



What do Florida's 'A' school districts have in common? Data tells the story

By Travis Gibson
January 27, 2019

What does it take to make an "A" school district in Florida?

Experts agree that it's hard to answer that question with certainty, but a recent analysis of Florida Department of Education data compiled by The Daytona Beach News-Journal helps bring an added understanding as to what goes into making the top grade in the St. Johns County School District as well as other large school districts in the state.

Of Florida's 22 large school districts, meaning those districts that serve 40,000 students or more, 15 school districts received B's during the 2017-18 school year, and seven received A's, including St. Johns, Brevard, Collier, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach and Sarasota counties.

The A districts have a few things in common that are believed to have factored into their high marks, which are based largely on scores on standardized tests.

The average teacher experience in each of the big A districts is above the state average of 11.3 years. In St. Johns County, which is one of two districts in the state that has received an A grade for the last nine years in a row, the average teacher experience is 13 years. Students in these districts also attend school more often. Every large A district falls below the state average for students who are chronically absent, which is 10.2 percent statewide. St. Johns County is tied for the second lowest rate for big A schools when it comes to chronic absenteeism at 6.6 percent. Only one school district, Miami-Dade, has more schools that receive Title I funding than the state average.

But St. Johns County School District superintendent Tim Forson said Friday it doesn't always tell the entire story when you paint successful schools with a broad brush. Districts that performed well in some areas were weaker in others, and no single district surpassed its peers in every category, according to the News-Journal report.

“Every school district is unique,” Forson said.

St. Johns County, for example, enjoys advantages that other top school districts would gladly welcome.

For example, just 27 percent of St. Johns County students receive free or reduced lunch, a mark that is well below the state average of 69.4 percent. The next lowest of the big A school districts is Sarasota, where 53.7 percent of students receive financial help with lunch. St. Johns County also leads the big A school districts in median household income (\$73,640) and residents with a bachelor’s degree or higher (43 percent). Studies have long found a connection between affluent families and high-achieving students.

Forson was quick to point out that while St. Johns County is full of families who are well off, there are also many families that still struggle to make ends meet. Still, schools are able to be successful. Out of 40 county schools, 27 received A grades and just six had a C or below in 2018. The 93.3 percent graduation rate in 2017-18 was one of the best in the state.

“It doesn’t matter what status is, we have a lot of parents that value education and are involved,” Forson said. “That vision is shared by parents and teachers.”

There is also community buy-in. St. Johns County voters passed a measure adding a half-cent sales tax that goes towards improving local schools. Parent-teacher organizations and local businesses often donate thousands of dollars for things like classroom improvements.

However, St. Johns County is operating at a disadvantage when it comes to teacher salaries. Compared to other large A districts, St. Johns County teachers have the lowest average salary at \$45,607. That’s more than \$2,600 below the overall state average salary and \$1,458 lower than Brevard, the next lowest in terms of average teacher salary. Lower salaries makes it more difficult to recruit and retain teachers.

“Retaining the level of quality teachers starts to become a concern over time because the demand for us in regards to growth,” Forson said. “[Teacher salaries] are a challenge for everyone.”

That average will improve next year as the St. Johns County Education Association, the local teacher’s union, negotiated the biggest raise for county teachers in eight years. Under the terms of the agreement, veteran teachers got an extra \$1,048 added to their base salary. Teachers who were graded “effective” for the 2017-18 school received a \$1,049 raise, while those graded “highly effective” would get a \$1,415 raise.

As far as state funding, data shows that St. Johns County is one of three big A-rated districts, along with Brevard and Seminole counties, that fell below the state average in terms of state funding allocations.

“The [state] funding is what it is,” Forson said. “I don’t see that changing a lot in the near future. It puts a ceiling on what you can do and how much you can pay for people.”

Looking forward, Forson said maintaining quality teachers and adapting to the needs of students two of the most important things the district can do to make sure it continues to be one of the best districts in the state.

Continued student success can help fuel more successes. A-rated schools also get an extra \$100 per student from the state to put toward one-time expenses like teacher bonuses.

The letter grades for each Florida school for the 2018-19 school year are expected to be released in June. Last year, Florida had more than 1,000 A schools (1,027), an improvement from 987 the previous year.