

# POLICY ISSUE BRIEF:

# SCHOOL RATINGS AND RANKINGS

## Issue at a Glance

As interest in school accountability has increased, policymakers, media outlets, and corporate leaders have determined that school ratings or rankings are an effective and necessary tool for parents, students, and other stakeholders to determine whether schools are performing to expectations. Those ratings have only proliferated since schools have been required to publish report cards for the public, making available more data on individual student outcomes.

It is important to note the difference between state-developed ratings used for accountability and school improvement and consumer-oriented enterprises and journalists that publish ratings or rankings to guide school-choice decisions. Some of the most well-known outlets include GreatSchools, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *The Washington Post*. Some ratings rely on a single criterion, while others employ more complicated scales. Additionally, school rankings that sort schools into a particular order may suggest larger differences between schools than the underlying measure actually indicates. In either case, consumers should approach school ratings with a healthy skepticism, particularly since assessment results and proficiency benchmarks are not comparable across state lines.

## National Principals Association Position

- School ratings often represent a snapshot in time, which may not be an accurate assessment of a school's performance over time.
- School ratings should include the most complete information available and should not be limited to any one statistic or benchmark, such as test scores.
- School ratings are useful only insofar as they help determine what resources and changes are necessary to help improve student performance.
- National Principals Association has an additional policy issue brief on [High-Stakes Assessment](#) with recommendations for considering test scores as part of school evaluation.

## Recommendations for Policymakers and Researchers

- Use ratings as diagnostic tools to identify areas of need and focus resources and assistance where required.
- Avoid negative labels, such as “failing,” when schools miss a benchmark but are actually making progress.
- Use school data to improve, not punish, low-performing schools.
- Conduct research on the construction and validity of school ratings systems and the effects of summative ratings and rankings on school performance, school leader and teacher practices, and the perception of parents.
- Appropriately fund data collection systems that educators can use for instructional purposes.
- Ensure that any and all information used to assess schools is accurate and reliable.
- Provide a complete picture of a school’s ability to deliver quality services by including multiple indicators of school progress (e.g., percentage of graduates attending college, average teacher salaries, class-size ratio, and percentages of underserved populations enrolled in AP and IB courses).
- Include categories in every school-based assessment that reflect the infrastructure and resources available to that school, such as funding levels, admission criteria and process, and teacher quality.
- Provide school-based longitudinal data to identify improvement or weakening of a school’s performance.
- Avoid ranking schools from best to worst based on academic achievement. Such rankings give an impression of a wide disparity in achievement where one might not exist.

## Recommendations for School and Districts Leaders

- Educate local communities about school ratings, including the difference between state-determined ratings and those created by private entities or journalists, and what can and cannot be reasonably concluded from the data.
- Exercise discretion in providing school data to consumer-oriented developers of school ratings and reserve the right to decline requests if the ratings fail to meet the criteria outlined above.