

1979

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Repository Citation

Swaine, Cynthia Wright, "Requests for Ratings of School Systems" (1979). *Libraries Faculty & Staff Publications*. 14.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/libraries_fac_pubs/14

Original Publication Citation

Swaine, C. (1979). Requests for ratings of school systems. *RQ*, 19(1), 59-60.

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American Library Association

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Source: *RQ*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Fall 1979), pp. 59-60

Published by: [American Library Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25826282>

Accessed: 02-02-2016 15:28 UTC

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Requests for Ratings of School Systems

A guide to reference sources for consumer information about school systems.

Cynthia Swaine

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Which school system is better—Norfolk or Virginia Beach? How do the Memphis schools rate nationwide? Are the schools in Florida better than those in North Carolina? The question varies, but the need to know how schools measure up remains real and the demand for answers continues. Library users comparison shop for the best values in freezers, subcompact cars, and hair dryers by using indexes to product ratings with relative ease and often expect to be able to find ratings for schools just as easily. Yet there is no simple answer to the question “Which school is better?” and no handy pocket guide that rates school systems on a nationwide scale of 1 to 17,000. Evaluating a school is much more complex than choosing the best vacuum cleaner or food processor; the determined education consumer must be willing to spend some time investigating, and the reference librarian must be equipped to assist.

When such a question is posed to the reference staff at the Old Dominion University Library, the user is first given a handout, “A Guide to Evaluating School Systems,” prepared by the education reference librarian in response to the many requests for such information. (A copy of this six-page handout is available from the author for \$.85.) The guide outlines the many factors to consider in evaluating a school, gives local library locations of specific reference materials, and cites sources (state agencies, education associations, etc.) to consult for further information. Next, the reference librarian provides the user with immediate access to several education statistics sources offering useful data for comparison. State and

federal government publications and other handbooks contain data on accreditation, enrollment, class size, teacher salaries and educational attainment, student attendance, test scores, and federal, state, and local funding of school operations.

Sources that have proved most valuable to our reference staff in providing statistics to aid in evaluating schools include the following:

Hamilton, Malcolm C. *Directory of Educational Statistics: A Guide to Sources*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pierian Pr., 1974.

National Education Association. Research Division. *Estimate of School Statistics*. Serial.

———. *Selected Statistics of Local School Systems*. Serial.

Standard Education Almanac. Los Angeles: Academic Media. Serial.

U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics*. Serial.

———. *Statistics of Local Public School Systems*. Serial.

———. *Statistics of State School Systems*. Serial.

Also, *American Statistics Index*, *Current Index to Journals in Education*, *Resources in Education*, and *Education Index* have proved helpful in some cases. In addition to these several standard sources of education statistics information, we keep in our vertical file a collection of pamphlets on school statistics published by various state education associations and departments of education sent to us free of charge upon

request. Since addresses for such agencies are readily obtainable from *Patterson's American Education*, library users could be given these addresses for making their own personal inquiries, but responses are often not received for several weeks. Having most state education statistics publications on file in the library enables us to meet the users' needs more immediately. For data that are difficult to obtain, we also stand ready to refer users to the NEA Research Division (National Education Association, Research Division, 1201 16th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036; telephone [202] 833-5462) and the National Center for Education Statistics Reference Service Division (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, National Center for Education Statistics, Reference Services Division, 400 Maryland Ave. SW, Washington, DC 20202; telephone [202] 245-8436).

Finally, to aid the user in realizing the

necessity for making important subjective judgments, the reference librarian may remind the user (verbally, by reference to appropriate articles, or by calling attention to the relevant section in the printed guide) of the importance of considering such factors as the basic purposes of the school and the attitudes of students, teachers, and administrators toward one another and the educational program.¹ Answers to inquiries concerning such factors are best obtained by a visit to the school,² if this is possible, for a visit affords opportunity to observe the actual school situation and to pose direct questions concerning purpose, attitudes, and programs geared to special needs. All such inquiries are likely to lead to a more accurate picture of a particular school system,³ when used to supplement the published statistical data available in the library. ●

REFERENCES

1. Stanton Leggett, "How to Rate Your School," *American School Board Journal* 164:31-35 (Nov. 1977).
2. M. Donald Thomas, "How to Recognize a Gem of a School When You See One," *American School Board Journal* 162:27-30 (March 1975).
3. Randolph A. Ellsworth and Cathy Rickard, "Taking Your School's Pulse," *NASSP Bulletin* 61:1-4 (March 1978).