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REVIEW OF *SCHOOLGRADES.ORG*

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Summary of Review

The Manhattan Institute's SchoolGrades.org evaluates and assigns grades, using reading and math test scores, to U.S. schools and compares schools across their respective states and to other countries. They apparently use a four-step process: (1) average two state test scores; (2) "norm" these results to the NAEP exam; (3) make an adjustment to this national "normed" measure using free and reduced price lunch data to account for SES; and (4) "norm" these results to the international PISA exam. The claim is that this process allows a parent to compare a local school to schools in their state and to other countries like South Korea and Lithuania. But the unsubstantiated norming chain is too tenuous and the results are overly extrapolated to be of any useful value. The website does not explain how international scores are "normed" (equated) to the national standard they developed or how letter grades were determined, nor does it explain how free-and-reduced-lunch counts are used to make socioeconomic adjustments. While there is considerable equating research available, none is cited. Further, the reliance on aggregated test scores is far too narrow a base to serve as a useful evaluation of schools. Thus, the website's approach to evaluating schools fails on technical grounds and, just as importantly, it fails to understand and consider the broader purposes of education in a democratic society.



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REVIEW OF *SCHOOLGRADES.ORG*

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I. Introduction

The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research in September 2015 released a website called “SchoolGrades.org - A New Way to Grade America’s Schools”¹ authored by researchers Jacob L. Vigdor & Josh B. McGee. This website claims to use “an international standard of excellence to grade how well America’s schools prepare students in core subjects.” It assigns grades (A, B, C, D, F) to U.S. schools using a ranking system they created. They do this by using state tests and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam to create a national standard and then norming² this national standard to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam to create a school grade, which then is compared to other state schools and other countries. While this approach would require significant and technically sophisticated norming work, the methods are not presented.

SchoolGrades.org is an exemplar of the current fad of ranking and comparing schools in the United States according to the criteria of interest or agenda of the sponsor. In this case, the Manhattan Institute promotes itself as a free-market think tank. Though its stakeholders may include a number of different groups, parents are referenced often enough to conclude that they are one of their key audiences.

This review examines the process that SchoolGrades.org used to grade, rank, and compare U.S. schools. It also examines the practical and theoretical limitations of relying exclusively on test scores and the extensive equating employed.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

SchoolGrades.org claims to provide “A New Way to Grade and Compare America’s Schools”.³ It claims it does this by (1) Applying a rigorous National Standard, where they norm the average of two state test scores to the NAEP exam; (2) Adjusting for socioeconomic differences based on the number of students the school serves who are on a free and reduced price lunch program; and (3) Assigning the school a letter grade based on how the school would perform internationally by norming their adjusted national standard to the international PISA examination scores. The site also assigns their top 4.3% schools with either a Gold, Silver, or Bronze ranking and provides them with an “All-American” designation if the school serves a greater percentage of students on free and reduced price than the national average, which they cite as 48%. Overall, the site concludes that it will provide parents and other stake-

holders a global perspective on how their schools measure up against other schools within their state and in other countries.

The site claims they use one standard for the 71,405 schools in their database so “that parents can more accurately compare schools’ performance, no matter where they live.”⁴ The site states that it is “a fair way to compare” since they take into account the “economic profile” of each school. They do this by “giving extra credit to schools that serve economically disadvantaged students and holding schools that serve affluent students to a higher standard.”⁵ How they determine “extra credit” adjustments is not provided.

SchoolGrades.org provides a page entitled, “Spotlight on America’s Best Schools.”⁶ It is a page with an interactive map of the United States that permits the user to click on a state and see the number of schools in that state that received Gold, Silver, or Bronze honors. Gold schools have a SchoolGrades.org adjusted overall proficiency percentage of 75% or higher, Silver schools have a percentage of 70% to 75%, and Bronze schools’ have a percentage of 65% to 70%. The site does not explain how they came up with these ranges. If they served a higher percentage of students on free and reduced price lunch at their school than the national average, then they are awarded an “All-American” distinction.

An example of this “spotlight” is shown in Figure 1 below.

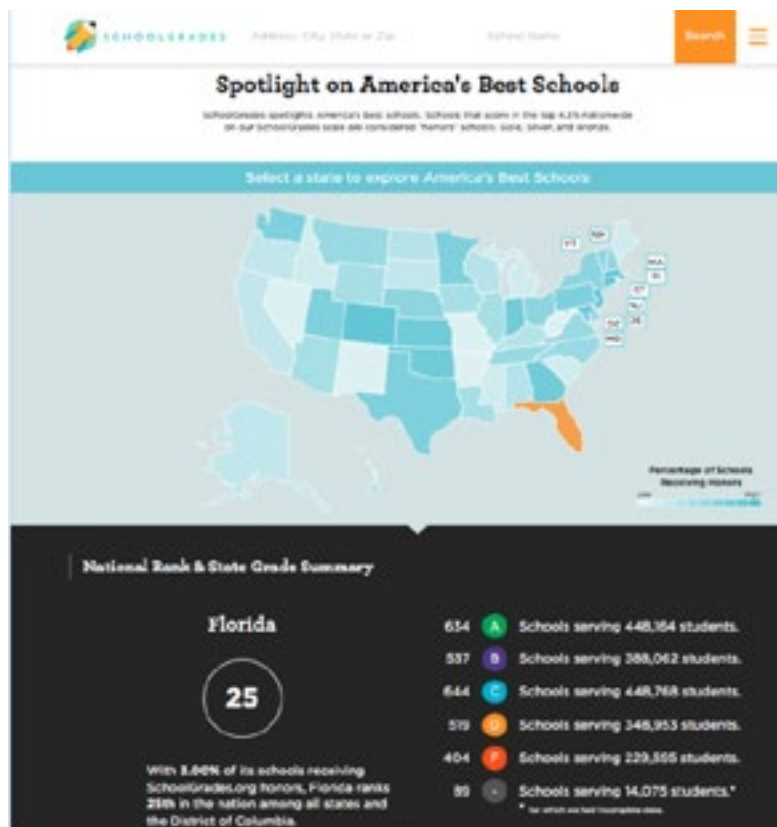


Figure 1: Spotlight on America’s Best Schools

Source: <http://schoolgrades.org/honors?state=FL&gold=false&silver=false&bronze=false&all-american=false>⁷

As figure 1 shows, Florida is ranked as 25th amongst all states. Though not shown on figure 1, Nevada and the District of Columbia are ranked 50th and Massachusetts is ranked 1st. Returning to figure 1, it shows that 3% of the Florida schools received SchoolGrades.org honors. Also, Figure 1 shows that of the 2,738 Florida schools graded by SchoolGrades.org, 1,815 schools (~66.3%) received a grade of C or higher and 923 schools (~33.7%) received a grade of D or F. Those schools who received honors can be seen as the user scrolls down and is partially shown in Figure 2 below:

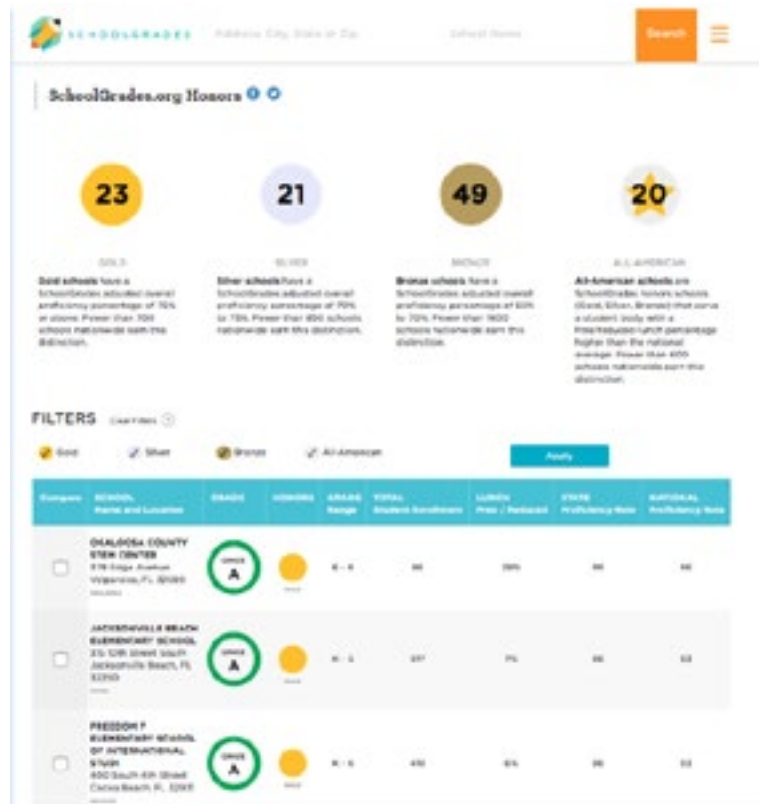


Figure 2: SchoolGrades.org Honors

Source: <http://schoolgrades.org/honors?state=FL&gold=false&silver=false&bronze=false&all-american=false>⁸

Figure 2 shows that of those Florida schools that were deemed “honors” 23 received Gold, 21 Silver, 49 Bronze, and 20 amongst those schools were given the distinction of All-American schools. That’s 93 schools from its 2,738 schools or approximately 3.40% of its schools receiving honors, which is different than what the site reports as 3.00%. In addition, the site permits the user to filter the honors it chooses to view, be it Gold, Silver, Bronze, and/or All-American. The user can also select which schools it wishes to compare. The tool is very intuitive and one could spend a considerable amount of time running different queries.

With such a small percentage of schools designated as “honors”, the selection of such a high cut score begs to be explained. No such explanation is provided.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The primary rationale is that their process for equating state test scores to NAEP scores and then to the PISA scores yields a valid measure of a school's quality. Further comparing schools within a state, nationally and internationally will provide parents and other stakeholders with useful information. The site claims that it offers "a fairer, more comprehensive way to evaluate America's schools."⁹ As mentioned above, it does this in three ways:

1. The site uses a national standard and avoids using only state standards, which vary significantly across states;
2. It accounts for the economic profile of the schools because, "Unfortunately, there is a strong correlation between family income and student test scores in the United States. Thus, if you look at straight test scores, you are only getting a part of the picture: you'll give an advantage to schools that serve affluent families, even if they end up offering those students a mediocre education."¹⁰; and
3. It bases its final school grade (A,B,C,D,F) on an international ranking system because as the site states, "We live in an increasingly global society. It's no longer sufficient to judge schools by how well they compare within your state or even within the United States."¹¹

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

No research literature is referenced on this website even when a citation is warranted. For example, "Studies have shown that economic background can significantly affect a student's academic performance. Among students attending the same school, those from families below the poverty line score 8-10 percentile points below their classmates on standardized exams—a performance gap that is present even on the first day of kindergarten."¹² Many researchers have examined similar correlations¹³ and citing some of the massive relevant work would have been useful.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

SchoolGrades.org provides a methods page, which is general and vague.¹⁴ Their method for determining a "rigorous national standard" begins with calculating the percentage of students who qualify as proficient on their state math and reading exams. Their test scores are obtained through an arrangement with GreatSchools.org yet there is no description of that arrangement or methodology. Nevertheless, SchoolGrades.org apparently averages state proficiency scores on these two subjects (math and reading) for an overall state proficiency percentage. While the reader may assume the investigators relied on convenient and mandated NCLB results, there is no mention why the site uses these two subjects. However, in

a video from the Manhattan Institute they mention that they do not say these two subjects, math and reading, are the most important subjects but that they are important. While there may have been differences by grade level requiring adjustments, the issue is not addressed.

The next step in their method is using “a simple statistical method to determine the percentage of students who would qualify as ‘proficient’ under the federal government’s National Assessment of Educational Progress.”¹⁵ However, this simple statistical method is not explained on the site. Their final step is using the difference in these percentages to apply the “rigorous national standard to all schools’ test results.”¹⁶ The site provides a bar chart of three states to show the difference between state proficiency and national proficiency shown in Figure 3 below.

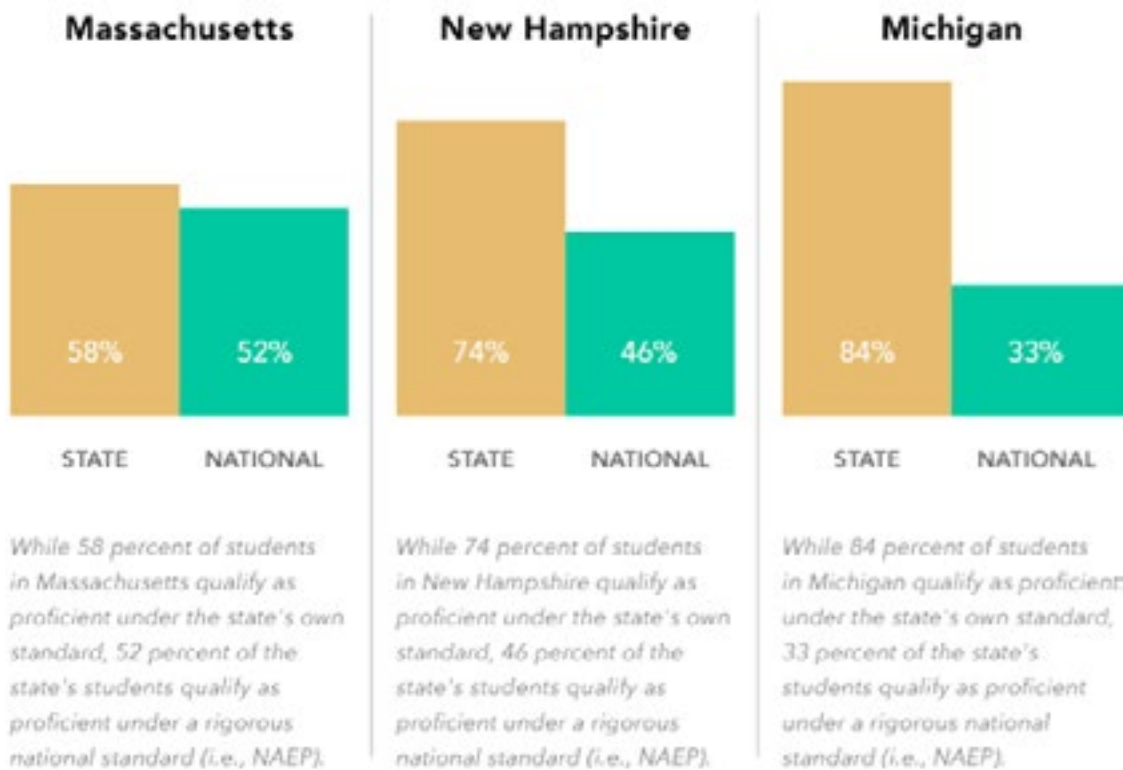


Figure 3: Proficiency Percentage Under State vs. National Standard

Source: <http://schoolgrades.org/methodology>¹⁷

As Figure 3 shows, the difference can vary widely from state to state depending on the rigor of the proficiency standards between the state and national exams. Differences in test construction and content are not addressed.

After calculating their “rigorous national standard,” SchoolGrades.org provides an adjustment to account for the “students’ economic profile.” How they calculate this adjustment is not explained on the site. Their answer for why they make this adjustment is that “students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds tend to perform worse on standardized tests than do students from more advantaged backgrounds. Adjusting for students’ economic pro-

file provides a fairer and more consistent comparison between schools.”¹⁸ As mentioned, there is no reference to research literature, which could be useful here.

The claim of “performing worse” on an exam puts the onus solely on the students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and not on the historical and systemic structures that affect student learning. There is an “education debt” that is owed to these students¹⁹ that should be referenced if we are serious about creating a fairer system. Community resources, funding adequacy, professional support, breadth of programs and other relevant data and issues are not addressed.

This same webpage goes on to say, “Among students attending the same school, those from families below the poverty line score 8-10 percentile points below their classmates on standardized exams—a performance gap that is present even on the first day of kindergarten.”²⁰ How they arrived at this figure, which NCES demonstrates is highly variable, is not explained²¹ nor is any research literature referenced to support this claim. No research literature is referenced to explain what they mean by a “performance gap.” The site relies too much on how the student performed on an exam and is silent on the unequal structures and unjust historical legacies that have created this “gap” for many students.

SchoolGrades.org calculates an adjustment that is based on the percentage of students at a school who qualify for free and reduced price lunch. The formula for this adjustment is not provided on the site but it does explain that this “adjustment results in an estimate of the proportion of each school’s students who would qualify as “proficient” under the rigorous national standard if the school had as many students in the free and reduced price lunch program as the average American school (roughly 48%).”²² How it does this, again, is not described on the site. The site goes on to state, “In practice, this adjustment gives extra credit to schools that serve economically disadvantaged students and holds schools that serve affluent students to a higher standard.”²³ The language in the preceding quote is problematic. It paints a picture of “economically disadvantaged students” in a deficit portrait in need of “extra credit” and not being held to a “higher standard” from their affluent peers. Notwithstanding the deficit language, research has shown that using free and reduced price lunch (FRL) is a poor measure for determining Socioeconomic Status (SES) yet is often used because of its easy access to this data.²⁴ Hence, using FRL as their source for determining “students academic profile” is problematic.

SchoolGrades.org states that “the last step in our process is to assign final letter grades — A, B, C, D, F — based on how each school would rank internationally in comparison with the performance of students in more than 60 countries on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam.”²⁵ It is unclear how the PISA is used to determine a school’s final letter grade and despite stating that each school is ranked against 60 other countries, only 12 other countries are referenced in all of their assigned grades. The user can click on the colored letter grades to see the countries schools’ grade. Below are the results:

1. “Schools receiving A grades are on par with schools from countries at the top of the international education rankings, like South Korea and Finland.”

2. “Schools receiving B grades are on par with schools in Canada, Japan, and Australia.”
3. “Schools receiving C grades are on par with schools in Belgium and France. The average American school receives a C grade.”
4. “Schools receiving D grades are on par with schools in Lithuania and Spain.”
5. “Schools receiving F grades are on par with schools in Chile, Serbia and Thailand.”²⁶

Though it is important to recognize that we live in a global society, there is minimal value in knowing that a school that was awarded an A or an F is “on par” with South Korea and Finland or Chile, Serbia and Thailand, respectively. The value is minimal not because having a global perspective is not valuable; it is minimal because the most pressing issues around neighborhood schools tend to be local. However, one thing that this grading system could promote (unintended or otherwise) is a perception, good and bad, of countries and the students and their parents who come from those countries. Given the large percentage of students who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants, this could promote an unfair perception of these students when low grades are assigned to their country or the country of their parents. Without additional context to explain how these countries were assigned this grade or research literature showing the value of this grading system of countries, the user must exercise caution in accepting these rankings.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Since SchoolGrades.org does not adequately define its methods, it is impossible to conclude they are valid. However, there are flags that indicate invalidity.

To compare a local school based on a percentage passing a combined score, to a state test average and then to a national average and then to an international test to determine if your local school is better or worse than other schools in your state or students in other countries is too far a reach. Under the best of circumstances, the compounding of statistical error would render the results highly suspect.

SchoolGrades.org claims that it offers “a fairer, more comprehensive way to evaluate America’s schools.” It is not “fairer” nor is it “more comprehensive.” It relies solely on the test performance of students who scored proficient on their state standardized test and the percent of students who are on free and reduced price lunch at their school. Certainly, there is value in knowing these metrics but using only these two as the bedrock upon which they grade and compare schools is neither valid nor comprehensive.

A test can provide data on how a student performed on a test but it does not tell us the complete picture of what the student knows nor the teaching and learning that takes place

at her/his school. Since test performance is insufficient to determine the value of what students know, it certainly is insufficient to tell us the value of an entire school.²⁷

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The site fails on two grounds; technical and philosophical.

Technically, it fails to make and document the case that it can empirically and validly compare international schools in such a fashion. On the surface, a parent might consider SchoolGrades.org as being useful by providing a simple and familiar way of judging a school's value but it would be wise to be cautious given the overreliance on test results as its sources. Further, its method of transforming data from state tests to a national standard to an international standard leaves out too many dimensions of the values and knowledge imparted by schools.

Philosophically, SchoolGrades.org perpetuates the misuse of tests as our best way of assessing a school's worth despite ample research that speaks to the contrary. In a recent article entitled, "Calling attention to excellence among Phila. Schools", the authors, who are the researchers of SchoolGrades.org, declare that the information on their site is "vital to parents who recognize that their children will be expected to compete in a globalizing economy."²⁸ It is true that understanding globalization (in all its facets) is important. However, schools are not factories. They also serve civic and socialization purposes and they cannot be compared solely as competitive markets.

At the turn of the millennium, Orfield reminded us that the "U.S. school reform agenda" in the last two decades had been driven by politics and not research. He wrote, "These reforms, particularly the market and choice portions, tend to be treated as scientifically valid, particularly by economists, because of their belief that markets work efficiently for the poor and will make things better."²⁹ Education reform efforts of all kinds and certainly those that claim to evaluate schools should recognize that schools serve many purposes beyond test scores. That schools can still be beacons of hope and places of enlightenment should not be sacrificed for the sake of competition and business models where we separate the winners from the losers. Thus, the Manhattan Institute's website fails to advance policy not only on the technical shortcomings of its effort but most importantly, for not appreciating nor addressing the purposes of education.

Notes and References

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