

THE ULTIMATE ATLANTA SCHOOL GUIDE

The decision tool for all parents who care
about their children's education.

In-depth comparisons of metro Atlanta public schools,
plus vital information about local private schools.

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Computer-Assisted Reporting Editor

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The logo for ajc.com, featuring the letters 'ajc' in a stylized, lowercase font followed by '.com' in a standard lowercase font.

Understanding test scores and school performance

By Stephen Cramer

How can you tell whether a school is doing a good job teaching its students what they need to know? Your answer to that question depends a lot on how you define "good." We deal with two evaluation methods in this book: test scores and socioeconomics.

1. Unadjusted test scores — a measure of student performance.

Check a school's test-score chart for this measure.

If the standardized test scores of the students in the school are high, it's hard to argue that the school isn't doing a good job. For example, if you check the test-score chart on a school and it shows that third-grade performance on the reading (READ) portion of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills is 4.9, that means those third-graders there are reading at nearly a fifth-grade level. High test scores on a valid and reliable test indicate that students are learning. We're pretty safe in saying that students in schools with high scores know and can do more than students in schools with lower scores.

But what are the causes behind high and low scores? Research by the Georgia Department of Education and the University of Georgia shows that the socioeconomic status of the students attending the school has a lot to do with the school's overall performance on standardized tests. This is not to say poorer students can't learn, only that socioeconomic status is related to conditions that can make learning easier or more difficult. For example, as income and education of parents goes up, the number of books present in the household goes up.

This does not mean we should lower expectations for poorer students. We need to communicate to each teacher and student the expectation that he or she always should do his or her best to teach and learn. However, 12 years of data makes it possible to predict which schools are likely to perform higher than others, and these are the schools whose student bodies have a higher socioeconomic status.

Stephen Cramer is on the faculty of the College of Education at the University of Georgia, where he teaches research methods, tests and measurement, and cognitive psychology. He designed many of the statistical models used by the Georgia Department of Education for test score reporting and used parallel models to assign the star ratings for this book.

2. Adjusting for socioeconomics — a measure of instructional quality. Check a school's AJC star rating for this measure.

The AJC rating in The Ultimate Atlanta School Guide is a measure of how well a school's students perform on tests, considering the socioeconomic composition of the student body. In short, do the students score above or below the level predicted for schools with a similar demographic

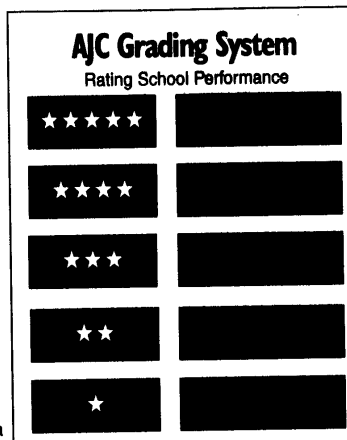
mix of students? If the scores are higher, that's an indication that the quality of instruction in the school is high. If it's lower, that's an indication that something in the school is preventing students from performing as well as their peers in similar schools.

The actual level of performance and predicted performance are independent of each other. That is, regardless of how high or low a school scores on tests, it may be doing better or worse than its socioeconomic status would predict. A school in an affluent area that scores above its prediction is clearly doing a good job in both senses. However, even a low-scoring school might be considered to be doing a very good job of educating its students if those students score higher than predicted. And an affluent school where scores are lower than predicted could mean that instruction at the school is not as strong as at other affluent schools.

What do test scores tell you?

So, a school with high or higher than predicted scores is a good place to send my children, right? Well, maybe. Remember that more goes on in schools than purely academic learning. School is where children go to learn to get along with people and to become productive adults. Standardized tests don't measure that. Nor do they measure, except indirectly, skills learned in foreign language, art, music, drama, vocational and physical education classes.

Even if we think only about the academic areas, standardized tests still will not tell a complete story. The test scores used to evaluate elementary and middle schools in this book are from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a highly regarded and widely used nationally standardized test. As good as the ITBS may be, its content coverage is based on a national sample of curricula, not the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum. It may not tell us exactly how much of the Georgia curriculum a student has learned. Still, it provides a good basis for comparing schools.



For high schools, the scores reported here are based on the Georgia High School Graduation Test, which is very closely patterned after the student curriculum. They have to be, of course, because students must pass each of these tests (English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Writing) to receive a high school diploma.

Iowa Test of Basic Skills and Georgia High School Graduation Test

The scores reported in this book are from the 1998-99 school year. The ITBS is a nationally norm-referenced test (NRT). In other words, the students' ITBS test scores tell us not how much they have learned, but how much they have learned compared to the average student in that grade nationwide. If students nationally don't know much about science, it's not hard to score high in science on an NRT. Conversely, if students nationally read pretty well, you have to read well to get a good NRT reading score. Students take the ITBS in grades 3, 5 and 8. These grades were chosen because they are the last years of primary, elementary and middle school, respectively.

The GHSQT, on the other hand, is a criterion-referenced test (CRT) based on the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum and written for the most part by Georgia teachers. Other Georgia teachers compared this test and the Quality Core Curriculum and decided on the score the students must achieve to pass. This passing score represents a level of performance that Georgians deem sufficient for students to have achieved by their 11th-grade year in order to earn a diploma upon graduation. It does not matter how other students perform; each student must meet the criterion in each content area. Students take the GHSQT for the first time in March or April of their 11th-grade year. They have four more opportunities to take and pass the test if they do not pass every content area; however, the school's score is based only on first-time scores. Students who have not passed all four sections of the test by the time their class graduates may have to go back up to four times a year to try to pass it and obtain their diploma.

How did the AJC get from the standardized test scores to its star rating?

The star ratings reflect only test scores, which are the best measure of learning available to us. Remember, though, that other characteristics may be more important to you than those of this guide.

Even after we focus on scores, we have to ask "which scores?" The ITBS has 27 subscales. Individual students get a score for each, which helps us see that Jimmy is good in math but weak in language arts. For the school's score, though, having 27 subscales is too complex, especially considering that an elementary school may have scores in 100 different grades. So, to simplify things, the scores used for the star ratings reflect the average of a lot of scores.

ITBS reports a composite score for the whole test, which includes all the subscales. For the elementary schools, we performed a statistical manipulation, called standardization, to put the third- and fifth-grade scores into the same range. Then we averaged the third- and fifth-grade composites together. For the middle schools, we simply used the eighth-grade ITBS composite.

For the high schools, we averaged all five GHSQT content areas' (English, Math,

Science, Social Studies and Writing) scores. These school scores represent the average of all the students in the school, except those classified as Limited English Proficiency or special education. These students take the test like everyone else, but their scores do not contribute to the school's average.

Starting in 1986, and over the ensuing years, the Georgia Department of Education and the University of Georgia have carried out research aimed at identifying the factors that predict schools' test score performance. Starting out with a list of over 30 student, school and community variables, they have settled on four:

1. Percent of students eligible for federally subsidized free lunch
2. Percent of students eligible for federally subsidized reduced-price lunch
3. School size
4. The wealth of the system, in terms of its property tax base

These variables explain 50 to 70 percent of the differences between schools. The same statistical model used by the Georgia Department of Education was applied to calculate this guide's star ratings. Specifically, using a technique called multiple regression, the school score is correlated with the demographic predictors. The regression analysis yields a prediction equation. Plug in the individual school's demographic values, and you get its predicted score.

Notice the logic of this: Schools vary in their scores. We have explained much of this variance by looking at the demographic information. The remainder we attribute to other factors, among them, the quality of instruction in the school.

That's just mathematics. We still have to decide how much better than predicted is "good" and how much worse than predicted is "bad." Borrowing again from the Georgia Department of Education, we used a statistic called the standard error of prediction (SEP). State educators used the SEP to report performance on the Curriculum-Based Assessments.

In a similar method, we made a judgment that a school whose score is within plus or minus one SEP of its predicted score is doing about average, and we awarded it three stars (no grade inflation in this guide). A school that scores at least one SEP above its prediction earns four stars, above two SEPs, five stars. Conversely, more than one SEP below prediction brings a school to two stars and more than two SEPs below prediction awards the school only a single star.

Granted, that's an arbitrary standard, and it weights all content areas equally. Your own standards may be different, and we encourage you to look deeper into the details of your community schools' scores. The AJC ratings serve as an overview to show that some schools are doing better than you would predict, others worse. We assume this is due, at least in part, to the quality of instruction.

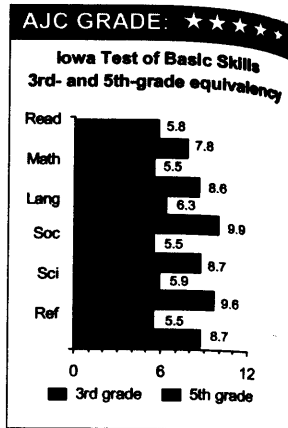
Journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne once said the purpose of journalism is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. We don't intend to afflict anyone, but if an inner-city school with a poor population is exceeding its predictions, we want to point it out. By the same token, if a school with a wealthy suburban population is not meeting its predictions, it may need a wake-up call.

Sope Creek Elementary School

3320 Paper Mill Rd SE, Marietta, GA 30067-4925
(770) 916-2300 · Grades K - 5



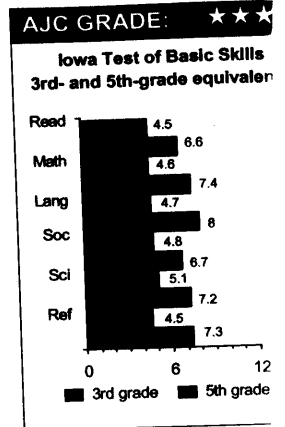
Enrollment: 1,066
 White / black / other: 89.4% / 2.4% / 8.2%
 Not native English speaking: 10 / 0.9%
 Limited English proficiency: 88 / 8.3%
 Student absenteeism: 3.8%
 Students per teacher: 16.5
 Parent-friendliness: ① ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
 Teachers with advanced degrees: 35.8%
 Average years teaching experience: 13.3
 Students in gifted program: 86 / 8.1%
 Students in remedial education: 6.0%
 Students held back a grade: 1.2%
 Total suspensions, pct. in-school: 4 / 50.0%
 Offense: violence: 1, drugs: *, vandalism: *
 Eligible students, free or reduced lunch: 2.4%
 Before / after school program: No / Yes
 Students at this school generally go on to:
 Dickerson, East Cobb Middle



Teasley Elementary School

3640 Spring Hill Rd SE, Smyrna, GA 30080-4652
(770) 319-3917 · Grades K - 5

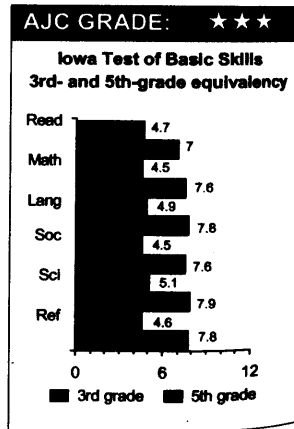
Enrollment: 425
 White / black / other: 61.6% / 28.0% / 10.4%
 Not native English speaking: 9 / 2.1%
 Limited English proficiency: 72 / 16.9%
 Student absenteeism: 4.2%
 Students per teacher: 16.0
 Parent-friendliness: ① ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
 Teachers with advanced degrees: 39.3%
 Average years teaching experience: 11.3
 Students in gifted program: 34 / 8.0%
 Students in remedial education: 11.0%
 Students held back a grade: 0.2%
 Total suspensions, pct. in-school: *
 Offense: violence: *, drugs: *, vandalism: *
 Eligible students, free or reduced lunch: 20.8%
 Before / after school program: Yes / Yes
 Students at this school generally go on to:
 Campbell Middle



Still Elementary School

870 Casteel Rd, Powder Springs, GA 30127-4403
(770) 528-6591 · Grades K - 5

Enrollment: 724
 White / black / other: 88.5% / 7.7% / 3.7%
 Not native English speaking: 1 / 0.1%
 Limited English proficiency: 103 / 14.2%
 Student absenteeism: 3.8%
 Students per teacher: 15.4
 Parent-friendliness: ① ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
 Teachers with advanced degrees: 47.9%
 Average years teaching experience: 13.6
 Students in gifted program: 26 / 3.6%
 Students in remedial education: 8.0%
 Students held back a grade: 0.7%
 Total suspensions, pct. in-school: 3 / 66.7%
 Offense: violence: 1, drugs: *, vandalism: *
 Eligible students, free or reduced lunch: 7.7%
 Before / after school program: No / Yes
 Students at this school generally go on to:
 Lost Mountain, Pine Mountain, Tapp Middle



Timber Ridge Elementary School

5000 Timber Ridge Rd, Marietta, GA 30068-1529
(770) 640-4808 · Grades K - 5

Enrollment: 608
 White / black / other: 90.8% / 2.1% / 7.1%
 Not native English speaking: *
 Limited English proficiency: 74 / 12.2%
 Student absenteeism: 3.4%
 Students per teacher: 15.3
 Parent-friendliness: ① ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
 Teachers with advanced degrees: 53.7%
 Average years teaching experience: 15.4
 Students in gifted program: 30 / 4.9%
 Students in remedial education: 0.7%
 Students held back a grade: 0.7%
 Total suspensions, pct. in-school: 3 / 0.0%
 Offense: violence: *, drugs: *, vandalism: *
 Eligible students, free or reduced lunch: 0.9%
 Before / after school program: No / Yes
 Students at this school generally go on to:
 Dickerson, Dodgen Middle

