



OHIO COMMON GROUND RESEARCH CENTER

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How Good Is K–12 Public Education in Each State?

A Structured Review of State Education Rankings

What the Published Rankings Measure, and Why They Disagree

Ranking editions current through August 4, 2026

Prepared by the Ohio Common Ground Research Center

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EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE NOTICE — This report reviews how third-party state education rankings are built. The rankings and placements belong to the cited publishers. OCG’s classifications and methodological observations are its own research judgments, and this report does not declare any state’s schools best or worst or take an organizing, advocacy, or electoral position. Ranking editions and data vintages reflect the public record as of the status date and are subject to later revision. See Revision History for the update log.

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Executive Summary

How good are a state's public schools? The first thing to settle is which ranking is being cited, and what it measures. A state can rank first for education in one widely used product and land in the middle of another released the same year. This report explains why. The contradictions are usually not errors. They follow from different publishers measuring different things and calling each result "education."

This is a structured review of the national products that rank the 50 states on K–12 public education. It catalogs each product, records what it actually measures, and documents where and why the rankings disagree. It is descriptive. It does not decide which ranking is correct, does not assign a quality grade to any publisher, and does not declare any state's schools best or worst. Its unit of study is the rankings themselves. A later phase, involving rank correlations and a fully verified 50-state matrix, would add a quantitative synthesis; this version establishes the registry and the method that phase requires.

There is no single "education ranking." OCG cataloged five current publishers that rank the states — U.S. News (which reports two education rankings), the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT, WalletHub, ConsumerAffairs, and Scholaroo — along with Niche, a school- and district-level rating system whose state views are aggregated from local grades; two discontinued products (Education Week's Quality Counts and ALEC's Report Card on American Education); three federal data systems that supply the inputs; and two aggregator pages. The current products cluster into recognizable types: outcome-focused products built on federal achievement and graduation data; mixed composites that fold in spending, safety, and sometimes higher education; and a review-based rating system. The two discontinued products include a policy-adoption report card that graded whether a state had adopted particular reforms rather than how its students performed.

Two examples show the pattern, both from 2026 rankings. Massachusetts ranks first on the two composites that focus on school systems (WalletHub and ConsumerAffairs) but seventh in the U.S. News Education category, because that category weights higher education at fifty percent and Massachusetts ranks 46th on that half. Florida ranks third in the same U.S. News category, lifted by a first-place higher-education subrank, while sitting 22nd on the K–12-only Pre-K–12 subindex. A reader can repeat a rank accurately and still describe it inaccurately, which is the confusion this report is meant to prevent.

This version delivers the registry, the indicator taxonomy, a factual account of what each publisher discloses, a verified comparison of Ohio against six other states in the current WalletHub edition, and a set of illustrative cases. It does not publish a single aggregated "consensus rank" for each state. That requires a fully verified state-by-state matrix drawn from each publisher's own tables, which is the next phase of this work.

Key Findings

- **There is no single "education ranking."** OCG cataloged five current publishers that rank the states (producing six ranking outputs, since U.S. News reports two), a separate school- and district-level rating system (Niche), two discontinued products, three federal data systems, and two aggregators. The current products differ so much in what they measure that the definition of "best" drives much of the result.
- **The same state ranks differently across products (all 2026).** Colorado ranks first in the U.S. News Education category but 27th on WalletHub and 32nd on ConsumerAffairs. Massachusetts ranks first on WalletHub and ConsumerAffairs but seventh in the U.S. News Education category, which weights higher

education at fifty percent and places Massachusetts 46th on that half. New Jersey ranks first on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex but third on WalletHub and fourth on ConsumerAffairs.

- **The clearest divergence is outcomes versus policy.** Arizona finishes last on ConsumerAffairs (2026, third straight year) and 46th on WalletHub yet ranked at or near the top of an earlier ALEC policy report card (2019). ALEC grades policy adoption, while ConsumerAffairs and WalletHub are mixed composites of measured outcomes, funding, and safety. Roughly seven years also separate those editions.
- **Ohio’s standing depends on what a product measures.** Its strongest showing is the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex, 14th of 50. The rankings that add higher education (where Ohio ranks 42nd), funding, and safety place it lower: 29th in the U.S. News Education category, 36th of 51 on WalletHub, and 41st of 50 on ConsumerAffairs, its lowest, which falls in the bottom ten there. Ohio is not in the top ten on any of the four products, and its placements span from 14th to 41st.
- **The rankings are not fully independent.** Most outcome-oriented products draw on the same federal inputs: NAEP grade 4 and grade 8 reading and mathematics, the adjusted-cohort graduation rate, and NCES/Census finance data. The KIDS COUNT Education domain uses NAEP fourth grade reading and eighth-grade math directly. When several products agree that agreement partly reflects shared inputs rather than independent confirmation. OCG has not yet quantified the overlap.
- **Transparency varies.** KIDS COUNT publishes its full 0–1,000 formula and 2019 anchor. WalletHub and Scholaroo publish metric lists and weights. U.S. News discloses categories but not full internal weights. For ALEC, OCG located policy categories but no public workbook mapping each measure to the final grade. Niche depends substantially on user reviews and school-supplied data.
- **Editions and universes differ, so labels matter.** The U.S. News Education top spot moved from Florida (2025) to Colorado (2026). WalletHub ranks 51 jurisdictions (50 states plus D.C.); a ranking of 50 is not directly comparable to a ranking of 51. Secondary outlets frequently recycle older editions, so every placement in this report is tagged to an edition and universe.
- **Some widely cited "rankings" are aggregators.** World Population Review and DataPandas re-present U.S. News and WalletHub results. Counting them as separate rankings would double-count the underlying products.
- **The most concept-separated scorecard is gone.** Education Week’s Quality Counts reported achievement, school finance, and cradle-to-career "chance for success" as separate graded indices. Its last full editions appeared in 2020 and 2021, and Education Week announced the end of the report in March 2024. OCG did not identify a current product that reproduces that separation.

The Ranking Registry at a Glance

The table below lists the products cataloged in this report: three federal data systems that supply the raw inputs, the current ranking publishers and the Niche rating system, two discontinued products, and two aggregator pages. Full profiles follow in The Ranking Registry.

Product	Type	Latest edition	Taxonomy	Scope
NAEP (Nation’s Report Card)	Federal data	2024	Outcome	K–12
NCES / ACGR; Census finance	Federal data	Rolling	Outcome + input	K–12

Product	Type	Latest edition	Taxonomy	Scope
U.S. News — Education category	Current ranking	2026	Mixed composite	Pre-K–12 + higher ed
U.S. News — Pre-K–12 subindex	Current ranking	2026	Outcome-leaning	Pre-K–12
KIDS COUNT — Education domain	Current ranking	2026	Outcome-heavy	K–12 + early ed
Education Week — Quality Counts	Historical	2020–21	Separated indices	K–12 + context
WalletHub	Current ranking	2026	Mixed composite	K–12
ConsumerAffairs	Current ranking	2026	Mixed composite	K–12 + higher ed
Scholaroo	Current ranking	2023	Mixed composite	K–12
ALEC — Report Card	Historical / dormant	2019	Policy-adoption	K–12 policy
Niche	Rating system	2025	Review-based	Schools/districts
World Population Review; DataPandas	Aggregator	Rolling	Inherits sources	Mirrors sources

A product's "latest edition" year is its publication cycle, which usually post-dates the underlying data by one or more years.

Why This Report Matters

Ohioans encounter state education rankings often, in headlines, relocation guides, and social-media arguments, and the numbers routinely contradict one another. One source places a state in the top ten; another, released weeks later, puts it in the bottom half. Without a way to see what each ranking measures, a reader cannot tell whether a state looks strong because its students achieve, because it spends heavily, because its residents are comparatively affluent, because it has adopted a preferred set of policies, or because a publisher chose favorable inputs.

This report gives Ohioans that map. It does not say which ranking to trust or where Ohio really stands. It documents what is being measured behind each headline so a claim can be traced to its source before it is repeated. That is a civic-literacy function within the Research Center's descriptive remit.

Scope, Data, and Method

The unit of analysis is the ranking product, not the state. For each product, OCG recorded the publisher, the stated object of measurement, the most recent edition and data vintage, the indicators and disclosed weights, the unit actually measured (students, schools, systems, or policy), the scope (K–12 only, or also pre-K and higher education), the ranked universe (50 states, or 50 states plus D.C.), and the product's place in a common indicator taxonomy.

How products were identified

Products were located through structured web searches on state education rankings and school-system rankings, publisher methodology pages, and contemporaneous news coverage of each release, cross-checked

against each publisher’s own tables. Coding and classification were performed by a single analyst; independent double-coding is noted as a limitation.

Inclusion and exclusion

A product was cataloged if it ranks most or all states, addresses K–12 public education substantially, discloses enough method to identify its indicators, uses identifiable sources, carries a defined publication year, is issued by an identifiable organization, and can be archived for review. Products that republish another publisher’s ranking were cataloged separately as aggregators. Niche, which relies substantially on user reviews and rates schools and districts rather than ranking state systems, is cataloged as a related rating system. The table below records products that were considered but not profiled, with the reason for each.

Product considered	Reason not cataloged as a state ranking
ALEC Index of State Education Freedom	Measures education policy alone (school choice, regulation), not state system performance. ALEC’s earlier Report Card is cataloged as a historical policy-adoption product.
Urban Institute adjusted NAEP (America’s Gradebook)	A demographically adjusted achievement comparison, not a composite state ranking. Candidate for a future revision extending the context category.
Education Recovery Scorecard	A pandemic learning-recovery measure, not an overall state ranking.
Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA)	A research data archive of comparable achievement, not a published state ranking.
Education Law Center (Making the Grade)	A school-finance fairness rating, not a broad system ranking.
National Council on Teacher Quality	A teacher-policy evaluation, a subset of K–12 policy, not an overall ranking.

Universe and comparability

Ranked universes differ. WalletHub and ConsumerAffairs rank the 50 states and the District of Columbia (51 jurisdictions); some products rank 50 states only. Ranks from a 51-jurisdiction product are not directly comparable to ranks from a 50-state product, and this report labels the universe wherever it reports a rank.

Classification, and a note on scoring the rankings

Each product is classified by the taxonomy in the next section. OCG also documented, factually, what each publisher discloses about its own method. The external peer input that informed this report proposed assigning each ranking a numeric "integrity score." OCG did not adopt that step, because scoring third-party products would turn a descriptive catalog into a rating of the rankings. This report records observable methodological characteristics and lets readers weigh them.

Verification and treatment of peer input

Placements, methodologies, and vintages were confirmed against each publisher’s materials and the federal data systems cited in Sources. External and internal peer-review inputs were treated as unverified issue-spotting leads; each point adopted was independently confirmed against a primary or publisher source before inclusion, and where a suggestion conflicted with the primary record, the primary record controlled. Status date: August 4, 2026.

Definitions

- **Ranking.** A published product that orders states by an education-related measure. This report distinguishes rankings from the federal data systems (NAEP, NCES, Census) that supply their inputs.
- **Index.** A ranking built by combining multiple indicators into a single score under stated weights, such as the KIDS COUNT Education domain's 0–1,000 score.
- **Aggregator.** A page that re-presents one or more other publishers' rankings rather than measuring independently.
- **Outcome, input, context, and policy.** The four indicator types used to classify what a ranking rewards: student results; resources and staffing; socioeconomic conditions; and adopted policies. A single product may mix them.
- **Composite.** A single overall number produced by blending several categories; the blend and its weights determine the result.
- **Data vintage.** The reference year of the underlying data, which often pre-dates a ranking's publication ("edition") year.
- **Jurisdiction universe.** The set of ranked units, either 50 states or 50 states plus the District of Columbia. Ranks are comparable across products only within the same universe.
- **NAEP.** The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the principal regularly administered national assessment designed to support comparable state-level achievement reporting. Because state proficiency tests use different standards and cut scores, outcome rankings converge on NAEP for comparability.

The Ranking Registry

This registry is the core of the report. Each entry records who publishes a ranking, what it measures, the vintage of its most recent edition, its indicators and disclosed weights, the unit it measures, its scope and universe, and its place in the taxonomy. The federal data systems in the first group are not "best-state" rankings; they are listed because nearly every ranking draws on them, a point developed in Shared Underlying Data.

Federal data source (not a ranking)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — "The Nation's Report Card"

Publisher: NCES / IES / National Assessment Governing Board (federal)

What it is	The federal achievement assessment that most state rankings draw on. NAEP is not a "best-state" ranking; it reports comparable student achievement.
Most recent edition	Main assessment 2024 (grades 4 and 8, reading and mathematics), administered January through March 2024 and released January 2025.
What it reports	Average scale scores (0–500) and the percentage of students at or above NAEP Basic, NAEP Proficient, and NAEP Advanced.
Unit measured	Students (representative samples), aggregated to the state level.

State-comparable scope	The series used in state rankings is public-school results in grades 4 and 8 reading and mathematics. NAEP also runs other national assessments (including grade 12 and some private-school reporting), but those do not provide the same full 50-state comparison.
Methodology	Public; standardized, statistically weighted samples; achievement-level cut scores set by the Governing Board.
Taxonomy	Outcome (achievement).

NCES data systems — Common Core of Data, EDFacts, ACGR

Publisher: National Center for Education Statistics (federal)

What it is	Federal repositories for enrollment, staffing, graduation, and finance data. The adjusted-cohort graduation rate (ACGR) is the standardized interstate graduation measure.
Most recent edition	Continuously updated; graduation and finance series usually lag one to three years behind the reference school year.
What it reports	Enrollment, four-year adjusted-cohort graduation, staffing, and school finance.
Unit measured	Schools, districts, and states.
Scope	Public K–12.
Methodology	Public definitions and collection protocols.
Taxonomy	Outcome (graduation) and input (finance, staffing).

U.S. Census Bureau — Annual Survey of School System Finances

Publisher: U.S. Census Bureau (federal)

What it is	The standard per-pupil spending series used by finance-oriented rankings.
Most recent edition	Annual. Per-pupil figures used in 2026-cycle rankings generally reflect a fiscal year two or more years earlier.
What it reports	Revenues and current per-pupil expenditures by state.
Unit measured	State and district finance.
Scope	Public K–12 finance.
Methodology	Public.
Taxonomy	Input (resources).

Current ranking product

U.S. News & World Report — Best States: Education (category)

Publisher: U.S. News & World Report (media)

What it measures	A composite of two equally weighted halves: Pre-K–12 performance (50%) and higher education (50%). The category rank reflects postsecondary outcomes as much as K–12 schooling. It is one of eight categories in the broader "Best States" ranking.
Universe	50 states (no District of Columbia).

Most recent edition	2026 cycle (retrieved August 4, 2026): Colorado first, New Jersey second, Florida third in the Education category. Per U.S. News reporting, Florida led the category in 2025.
Indicators (Pre-K–12)	Standardized test scores (NAEP), preschool enrollment, high school graduation, and college readiness.
Indicators (higher education)	College graduation rates, cost, and degree attainment.
Weighting	Categories disclosed; full internal metric weights only partly published.
Unit measured	State systems (composite).
Scope	Pre-K, K–12, and higher education.
Taxonomy	Mixed composite (outcome, attainment, higher education).

U.S. News & World Report — Pre-K–12 subindex

Publisher: U.S. News & World Report (media)

What it measures	The K–12 half of the U.S. News education composite, reported separately (50 states).
Most recent edition	2026 cycle (retrieved August 4, 2026): New Jersey first, Massachusetts second, Connecticut third; New Mexico last.
Indicators	Standardized test scores, preschool enrollment, high school graduation, college readiness.
Weighting	Categories disclosed; full metric weights only partly published.
Unit measured	State K–12 systems.
Scope	Pre-K and K–12.
Taxonomy	Outcome-leaning composite.

Annie E. Casey Foundation — KIDS COUNT Data Book (Education domain)

Publisher: Annie E. Casey Foundation (nonprofit)

What it measures	One of four domains in a child-well-being index. The Education domain uses four indicators: young children (ages 3–4) not in school, fourth graders not proficient in reading (NAEP), eighth graders not proficient in mathematics (NAEP), and high school students not graduating on time.
Most recent edition	2026 Data Book (37th edition); most estimates from 2024. Education was the weakest-performing domain nationally.
Weighting and formula	The four indicators are equally weighted. Each indicator is min-max transformed against the best and worst 2019 state values, then the four are averaged into a 0–1,000 domain score. Scores of 0 and 1,000 mark the observed 2019 state extremes, not absolute failure or success.
Data inputs	Its achievement measures come directly from NAEP. Recent graduation estimates use state education-agency reporting, while earlier years used the federal Common Core of Data.
Unit measured	Children / state outcomes.

Scope	K–12 outcomes plus early-childhood access; part of a broader child-well-being index, not a K–12-only "school quality" ranking.
Taxonomy	Outcome-heavy (achievement, graduation, early-education access).

WalletHub — States with the Best & Worst School Systems

Publisher: WalletHub (consumer finance)

What it measures	A composite of two weighted dimensions: Quality (80%) and Safety (20%).
Universe	50 states and the District of Columbia (51 ranked jurisdictions).
Most recent edition	2026 edition (data collected as of June 2026). Massachusetts ranked first; New Mexico ranked 51st. Ohio ranked 36th overall (38th in Quality, 33rd in Safety).
Indicators	32 metrics per WalletHub's published methodology, spanning test scores, graduation and dropout, ACT/SAT, AP performance, pupil-teacher ratio, teacher credentials, digital-learning policy, and presence of schools in U.S. News' "top 700," plus bullying, violence, and disciplinary measures on the safety side.
Weighting	Metric list and the 80/20 Quality/Safety split published.
Data sources	Census, U.S. Department of Education, NCES, CDC, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. News, the College Board, and ACT.
Unit measured	State public-school systems.
Scope	Public K–12.
Taxonomy	Mixed composite (outcome, input, policy, safety).

ConsumerAffairs — Best States for Public Education

Publisher: ConsumerAffairs (consumer/media)

What it measures	Four weighted categories on a 100-point scale: K–12 academic outcomes (30), school funding and resources (30), higher education (30), and school safety (10).
Universe	50 states (no District of Columbia).
Most recent edition	2026 (retrieved August 4, 2026): Massachusetts first, New York second, Connecticut third; Arizona last for the third straight year. Wyoming and Wisconsin entered the top 10, displacing Maryland and Pennsylvania.
Indicators	Fourth- and eighth-grade NAEP (2024), graduation, SAT/ACT; per-pupil spending, student-teacher ratio, teacher salary and board certification; college graduation/retention, tuition, and grant aid. Its safety category spans K–12 and postsecondary, including gun-violence incidents per 100,000 K–12 and college students and reported criminal offenses at colleges.
Data vintage note	The 2026 edition reused the prior year's graduation-rate and NAEP data where newer national figures were unavailable, so its "2026" label mixes vintages.
Unit measured	State systems; includes higher education.
Scope	K–12 plus higher education and safety.
Taxonomy	Mixed composite (outcome, input, higher education, safety).

Scholaroo — State Education Rankings

Publisher: Scholaroo (consumer)

What it measures	Three dimensions: Student Success, Student Safety, and School Quality.
Most recent edition	Most recent widely available edition is 2023.
Indicators	43 metrics, each graded on a 100-point scale with published per-metric weights (graduation and dropout rates are double-weighted, for example).
Weighting	Published per metric.
Unit measured	State systems.
Scope	Public K–12.
Taxonomy	Mixed composite (outcome, input, safety).

Historical ranking product

Education Week — Quality Counts (historical; discontinued)

Publisher: Education Week / EdWeek Research Center (media/research)

Status	Its last full editions appeared in 2020 and 2021, and Education Week announced the end of the report in March 2024, after 25 years. It is included here as a historical benchmark, not a current ranking.
What it measured	An overall A–F grade equal to the average of three indices: Chance-for-Success (13 cradle-to-career indicators), School Finance (spending and district-to-district equity), and K–12 Achievement (18 indicators covering NAEP, graduation, and Advanced Placement).
Why it is noted	It reported achievement, finance, and socioeconomic "chance for success" as separate grades rather than one number. OCG did not identify a current product that reproduces that separation.
Unit measured	State systems and conditions.
Scope	K–12 with cradle-to-career context.
Taxonomy	Separated indices: outcome (Achievement), input/equity (Finance), context (Chance-for-Success).

ALEC — Report Card on American Education (historical)

Publisher: American Legislative Exchange Council (advocacy-affiliated)

Status	The 23rd edition (2019) was the last edition of this series. ALEC's later education work shifted toward a school-choice-focused index, which this report does not catalog because it measures policy alone. The Report Card is included here as a historical, policy-adoption benchmark.
What it measured	Chiefly state education policy rather than measured outcomes: private-school choice, charter law, homeschool-regulation burden, teacher-quality policy, virtual schooling, and academic-standards rigor, alongside performance and gains for low-income students.
Most recent edition	23rd edition, 2019. Earlier editions ranked policy-forward states (for example, Arizona) at or near the top.

Disclosure	The 2019 edition identifies broad policy categories and discusses several category sources. OCG did not locate a public workbook mapping each underlying measure to the final grade.
Unit measured	State policy environment.
Scope	K–12 policy.
Taxonomy	Policy-adoption (measures alignment with a policy framework, not primarily student outcomes).

Rating system (review-based)

Niche — K–12 school and district ratings

Publisher: Niche (consumer)

What it is	A rating system that grades individual schools and districts (A+ to F) and aggregates those grades into county, place, and state views weighted by enrollment. OCG did not locate an authoritative Niche methodology for a single nationwide 50-state public-system ranking comparable to WalletHub or U.S. News, so Niche is cataloged as a related rating system rather than a state ranking.
What it measures	School- and district-level grades blending public statistics with user reviews and non-academic factors (athletics, diversity, administration).
Most recent edition	Most recent K–12 school and district rankings released September 29, 2025; updated annually with a mid-July data cutoff.
Indicators	U.S. Department of Education / NCES statistics, state-assessment proficiency, college-enrollment data, and parent/student reviews; schools may update their own data through a partner portal.
Unit measured	Schools and districts (aggregated to local and state views).
Scope	Public and private K–12.
Taxonomy	Review-based; mixed inputs.

Aggregator / compilation

World Population Review; DataPandas (compilations)

Publisher: Aggregator sites

What they are	High-traffic pages that republish other publishers' rankings rather than measuring independently. World Population Review compiles WalletHub and U.S. News data; DataPandas builds on the U.S. News Education Quality Rank and the WalletHub Education Score.
Why flagged separately	They add reach and side-by-side presentation, not an independent data collection. Treating them as additional rankings would double-count the underlying U.S. News and WalletHub results.
Unit measured	Re-presented state ranks/scores.
Scope	Mirrors the sources they compile.

Taxonomy	Inherits sources.
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What Each Ranking Measures: An Indicator Taxonomy

Every ranking rewards some mix of four things: outcomes (what students achieve), inputs (what a state provides), context (the conditions students bring), and policies (what a state has adopted). Sorting the products this way explains much of the disagreement among them. A state can look strong on outcomes and weak on policy alignment, or the reverse, and two rankings that emphasize different types will place it differently for reasons that have nothing to do with error.

Category	Products that fall here (and what it means)
Outcome-focused	NAEP (the underlying achievement anchor), the KIDS COUNT Education domain, and Education Week's former K–12 Achievement Index. This reward measured student results, chiefly test scores and graduation. They may produce similar placements because they draw on overlapping achievement and graduation measures, though this has not been tested across the full state matrix.
Mixed composite	The U.S. News Education category, WalletHub, ConsumerAffairs, and Scholaroo. These blend outcomes with resources, safety, and (for U.S. News and ConsumerAffairs) higher education. Where a state lands depends on the blend. WalletHub is a mixed composite, not an outcome ranking.
Input / context-heavy	Census and NCES finance data, and Education Week's School Finance and Chance-for-Success indices. These describe spending, equity, and socioeconomic conditions rather than student results.
Policy-adoption	ALEC's Report Card grades whether a state has adopted particular policies (school choice, charter law, homeschool deregulation), not whether its students perform well. A high grade signals alignment with a policy framework.
Review-based	Niche blends federal statistics with parent/student reviews and school-supplied data, adding non-academic factors such as athletics and administration.
Aggregators	World Population Review and DataPandas re-present U.S. News and WalletHub results rather than measuring independently.

Every composite embeds choices about which outcomes matter, whether safety and spending count, and whether higher education belongs in an education score. The distinction drawn here is narrower: ALEC primarily scores policy adoption, while the other products primarily score observed outcomes or characteristics. A reader should know which of these a given headline reports.

Methodology Characteristics: What Each Publisher Discloses

The matrix below records observable attributes of each product's disclosed method. It is not a scorecard of the rankings and does not order the publishers by quality. Coded values follow fixed definitions.

Metrics/weights public: "Yes" means every indicator and numeric weight is disclosed; "Partly" means categories or the top-level split are disclosed but one or more indicator weights are absent; "Categories only" means only broad categories are named. Data vintage labeled: "Yes" means a reference year is given for every indicator; "Partly" means some but not all. Result reproducible from public inputs: "Yes" means published results can be recalculated from public inputs and a public formula; "Partly" means the formula is

public but some inputs are proprietary; "No" means essential inputs are not public; "Not assessed" means OCG did not evaluate it. For NAEP, "Yes" means published state results and full methodology are available for verification, not that the survey estimates can be recreated from raw microdata.

Product	Metrics/weights public?	Data vintage labeled?	Result reproducible from public inputs?	What it measures (unit)
NAEP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Student achievement
KIDS COUNT (Ed. domain)	Yes (full formula)	Yes	Yes	Child / state outcomes
U.S. News	Partly	Partly	Partly	State composite incl. higher ed
WalletHub	Yes (32 metrics, 80/20)	Partly	Partly	System quality + safety
ConsumerAffairs	Categories only	Partly	Partly	System incl. higher ed + safety
Scholaroo	Yes (43 metrics)	Partly	Partly	System composite
Education Week (hist.)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Separated indices
ALEC	Categories only	Partly	Not assessed	Policy environment
Niche	Categories only	Partly	No	Schools / districts aggregated

Two patterns are visible. The products with the most fully published methods (NAEP and the KIDS COUNT Education domain) are also the most outcome-focused. The products whose results are hardest to reproduce from public inputs are those that depend on policy judgments (ALEC) or on proprietary user reviews (Niche). These are observations about disclosure and reproducibility, not overall quality grades.

Ohio and the Comparison States Across Rankings

The table below places Ohio next to the six comparison states across four current (2026) rankings. Every cell is taken from the publisher's own 2026 table, retrieved August 4, 2026. Ranks are comparable only within a column, because the universes differ: WalletHub ranks 51 jurisdictions (50 states plus D.C.), while the U.S. News subindices and ConsumerAffairs rank the 50 states.

State	WalletHub 2026 (of 51)	U.S. News Education 2026 (of 50)	U.S. News PreK–12 2026 (of 50)	ConsumerAffairs 2026 (of 50)
Massachusetts	1	7	2	1
New Jersey	3	2	1	4
Florida	13	3	22	22
Colorado	27	1	9	32
Ohio	36	29	14	41
Arizona	46	43	45	50 (last)
New Mexico	51 (last)	50 (last)	50 (last)	46

Universe: WalletHub, 51 jurisdictions; U.S. News and ConsumerAffairs, 50 states. Reading the table: the U.S. News Education category is a 50/50 blend of the Pre-K–12 and higher-education subindices, computed from weighted underlying scores and then reranked, not by averaging the displayed ordinal ranks. A weak higher-education subrank therefore contributes to a lower Education-category placement: Massachusetts ranks 2nd on Pre-K–12 but 46th in higher education and 7th in the category; Florida ranks 1st in higher education and 3rd in the category despite a 22nd Pre-K–12 rank; Ohio ranks 14th on Pre-K–12 but 42nd in higher education and 29th in the category. WalletHub reports separate Quality and Safety subranks (Colorado ranks 11th in Quality and 46th in Safety, and 27th overall). Sources: publisher tables retrieved August 4, 2026 (WalletHub data collected June 22, 2026).

Ohio’s strongest showing is the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex, where it ranks 14th of 50. The rankings that add higher education (where Ohio ranks 42nd), school funding, and safety place it lower: 29th in the U.S. News Education category, 36th of 51 on WalletHub, and 41st of 50 on ConsumerAffairs, its lowest, which sits in the bottom ten of that product. Colorado shows the same pattern in reverse, ranking first in the U.S. News Education category, which rewards its higher-education strength, but 27th on WalletHub and 32nd on ConsumerAffairs. Ohio’s placements span from 14th to 41st of the states, and where it lands depends on how much higher education, funding, and safety each product folds in.

Illustrative Cases: Where the Same State Places Differently

The cases below were selected for explanatory value, not because they have the mathematically largest rank spreads. All figures are from the 2026 editions, except the ALEC reference for Arizona, which is the 2019 policy report card. Each row pairs a state’s higher and lower placements with the subrank that drives the gap. This is not a consensus ranking and does not average the products.

State	Higher placement (product, edition)	Lower placement (product, edition)	Why the placements differ
Massachusetts	No. 1 on WalletHub and ConsumerAffairs; No. 2 on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex.	No. 7 in the U.S. News Education category.	The Education category weights higher education at 50%, and Massachusetts ranks 46th in higher education, which lowers its category score even though it leads or nearly leads the K–12 outcome measures reviewed here.
Colorado	No. 1 in the U.S. News Education category (Pre-K–12 9th, higher education 3rd).	No. 27 on WalletHub and No. 32 on ConsumerAffairs.	WalletHub ranks Colorado 11th in Quality but 46th in Safety. The composites that weight safety and K–12 measures place it far below the category that rewards its higher-education strength.
Florida	No. 3 in the U.S. News Education category, on the strength of a No. 1 higher education subrank.	No. 22 on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex and No. 22 on ConsumerAffairs (13th on WalletHub).	A first-place higher-education subrank lifts the blended category well above Florida’s K–12-only standing.
New Jersey	No. 1 on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex; No. 2 in WalletHub Quality.	No. 38 in the U.S. News higher-education subrank; No. 20 in WalletHub Safety.	Top K–12 results sit alongside a weaker higher-education subrank and a middling safety subrank.
Arizona	No. 22 in the U.S. News higher-education subrank, and at or near	No. 50 (last) on ConsumerAffairs, No. 46 on	Mixed composites that blend outcomes, funding, higher

State	Higher placement (product, edition)	Lower placement (product, edition)	Why the placements differ
	the top of an earlier ALEC policy report card (2019).	WalletHub, No. 45 on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex.	education, and safety rank Arizona near the bottom. A policy-adoption report card grades adopted policy rather than results, and that 2019 edition is roughly seven years older.
New Mexico	No. 18 in the U.S. News higher-education subrank; 5th in the ConsumerAffairs higher-education category.	Last or near-last on every K–12 composite: 51st on WalletHub, 50th on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex and Education category.	Strong higher-education-access measures sit alongside some of the weakest K–12 outcomes in the rankings reviewed here (ConsumerAffairs places its K–12 outcomes 48th of 50).
Ohio	No. 14 on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex.	No. 29 in the U.S. News Education category; 36th on WalletHub; 41st on ConsumerAffairs.	Ohio’s Pre-K–12 subindex is its strongest showing. The composites that add higher education (where Ohio ranks 42nd), funding, and safety place it in the 30s and 40s.

Among the illustrative cases shown, Florida and Arizona show especially large differences across products, where a publisher’s choice to include higher education or to grade policy pulls the result away from measured K–12 outcomes. Massachusetts (near the top) and New Mexico (near the bottom) move less across the outcome-weighted products, which share the same federal inputs. Because OCG has not computed rank spreads for all 50 states, these are described as illustrative rather than as the largest movers overall.

Shared Underlying Data: Rankings Are Not Fully Independent

Several products placing Massachusetts near the top of their K-12 measures may look like several independent analyses reaching the same verdict. They are not fully independent. Most outcome-oriented rankings draw on the same small set of federal inputs, whatever the brand name.

- **NAEP is the shared achievement anchor.** The KIDS COUNT Education domain uses NAEP fourth grade reading and eighth-grade mathematics directly. The U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex uses NAEP-based scores. WalletHub and ConsumerAffairs both build on NAEP-derived measures. Because state proficiency tests are not directly comparable, publishers converge on NAEP.
- **Graduation and finance inputs are shared too.** Graduation and per-pupil spending measures recur across WalletHub, ConsumerAffairs, U.S. News, and the historical Education Week finance index, though publishers do not all draw graduation from the same series (KIDS COUNT, for instance, uses state-agency reporting for recent years). Products can differ in the year, transformation, weighting, and combination they apply, so shared inputs reduce independence without making the products equivalent.
- **Aggregators reuse whole rankings.** World Population Review and DataPandas re-present WalletHub and U.S. News outright.

This means apparent agreement among rankings may be amplified by shared data sources rather than confirmed by independent methods. It does not make the rankings wrong. OCG has documented the overlap

qualitatively; it has not yet quantified the share of each ranking traceable to NAEP, the adjusted-cohort graduation rate, and NCES/Census finance. That measurement is a priority in Future Research, and until it is done, this finding is preliminary.

Interpretive Considerations

- **The definition of "best" does much of the work.** A composite that weights higher education fifty percent (the U.S. News Education category) will rank states differently from a K–12-only outcome product, even using the same schools. These answer different questions.
- **Different questions do not immunize a ranking from error.** Different constructs explain much disagreement, but a ranking can still be wrong if it miscalculates, uses stale data, mislabels a broad composite as K–12 quality, or applies undisclosed weights. Answering a different question is not the same as being equally valid.
- **Policy and outcome rankings are not comparable.** ALEC's report card and ConsumerAffairs' outcome ranking can place the same state at opposite ends because one grades adopted policy and the other grades measured results.
- **Spending enters some products and not others.** Some products reward expenditure levels while others do not, which can change ordinal results. This report does not attempt to estimate the empirical relationship between spending and outcomes, which would require a separate analysis with cost and need adjustments.
- **Vintage and universe matter.** A "2026" ranking may rest on 2024 achievement data and older finance data and may rank 50 or 51 jurisdictions. Comparing two rankings without checking their vintages and universes can mistake a data-year or counting difference for a real change.

Limitations and What This Report Does Not Claim

- **Verified for seven states, not yet all fifty; no blended rank.** The Ohio comparison (Section 10) is drawn cell by cell from each publisher's own 2026 table for the seven states shown. This version does not extend that matrix to all 50 states, and it does not compute a single blended cross-product rank for any state. A blended rank would require the full 50-state matrix and a defensible way to combine non-additive figures, which OCG's data-precision standards reserve for the next phase.
- **Preliminary, not quantified.** The shared-data finding and the observation that outcome-weighted products converge are based on qualitative inspection and selected examples. Neither has been established with rank correlations or a dependence analysis. Those are next-phase tasks.
- **No composite quality grade for publishers.** OCG does not decide which ranking is correct, does not order the publishers by overall quality, and does not declare any state's schools best or worst. It does document and characterize specific, predefined methodological attributes, such as disclosure, scope, data provenance, and reproducibility. This report does not construct an OCG index that scores or ranks states, which would require choosing weights and is outside its scope.
- **Selected products, labeled editions.** This registry covers the major national products meeting the inclusion criteria; a niche or specialized product using different terminology may exist and is invited for a future revision. Placements are tagged to editions and universes, which do not all share the same year.

- **Single-analyst coding.** Classification was performed by one analyst. Independent double-coding, publisher review of profiles, and a documented exclusion log would strengthen a future revision.
- **Placements are the publishers', not OCG's.** Every rank reported here is attributed to the product and edition that produced it. OCG reproduces these as facts about the rankings, not as its own assessment of any state.

Future Research

- Build the verified state-by-state matrix: capture every state's rank and, where available, score for each cataloged product and edition, with a data-vintage and universe label on each cell.
- Once the matrix is verified, use publisher scores where available; otherwise convert ordinal ranks to within-universe percentile ranks rather than averaging raw ranks. Evaluate agreement with rank-based methods (Spearman's rho and Kendall's tau), examine per-state rank spread, and treat disagreement as a finding.
- Before combining any products into a consensus measure, decide which products are eligible to combine at all. Grouping into strata by construct — K–12 achievement, mixed public-school systems, broader systems that include higher education, policy indices, and consumer/review products — avoids blending measures that answer different questions. This is a construct-validity question, not only a data-verification one.
- Quantify the shared-data overlap: estimate the share of each ranking traceable to NAEP, the adjusted-cohort graduation rate, and NCES/Census finance, to show how much apparent agreement reflects common inputs.
- Profile the specialized products set aside here (for example, the Urban Institute's demographically adjusted NAEP comparisons and the Education Recovery Scorecard), which adjust outcomes for student demographics and would extend the taxonomy's context category.
- Note where spending inputs are unadjusted for regional cost of living, since cost adjustment can shift the relative standing of high-cost and low-cost states.
- Produce an Ohio deep dive comparing Ohio with its border states across products and editions, once the matrix supports it.
- Monitor for a successor to Education Week's Quality Counts, since its discontinuation left no current product that cleanly separates achievement, finance, and chance-for-success.

Sources

- NAEP / The Nation's Report Card — NCES, IES, and the National Assessment Governing Board: 2024 mathematics and reading results at grades 4 and 8 for the nation, states, and districts (nationsreportcard.gov; nces.ed.gov; nagb.gov).
- National Center for Education Statistics — Common Core of Data, EDFacts, and adjusted-cohort graduation rate series (nces.ed.gov).
- U.S. Census Bureau — Annual Survey of School System Finances.
- U.S. News & World Report — Best States: Education, full 50-state table showing each state's Education-category, Pre-K–12, and higher-education ranks, retrieved August 4, 2026 (usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education).

- Annie E. Casey Foundation — 2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book and the KIDS COUNT Data Center Education scores-and-rankings methodology, including the 0–1,000 indicator-level formula anchored to 2019 (aecf.org; datacenter.aecf.org).
- Education Week / EdWeek Research Center — Quality Counts archive, the three-index structure, the 2020–2021 final full editions, and the March 2024 discontinuation announcement (edweek.org).
- WalletHub — States with the Best & Worst School Systems in 2026, full 51-jurisdiction table (Overall, Total Score, Quality, and Safety ranks) and published 32-metric methodology (Quality 80% / Safety 20%), data collected as of June 22, 2026, retrieved August 4, 2026 (wallethub.com). Ohio: 36th overall, 38th Quality, 33rd Safety.
- ConsumerAffairs — The Best States for Public Education in 2026 (Sharon Wu), full 50-state table with the four category subranks (K–12 outcomes, funding, higher education, safety) and point weights, retrieved August 4, 2026 (consumeraffairs.com).
- Scholaroo — State Education Rankings, 2023, three-dimension, 43-metric methodology with published weights.
- American Legislative Exchange Council — Report Card on American Education, editions through the 23rd (2019), policy-grade categories (alec.org).
- Niche — K–12 rankings methodology and data-source disclosures; September 2025 release, mid-July data cutoff (niche.com).
- World Population Review and DataPandas — compilation pages re-presenting U.S. News and WalletHub results (worldpopulationreview.com; datapandas.org).

Note on peer input: external peer-review input that informed this report’s structure and prompted several corrections was treated as an unverified lead only. Every factual point adopted was independently confirmed against the primary and publisher sources above before inclusion; where a suggestion conflicted with the primary record, the primary record controlled. No AI tool is listed as a source.

Conclusion

There is no single answer to how good each state’s public schools are, because there is no single ranking. There are many, measuring different things under the same word. This report catalogs those products, sorts them by what they reward, records what each publisher discloses, and shows several reasons the same state can place first in one product and far lower in another. Across the four 2026 rankings compared here, Ohio ranks from 14th of 50 on the U.S. News Pre-K–12 subindex to 41st of 50 on ConsumerAffairs. This report does not pick a best ranking or a best state. A reader who can tell whether a headline report measured achievement, a blended composite, adopted policy, or republished data from another site is equipped to read the next ranking critically. The full 50-state matrix and the agreement diagnostics are the next steps, set out in Future Research.

Revision History

This is a versioned research product. Version numbers increment only at republication. Superseded versions are preserved in the OCG Research Library.

Version 1.0 — August 5, 2026 — Initial publication. Establishes the ranking registry, the indicator taxonomy, the methodology-characteristics matrix and codebook, a cross-product comparison of Ohio against six other states, the illustrative cases, the exclusion log, and the shared-data observation.

Appendix A. Products Cataloged in This Report

The products below are the units of analysis. Federal data systems are listed because the rankings depend on them, not because they rank states themselves.

- NAEP / The Nation’s Report Card (NCES/IES/NAGB) — federal achievement data; 2024 main assessment.
- NCES data systems (Common Core of Data, EDFacts, adjusted-cohort graduation) — federal data.
- U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Survey of School System Finances — federal finance data.
- U.S. News & World Report, Best States: Education category — 2026 cycle.
- U.S. News & World Report, Pre-K–12 subindex — 2026 cycle.
- Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Book, Education domain — 2026 edition.
- Education Week, Quality Counts — historical; last full editions 2020–2021; discontinuation announced March 2024.
- WalletHub, States with the Best & Worst School Systems — 2026 edition (51 jurisdictions).
- ConsumerAffairs, Best States for Public Education — 2026.
- Scholaroo, State Education Rankings — 2023.
- ALEC, Report Card on American Education — historical; 23rd and final edition (2019); policy-adoption. ALEC’s later education work shifted to a policy-only index, which is not cataloged.
- Niche — K–12 school and district ratings; 2025 release; review-based; cataloged as a related rating system, not a state ranking.
- World Population Review; DataPandas — aggregator/compilation pages.

Appendix B. Source Tables and Retrieval

Every cell in Section 10 is drawn from the publisher tables below. Each was retrieved on the date shown and preserved in the OCG Research Library. The verified seven-state matrix appears in Section 10; the underlying subranks appear in the Ranking Registry and the Section 10 notes.

Publisher table	Coverage	Data vintage	Retrieved / location
U.S. News & World Report, Best States: Education	50 states; Education-category, Pre-K–12, and higher-education ranks	2026 cycle	Retrieved August 4, 2026; usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education
WalletHub, States with the Best & Worst School Systems in 2026	51 jurisdictions (50 states + D.C.); Overall, Total Score, Quality, Safety	Data collected June 22, 2026	Retrieved August 4, 2026; wallethub.com
ConsumerAffairs, The Best States for Public Education in 2026	50 states; overall plus four category subranks (K–12)	2026 (reuses prior-year graduation and NAEP data)	Retrieved August 4, 2026; consumeraffairs.com/movers/best-states-for-public-education.html

Publisher table	Coverage	Data vintage	Retrieved / location
	outcomes, funding, higher education, safety)		

Federal inputs referenced throughout (NAEP 2024; NCES adjusted-cohort graduation; U.S. Census school-system finance) are cited in Sources. Aggregator pages (World Population Review, DataPandas) are not used as data sources for Section 10.