

# How U.S. News Calculated the 2017 Best High Schools Rankings

**We looked at thousands of public schools to identify the top performers.**

By [Robert Morse](#), Chief Data Strategist | April 24, 2017, at 9:30 p.m.

To produce the 2017 [Best High Schools](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools) rankings, U.S. News & World Report teamed with North Carolina-based [RTI International](http://www.rti.org/), a global nonprofit social science research firm.

RTI implemented the U.S. News comprehensive rankings methodology, which is based on these key principles: that a great high school must serve all of its students well, not just those who are college bound, and that it must be able to produce measurable academic outcomes to show it is successfully educating its student body across a range of performance indicators.

We started by reviewing 28,496 public high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Some of those schools had to be eliminated from consideration, mainly because they were too small to be analyzed. This reduced the count to 20,487, which is the total number of public high schools across the country that had high enough 12th-grade enrollment and/or sufficient enrollment in other grades during the 2014-2015 school year to be eligible for the rankings.

## National Rankings

A four-step process determined the Best High Schools. The first three steps ensured that the schools serve all of their students well, using their performance on the math and reading parts of their state proficiency tests and their graduation rates as the benchmarks. For those schools that made it past the first three steps, a fourth step assessed the degree to which schools prepare students for college-level work.

• **Step 1:** The first step determined whether each school's students were performing better than statistically expected for students in that state.

U.S. News started by looking at reading and math results for all students on each state's high school proficiency tests. U.S. News then factored in the percentages of economically disadvantaged students – who tend to score lower – enrolled at the schools to identify schools performing much better than statistical expectations. To pass Step 1, high schools' performance had to be one-third of one standard deviation above the average.

This threshold was applied to a school's performance compared with what would be statistically expected for that school in its state, based on its percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

In the 2017 rankings, for the second year in a row, U.S. News used an absolute performance adjustment in Step 1.

The 10 percent of schools with the highest absolute performance on their state's reading and math assessment tests automatically passed Step 1. Schools with reading and math assessment test performance in the bottom 10 percent of the state's results automatically failed Step 1.

U.S. News made this adjustment again to reward schools in their state for exceptionally high performance on state assessment tests, regardless of their poverty level, as well as to prevent schools in their state with exceptionally low state assessment test performance from being able to win a gold, silver or bronze medal.