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## State Public School System Ranked Best in U.S. by 2 Reports

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A six-year Maryland effort to spend billions of dollars more on public education has led to major performance gains that have helped make the state's schools the best in the country, according to a pair of independent reports released yesterday.

A three-year study of the Bridge to Excellence Act came as [Editorial Projects in Education](#), which publishes the trade newspaper Education Week, announced the results of its annual survey of state school systems. In the latter report, Maryland was ranked first among the 50 states and the District. Last year, the state ranked third.

"I'm elated," Gov. [Martin O'Malley](#) (D) said at an [Annapolis High School](#) event to promote the two reports. "We now have the No. 1, the best public school system in the United States of America, and we need to do our best to defend that."

The Education Week study evaluated school systems on several criteria, including accountability standards, college readiness of high school graduates, spending and equity. Virginia ranked fourth and the District last.

Maryland student performance on standardized tests, another factor in the Education Week report, has steadily improved since passage of the law. Annual state education spending is now \$4.6 billion a year, up 80 percent from the 2002 level, according to the report. In addition, local governments have raised education spending 34 percent in that time.

The report by MGT of America found that "proficiency levels statewide have improved dramatically for all students," particularly in elementary schools. Elementary students cut in half the gap between where they were in 2004 and the goal of 100 percent proficiency in math and reading, the report said.

The MGT report found that for every additional \$1,000 spent per elementary student, proficiency rates rose 4 percent. They rose 8 percent on the same measure for middle school students.

"Additional money, with strong accountability, can make a difference," [Nancy S. Grasmick](#), state superintendent of schools, said in response to the two reports.

The reports provide ammunition for lawmakers and education leaders who are fighting to hold the line on school funding. With the state facing a \$1.9 billion revenue shortfall next year, government leaders are under heavy pressure to slash spending.

Some cuts are likely to come from education, which represents more than a third of the state's annual budget. Last month, O'Malley's budget secretary recommended cutting almost \$38 million from an initiative that sends additional education aid to Montgomery, [Prince George's](#) and other counties. Other proposals include making local jurisdictions pay for teachers' pensions.

O'Malley acknowledged that he was examining those cuts as possibilities -- he called the pensions "a huge burden that we labor under" -- but said the studies showed that money spent wasn't wasted.

"I think what this report means is that we, the people of the state of Maryland, have made a huge investment in education, and that investment is paying off," O'Malley said. Echoing the governor, banners draped in the Annapolis High auditorium proclaimed: "Maryland Public Schools -- A Great Investment!"

Much of the past six years' spending increases went toward hiring and paying new, highly qualified teachers. School systems spent \$1.8 billion on raises and benefits for teachers, the MGT report said, and hired staff for more than 10,900 new positions, with 8,300 of those teaching positions.

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