



Analytics

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RE: The details behind Delaware student test scores

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Every year the U.S. Department of Education produces a report card with the test performance of 4th and 8th grade students by state. The latest available test data is for 2009. What does it show for Delaware and what does it mean exactly?

The tables below show the ranking across the states of the Delaware, Maryland and Pennsylvania on 8th grade public school students' average NAEP test scores in reading and math. Maryland and Pennsylvania are shown as these are the states to which persons who work in Delaware and have school age children can most easily locate.

Table 1 State rank of 8th grade NAEP reading scores for public school students, 2009

	All 8 th graders	White	Black	Hispanic
Delaware	26	13	3	9
Maryland	14	3	5	7
Pennsylvania	6	5	12	31

Table 2 State rank of 8th grade NAEP math scores for public school students, 2009

	All 8 th graders	White	Black	Hispanic
Delaware	28	13	3	3
Maryland	14	3	5	7
Pennsylvania	6	5	12	29

What is clear from the two tables? First, Delaware 8th graders perform worse in reading and math than 8th graders in the two surrounding states. Second, this same pattern holds true for white 8th graders. Third, black and Hispanic 8th grades tend to score higher in Delaware than in the surrounding states.

How does Delaware's relatively high rankings by race (e.g., 13, 3 and 9 in reading) result in a lower overall rank (e.g., 26 in reading)? The answer is a mixture of the racial composition of the students, economic disadvantage, and English language proficiency.

Table 3 Public school student racial characteristics, 2009

	% students White	% students Black	% students Hispanic
Delaware	52	33	11
Maryland	46	38	10
Pennsylvania	74	16	8

Among 8th graders across the nation, on average whites score about 11% higher in reading and math than do blacks and Hispanics, and Asians score higher than whites. Pennsylvania's public school population is far more white than Delaware and Maryland, and Maryland has double the proportion of Asian students as Delaware. This pulls down Delaware's overall average test scores.

Additionally, 40% of Delaware's public school students qualify for free/reduced lunches compared to 35% in Maryland and 32% in Pennsylvania. Economically disadvantaged children tend to score lower on reading and math tests. Delaware also has almost double the proportion of public school children enrolled in English proficiency programs.

So, what do these test scores mean exactly? First, Delaware's lower rank on reading and math tests for 8th graders is due, in part, to the variations in the racial composition of public school students among states. For example, when the Pennsylvania racial composition of public school students is applied to the 2009 Delaware test scores by race, the overall Delaware reading and math test scores become virtually equal to the Pennsylvania scores.

Second, in 2010 Delaware lost a net of \$2.3 billion of wages from folks who worked in the Delaware and lived outside the state. Most of this net loss came in New Castle County. This is very unusual for a county that is contiguous to a major metropolitan area. As the test score data shows, it is very tempting for white families with school age children to pay the higher property taxes in such high performing school districts as Unionville-Chadds Ford, Wallingford-Swarthmore, or Avon Grove in lieu of even higher private school tuitions in New Castle County.

Further analysis of the test scores by contiguous county and school districts among Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania would be helpful, as would the proportion of students in private school.

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