

VIRGINIA CHILDREN HAVE THE BEST CHANCE TO SUCCEED

As reported By LAUREN ROTH of The Virginian-Pilot on January 4, 2007

A national report has pegged Virginia as the state where children have the greatest opportunities to succeed.



Education Week, in a report released Wednesday, January 3, 2007 compared states based on 13 factors, including parents' education, kindergarten enrollment, student test scores, and the percentage of adults working full time.

By those measures, considered indicators of early advantages, educational success and adult achievement, Virginia ranks first nationwide.

"This is welcome news, but I'm surprised we're on top," said Margaret Miller, director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Virginia. "Our overall national performance is not something to brag about."

Nearly two-thirds of the state's students score below proficient on national English and math tests, and only half of the state's young adults go to college.

But those statistics are enough to mark Virginia as above the national average. Other states simply fared worse.

In Education Week's methodology, points were assigned based on whether states were above, below or equal to the national average. No more than 2 points were assigned for each of the 13 factors.

That means Virginia doesn't necessarily have the best preschool enrollment rate or the best high school graduation rate, for example. New Jersey does in both cases. Instead, it means Virginia ranks consistently at or above average on the report's measures.

Dennis Gregory, associate professor of higher education at Old Dominion University, said the report confirms that Virginia is doing well overall.

We have an excellent public school system and high-quality private education and a variety of different kinds of institutions of higher education," he said. "It creates the kind of environment where these things can happen."

Non-academic factors play at least as great a role.

Miller said several "accidents of geography" help Virginia excel in the seven measures that focus on adults. A strong economy and proximity to Washington, D.C., have helped push up median incomes in the state and attract well-educated adults, she said. Also, the nation's recent influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants has mostly bypassed Virginia in favor of the Southwest. The report

considers fluent English-speaking households a factor for success, as well as high school completion, which is lower among Hispanic students than white students.

A different report by Education Week two years ago ranked the state second-worst in the country for the spending gap between its wealthiest and poorest schools.

Making sure children are educated equally statewide will continue to be the state's biggest challenge, Miller said.

But she said it's also a good idea to consider the big picture. "You can't really separate higher education policy, K through 12 policy and economic development policy," she said.

The 2007 report, called Quality Counts, also contains an Achievement Index ranking states solely on student performance between kindergarten and graduation. On that list, Virginia tied for fourth with five other states.

Alfred Rovai, a professor of education who specializes in research at Regent University, said the different rankings should lead to some questions.

"If Virginia comes out No. 1, Virginia should also come out No. 1 on student outcomes," he said.

One possibility is that the report isn't considering the correct factors, he said. Another possibility is that the educational system in Virginia isn't doing as well as other factors suggest it should, he said.

"There's a lot of cause to be happy and feel we're doing a good job," Rovai said, "but we should use this report as a launching pad to ask some penetrating questions."

• Reach Lauren Roth at (757) 222-5133 or lauren.roth@pilotonline.com. state's students score below proficient on national English and math tests, and only half of the state's young adults go to college. But those statistics are enough to mark Virginia as above the national average. Other states simply fared worse. In Education Week's methodology, points were assigned based on whether states were above, below or equal to the national average. No more than two points were assigned for each of the 13 factors.

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