

State's schools improve to a B-
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By [Ron Matus](#), Times Staff Writer
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Today, pigs fly.

Florida ranks No. 10 among states in education quality, according to the latest annual report card from the highly regarded *Education Week* newspaper.

The rankings, released this morning, are based on six broad categories — including student achievement, standards and accountability, and funding — and dozens of specific indicators, such as licensing requirements for teachers and scores on Advanced Placement exams for high school students.

Florida earned a B- this year, up from a C+ last year. The national average is a C.

In three years, Florida has climbed from No. 31 to No. 14 to No. 10.

"It's extraordinary news," Florida Education Commissioner Eric J. Smith said. "This is a very credible evaluation of state performance against other states."

Education Week's conclusion comes despite the fact that Florida has one of the worst graduation rates in the country and among the lowest rates of per-pupil funding. It also clangs off a perception, ingrained in the collective psyche of Floridians, that their schools are lame.

State Rep. Marty Kiar, D-Davie, the House Democrats' point man on education issues, said it's encouraging that "one group thinks we're doing a little better." But he said complaints from parents on things like the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test still lead him to conclude that Florida's education system is "deplorable."

"Now's not the time to pop the cork on the champagne bottle," he said.

The backdrop for the rosy report couldn't be gloomier: Lawmakers are in special session, preparing for another round of budget cuts. And while the Legislature cut school spending for the first time in decades last year, even bigger cuts appear likely when it meets for regular session in March.

"We are at a tipping point," Smith said. "The next round (of cuts) is going to be very challenging ... to keep the level of performance and achievement continuing to move in the direction we want to move in."

Decades of funding complaints have helped fuel negative views of Florida schools. A *St. Petersburg Times* poll last year found only 12 percent of respondents said the education Florida children get is better than in other states, while 45 percent said it was worse.

Education Week looked at not only graduation rates and school funding, but a wide range of state policies and demographics; the quality of state standards and testing systems; and requirements for licensing and evaluating teachers.

Florida scored 79.6 this year. That put it behind top states like Maryland and Massachusetts, but ahead of states with arguably better education reputations like Vermont and Minnesota.

Mississippi, Idaho and Nevada fared the worst.

In school finance, Florida got a C-, ranking 41st in per-pupil spending.

In K-12 achievement, it got a C, despite finishing in the Top 10 in 9 of 18 categories. (*Education Week* looked at overall scores and improvement over time and narrowing of achievement gaps for low-income students.)

Florida got an A- in standards and accountability, a B for teacher-related measures and a C+ for "transitions and alignment," which covers everything from preschool standards to the ability of high school students to earn industry certification.

This year's report included a state-by-state look at the achievement of students who are learning to speak English. Florida has wide achievement gaps between those students and their English-speaking peers, but the gaps in Florida are smaller than the national average, the report found.

Aubrey Jewett, a political science professor at the University of Central Florida, said a single, positive report won't change what he called Florida's "educational inferiority complex." But if more studies arrive at the same conclusion, perceptions can shift.

Then again, the timing for the *Education Week* report couldn't be worse.

"With the budget cuts," Jewett said, "people are going to say, 'Even if we are doing better than we thought, we're going down the tubes again.' "

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Moving up		
No, these aren't the latest college football rankings. They're the top schools in <i>Education Week's</i> "Quality Counts" report, which ranks Florida No. 10 based on a range of indicators.		
State	Score	Grade
1. Maryland	84.7	B
2. Massachusetts	84.6	B
3. New York	84.1	B
4. Virginia	83.2	B
5. New Jersey	81.9	B-
6. Ohio	81.2	B-
7. Pennsylvania	80.3	B-
8. Georgia	80.0	B-
West Virginia	80.0	B-
10. Florida	79.6	B-
Arkansas	79.6	B-
U.S. average	76.2	C
Source: Education Week		

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