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## New Report Card Shows Which Schools Are Doing the Most for Students

By Ben DeGrow

### Summary

The Mackinac Center's Context and Performance Report Card rewards school leaders whose students perform better than expected on state tests.

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There are many facets to the quality of a school. The Mackinac Center's Context and Performance Report Card sheds light on an overlooked facet that can help many people who need access to an effective education.

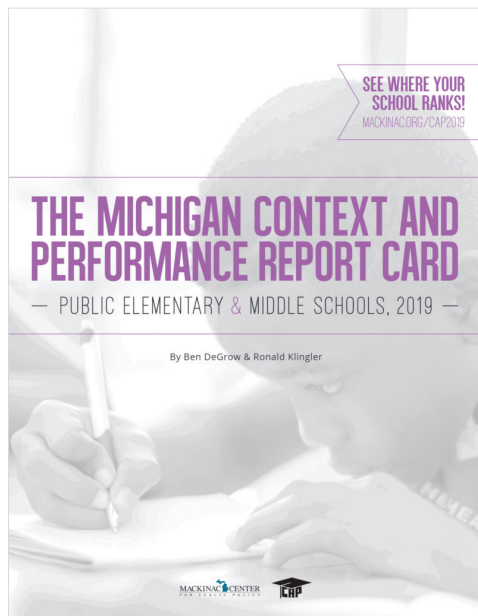
Following the pattern of previous editions, the new report card grants an A (and a certificate) to the top 10% of the 2,203 elementary and middle schools it grades. Clearly, the recognition will be a matter of pride for some. I've lost count of the number of schools I've visited where the certificate issued from a previous report card is proudly displayed.

The CAP report measures multiple years of comparable state achievement data, assigning a score based on how well a school's actual score matches up with an expected score. That expected score is determined by how many test-takers are eligible for free-lunch assistance. The number is important because these students tend to bring more learning deficits and other challenges with them to school. So the more low-income students there are in a school, the lower its expected score on state tests.

Our statistical analysis has repeatedly found that the scores reported for a school on state tests line up closely with the share of low-income students enrolled there. Unfortunately, investing too much meaning in raw scores can give a distorted view of a school, as can putting too much weight on test scores and ignoring other considerations. Many different features can attract families to a learning environment — or conversely, make them rule out a school.

Still, the CAP grades give a snapshot of how well each school instills in students the knowledge and skills they need to succeed academically. And for educators who toil in challenging environments, where raw test scores may tell a story of mediocre performance, a high CAP grade can be a significant morale-booster.

It's not just a means for top-flight performers like Hamtramck Academy, a school managed by National Heritage Academies to congratulate themselves. (It is the highest-ranked school in the state two times running.) We have heard anecdotes from principals and other educators at various other schools, who use our report as one key measuring stick of their own performance.



Parents can use the latest report card to compare schools.

Find it online at [mackinac.org/s2020-01](http://mackinac.org/s2020-01).

CAP scores can also give clues to those who want to dig deeper to determine what's driving their success. For example, the new report card reveals that four Dearborn district schools stand among the top six in sustained effective performance for the past decade. A careful study of their policies and leadership practices might provide lessons for others.

Schools that show the most growth from earlier CAP reports should provide some of the best case studies to emulate. There's at least an opportunity to examine the five most improved schools in Michigan — a list that includes two different Hamtramck charter schools and elementary schools from the Lapeer, Plymouth and Lansing districts.

The people who may get the most value from the Context and Performance Report Card are families who are looking for alternatives, especially as they wait for the Michigan Department of Education to comply with state law and publish an A-F school report card of its own. The department's online parent dashboard lets users compare the performance of "similar" schools. But most of the characteristics it employs to create comparison groups — school size, student-teacher ratio and per-pupil spending — simply aren't relevant to achievement levels.

Or parents may look at the state's current School Index, which uses a number of metrics to assign scores between 0 and 100. But with that index, it's not easy for them to see how well a particular high-poverty school is doing compared with the one their child attends. Nor may a mom discern much difference in the output of her own school in an affluent area and one in a nearby suburban neighborhood. CAP scores, on the other hand, can provide another key piece of data to help inform schooling decisions.

Clearly, the Mackinac Center's rankings are not the only standard by which to judge Michigan public schools. But they continue to provide a unique perspective that can help shape the decisions of parents and educators alike.

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**Ben DeGrow is the director of education policy for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy**, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Mackinac Center are properly cited.

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