

Understanding U.S. News School Rankings: What Parents in Somerset County Need to Know

By Nandini Menon, Cedar Hill Prep School

As a parent, it's natural to want the best educational opportunities for your child. And with so many private, public, and charter schools in Somerset County and New Jersey, it's no surprise that U.S. News & World Report's school rankings attract so much attention.

But what do these rankings really measure — and do they tell the whole story?

Here's a smart breakdown to help parents better understand how these rankings work, and why they often leave out key aspects of what makes a school truly great.

What U.S. News School Rankings Measure

U.S. News ranks public schools (including charter schools) based strictly on test data from the U.S. Department of Education.

Two factors drive their rankings:

1. Student Proficiency (50%)
Measures the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards in math and reading.
2. Performance vs. Expectations (50%)
Evaluates how well students perform compared to predictions based on their socioeconomic background.

This method is intended to reward schools that “over-perform” relative to expectations.

Why Private Schools Aren't Ranked

Private schools are listed but not ranked by U.S. News because:

- They do not submit state assessment data, which rankings rely on.

- Most private schools use nationally normed assessments, a different type of test.
- Many private schools focus on mastery-based learning models, not state tests.

So while private schools like Cedar Hill Prep are highly regarded by families, they don't appear on U.S. News rankings in the same way public schools do.

Proficiency vs. Mastery: Why It Matters

Most public schools in Somerset County report that 60–88% of students are proficient in math and reading based on state standards.

But proficiency represents only basic grade-level expectations — it's not a true measure of deep understanding.

Mastery, by contrast:

- Measures a child's ability to analyze, create, and apply knowledge
- Goes beyond test performance to assess critical thinking and problem-solving
- Better prepares students for high school, college, and real-world success

This is why Cedar Hill Prep's educational model is designed to ensure students don't just hit benchmarks — they think, lead, and innovate.

Mastery-Based Learning at Cedar Hill Prep

At CHP, learning goes beyond memorization. Our approach includes:

- Project-based learning
- STEM-rich inquiry and exploration
- Performance-based assessments
- Leadership and entrepreneurial thinking
- Real-world applications of knowledge

Result: students don't just earn grades — they master ideas.

Parent FAQ: U.S. News Rankings & Private Schools

Q: Why isn't my child's private school ranked by U.S. News?

Because U.S. News only ranks schools that take state-mandated tests. Most private schools use different (and often more rigorous) assessments.

Q: Are U.S. News rankings the best way to judge a school's quality?

Rankings show how well students score on state tests — but don't reflect school culture, creativity, or quality of instruction.

Q: What's the difference between proficiency and mastery?

Proficiency = basic grade-level knowledge.

Mastery = deep understanding + critical thinking + real-world application.

Q: How does mastery-based learning prepare students for college?

Mastery equips students with problem-solving, analysis, and reasoning skills needed for honors courses, college admissions, and career paths.

About the Author

Nandini Menon (Ed.D, Mind, Brain and Teaching) is Chief Education Officer at Cedar Hill Prep School in Somerset, NJ. With over 20 years of experience in mastery-based education, she has helped hundreds of students develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed for success in top high schools and colleges.