

Beaufort Makes the Forbes List

Written by

When I heard Beaufort made the Forbes List, I thought, awesome, here's another feather in our cap! I thought it was kind of like being named one of the best places to retire, or one of the coolest places to go kayaking.



After all, throughout its editorial cycle each year, Forbes publishes list upon superlative list: The 200 Best Small Companies! The 400 Best Big Companies! Top Earning Dead Celebrities! World's Wealthiest Widows! Just kidding about that last one, although it might be something worth writing about.

My personal favorite is the Forbes Fictional 15. This is the list of the world's wealthiest people who aren't actually real. It includes characters who been around for a while, like Jed Clampett and Thurston Howell III, as well as newer ones like Montgomery Burns (Homer Simpson's boss) and Prince Abakaliki of Nigeria (the spammer who keeps asking us all for help transferring his money.)

It turns out, though, that the particular Forbes list that Beaufort was named to is not a good one, at least if you are at the bottom of it, which we are. It is the Best and Worst School Districts for the Buck list.

Forbes wanted to see if people who were getting taxed out the wazoo for schools were getting their money's worth. So they looked at high-tax counties with populations over 65,000 where education is mostly paid for with local property taxes. There were 97 counties that met these criteria.

Then Forbes looked at the SAT and ACT scores of these 97 counties. You can complain all you want and talk about how easy it is for squirrely guidance counselors to manipulate the data by only letting the smart kids take SATs, but really, other than college entrance exam scores, it's not like there are any easy ways to compare educational outcomes, unless you want to invest in primary research.

And unfortunately, that's not Forbes' forte. Even though they have a reputation for being ritzy, when it comes to research for their Big Lists, they settle for the cheap secondary stuff.

This is how a Big Forbes List gets put together. Forbes gets a list or two from a Washington think tank, then their own people do some legwork to put together a few more lists, then they cross tabulate all these little lists, and turn the results into One Big List.

In the accompanying article, the writers explain whose lists they used and why, and they carefully point out that they have assigned extra weight to this or that variable, so it sounds like they measured it and thought it all through very thoroughly.

Then the magazine's page designers jazz up the charts and put all the caveats in tiny italics, and pretty soon, printed in full color on a glossy page, the whole thing looks very serious and well researched.

The only problem is, it isn't. As a matter of fact, the entire exercise is so lacking in rigor that it is meaningless.

Let's compare the Forbes figures for the top ranked county, Marin County, CA, with those for Beaufort: Marin spends \$6,579 per student. It has a stellar average SAT score (1133) and an absolutely amazing graduation rate (97%). Beaufort County, on the other hand, spends a lot more -- \$9,278 per student. But it has lackluster SAT scores (971) and an abysmal graduation rate (64%).

Now, honestly. Do these numbers really have anything to do with each other?

Well, they kind of do. In today's economy, high school seniors from San Francisco are

competing for jobs with high school seniors from Sheldon Township. And they are all competing with students from Singapore, Spain, Sweden and all the other countries whose names begin with the letter “S”.

Given that we want our kids, and our region, to be competitive in the global market, I should hope that the notoriety of being at the bottom of this Forbes list would prod us into action. But we shouldn't beat ourselves up too much, either, because as I've tried to point out, Forbes' facts are just about as real as Prince Abakaliki's fortune.

Here's how their numbers are messed up: Marin County schools enjoy a distinct advantage in the ranking system. They serve highly urbanized communities with an impressive array of resources, and the dollar amounts that these resources are worth are not included in Forbes' calculations of per-pupil spending.

How much value does Marin get from having good mass transit and a preponderance of healthy, well-educated parents? What per-pupil dollar amount can we assign to variables like the presence in the community of good jobs, richly funded cultural institutions, and major research universities?

There's no doubt that a straightforward reading of the Forbes article forces us to ask Beaufort County schools to do better. But a more nuanced reading forces us to ask ourselves what we, as a community, can do to better share Beaufort's wealth – its cultural capital, as well as its economic capital – with its children.