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We Knew it All

Along GreatSchools.org ranks Lamorinda schools among the best

By Sophie Braccini

Did you hear that Lamorinda has the best schools around? A recent Forbes magazine article has been all the buzz of late, and generated national attention to results compiled by a non-profit organization, GreatSchools.org, that aims to inform parents about where to find the best schools in relation to where they can afford to buy a house.

GreatSchools.org goes a step further and looks beyond the test scores in an attempt to capture the whole school experience. They note that although only quantifiable data can lead to rankings, there is more to a school experience than high test scores.

The Moraga School District gets the bragging rights to being the 6th best district in the nation, according to the Forbes article. The Lafayette and Orinda school districts ranked among the top 10 in California.

These ratings are the result of GreatSchools.org's compilation of two sets of data: Results from Standardized Testing and Reporting (California's STAR tests) or the equivalent in each state, combined with the results from the most recent National Assessment for Educational Progress data, a federal program that tests randomly selected students in fourth, eighth and 12th grades to provide state-level assessments of learning and educational progress. Every year, GreatSchool.org releases national results, ranking schools districts nationally, and per home price range, allowing Americans to find the best schools for their buck.

All of GreatSchools.org's top 10 best school districts nationwide for 2011 present very consistent demographic profiles. They are small (10,000-37,000 people), the percentage of minority students is very low (with the exception of Moraga and Mercer Island, WA, in which Asians represent over 10% of the student population), and the residents are mostly affluent. Falmouth, Maine, Barrington, Rhode Island and Pella, Iowa (ranked 1st, 4th and 3rd respectively) are a bit more average with about 3% of the families below the poverty level, and average incomes below \$100,000. In the top spot, Falmouth, Maine, the median home value is \$351,550. Falmouth claims a low student-teacher ratio (12:1), a generous dollars-per-pupil spent of \$10,075, and a highly-educated staff (more than 60 percent of teachers have at least a master's degree). In comparison, according to Moraga Superintendent Bruce Burns, his district spends \$8,700 per student.

"The school districts we've highlighted in our line-up of top cities to live and learn have an abundance of key assets: devoted teachers, challenging curricula, and vibrant cultures of achievement," says GreatSchools.org's Connie Matthiessen, "but there's one important quality almost all of these areas lack, and that's racial diversity." She adds, "Ironically, while our schools are becoming more segregated, our society is becoming ever more diverse. Some 44 percent of American students today are nonwhite, and that number rises every year."

GreatSchools.org strives to provide information beyond the test scores. "There are ways for teachers and principals to enrich their profile; parents and students participate on the site as well," says GreatSchools.org's Kristan Kirsh, "Principals are excited to add content and we moderate it. We have 37 million unique visitors a years, 20% of which are students."

The organization's staff also does its own research - Jessica Kelmon, Associate Editor for GreatSchools.org, who researches clusters of excellence (such as Lamorinda), recently interviewed Lafayette School District Superintendent Fred Brill. "I just ask open-ended question," she says, "we want to find out what's unique about the area and the schools, the level of parental engagement, the number of parents in classrooms, the level of support for school parcel taxes. There is more to a school than just the numbers measured by a test, and we try to offer a full picture, so parents can choose the best school for each of their children."

For more information go to: <http://www.greatschools.org/find-a-school/4083-best-cities-2011-clusters-of-excellence.gs?page=1>

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