



St. Johns County students most likely to succeed in Florida, study says

By Christen Kelley
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St. Johns County students are more likely to succeed than any other school district in Florida, according to a new study.

24/7 Wall Street, a financial news organization, created an index that analyzes different factors that influence student success.

The study looked at child poverty rates, the teacher-to-student ratio, per-pupil spending, the share of adults with a college education, and the high school graduation rate to determine the school district where students are most likely to succeed in every state.

St. Johns County has the second highest graduation rate in Florida at 94.3%. The school district with the highest graduation rate, Lafayette County, is somewhat of an outlier as it graduated 78 of only 79 seniors last year. The rural county has a population of about 8,500 compared to about 250,000 for St. Johns County.

St. Johns also has an extremely low rate of childhood poverty at only 6.5%, compared to the state average of 18.4% of people living below the poverty line. That's far less kids who are struggling to focus on their schoolwork.

Children who grow up in financially stable households with college-educated parents are at a considerable advantage academically. In the St. Johns County School District, 43.7% of adults have a bachelor's degree, far above the state average of 29.2%.

St. Johns County is also far less diverse than other counties, with 85.7% of the student population being Caucasian, according to the district.

Doug McIntyre, editor of 24/7 Wall Street, said they wanted to inform parents on the best school districts in their areas.

"Around most cities of any size, there are dozens and dozens of school districts so people have a level of choice when it comes to where they want to live and school districts are extremely important to a lot of families," he said.

On the other end of the spectrum, Hamilton County was considered the district where students are least likely to succeed in Florida.

A major reason for this ranking is the district's very high child poverty rate of 34.3%, which is much higher than both the state and national rates of 18.4% and 17.0%, respectively. Only 9.3% of adults over 25 have a bachelor's degree, as well. However, this district is much smaller than St. Johns and is in a rural area.

While St. Johns County students might fare well compared to other Florida counties, the state itself is ranked 23rd overall for education, according to another study by 24/7 Wall Street.

One of the reasons is that Florida has the seventh lowest amount of per-pupil spending at \$9,075 per pupil. St. Johns County spends less money per student, at \$8,331.

But St. Johns County schools receive money in other ways. County voters invested in a half-cent sales tax that contributes to capital projects such as new schools. Parent teacher organizations also donate thousands of dollars in school supplies and equipment, according to School Board documents.

Those investments are increasingly important, as being the top-rated school district is attracting droves of young families to move to the area. The school district grew by 6% from 2018 to 2019 first day counts alone, and those numbers are now posing challenges to district officials as they rush to build new schools.

And the families that are moving here will have to be able to afford it. That makes it harder for families in low-rated districts to break out.

"The better school districts tend to be in areas that are more affluent. Property taxes tend to be higher, which means that students tend to be better educated," McIntyre said. "It's unfortunately a vicious circle because young people who can't move because of poverty are less likely to become college educated, which means that their children are less likely to be as well."