

Misleading Measurements

How Ohio school ratings foster false comparisons

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Any source of innovation should be tapped in our drive to make sure every Ohio child gets an excellent education. Some highly rated urban schools with strong test scores are held up as models for school improvement.

Policy Matters compared demographics of the urban schools scoring highest on state measures with the districts in which they are located. We found that the majority of the highest-rated schools served different populations from those districts, enrolling fewer children with disabilities, fewer poor students, and fewer minorities. Many enroll selectively, offer small class sizes, require applications, or engage in other practices not available to all public schools. Some schools, particularly charters, enroll students from other districts, usually suburban or even exurban.

Key findings

- High-rated schools, on average, serve a lower percentage of students with disabilities, of students in poverty and of minority students than Ohio's urban districts as a whole.
- The majority of Ohio's top-rated urban schools screen students, restrict enrollment, and/or limit class size.

Comparing districts and top urban schools

Policy Matters looked at schools rated the highest over a two-year period in each of Ohio's eight largest urban districts. We used state, school and district data to examine schools – district-run and charter – that were rated Excellent or higher for either the 2010-11 or the 2011-12 school year or both.¹ The number of schools examined ranged from two each in Canton, Dayton, and Youngstown to 22 in Cleveland; overall, the study included 57 district and 27 charter schools. We found that most top-rated schools are not reaching an equal share of the students with the fewest opportunities in Ohio's urban districts.

Among the most significant findings:

- **The overwhelming majority of highly rated district and charter schools served fewer students with disabilities than their home districts.** There were no students with disabilities enrolled in Akron's highest-rated school, Early College High School, the Early College schools in Toledo and Youngstown or two of the three specialized John Hay schools in Cleveland. Only 1.7 percent of the students enrolled at Cincinnati's highest-rated school, Walnut Hills High School, had disabilities. Of the 27 highest-rated charter schools included in this study, 26 had lower percentages of students with disabilities than their home districts.

¹ We used the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years because report cards for 2012-13 changed substantially from previous years, don't yet provide a single measure, and can't be compared to previous years.

- **High scorers had lower poverty rates.**² On average, Ohio's eight urban districts had an economically disadvantaged rate of 86 percent, while more than a quarter of all high-scoring schools included in this study enrolled fewer than 50 percent poor students and more than half served fewer such children than their home districts. Without weighting for school size, high-scoring schools had an average rate of 62 percent and only 12 of the top schools exceeded their district's percentage. Portage Collaborative Montessori Middle School in Canton served no economically disadvantaged students.
- **Most top-rated schools served fewer minority students.** Urban districts primarily enroll African-American, Hispanic, and multi-racial students. Some top-performing schools do an excellent job of reaching minority students and most serve a far higher share of minorities than the statewide population, but the schools in this study averaged a higher share of white students and a lower share of African-American students compared to district schools.
- **More than 60 percent of top-rated schools have selective enrollment policies.** To enroll in many top-rated schools, students must meet requirements including minimum GPA, test scores, prior language study or Montessori experience; others hold auditions or interviews, or require students and parents to sign contracts. Many schools maintain and market their small class sizes. Even early enrollment deadlines, application fees, or school choice procedure can skew the populations many schools serve. For example, parents self-select by camping out to get their children into some Cincinnati magnet schools.³
- **None of the charters in urban districts enrolled only students who live in those districts, and many top-rated district schools enrolled students from other districts.** While most top district schools primarily enroll resident students, examples abound of charters with very low urban district enrollments even though they are located in Ohio's largest urban districts. For example, only 15 percent of students enrolled at Menlo Park Academy in Cleveland were residents of the Cleveland school district.
- **In several districts, top-rated schools enrolled significantly fewer students than the district average.** Although enrollment at some top schools is higher, many top-rated schools enroll far fewer students. For example, Arts & College Prep Academy, a Columbus charter high school, enrolls 240 students, while the district high school average is 736 students.

It is essential that we use every tool available to deliver the best education to all children. We should not pretend that schools with larger class sizes and more troubled or disadvantaged students can easily achieve what smaller classrooms in selective schools manage.

Some high-scoring urban schools are succeeding in the face of difficult challenges, but most benefit because they serve less disadvantaged populations than urban districts. We urge advocates, reporters and policymakers to be honest about the challenges and to avoid misleading comparisons.

Correction: An earlier version included a charter school that is not located in Cincinnati; all references to that school, Hamilton County Math and Science, have been removed and our findings adjusted.

² Akron district elementary schools and all Cleveland district schools use a 100 percent economically disadvantaged rate established by a federal provision allowing them to claim all students as eligible for free and reduced meals, even if specific schools have much lower rates. Akron last reported E.D. rates in 2003-04 and CMSD in 2007-08.

³ Brown, Jessica, "Campouts at Cincinnati's highest-demand schools have begun." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 11, 2013, <http://cin.ci/1cTZsTi>. Also see Smith Richards, Jennifer and Collin Binkley, "Columbus school board seeks OK of selective-admissions plan." *Columbus Dispatch*, December 26, 2013. <http://bit.ly/1arkJzt>.