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# Report says some states deserve better education rankings

By **David Leonhardt** | NEW YORK TIMES OCTOBER 27, 2015

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NEW YORK — When the Education Department releases its biennial scorecard of reading and math scores for all 50 states this week, Florida and Texas are likely to look pretty mediocre. In truth, schools in both states appear to be well above average at teaching their students math and reading.

In 2013, the last time scores were released, Florida ranked 30th on the tests, which are given to fourth- and eighth-graders, and Texas ranked 32d. But these raw scores, which receive widespread attention, almost certainly present a misleading picture — and one that gives short shrift to both Florida and Texas.

The two states look worse than they deserve to because they're educating a more disadvantaged group of students than most other states.

A report released Monday by the Urban Institute has adjusted the raw scores for each state to account for student demographics, including poverty, race, native language, and the share of students in special education.

The Education Department plans to release a new set of scores for fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading on Wednesday, and the Urban Institute plans to release estimated demographic adjustments this week.

The central idea behind the adjustments is that not all students arrive at school equally prepared, and states should not be judged as if students did.

“Making these demographic adjustments gives us a much better picture of how students are doing,” said Matthew Chingos, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute and the report’s author.

With the adjustments, Texas jumps all the way to third in the 2013 state ranking, and Florida to fourth. Massachusetts, which also ranks first with unadjusted scores, remains in the top spot; although the state is relatively affluent, its students perform even better than its demographics would predict. New Jersey ranks second.

Other states with a less extreme version of the Florida and Texas story — that is, their schools are performing better than is often understood — include Arkansas, Georgia, Nevada, and New York.

The new results will no doubt offer fodder for the continuing debate over education. Florida and Texas are mostly Republican-run states, where teacher unions are relatively weak and policymakers have tried to introduce more competition and accountability. At the same time, some states with a strong union presence, including New Jersey and New York, also perform well.

The results do seem to offer another vote of confidence for rigorous, common standards — an idea that took off with the Common Core, but has since come under harsh political attack. Massachusetts helped pioneer the idea of such standards in 1993, with ambitious goals, clear assessments, and increased school funding.

States with less impressive results in the Urban Institute analysis, where favorable demographics are disguising mediocre performance, include Connecticut, Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana and Iowa. And while New Hampshire, Vermont, Minnesota, and Washington are still above average, their scores are not as impressive as the unadjusted numbers suggest.

Many of these states are affluent or predominantly white — if not both. The new analysis suggests that many of their school systems have better reputations than they deserve. They enroll a lot of students who come to school well prepared and thus excel on tests. But the schools themselves are not doing as good a job as their test scores suggest.

A given student who enrolls at an average elementary school or middle school in Minnesota may well be learning less than he or she would be at an average school in Texas.

To be sure, no single set of numbers presents a complete picture. Many school policies are set locally, rather than at the state level, which means that any analysis of state data has limitations. But states do have enough influence to matter — and demographically adjusted scores do seem to be a more sensible yardstick than unadjusted scores.

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