



What America's Best High Schools Get Right

Lists of America's best high schools attract attention because they appear to answer an important question: What are the country's most successful schools doing right?

Rankings can offer a useful starting point, but the number beside a school's name tells only part of the story. Rankings change, methodologies evolve, and the underlying statistics may be several years old by the time they are published.

The more enduring question is not which school occupies the top position in a particular year. It is what effective schools have in common—and what other schools can learn from them.

A Challenging Academic Curriculum

Strong high schools give students opportunities to move beyond minimum graduation requirements. Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs, dual-enrollment classes, technical certifications, and specialized electives allow students to pursue subjects in greater depth.

Whitney High School in Cerritos, California, for example, continues to offer an extensive selection of Advanced Placement courses. Its academic program illustrates how a public school can provide students with challenging work across several disciplines.

Rigorous coursework does more than strengthen a college application. It asks students to manage demanding assignments, think independently, and develop the study habits they will need after graduation.

Specialized Programs and Facilities

Some outstanding high schools distinguish themselves through specialized programs in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, the arts, or other fields.

Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Virginia is a prominent example. Its academic program includes specialized senior research laboratories in subjects such as biotechnology, engineering, neuroscience, computer systems, astronomy, and quantum physics.

These facilities give students an opportunity to move beyond textbook learning. They can investigate complex questions, conduct research, solve problems, and experience the kind of collaborative work performed in universities and technical professions.

Not every school can build advanced research laboratories. Every school, however, can look for ways to connect classroom instruction with experimentation, projects, and practical applications.

Service Beyond the Classroom

The best schools recognize that education involves more than grades and examinations. They also encourage students to become responsible members of their communities.

Carnegie Vanguard High School in Houston, for example, requires students to complete and document 100 hours of community service. Such a requirement asks students to look beyond their immediate academic concerns and consider the needs of others.

Community service can expose young people to unfamiliar circumstances, develop leadership skills, and help them understand how their abilities can contribute to the larger society.

High Expectations Accompanied by Opportunity

Successful schools expect a great deal from their students. High expectations alone, however, are not enough. Students must also receive meaningful opportunities to meet them.

Those opportunities may include advanced classes, academic counseling, tutoring, research projects, career and technical programs, extracurricular activities, and relationships with adults who take students' ambitions seriously.

A demanding school culture is most effective when students understand that difficulty is not intended to exclude them. It is an invitation to grow.

Learning That Extends Beyond Test Scores

Standardized-test performance and graduation rates provide useful information, but they cannot measure everything that matters in education.

A successful high school should also help students learn how to:

- Communicate clearly
- Evaluate information critically

- Work constructively with others
- Persist through difficult assignments
- Use knowledge to solve practical problems
- Participate responsibly in their communities
- Make informed decisions about college, technical training, employment, and adult life

These abilities are difficult to reduce to a single score, yet they are central to a student's future success.

Different Schools, Common Principles

Outstanding high schools do not all follow the same model. Some are neighborhood schools, while others are magnet, charter, or specialized institutions. Some emphasize college preparation; others combine academics with technical and career education.

Their strongest programs nevertheless share several characteristics: demanding coursework, capable teachers, purposeful learning, high expectations, opportunities for individual growth, and a culture that treats education as preparation for life rather than merely preparation for the next test.

Reasons for Confidence

Public education faces genuine difficulties. Many high schools contend with limited resources, overcrowding, unequal opportunities, teacher shortages, and students carrying burdens that reach far beyond the classroom.

Those problems should not be minimized. Neither should the accomplishments of dedicated teachers, administrators, families, and students.

Across the country, public high schools are finding ways to challenge young people and prepare them for an increasingly complicated world. Their success demonstrates that educational excellence is possible. The important task is to understand what makes it possible—and extend those opportunities to more students.