

Northeast Travel: Fabulous Factory Tours
Paul Newman: Connecticut's Own



CONNECTICUT

connecticutmag.com

MAGAZINE

TOP HIGH SCHOOLS

Motivated, college-bound students, involved parents, committed faculty and staff—we've got the Top 35 inside.



NOVEMBER 2008 \$4.50



November 2008

Making The Grade

By: Margaret Farley Steele and Charles Monagan

Our ranking of the top Connecticut public high schools shows that money helps, but so does the right attitude among students, parents and staff.

HOW THEY WERE RANKED

If a school finished among the top 30 among all high schools in any of the 11 categories, it was awarded points every time it did-30 points for being 1-10, 20 for being 11-20 and 10 for being 21-30. Double weight (60, 40, 20) was given in one category: the percentage of seniors who took AP tests. Points were then added up and the schools ranked according to how many points they received. Of the 135 high school tracked, 87 received at least 10 points. The winner, Staples in Westport, received 330 points. Wamogo, No. 35, received 70.



The survey includes only what the state terms "Traditional/Regular" public high schools. Magnet schools, charter schools and technical schools were not included.

Where possible, ties were broken by determining the number of National Merit Scholarship semifinalists in the senior class. For example, Wilton, Avon and Ridgefield tied for second place, but Wilton had nine semifinalists, Avon had seven and Ridgefield five.

All data is contained in the state Department of Education's "Strategic High School Profiles 2006-07," the most recent available. The profiles can be found online at sde.ct.gov.

We realize that high schools in Connecticut operate under vastly differing circumstances and don't all have the same objectives. Our goal was to find the schools with the greatest percentage of motivated students, along with faculty and staff that seemed to do the best job of college preparation.

Top 35

Compiled by Charles Monagan
Public High Schools

Rank	School (Points)	Town	AP Courses	AP % Tested	AP % 3+	CAPT Reading	CAPT Writing	CAPT Math	CAPT Science	SAT Math	SAT Reading	% College	% Master's
1	Staples (330)	Westport	21	53.3	77.6	87.2	82.9	85.7	81.1	588	571	93.3	91.7
2	Wilton (310)	Wilton	19	44.4	88.6	81.2	86.8	85	73.4	602	591	93.3	85.8
3	Avon (310)	Avon	16	45.7	88.4	71.2	85	79.6	78.3	576	575	91.4	92.8
4	Ridgefield (310)	Ridgefield	19	51.1	91.9	84	87.6	82.2	77.8	596	581	94.3	83.5
5	Darien (300)	Darien	15	45.6	94.5	74.1	81.1	79.3	71.8	603	576	97.1	86.5
6	Weston (290)	Weston	11	41.7	90.1	76.5	82	79	84.5	604	595	95.1	82.3
7	New Canaan (270)	New Canaan	17	30.3	98.7	75.5	86	86.3	80.4	599	571	93.4	89.8
8	Farmington (260)	Farmington	21	50.4	74	73.9	79	76.4	74.9	554	552	94.5	84.1
9	Simsbury (250)	Simsbury	17	15.9	93	78.9	83.2	82.2	75.9	573	566	88.4	89.3
10	Joel Barlow (230)	Redding/Easton	17	32.2	88.5	82.4	87	75.8	71.4	565	561	91.2	87.6
11	Greenwich (220)	Greenwich	19	40.3	91.3	71.4	76.7	71.2	62.2	582	565	86.9	89
12	Ludlowe (220)	Fairfield	24	37.5	75.5	70.2	75.5	70.9	68.5	554	545	90.7	90.2
13	Hall (190)	West Hartford	21	41.1	88.8	66	70.8	61.8	69.3	561	561	88.8	83.1
14	Granby (190)	Granby	14	43.1	81.7	71.8	79.1	65	77.9	549	554	90.8	82.6
14	Hand (190)	Madison	11	15.6	86.3	74.6	84.7	80.3	76.9	569	548	95.1	80.2
16	Lyme/Old Lyme (160)	Lyme/Old Lyme	12	33.9	81.7	74.1	78.6	61.5	70.7	567	542	84.3	92.3
17	Amity Regional (150)	Woodbridge/ Orange/Bethany	24	32.8	86.2	69.1	68.6	68.5	66.1	566	552	92.2	82.2
18	East Lyme (150)	East Lyme	19	40.7	72.5	66.8	76	73.1	68.8	552	541	82.6	79.2
19	Glastonbury (140)	Glastonbury	9	15.3	92.8	64.8	70.4	74.9	67.9	571	544	92.2	82.8
20	Old Saybrook (120)	Old Saybrook	9	37.2	73.2	75.2	79.3	72	66.4	531	504	81.3	76.4
21	Pomperaug (120)	Southbury/ Middlebury	20	31.3	87.3	69.5	69	68.5	67	528	522	91.4	82.9
22	Conard (120)	West Hartford	22	45.7	70.5	57.9	65.6	51.3	58.2	536	535	88.5	86
23	New Fairfield (110)	New Fairfield	18	34.1	55.5	75.5	72.1	62.4	71.6	529	523	86.7	69.2
24	Guilford (90)	Guilford	17	37.5	76.7	62.7	64.3	59.2	65.9	547	542	86.2	81.3
25	East Granby (90)	East Granby	5	21.7	92.1	75.9	81	60.3	57.9	548	510	80	83.3
25	E.O. Smith (90)	Ashford/Mans- field	16	4.8	93.2	51.1	63.2	56.4	59.7	558	563	77.5	79
25	Northwestern Regional (90)	Barkhamsted/ Colebrook/ New Hartford/ Norfolk	8	32.1	76.5	63.8	76.9	71.9	65.8	548	544	69.4	64.9
25	Warde (90)	Fairfield	20	25.5	77.9	63.9	69.3	64.6	66.8	548	539	86.4	94.1
29	Litchfield (90)	Litchfield	11	31.6	54.1	72.3	61.4	55.4	75.2	523	509	91	81.5
30	Lewis Mills (80)	Burlington/Har- winton	12	29.9	84.8	74.4	73.9	62.3	67.3	527	532	83.2	90.9
31	Newtown (70)	Newtown	14	39.6	75.3	57.3	60.8	68.8	63.6	539	532	86	86.8
32	Brookfield (70)	Brookfield	13	33.2	82.8	60	78.7	58	63.9	534	538	91	72
32	Cheshire (70)	Cheshire	17	12.2	86.7	71	66.8	65.4	65.4	544	529	91.9	75
32	Hamden (70)	Hamden	21	31.7	51.7	41.4	46.3	38.9	32.3	480	495	85	88.2
35	Wamogo (70)	Warren/Morris/ Goshen	8	34.9	80.9	66.1	59.6	64.3	66.1	517	520	77.5	72.9

The 11 categories of data included in the chart are, from left to right:
 1-The number of AP courses for which students at the school were tested in 2006. The statewide average was 8.9.
 2-The percentage of seniors who took at least one AP test. The statewide average was 20.1.

3-The percentage of completed AP tests earning a score of 3 or better, a 3 being generally required in order to earn a college credit. The statewide average was 71.9.

4 thru 7-The percentage of grade 10 students meeting the state goals in the Connecticut Academic Performance Test in reading, writing, mathematics and science. The state's "Goal" level is more demanding than its "Proficient" level, but not as high as the "Advanced" level that is reported in the federal "No Child Left Behind" report cards. The statewide averages for meeting the goals were 45.6 percent for reading, 52.9 percent for writing, 45.2 percent for math and 44.4 percent for science. For more detailed CAPT results, go to ctreports.com.

8 thru 9-The average score of the Class of 2006 for the SAT I in mathematics and critical reading. The statewide averages were 510 and 505.

10-The percentage of graduating seniors in the Class of 2006 who went on immediately to attend a two- or four-year college. The statewide average was 78.3 percent.

11-The percentage of the school's professional staff with a master's degree or above. The statewide average was 76 percent.

MAKING THE GRADE

The slim, gray-haired principal stands at the entrance to Staples High School from 6:45 to 7:30 a.m. daily, greeting his staff and students at the start of their school day. "That's how I meet a lot of kids and learn their names," says John Dodig.

The veteran school head, wearing a small stud earring in his left earlobe and a muted gray plaid sports jacket, came out of retirement five years ago, intending to fill the principal's vacancy temporarily. But he fell in love with the school, put his hat in the ring for the permanent position and won the job.

His openness and accessibility have helped propel Staples into the No. 1 spot in the state, say teachers and parents. "When we went here, Staples was a good school; now it's amazing," says Anne Hardy, a graduate of the class of '79 who has a daughter in Staples' class of 2010.

Teachers agree that Dodig has made a difference. "You need the right principal for the right generation," says Gerry Kuroghlian, who has worked for six other principals in his 42 years teaching English at Staples. "He's the best. He's very student-centered, and that's what it should be about."

The tools for success came with the job, Dodig, 64, says modestly. "It's a very accepting community and a very well-educated community. By and large, the kids who come here are motivated, respectful, inquisitive and responsible," he says. Their parents value education, and many move to Westport because of its schools' sterling reputations.

Parental interest-meaning involvement in the school and attention to their child's education-is the No. 1 attribute of a great school, according to Mark Sklarow, executive director of the Independent Educational Consultants Association in Fairfax, Va.

What Dodig added to the mix at Staples was a desire to make the large school (1,763 students) feel like a small community, and interest in improving existing opportunities. "Every program we do, we expect it to be at varsity level, the highest level," he says. The culinary department boasts two test kitchens, he notes, and the radio station broadcasts 24 hours. "Our black-box theater is a real one, better than many on 8th and 9th avenues," he says.

The formula devised by Connecticut Magazine to rate the state's traditional public schools included the number of AP courses offered and how many students take at least one; the number of AP tests graded 3 or better; CAPT results for reading, writing, math and science; SAT verbal and math scores; percentage of faculty with advanced degrees, and the percentage of graduates going on to two- or four-year colleges.

Statistics are great, but Sklarow treasures less tangible measures, such as an administration that encourages teenagers to be creative. In this era of widespread testing and "No Child Left Behind" requirements, administrators who encourage teachers to go outside the textbooks deserve high marks, he says. Also, the ability of a school to motivate all students, not just its prize winners, is paramount, he adds.

While looking at honors and AP courses can help ascertain how a school challenges its best pupils (and how many "best" students it has), the more difficult task is discerning how a middling or struggling student has been encouraged. If middling students are shuttled off to the same few colleges, or to the local community colleges, it could suggest that the school's energy is channeled exclusively into the top students, Sklarow explains.

Similarly, with the bottom students, "Even if they're struggling, we should be challenging them in areas where they can succeed," he says. "A student who can write might take a more advanced English class while taking remedial math."

Another element of greatness in Sklarow's view is a school where everyone from the principal to the custodians seems excited to be there. Some do a great job emphasizing school spirit, he says.

At Staples, the week before Homecoming was Spirit Week, and students were encouraged to wear pajamas that Wednesday. Many strolled the halls in flannel bottoms and sweatshirts emblazoned with the names of elite colleges and universities.

Wealthy suburban schools have an academic edge to be sure. Westport, for instance, spends almost \$16,000 a year per pupil on education, says superintendent Dr. Elliott Landon.

Upgraded technology, current textbooks and state-of-the-art facilities come with the territory, just like watchful parents. But that doesn't mean that inner-city schools are doomed. "There are plenty of inner-city schools where expectations are high and kids are reminded daily to be proud of themselves and their school," says Sklarow.

College administrators prefer to admit a mix of students. "We don't want a school full of students from the best high schools. We want to fill a class with the best students," says Martha Merrill, dean of admission and financial aid at Connecticut College in New London.

Rather than ranking high schools in her mind, Merrill evaluates applications alongside the particular high school profile, which reveals AP statistics, mean SAT scores, college admissions and more. "It's all about the student. If a school provides numerous honors and AP courses, we assume students will have challenged themselves appropriately," she says, defining "appropriately" as pursuing an AP course in a particular area of strength, not just signing up for every possible one. Context is important, she says, because some schools limit AP courses and some offer very few. "Some of our best students have come out of schools that don't have many AP courses," she notes.

Yale's dean of admission, Jeffrey Brenzel, echoes her sentiments. "We evaluate and admit individual students, not schools. Schools certainly differ in their resources, and they also differ in the kinds of students they serve," says Brenzel.

Yale looks for the individuals "who are extraordinary within the context of their schools, whatever that context happens to be," he says. "In the end, we take high-achieving, high-aspiring students from an amazing variety of schools and backgrounds."

To take some of the stress out of the college application process, Dodig encourages students to branch out. "If your goal as a family is to apply to and be accepted at one of the top 10 schools in the United States, accept the fact you're competing against kids who are all doing the same thing-taking AP courses, vying to be team captain, and taking on the leads in school plays." But he reminds families that there are 3,700 four-year colleges and universities in the United States, "many of which will provide a more than adequate or stellar education for young students."

Despite his attempts to reduce the often overwhelming pressure on kids, expectations continue to run high. "I have no answer to it, because it doesn't originate at the high school," says Dodig. "We've had some go off the deep end and have a breakdown."

He attempts to recognize all of his students, not just the stars. For instance, a "15 Minutes of Fame" feature in the local newspaper singles out "the kid who's not captain of a team, or the school president, but ordinary kids who do extraordinary things in anonymity." The message he wants to send them: "You're doing something worthwhile." One nominee was a cabinet maker, another a race car driver.

A lot of schools don't have the time for this, but "we make the time," says Dodig, a former school head at Fairfield High School, Daniel Hand High School in Madison and Cheshire High School.

The entire student body knew it was Lauren and Sara Casey's birthday on Sept. 24 because it flashed on an electronic billboard in the lobby. The digital poster was one of the innovations Dodig requested during the school's renovation.

His attention to the affective side of a student's life, not just the cognitive, is his trademark. "It's as important to me that a person graduating understands who she is and feels good about the person she is as well as having mastered material of the 21st century," the principal says.

Anne Hardy, the school's PTA co-president and daughter of a longtime Staples teacher, says, "There's something for everyone here and everything is valued. The kids get a sense that what we're doing is meaningful and they want to come to school."

In any school, those values will be reflected in grades and test scores, says Sklarow.

Not everyone has the luxury of choosing their child's school. But those who do should consider a school's profile but not limit their decision to that alone. When Sklarow and his wife were moving with two students in tow, they asked their real estate agent to show them schools first, not houses. The school that felt right, he says, had ribbons with hundreds of badges belonging to parent volunteers, even though most of the parents worked.

Connecticut College often gets calls from alumni asking where the best schools are in their state. Martha Merrill's answer: "It's what is the best school for your child. What does your child need to do his or her best?" Some teens excel among all the options of a large school; others will do their best in a smaller, more personal setting.

She advises parents to visit different high schools and examine the pertinent data. "The profile will tell you a lot," she says, "but whether that's a good or bad school for your child is a personal decision."

Making the Grade: Runners Up

Rank, High School - Score

36. Bolton H.S. - 60	45. Housatonic Valley Regional H.S. - 40
36. New Milford H.S. - 60	45. Nonnewaug H.S. - 40
36. Suffield H.S. - 60	45. Stonington H.S. - 40
36. Tolland H.S. - 60	45. Windsor H.S. - 40
40. Canton H.S. - 50	50. Norwich Free Academy - 30
40. Haddam-Killingworth H.S. - 50	50. Woodstock Academy - 30
40. Coginchaug Regional H.S. - 50	50. Danbury H.S. - 30
40. RHAM H.S. - 50	50. Masuk H.S. - 30
40. Trumbull H.S. - 50	50. Portland H.S. - 30
45. North Branford H.S. - 40	50. Bassick H.S. - 30

50. Crosby H.S. - 30
50. Shepaug Valley H.S. - 30
50. Tourtellotte H.S. - 30
50. Westbrook H.S. - 30
50. Wilbur Cross H.S. - 30
61. Lyman Hall H.S. - 20
61. Lyman Memorial H.S. - 20
61. Manchester H.S. - 20
61. Naugatuck H.S. - 20
61. Putnam H.S. - 20
61. Valley Regional H.S. - 20
61. South Windsor H.S. - 20
61. Somers H.S. - 20
61. Stafford H.S. - 20
61. Wheeler H.S. - 20
61. Wolcott H.S. - 20
61. Norwalk H.S. - 20

73. Bacon Academy - 10
73. Bridgeport Central H.S. - 10
73. Bunnell H.S. - 10
73. Cromwell H.S. - 10
73. East Hampton H.S. - 10
73. Fitch H.S. - 10
73. Foran H.S. - 10
73. New Britain H.S. - 10
73. Newington H.S. - 10
73. Plainfield H.S. - 10
73. Parish Hill H.S. - 10
73. Shelton H.S. - 10
73. Waterford H.S. - 10
73. Wethersfield H.S. - 10
73. Wilby H.S. - 10
73. Brien McMahon H.S. - 10

In addition, there were 52 traditional Connecticut high schools that did not receive any points.

©Connecticut Magazine 2008