent of scores higher than 3.

Scarsdale's student-teacher ratio was more favorable than the first-ranked school's.

Scarsdale's state test results were stronger than those at the top-rated (and selective) New York high school. We don't know whether Scarsdale's results were stronger than those at the

first-ranked national school (also selective) because California data are reported in a different format.

The main difference between Scarsdale and the top-rated school appears to be the so-called "college readiness" score, which reflects the fact that 56 percent of our students took AP tests and 51 percent scored a three or better, while 100 percent of students in the magazine's top-rated school took AP exams, and 100 percent scored 3 or better.

In addition to the fact that one school was selective and the other (Scarsdale) wasn't, a main reason for the difference was that Scarsdale's academic program is different.

Many other schools have opened admission to AP courses, push students to take them and require them to take AP tests. Some districts require all students to follow an International Baccalaureate curriculum, which *U.S. News* counts as the equivalent of AP.

In Scarsdale, by contrast,

- The High School offers its own Advanced Topics honors program instead of AP courses.
- Participation in AP exams is voluntary, depending on student interest and needs.
- The High School has always limited admission to its most advanced offerings.

If the goal were to improve Scarsdale's standing in *U.S. News* rankings, the High School could require students in AT courses to take AP tests (even if they didn't need AP credit in college or want to take the exams). It could also liberalize admission to college level courses, so that more students would be in AT sections and in a better position to take AP tests.

It hasn't done either of these things.

First, it's taken the view that students should decide whether they need and want AP credit for college; it doesn't want to make that decision for them.

Second, the High School continues to take the view that admission to AT courses should be limited in order to maintain high academic standards in those classes. The High School continues ongoing discussions about the advantages/disadvantages of opening or further liberalizing admission to college level courses, while continuing to push the edges of current practice.

In the end, schools' rankings on the magazine lists (and whether a school even makes a particular list) depend on the criteria the writers and editors happen to choose.

In the case of the 2012 *U.S. News* rankings, Scarsdale was number 315 in the nation, despite its de-emphasis of AP classes and tests. On a contemporaneous *Newsweek* list, it wasn't in the top 1000. The inconsistency simply underscores how arbitrary these exercises are. If a scoring system emphasized the high graduation rates and job/college placement results for non-selective schools with high percentages of kids from low-income homes, the list of the "best" would be entirely different from the *Newsweek* and *U.S. News* lists of schools, many of which, doubtless, are very good.

\*How, then, can you tell whether a high school is highly effective?

Some outcome measures are useful: How many students graduate and how many graduates go on to college or meaningful work? What do follow-up surveys show about their preparation for college or for work?

Is the school a purposeful place where adults and students respect one another? Are security and disciplinary concerns minimal? Is there a strong safety net for student outreach, including psychological and counseling support?

How rich is the academic program? How much does it focus on preparing students for standardized tests? How does it aim to realize their personal potential? How does it foster critical and original thinkers and problem solvers? How does it prepare them for lives in the global community?

What opportunities do students have to explore their individual passions and interests – both in the classroom and beyond it? What percent are engaged in school activities outside the classroom and how many are involved in some form of service to others?

What do students say about their school? Teachers? Other parents?

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Below is a letter from national school superintendents, addressing the issue of school rankings.

[In this section of the Scarsdale Schools Website, you will also find a link to a column by *The New York Times*'s Michael Winerip on the topic.]

March, 2009

To the Editor of *Newsweek* Magazine,

We are school superintendents representing a cross section of districts, including some of the finest public schools in the nation.

Many of our high schools have received top rankings in your annual edition of "America's Best High Schools," as well as in other publications. Despite their achievements, others might never appear because these kinds of rankings so inadequately measure school quality.

Although some of our schools may seem to be the fortunate beneficiaries of your praise, we believe that all schools, communities -- and your readers -- are poorly served by persistent efforts to use simplistic measures to rate or rank schools -- in this particular case a single statistic, the number of students who sit for A.P. or I.B. exams.

The rationale for this flawed methodology, according to its inventor, Jay Mathews, is that A.P. or I.B. participation is the sole available nation-wide measure of whether students take a rigorous program of study. While it is true that there are few consistent national education measures, that fact does not justify inappropriate use of the data that are available.

In reality, it is impossible to know which high schools are "the best" in the nation. Determining educational quality is a matter of looking at many different factors including the academic achievements of students at all levels of aptitude, students' overall accomplishments, their subsequent performance in college or at work and the unique values and aspirations of their different communities.

Students and school communities deserve better than simplistic and misleading school rankings, and that is why the signers of this letter believe it is inappropriate to respond to your request for our A.P. or I.B. test data. We respectfully insist that you omit our schools from your rankings, no matter how well we score, even if you already have our data, or obtain it in some other way.

Sincerely,

**New York**

Ardsley UFSD – Jason Friedman  
Bedford CSD – Debra Jackson  
Blind Brook-Rye Public Schools – Ronald D. Valenti  
Brewster CSD – Jane Sandbank  
Bronxville UFSD – David Quattrone  
Byram Hills CSD – John Chambers  
Chappaqua CSD – David Fleishman  
Dobbs Ferry UFSD – Debra Kaplan  
Edgemont UFSD – Nancy Taddiken  
Greenburgh/Graham UFSD – Amy Goodman  
Greenburgh/North Castle UFSD – Robert Maher  
Hewlett-Woodmere Public Schools - Les Omotani  
Katonah-Lewisboro UFSD – Robert Roelle  
Mamaroneck UFSD – Paul Fried  
Mt. Pleasant-Cottage School, UFSD – Norman Freimark  
North Shore Schools – Ed Melnick  
Ossining UFSD - Phyllis Glassman  
Rye Neck UFSD – Peter Mustich  
Scarsdale UFSD – Michael McGill  
Spackenkill UFSD - Lois Colletta  
Tuckahoe UFSD – Mike Yazurlo  
Valhalla UFSD- Diane Ramos-Kelly

**New Jersey:**

Montclair Schools - Frank Alvarez  
Montgomery Schools - Sam Stewart  
Tenafly Schools – Morton Sherman  
Verona Public Schools – Earl Kim

**Connecticut:**

Darien Schools – Don Fiftal  
Simsbury Schools – Diane Ullman  
Stonington Public Schools – Michael L. McKee  
Wilton Public Schools - Gary Richards

**Illinois:**

Decatur Public School District #61 – Gloria J. Davis  
Deerfield/Highland Park Township HS District 113 – George V. Fornero  
Evanston Township High School – Eric Witherspoon  
Glenbrook High School District 225 - Dave Hales  
Lincoln-Way High School District 210 – Lawrence A. Wylie  
New Trier High School District 203 – Linda Yonke  
Oak Park and River Forest High School - Attila J. Weninger

**Massachusetts:**

Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools - Jere Hochman  
Masconomet Regional School District - Claire Sheff Kohn  
Wayland Schools – Gary Burton

Cc: The Editors of *Time* and *US News and World Report*