**BASIS Scottsdale – The Best School In the U.S.?**

***Success depends on failure at BASIS Scottsdale***

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**Summary:**

BASIS Scottsdale charter school was named the best high school in the nation for 2017 by U.S. News and World Reports (U.S. News). The top three high schools in the country are BASIS schools and BASIS has the top five schools in Arizona according to the report.[[1]](#footnote-1) What is the secret? What makes BASIS Scottsdale the best and what can public districts learn from the BASIS model?

BASIS Scottsdale’s statistics are very impressive. According to U.S. News, Basis Scottsdale is 31% minority. 92.5 % of all students were proficient on the 2014-15 AZ Merit test and an amazing 92.3% of disadvantaged students were proficient on the test. Students had a 97% success rate passing Advanced Placement Tests and averaged passing 11 AP tests. They have a 100% graduation rate.

There are four major factors analyzed in the U.S. News rankings:

**• Step 1:** The first step determined whether each school's students were performing better than statistically expected for students in that state.

**• Step 2:** For schools passing the first step, Step 2 assessed whether their disadvantaged students – black, Hispanic and low-income – performed at or better than the state average for the least-advantaged students.

**• Step 3:** For schools passing the first and second step, Step 3 required schools to meet or surpass a benchmark for their graduation rate. This is the second year U.S. News has included this step.

**• Step 4:** Schools that made it through the first three steps became eligible to be judged nationally on the final step – college-readiness performance – using Advanced Placement test data as the benchmark for success. AP is a College Board program that offers college-level courses at high schools across the country. [[2]](#footnote-2)

BASIS Scottsdale does not meet the U.S. News expectations for disadvantaged students or graduation rates. . The 92.3% success rate for disadvantaged students on the AZ Merit test is deceptive and inaccurate. There is also a huge problem with attrition with all BASIS high schools. BASIS Scottsdale had 84% of 9th grade students in 2011-12 make it to the 12th grade in 2014-15, not 100% as indicated by U.S. News. Overall, only 65% of the freshmen at the six BASIS high schools in 2011-12 were still at BASIS in 2014-15. This is not the resume of the best schools in the U.S.

**BASIS “Disadvantaged” Students**

Educating all children, including disadvantaged and non-college bound students is central to the U.S. News vision of school excellence. This is the opening statement from the 2017 Technical Manual: (Bold added for emphasis)

*“To produce the 2017* [*Best High Schools*](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools) *rankings, U.S. News & World Report teamed with North Carolina-based [RTI International](http://www.rti.org/" \o "Link: http://www.rti.org/" \t "_blank), a global nonprofit social science research firm.*

*RTI implemented the U.S. News comprehensive rankings methodology, which is based on these key principles****: that a great high school must serve all of its students well, not just those who are college boun****d, and that it must be able to produce measurable academic outcomes to show it is successfully educating its student body across a range of performance indicators.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

U.S. News compared each school's math and reading proficiency rates for disadvantaged students with the statewide results for these student groups and then selected schools that were performing better than their state averages. U.S. News defines poverty and minority distribution as follows:

**Poverty distribution:** This is the percentage of a school's 2014-2015 total enrollment that was eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, or the percentage of economically disadvantaged students (black and Hispanic).

**Minority distribution:** This is the percentage of a school's 2014-2015 total enrollment made up of black students and Hispanic students.[[4]](#footnote-4)

An amazing 92.3% of BASIS Scottsdale’s disadvantaged students performed better than state average on the AZ Merit test. There is just one problem:

***There are less than 8 disadvantaged students at BASIS Scottsdale.***

First, there are no free/reduced lunch students at BASIS Scottsdale. There are no free/reduced lunch students at any BASIS school.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Secondly, black and Hispanic students made up only 3% of the total 9-12 enrollment at BASIS Scottsdale in 2014-15. There were 281 students in grades 9-12 in 2014-15, so approximately 8 high school students at BASIS Scottsdale were Hispanic or black and could be considered “disadvantaged”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The average household income in BASIS Scottsdale’s 85259 zip code is $155,756 while the average income in the City of Scottsdale is $113,277 and Arizona is only $54,229. The median home value in 85259 is $615,500, the fifth highest real estate zip code in Arizona. [[7]](#footnote-7) See Table 1

Table 1 Income and housing prices in 85259, Scottsdale and Arizona in 2016

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Median income | Average household income | % Households making over $220k/year | Median House Price |
| 85259 Zip Code | $104,631 | $155,756 | 14% | $650,500 |
| Scottsdale | $73,288 | $113,277 | 5% | $400,000 |
| Arizona | $54,229 | $74,347 | 26% | $220,000 |

There is a very good chance that the eight black and Hispanic students at BASIS Scottsdale are far from “disadvantaged”.

BASIS Scottsdale’s minority students are almost all Asian - there were 192 Asian students enrolled in grades 5-12 in 2014-15. BASIS Scottsdale is 97% White and Asian.[[8]](#footnote-8) When U.S. News reports that 92.3% of disadvantaged students were proficient on state testing, they are talking about less than 8 students since the AZ Merit test is not given in the 12th grade.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**BASIS Scottsdale does not have 100% graduation rate as presented by U.S. News.**

The U.S. News definition *of* graduation rates:

*“As with the assessment data used in the previous steps, high schools' graduation rates were collected from each state. Although there is some variation in how states calculate graduation rates, the foundation of all states' calculations is the percentage of first-time ninth-graders who were awarded diplomas four years later.”[[10]](#footnote-10)*

Arizona calculates graduation rates based on the percentage of ninth grade students that graduate from 12th grade in four years, regardless of the schools they attended in 9th and 12th grade. That means that a student who began at BASIS in 9th grade and then transferred to a public district and graduated in four years is counted as a graduate.[[11]](#footnote-11) The U.S. News definition appears ask for the percentage of BASIS Scottsdale 9th graders in 2011-12 that graduated from BASIS Scottsdale in 2015.

BASIS Scottsdale’s graduation rate is actually 81% - 54 students were in 9th grade in 2011-12 and there were 44 left in 12th grade in 2014-15. The overall graduation rate for all BASIS schools is just 65%.[[12]](#footnote-12) See Table 2

Table 2 BASIS high school graduation rates 2011-12 to 2014-15

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2011-12 Grade 9 | 2014-14 Grade 12th | % Graduated |
|  |  |  |  |
| Scottsdale | 54 | 44 | 81% |
| Oro Valley | 56 | 32 | 57% |
| Peoria | 49 | 29 | 59% |
| Chandler | 62 | 39 | 63% |
| Flagstaff | 45 | 18 | 40% |
| Tucson North | 77 | 62 | 81% |
| Total | 343 | 224 | 65% |

The attrition of students between 6th grade and 12th grade is far worse. BASIS Scottsdale had 125 students in 6th grade in 2008-09.[[13]](#footnote-13) Only 44 students (35%) of those students made it to 12th grade in 2014-15.[[14]](#footnote-14) There could never be a public district with this kind of failure rate.

**Sources of attrition at BASIS Scottsdale**

There are two policies at all BASIS schools that force students to drop out of the BASIS program - the advanced curriculum and the required performance benchmarks all students must meet to be promoted.

BASIS claims to have one of the most accelerated programs in the world. The BASIS webpage states:

*“Our curriculum in these grades (5-8) is designed to provide one of the most advanced middle school programs available in the world, fully integrating the sciences, arts, math, language, and reading.”*

*“The BASIS.ed program for grades 8–12 is widely recognized as one of the most academically-advanced high school programs in the world.” [[15]](#footnote-15)*

The advanced program in grades 5-7 is indicative of the extremely accelerated curriculum at BASIS:[[16]](#footnote-16) See Table 3.

Table 3 BASIS Grades 5-7 Curriculum

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Grade 5 | Grade 6 | Grade 7 |
| Math | Math 7/8 or Algebra 1 | Pre-Algebra or, Algebra!, Algebra 2 | Algebra 1, Algebra 2, Pre Calculus A or AB |
| Science | Geography | Biology, Chemistry, Physics | Biology, Chemistry, Physics |
| Foreign Language | Latin | Latin | French, Latin, Mandarin, or Spanish |

Fifth grade students are encouraged to take high school Algebra 1. Seventh grade students are required to take biology, chemistry, and physics and must pass a comprehensive exam on high school Algebra 1 or they are not promoted to eighth grade. This is the first barrier students must hurdle to stay at BASIS.[[17]](#footnote-17)

(It should be noted that Phoenix Country Day School, one of the most prestigious (and expensive at $24,000 per year in 2014) private high schools in Arizona requires *9th grade* students to pass Algebra 1).[[18]](#footnote-18)

In eighth grade, BASIS students are required to pass eight comprehensive exams, including passing the high school AP World History test:[[19]](#footnote-19) See Table 4

Table 4. Required Eighth Grade Exams

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS Grade 8 |
|  |  |
| MATH | Algebra 2 |
| ENGLISH | English |
| SCIENCE | Biology, Chemistry, and Physics |
| HISTORY\*\* | AP World History |
| ECONOMICS | Economics |
| LANGUAGE | French, Latin, Mandarin, or Spanish |

Students must pass all of these comprehensive exams or they aren’t promoted to high school. The Class of 2014-15 at Scottsdale BASIS dropped from 99 in eighth grade to 75 students in ninth grade the following year. [[20]](#footnote-20) See Table 5

Table 5 BASIS Scottsdale enrollment 2010-2015

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 2010-11 | 146 | 146 | 130 | 96 | 48 | 36 | 26 | 21 |
| 2011-12 | 144 | 145 | 137 | 125 | 54 | 43 | 33 | 20 |
| 2012-13 | 119 | 144 | 111 | 115 | 91 | 47 | 40 | 32 |
| 2013-14 | 147 | 135 | 128 | **99** | 78 | 89 | 45 | 35 |
| 2014-15 | 89 | 145 | 120 | 120 | **75** | 73 | 89 | 44 |

The requirements increase in high school. High school students are required to take 8 Advanced Placement courses and pass at least six AP tests to graduate. AP tests are used as final examinations at BASIS Scottsdale.[[21]](#footnote-21)

According to the College Board, developers of the AP tests, between 2011 and 2015 only 3.8% of all students in the U.S. took six AP tests, let alone passed them. BASIS seniors averaged 11 AP tests passed. Only four tenths of one percent of all high school students in the U.S. takes 11 AP tests. The percentage that passed 11 tests is not available, but over 50% of all AP tests did not receive passing scores in 2015.[[22]](#footnote-22) See Table 6.

Table 6 AP Tests Taken Nationally Over Four Years 2012-2015

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Number of Exams Taken per Student | Frequency | Percent |
| 1 | 1.027,083 | 41.4 |
| 2 | 514,172 | 20.7 |
| 3 | 322,496 | 13 |
| 4 | 214,617 | 8.6 |
| 5 | 141,930 | 5.7 |
| 6 | 93,482 | 3.8 |
| 7 | 62,449 | 2.5 |
| 8 | 41,753 | 1.7 |
| 9 | 26,856 | 1.1 |
| 10 | 16,580 | 0.7 |
| 11 | 9,734 | 0.4 |

The 44 BASIS Scottsdale seniors who survived the BASIS curriculum and testing requirements are in the top .4% of all students in the U.S. – and probably much higher if they passed 11 AP tests.

**Conclusions**:

The question is: Is the best school in America one where the only students finding success are the top .4% of affluent White and Asian students from one of the richest neighborhoods in Arizona?

Remember the goal of the U.S. News rankings:

*“…a great high school must serve all of its students well, not just those who are college bound…”*

Ask any BASIS parent if they believe their child is college bound…

Imagine a public school that required all seventh grade students to pass Algebra 1, or required eighth grade students to pass comprehensive exams in Algebra 2, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Latin, and high school AP World History. Where all high school students are required to take 8 AP courses and pass six AP tests to graduate. Imagine a public school that is 3% minority in a state where 60% of students are minority and 50% are either Hispanic or black.[[23]](#footnote-23) Picture a public school that has no free or reduced lunch students in a state that is 46th in the nation in childhood poverty with over 26% of children living below poverty levels.[[24]](#footnote-24) Arizona has 500,000 students on free or reduced lunch.[[25]](#footnote-25) None are at BASIS schools.

If public districts could have the strict promotion requirements and exclusive demographics of BASIS Scottsdale they would surely be more successful. If a public district could weed out 65% of students between 6th and 12th grade - getting rid of all those troublesome average and below average students, special needs children, second language learners, and the unmotivated it would go a long way toward achieving academic excellence. This is the BASIS Scottsdale model.

Calling BASIS Scottsdale the best school in the U.S. is an insult to the educators who work magic every day to help all students, regardless of ability, ethnicity, or income level be successful rather than systematically finding ways to make them leave so the school can look better to U.S. News.

U.S. News provides BASIS millions of dollars worth of free advertising by not telling the whole story. They should be ashamed to call BASIS Scottsdale the best, when their stated goal is to identify schools that serve all students. BASIS Scottsdale high school serves only the brightest students in the U.S.

BASIS Scottsdale is only successful because they have no disadvantaged students and they eliminate all but the most gifted students in the country by the 12th grade. You be the judge if they represent the best public education in the U.S.

1. https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.propertyshark.com/Real-Estate-Reports/2017/03/28/expensive-zip-codes-arizona/> and

   https://www.incomebyzipcode.com/arizona/85259 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.expectmorearizona.org/arizona-aims-higher/assessments/faq/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. http://www.azed.gov/accountability/files/2014/11/grad-do-persistence-rate-tech-manual-nov26.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. http://www.ade.az.gov/Districts/ReportsData/ShowReport.asp?ReportID=72&EntityID=81078&FiscalYear=2009&AvailID=5298371 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Curriculum Overview at http://basisschools.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. BASIS Promotional Brochure 2014-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. BASIS Promotional Brochure 2014-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. http://www.pcds.org/student-life/upper-school/academics-upper-school [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. BASIS Promotional Brochure 2014-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures/ [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. BASIS Promotional Brochure 2014-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2015/Number-of-Exams-per-Student-2015.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures/ [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. <http://www.bizjournals.com/phoenix/blog/business/2015/07/arizona-ranks-near-bottom-for-child-poverty-well.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. http://www.bizjournals.com/phoenix/blog/business/2016/02/record-number-of-schoolchildren-eating-free.html [↑](#footnote-ref-25)