

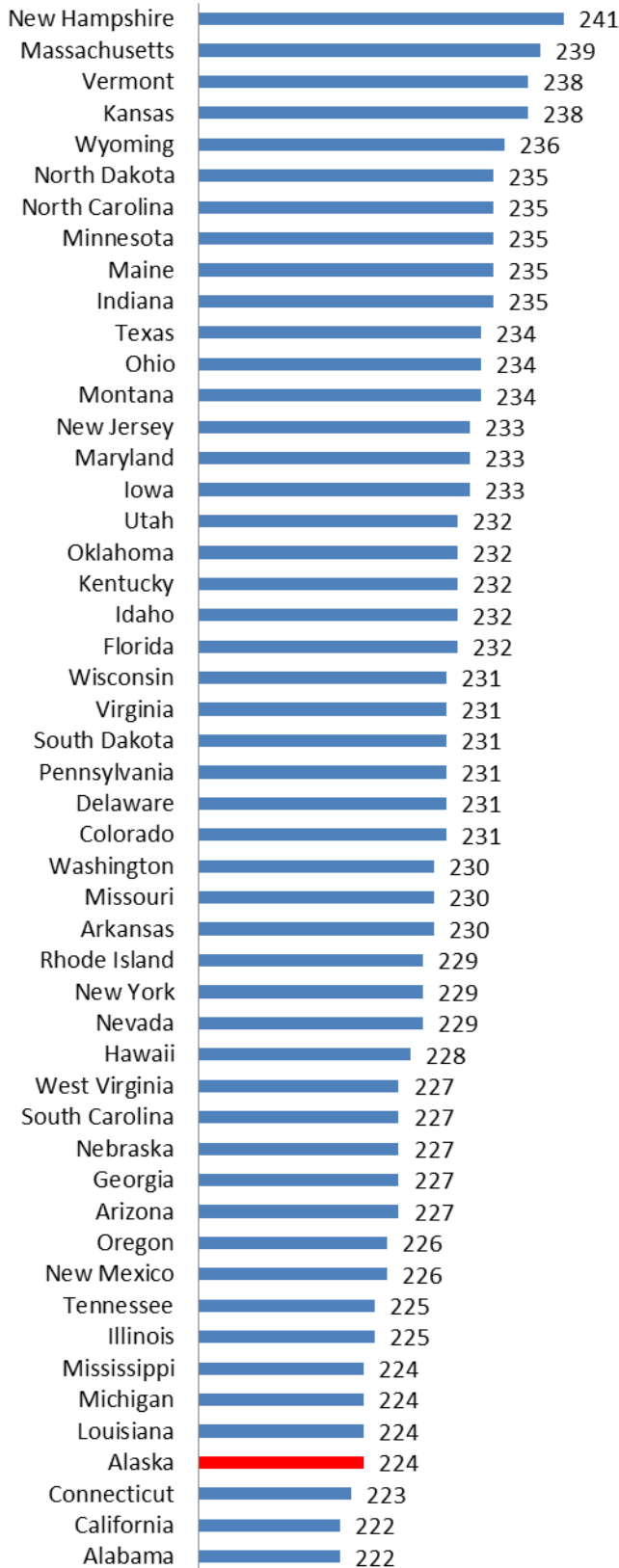
A STATE AT RISK

The Urgent Need for K-12 Education Reform in Alaska

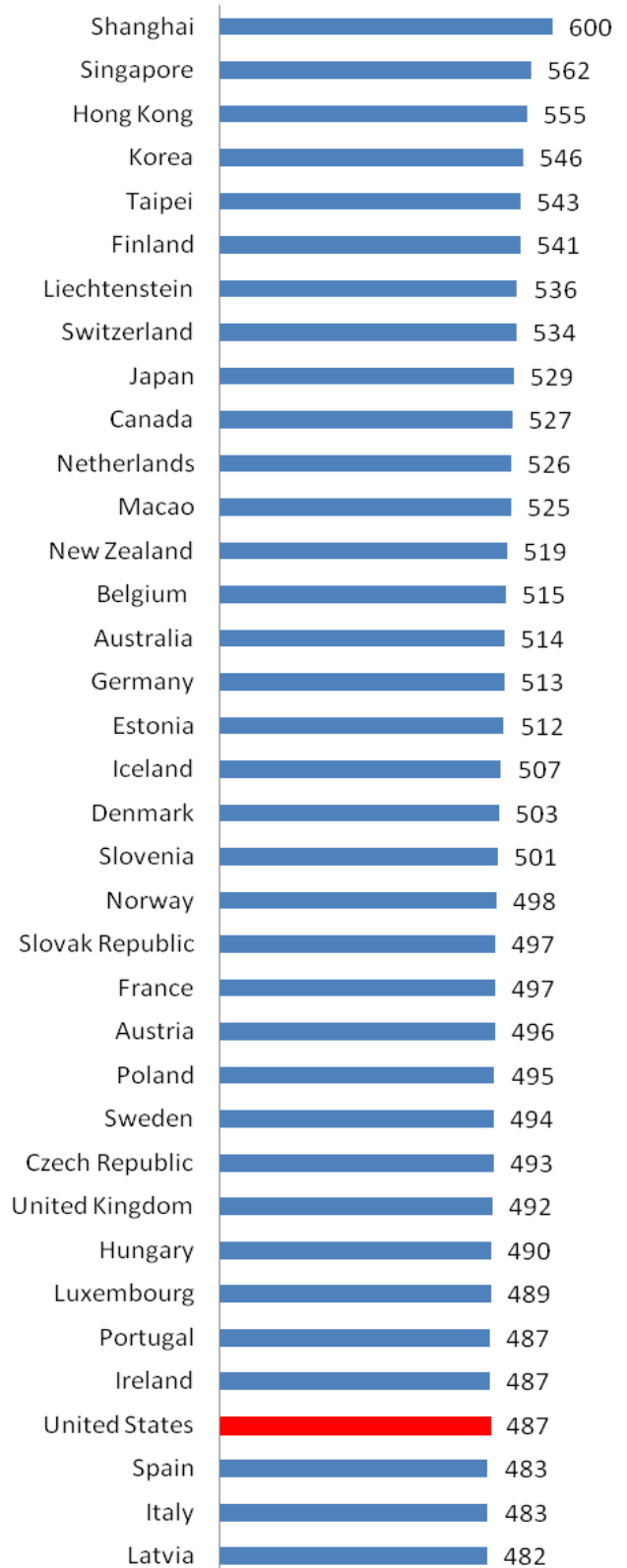


Bob Griffin
Alaska Policy Forum
Education Research Fellow

National Math Rankings
4th Grade, Low Income, 2011 NAEP



International Math Rankings
Math Scores, 2010 PISA



A State at Risk

Despite the fact that Alaska contributes more state and local dollars to K-12 education than any other state on a per capita basis, Alaskan kids from all walks of life continue to fall further behind the rest of the country and the rest of the world in achieving good educational outcomes. Alaska's children are just as bright as kids in any state or in any other country in the world. Unfortunately, they have been let down by an education system that hasn't allowed them to live up to their full potential.

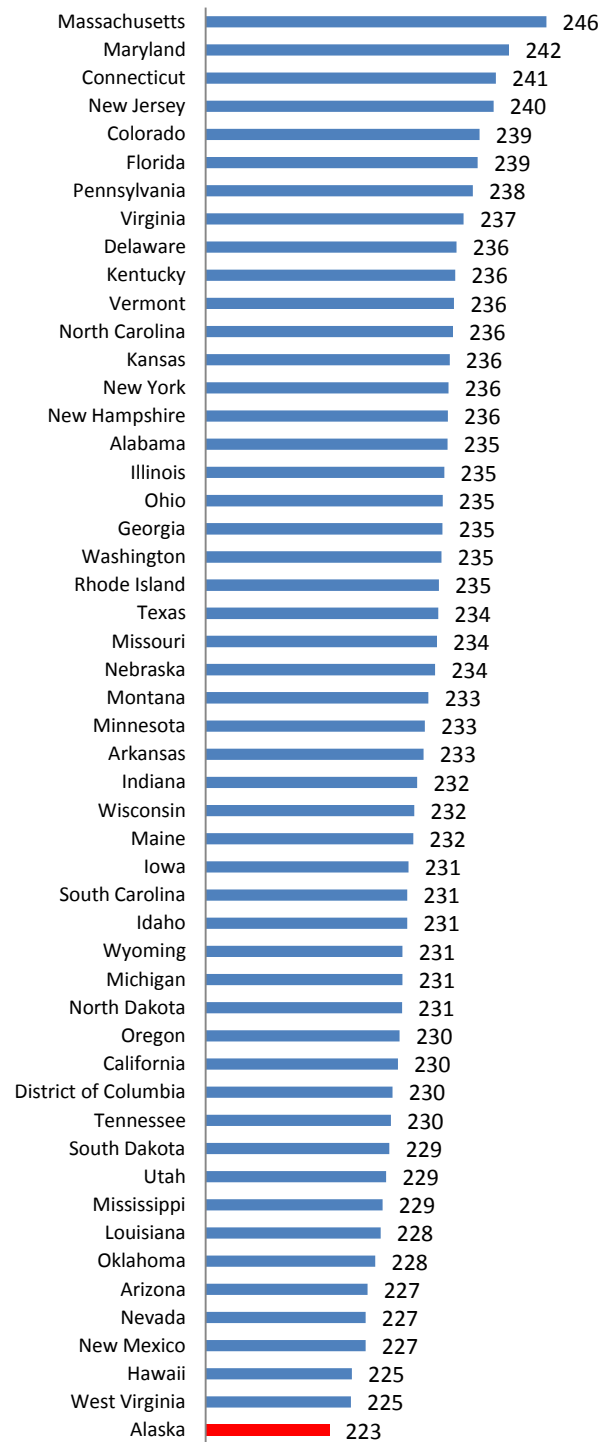
This paper will compare the condition of K-12 education in Alaska relative to other states, highlighting the urgent need for education reform in Alaska. Student achievement in this paper is approached from the perspective of the student's family economic situation. Though data are available comparing students on the basis of ethnic identification, *for the purpose of this paper, the assumption is made that the brightness of a child's mind and their ability to learn, is not closely linked to their ethnicity.*



Low Achievement-- Not Just Our Low Income Kids

The bar charts on this page compare reading achievement specifically for upper and middle income students to illustrate that Alaska's K-12 education woes are not limited to impoverished villages and inner cities. The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) clearly show that our significant problems in Alaska K-12 education include our upper and middle income kids as well.

Upper and Middle Income 4th Grade Reading, 2011 NAEP



Even Alaska's rich kids are doing poorly. Often the misconception is promoted that our low performance on national testing is exclusively attributable to schools in impoverished rural and urban areas.

What Defines Low or Upper-Middle Income and Why is That Important?

The dividing line for determining if a child comes from a low or upper-middle income situation, is whether not their family qualifies for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Child Nutrition Program, commonly refer to as the "Free or Reduced Lunch" (FRL) program.

FRL thresholds are based on 185% the official poverty rate. In Alaska, the threshold for FRL is 25% higher than the lower-48.

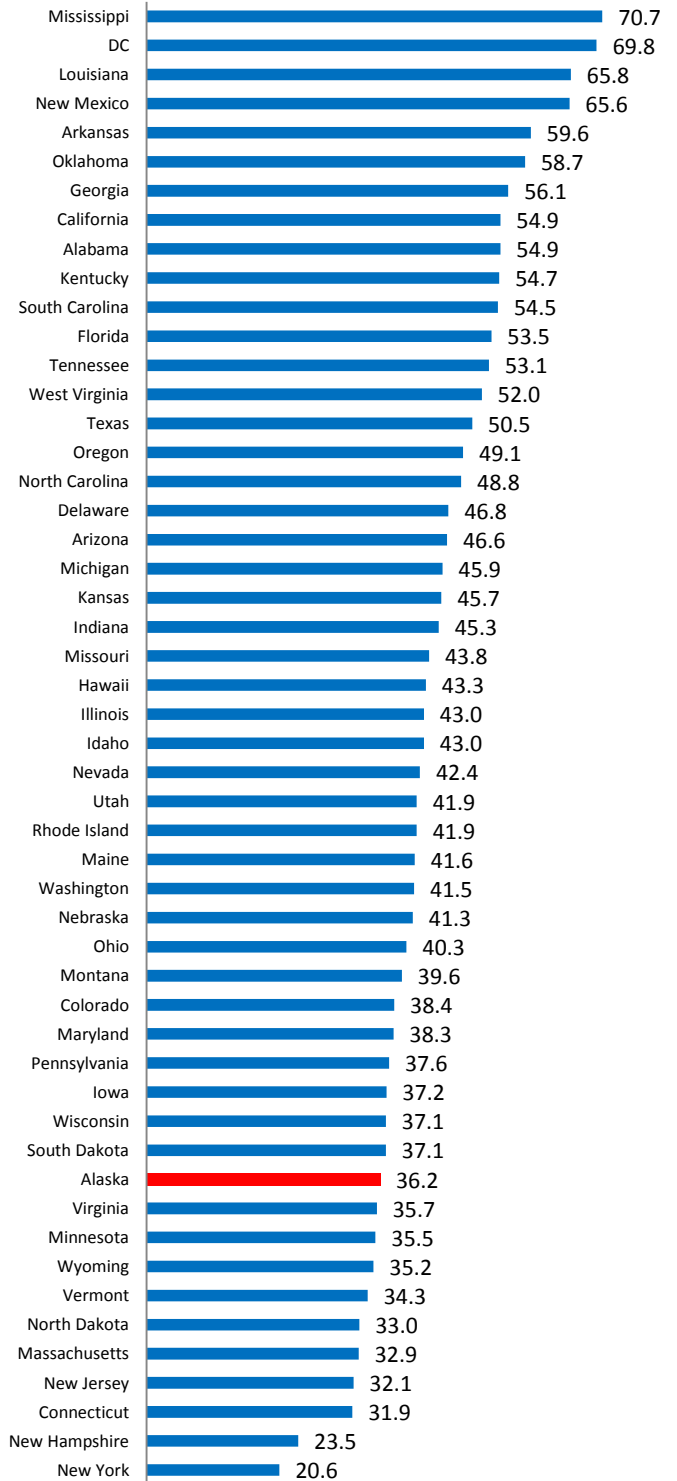


The Free and Reduced Lunch rate is important because low income is one of the key predictors of low academic achievement. In most states, low income kids lag 2-3 grade levels behind the academic achievement of their upper-middle income contemporaries. This is commonly referred to as the "achievement gap".

Alaska currently has an unusually large achievement gap between rich and poor students in most NAEP testing. Fortunately, poverty is not always an absolute predictor of low academic performance. Some shining examples of programs that have had great success despite crippling poverty are starting emerge. Programs like: The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program; The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program; American Indian Public Charter Schools; KIPP Academy; Rocketship Charter Schools and Carpe Diem are quickly dispelling the notion that poor kids are doomed to academic failure.

Though the challenges of low income levels in Alaska are very real, the bar chart on this page shows that Alaska's low-income student burden is significantly less than the average among the other states. (source: National Center for Education Statistics)

Percentage of Student Who Qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL) 2011



Though the academic challenges of low income levels in Alaska are very real, the bar chart above shows that Alaska's burden is significantly lower than the average among the other states and the District of Columbia.

The Bad News - 4th Grade Reading

According to the 2011 NAEP data, Alaska is at the bottom or near the bottom in 4th grade reading in nearly every way the data can be sliced. This is very troubling because of the great importance early childhood literacy has on future academic success.

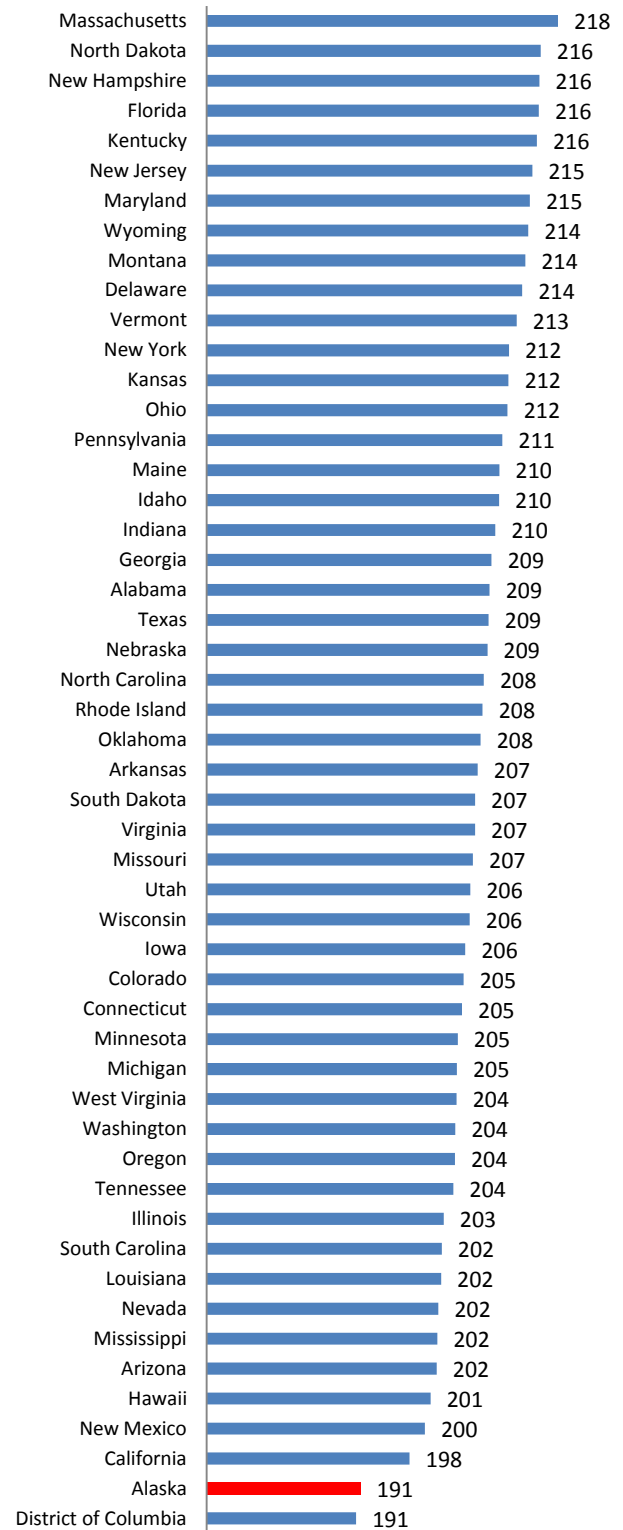


A common adage in education is that in kindergarten through third grade children "learn to read" so that they will be prepared to "read to learn" in later years. In a recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning, Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, researchers note that children that have not learned to read to by third grade have a 75% chance of being poor readers in high school and subsequently a much higher chance of dropping out. In 2011 only 25% of 4th-graders in Alaska were "proficient" or above in reading by national standards. The figure was 13% for kids from low income families. Children who fail to learn to read by third grade can recover and catch-up later but it is a very painful and resource intensive process.

Bar Chart Interpretation

This paper uses bar charts to visually tell the story of where Alaska stacks up against other states in NAEP testing. Included in the bar charts are the raw scores attained by each state. It has been observed that kids progressing normally will add approximately 10 points to their NAEP test scores with every year of learning. As an example, in the bar chart on this page low-income Alaskan kids lag behind low-income kids Massachusetts by 27 points. In other words, *Alaskan low income 4th graders were almost three grade levels behind Massachusetts -- at age nine.*

Low Income Students
4th Grade Reading 2011 NAEP



In 2011 only 25% of 4th-graders in Alaska were "proficient" or above in reading by national standards. The figure was 13% for kids from low income Alaska families

The Good News - 8th Grade Math

28th in the US - Alaska's High Point



Alaska is not a bottom tier performer in all of the four main categories of NAEP testing. Our 8th graders were 28th in the nation in math for upper and middle income kids. Unfortunately, our mediocre ranking as Alaska's academic zenith, in a country that was ranked 33rd in 2010 for PISA math scores, is not much of a cause for celebration.

Alaska 2011 NAEP Testing

UPPER and MIDDLE Income Rankings

4th Grade Reading	50 th out of 50
4th Grade Math	44 th out of 50
8th Grade Reading	34 th out of 50
8th Grade Math*	28 th out of 50

*Alaska's highest ranking out of the four primary measurements of the 2011 NAEP



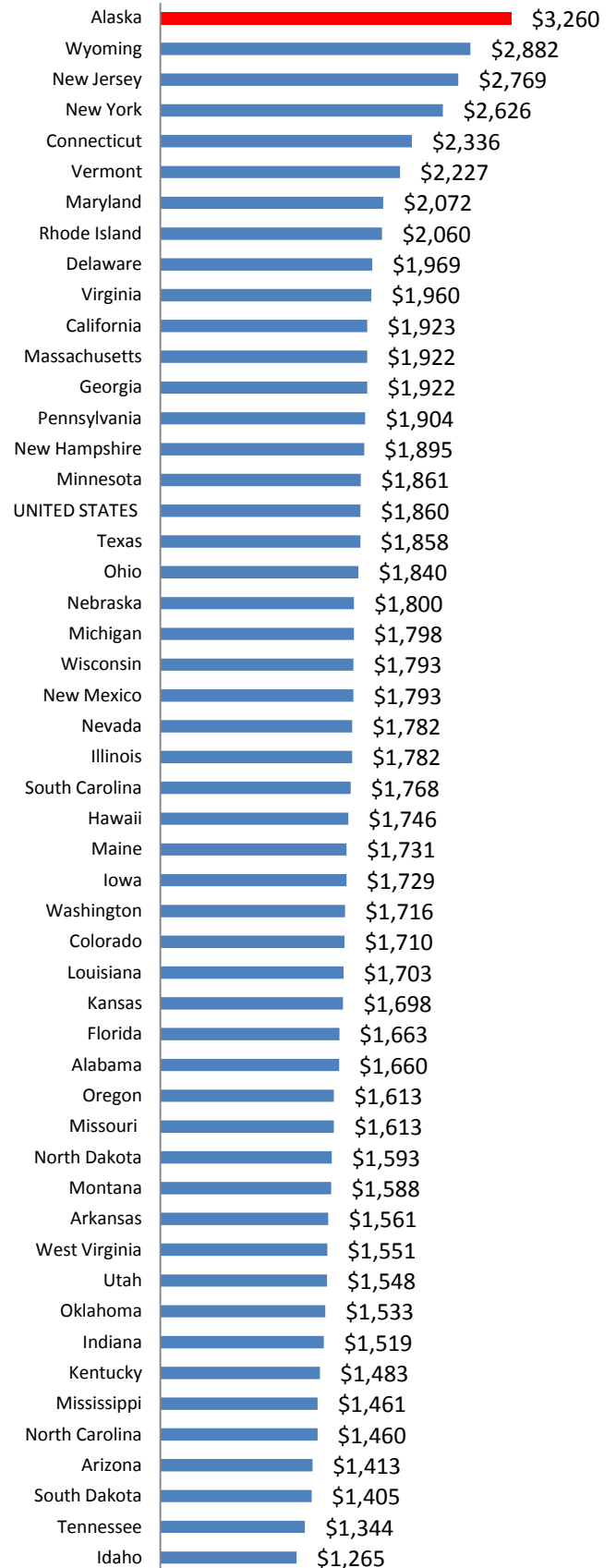
Alaska 2011 NAEP Testing

LOW Income Rankings

4th Grade Reading	50 th out of 50
4th Grade Math	47 th out of 50
8th Grade Reading	49 th out of 50
8th Grade Math	32 nd out of 50

K-12 Education Spending Per Capita State and Local Spending

Table H-8, 2012 NEA Rankings and Estimates



The Florida Example

Though Alaska's NAEP scores have seen a slight improvement between 2003 and 2011, most states are seeing much more rapid progress.

Student growth has been especially dramatic in states like Florida that have aggressively embraced K-12 school reforms like: Expanded School Choice; scholarships for disabled students to attend private schools of their choosing; 3rd grade literacy requirements; simplified charter school authorizations; alternative teaching certifications allowing tradesmen and other professionals to teach their crafts in public schools without formal teaching certificates and an easy to understand A-F grading system to help parents easily identify the effectiveness of their schools.

Despite Alaska's rapid increases in K-12 budget growth at the state and local level, our increase in the four primary measurements of NAEP was only 6 points between 2003 and 2011. Florida saw a 25 points growth during the same period with very little budget growth.

Because of the way that Florida structured its reforms, low income students, and students with disabilities saw the most rapid academic gains.



In 2011, low income Hispanic students in Florida scored higher in 4th grade reading than the average Alaskan 4th grader -- from all ethnic and economic backgrounds. Florida achieved this while spending about half as much per student as Alaska.



Conclusion

Education Reform - Why not Alaska?

There's an urgent need for change. It's clear that Alaska's kids can't endure the status quo of our K-12 education system much longer.

Our schools are the best equipped and funded in the nation. Our kids are just as bright as anywhere else and our educators and parents are just as dedicated. Still, our state education system has let our kids down in epic fashion.

With our abundant resources and relatively low poverty, there are very few excuses for having a school system that produces among one of the largest achievement gaps between rich and poor while simultaneously posting some of the worst results for affluent kids anywhere.

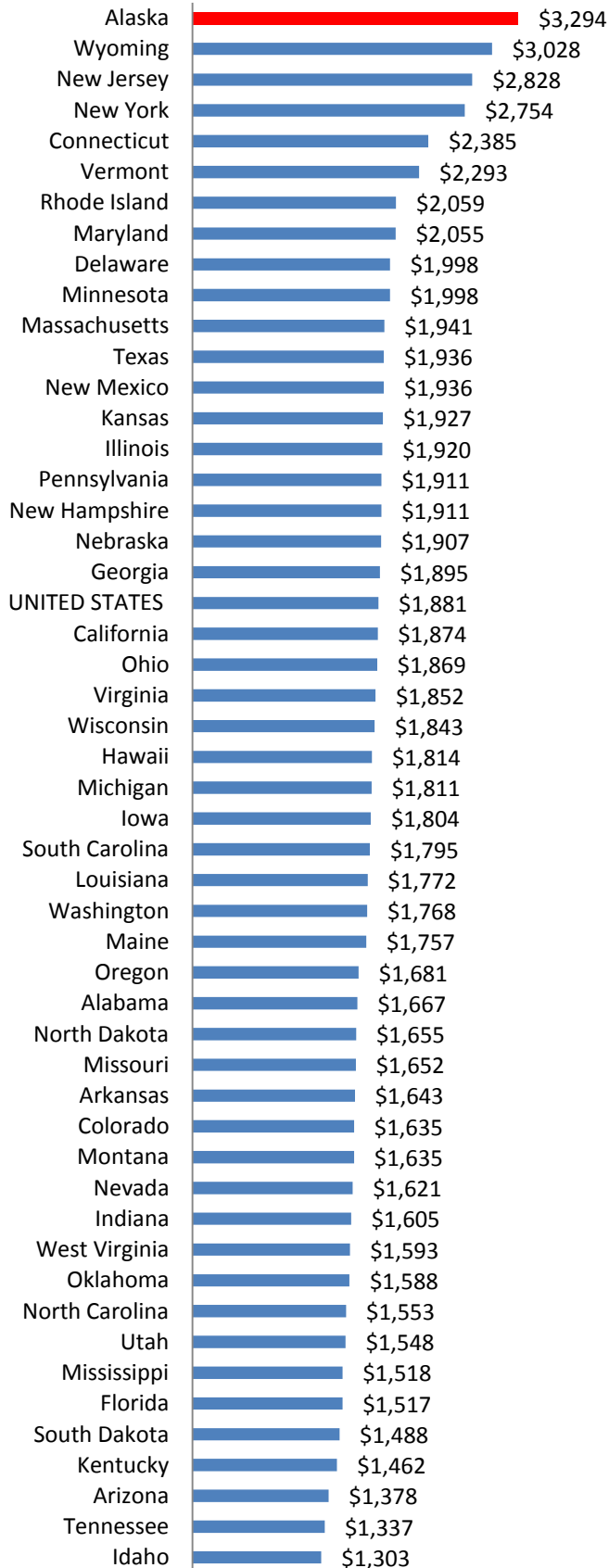
There are plentiful examples of proven school reforms that are sweeping the nation and are producing dramatic improvements. Yet, we here in Alaska continue to employ an increasingly more expensive and dated version of the same K-12 education system that offers very little hope of improvement.

Of the priorities for government, there are very few that are more important than preparing the next generation with the skills to sustain and improve the achievements of those who came before. Without significant change soon, Alaska will fail in this most fundamental task of educating our kids. Leaving us with: -- *A State at Risk.*

K-12 Education Spending Per Capita

State and Local Spending 2008-09

Table H-8, 2012 NEA Rankings and Estimates



4th Grade Reading Scores 2011

Upper and Middle Income

US Dept of Education, NAEP

