



MONTANA EDUCATION RANKS 6TH OF 8 ROCKY MOUNTAIN STATES, ACCORDING TO *U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT*

SEPTEMBER 2023

What are the best measures of the quality of education in a state? How do we know if schools at all levels, from kindergarten through college, are doing a good job serving Montanans?

The Political Narrative. The predominant narrative we often hear from politicians who defend the public education status quo is that Montana’s current system of education works great for students. For instance, in a recent guest column for the Bozeman Daily Chronicle, State Senator Shannon O’Brien of Missoula wrote: “I believe that the work Montanans have done for public education provides a pathway for every child to be their best, for every parent to be engaged in their child’s learning, and for every community member to know what their schools are teaching and with what results.”

But is this political narrative actually true? Over the next year, we are going to publish an article every month on the quality of education in Montana to answer this question. Through these articles, we will examine how well education is working for Montanans of all ages, from early childhood through postsecondary completion, throughout the state.

Performance Rankings. In this kickoff piece, we want to start with U.S. News & World Report’s rankings of education quality across the 50 states for 4 reasons.

- **Reason #1.** The rankings are understandable. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see how Montana stacks up and why.
- **Reason #2.** The rankings are holistic, taking stock of quality from preschool through college graduation. U.S. News’ approach to ranking education quality incorporates 8 basic measures as illustrated in the chart on the next page.
- **Reason #3.** The rankings are based on credible data from such sources as the Nation’s Report Card, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the American Community Survey.
- **Reason #4.** U.S. News has credibility and long-term experience. The company started rating education quality in 1983. These ratings aren’t produced by state bureaucrats or education wonks; they are produced by an evaluation team with deep experience issuing ratings across many sectors.

If these reasons aren’t enough, perhaps the most important reason is that U.S. News is independent, not representative of the leadership of Montana’s public education system.

Below, the chart summarizes the indicators that U.S. News uses to rate education across the states. One of the strengths of this approach is that there is a heavy emphasis on preparation for college and career.

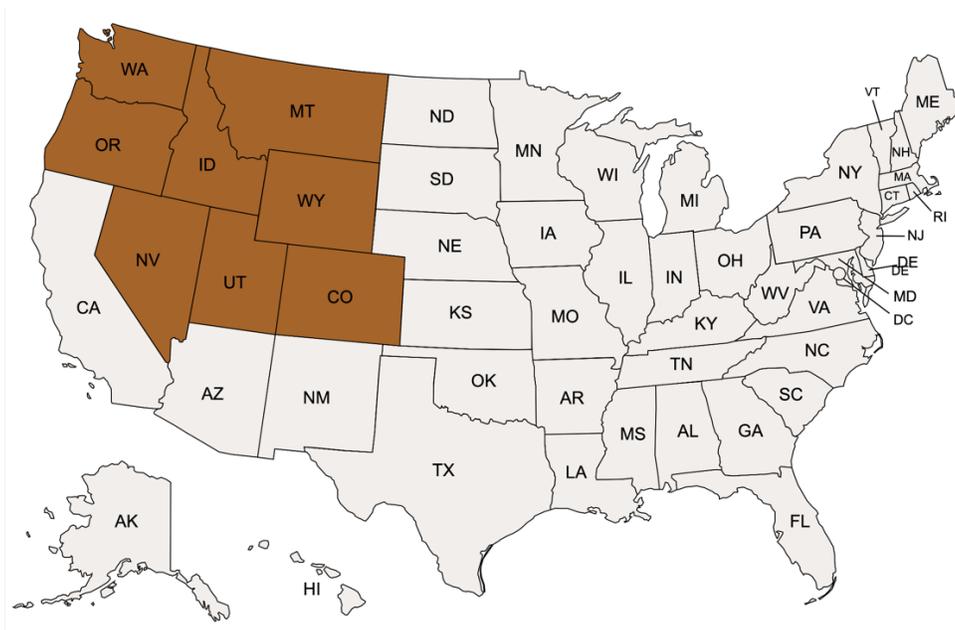
U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

STATE EDUCATION RANKING CRITERIA

	Quality Indicators	Data Sources
PK-12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Early Childhood Enrollment 2. Eighth Grade Achievement 3. High School Graduation Rates 4. College Readiness 	American Community Survey The Nation's Report Card (NAEPs) National Center for Education Statistics College Entrance Exam Scores
Higher Education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Share of Montanans with College Dreams 2. Two-Year Degree Completion 3. Four-Year Degree Completion 4. State Tuition/Fee Affordability 	American Community Survey National Center for Education Statistics National Center for Education Statistics U.S. DOE, Institute for College Access & Success

Comparing Montana. Drawing upon the *U.S. News* rankings, there are two ways to look at the quality of Montana's education compared to other U.S. states. One is to compare Montana to other states with similar characteristics and populations. The other is to compare Montana to all 49 American states recognizing that there is extraordinary variation from the East Coast to the Midwest to the Rocky Mountain States in this incredibly diverse nation of 332 million people. As a starting point, we thought it most meaningful to compare Montana with the 7 Mountain States around it – Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

COMPARISON TO OTHER MOUNTAIN STATES



After all, these states share a similar territorial history, prevailing values, and geographic region. Because of distance from the eastern seaboard and mountainous topography, these states were some of the last to be settled, organized into American states, and to see the growth of sizable population centers.

When considering this region of the U.S., it is important to factor in differences as well. For example, these 8 states vary greatly in population size, from a low of 576,000 residents in Wyoming to a high of 7.7 million residents in Washington State. There is a striking range in the ethnic and racial composition across the Rocky Mountain states, ranging from a population that is 55% non-white and 45% white in Nevada to a population that is 83% white and 17% non-white in Montana.

Over the past 20 years, it has become apparent just how different the political climate is across the Rocky Mountain States. Colorado, Oregon, and Washington have become predominately blue states known for urban sprawl, social activism, and liberal values. Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming have remained decidedly red states with a libertarian populous that values freedom and open spaces. By contrast, Nevada is a swing state with one very large population center that heavily influences the state's politics.

6th of 8 states in Rocky Mountain West. As the chart below illustrates, Montana ranks sixth among the eight states in the Rocky Mountain West on U.S. News' overall ranking of education quality. That includes ranking Montana below Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming but above Nevada and Oregon. More broadly, U.S. News ranks Montana at #25 among all 50 states.

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT OVERALL EDUCATION RANKINGS		
Rocky Mountain States	Regional Ranking	National Ranking
Colorado	1	4
Utah	2	5
Washington	3	10
Wyoming	4	14
Idaho	5	22
Montana	6	25
Oregon	7	38
Nevada	8	39

Why does Montana hold such an unimpressive standing among the Rock Mountain States? Here are several contributing factors:

1. Montana's 8th grade achievement levels are lackluster compared to other states. Likewise, Montana's high school graduation rates are low, and its college degree completion rates are unimpressive.
2. Four of the five states that outperform Montana offer families access to many school choices. Most notably, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho offer families access to many charter schools, education savings account (ESA) programs, and open enrollment within districts and across district lines.
3. According to a 2020 [analysis](#), Montana provided its public schools with per-pupil revenue of \$13,769, which was higher than Idaho, Nevada, and Utah but lower than Colorado, Washington, and Oregon.
4. From 2002 to 2020, Montana increased its per-pupil funding by 25%, a greater increase than Idaho, Nevada, and Utah but a smaller increase than Colorado, Washington, and Oregon.

As these factors make clear, Montana has a long way to go if it wants to be the best state for education quality in the Rocky Mountain West.

Getting a Complete Picture. With this article, we begin a deeper dive into the state of education to see if Montana deserves to be near the bottom among its neighboring states and middling in the nation.

In future months, we will examine such factors such as Montana's declining student achievement from 3rd to 8th grade, college preparation and completion levels, and workforce readiness to better understand how education is shaping the future of Montana.

As we seek to examine the quality of Montana education, the comparisons that we draw will not be limited to the Rocky Mountain states. Where appropriate, we will look at states with similar population demographics to draw more insightful comparisons.

To be clear, the purpose is not to overlook all the hard work that Montana educators are doing every day. Rather, we want to figure out what Montanans can do to better support education from preschool through college so that every child, family, and community has access to an education that is among the best in the nation.

Authors



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