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Schools among nation's elite

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Walnut Hills High and Wyoming High again made it onto U.S. News & World Report's national list of 100 top public high schools, out today.

The schools ranked 36th and 50th, respectively, up from last year's berths in the 80s. Two other Ohio schools were on the list, but no Kentucky schools made the top 100.

Educators say the ranking, and a similar one by Newsweek in the spring, measure high schools' records for preparing students for college.

U.S. News bases its numbers on how available Advanced Placement and similar courses are to students and how many passed the tests to achieve college credit. It also examines state test scores and the performance of disadvantaged student groups, such as minority or low-income students.

Walnut Hills has increased the number of AP offerings and strongly encourages all students to take them, Principal Jeff Brokamp said.

"It's become part of our language and part of the culture," Brokamp said. "If you're at Walnut Hills, you will take AP course work."

About 82 percent of last year's graduates passed at least one AP test, he said.

Wyoming High, with almost 700 students, maintains a challenging curriculum even for students who don't take AP courses, Principal Aaron Marshall said.

"We aim very high because of the benchmarks that have been set before us," he said. "There's a very healthy competition here. Students compete among themselves."

The building goals include remaining atop the national high school lists and staying among the top 3 percent on state test scores, Marshall said.

Eve Bolton, a Wyoming teacher and CPS board member, said the national rankings shift the focus in high schools away from minimum standards on state tests toward more advanced standards. "It can inspire children to higher learning," she said.

The magazine rankings are not without controversy. Critics have said schools with limited money might not be able to make AP courses available to large numbers of students.

Also, the College Board, which runs the AP program, has gotten more strict about which teachers can teach those courses.

Newsweek has been publishing its "Best High Schools in America" list since 1998.

Its ranking, out in May, also measures AP and International Baccalaureate course participation but not scores. It published a separate list of "Elite Public High Schools," which have average SAT scores above 1300 or average ACT scores above 27. It ranked Walnut Hills 57th and Wyoming 89th this year.

One local school that fell off of U.S. News' top 100 list was Indian Hill High, which ranked 48th last year.

Nancy Striebich, its principal, was puzzled and disappointed, especially since most of the schools' other academic

benchmarks haven't changed, she said.

"I don't think we've done anything differently. I still think we're a very good high school."

Paul Gazzo, a lead analyst on the Best High Schools project, said the bar was raised for the top 100 list because so many schools increased the number of students taking and passing AP courses. Walnut Hills and Wyoming both showed increased passage rates that put them over the cutoff point, he said, but Indian Hill's AP passage rate declined and put it below this year's mark.

The top 100 are the gold standard, he said. Indian Hill joins several other Cincinnati-area and Northern Kentucky districts with a silver designation, he said.
