Arkansans are accustomed to having outsiders deride our education system or, at best, give faint praise: “Well, at least we’re better than Mississippi.” And, on some measures, Arkansas does rank near the bottom.

Only 18.9 percent of our adults have a bachelor’s degree, putting us at 49th in the nation and ahead only of West Virginia. However, Education Week recently ranked Arkansas schools fifth in its annual Quality Counts report.

So, which is it? Are we 49th or fifth?

The first question we should ask is: fifth in what? What does this ranking mean? What Quality Counts really means, and what many people think it means, are two quite different things. Designed like a report card, Quality Counts grades all 50 states in several areas that are only loosely related to what happens in the classroom. One of the report’s categories is Transitions and Alignment, which considers how well states’ curricula and standards align between pre-K, K-12, and higher education. Arkansas gets an “A” in this category, which is good news.

But is a well-aligned school system necessarily a good school system? Alignment is important as a matter of policy, but it’s not the same thing as great teaching. Many of the Quality Counts measures concern inputs such as teacher pay and school finance, but we should look instead to our most important outputs—ultimately, whether and what our students are learning. If we want to determine our school quality compared to other states, the crucial output of student achievement should be our focus, rather than inputs that may or may not produce results.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as “The Nation’s Report Card,” is the best measure we have to compare achievement in Arkansas to other states. Just looking at NAEP scores, Quality Counts shows we rank 34th nationally in the “K-12 Achievement” category. This is what we should ultimately concern ourselves with, once all our policies and finances are accounted for.

The difference between education policy and student achievement is like the difference between a good blueprint and a beautiful building. We should not confuse one with the other, though we hope good policy leads to good schooling.

Achievement is what matters. But absolute levels of achievement compared to other states don’t tell the whole story. To get a better understanding of the quality of Arkansas’ education system relative to other states, we must remember that some students are easier to teach than others. Demographics matter a great deal. Arkansas schools face greater challenges with more impoverished populations than schools
in wealthier states. We remain one of the poorest states in terms of income. In 2011, the average Arkansas household earned $38,758, ahead only of West Virginia and Mississippi, and well behind the national average of $50,502.

Accounting for these headwinds can help give us an accurate estimate of states’ school quality by considering all the factors over which schools regularly have little or no control. By taking into account these factors, Arkansas would have the same chance of success as wealthy states. The only difference between states would be the difference in school quality.

The Office for Education Policy (OEP) at the University of Arkansas recently considered this question in more detail, finding positive results for Arkansas schools. Using detailed information on school demographics, Arkansas fourth- and eighth-graders consistently beat expectations in math and reading. When we compare this performance with other states, Arkansas ranks above 25th on the four tests we examine: 14th on fourth-grade math, 11th on fourth-grade reading, 12th on eighth-grade math, and 21st on eighth grade reading.

In other words, even though our test scores fall below the national average, this is due more to the state’s demographics than to poor school quality. Our schools are not 49th in the nation, nor are they fifth, though thankfully we’re closer to the latter than the former.

What have we done right? While answers to this question can be endlessly debated, we think Arkansas has benefited from a combination of sound policies and unintentional advantages. As Quality Counts rightly points out, we have set high academic standards for our students at a time when most states have tried to water down their curricula.

Due to the state’s poverty, teaching is an attractive profession in many towns and cities since well-paid private sector opportunities are more limited. This has probably served to attract more talented individuals into teaching. Lastly, district and school leaders have the strength and flexibility to respond to local needs, due partly to a teachers’ union that is less dominant than in other states. But these are best guesses, and people of good will can disagree over what we are doing right.

Regardless of disagreements, we should all recognize that Arkansas has made great strides in teaching its young people. We should be proud of our schools, even if greater challenges lie ahead.

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