Appendix II: Jay Mathews Responds

This is a fine piece of work. Your data appear to be accurate, and make a point that I have embraced many times. People say: "But the Challenge Index is such a narrow measure." I say, exactly right, and that to my mind is one of its great strengths. Its narrowness and simplicity means that readers can easily see what I am doing and judge for themselves if it makes sense to them. Since the rating involves only two easily obtainable numbers, they can do the arithmetic themselves for their own schools and see how they compare to those on the list.

Your article recommends that *Newsweek* embrace instead the increasingly sophisticated measures that we have of schools, such as "adequate yearly progress" (AYP). That would leave the reader lost in a statistical jungle, as he or she is with the *U.S. News* college list. There are so many factors in the *U.S. News* "America's Best Colleges" list, or the AYP list used by government officials, that most readers, including those like me with college degrees, cannot be expected to comprehend them without spending hours examining all the factors and weighing other details. The reader has no choice but either to reject the exercise as too complicated or to trust *U.S. News*, their state department of education or whatever statistical experts have drawn up the heavily weighted and massaged lists. That is not a game most readers can or want to play.

For instance, I have written about the AYP quest of Maury Elementary School in Alexandria, Va. What astonished me in my reporting for that story was that even when the Alexandria people had all the numbers, it was not enough. There was a subjective part of AYP too. The Alexandria school officials had to present almost a legal brief of arguments to get the decision they wanted, including many factors very dependent on seat-of-the-pants judgments.

You are in tune with many other critics when you complain about *Newsweek's* use of the term "best." But consider how we use that adjective in America. We argue about it a great deal and have learned that each "best" is different, depending on what measures we prefer. If we are talking about movie directors, for instance, my "best" may be the one whose movies sold the most tickets. Yours may be the one who won the most Oscars. Each is defensible. The only thing one has to do, in making such lists, is tell everyone what they are doing, and, as you acknowledge, that is what *Newsweek* has done. The discussion of what is best in this case has produced your interesting and valuable paper. But you have to take one more step before you convince me that your critique makes sense.

That last step starts with you recognizing the consequences of saying that schools with high dropout rates and wide achievement gaps don't belong on any top 100 list. That says to me that Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, the school that first inspired me to be an education reporter, and started me thinking about new ways to rate high schools, does not belong any best list. It would not make your list, it seems to me, because it has, and has always had, a large dropout rate, and if it had a significant number of non-Hispanic white students it would also have a very large achievement gap.

There are a few inner city schools like Garfield that have produced unusually encouraging and resourceful teachers and impressive AP and IB participation rates, but because the vast majority of their students are low-income, they have not made much progress yet on the dropout and achievement gap problems you properly identify. If I knew of any inner city public school with a majority of low-income students that had a significantly lower dropout rate and achievement gap than other schools with similar demographics, I would write about it and then follow your suggestion and look for a way to measure its achievement and rank other schools accordingly. But I have not found such a school, and I think that the dropout and achievement gap factors are so closely tied to average family income that no inner city school would ever get close to the top 100 list of schools that did the best by those measures. Indeed, that would not be a measure of how good the schools were but how well-off their students' parents were. When we find a way that inner city schools can significantly reduce their dropout rates, as Garfield significantly increased its AP participation rate, then we have something worth measuring. Until then, you

have a measure with no point. Low-income schools will lose in your game every time.

The Challenge Index was inspired by Garfield, which I found to be doing something that almost no other inner city schools were doing, opening up AP to many students and getting them the intense academic experience they needed to survive in college. Everybody told me Garfield was a bad school, because it had so many poor kids, but I decided that, at least in terms of challenging students and preparing them for college, it was a *good* school, just as good, and in some ways even better, than the majority of schools in affluent neighborhoods where many students who might have benefited from taking an AP course and test were prohibited from doing so. My own son, for instance, had to take an entrance test to get into AP U.S. history at Scarsdale High School in an affluent New York City suburb—a rule that would have justifiably made Jaime Escalante at Garfield High furious.

I realize the Challenge Index is an unusual way to rate high schools. That is the point. The *Newsweek* list of the 1,069 schools that have reached a Challenge Index rating of 1.000 or above—having at least as many AP or IB tests as they have graduating seniors—has room for Garfield as well as Scarsdale High. It is a much better measure of high schools than the most common measure, which you did not mention in your piece—average SAT score. Give me a list of the top 100 schools by average SAT score, and I will show you a list that has *no* schools where even a third of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. But the *Newsweek* Top 100 has 17 such schools, alerting readers to the fact that schools with lots of poor kids are not necessarily bad schools. One or two of them benefit from small magnet programs that have lots of AP or IB test-takers and don't encourage the rest of the school to participate. But in most of those inner city schools on the *Newsweek* list, the AP or IB courses are open to all students. This is a great leap forward from the usual neighborhood back fence view that if a high school has lots of low-income kids, then it is by definition a bad school.

Here is the step you still have to take. Produce your own top 100 list, with clearly defined rules based on the points you made in your piece. Perhaps you can find inner city high schools that are not on the *Newsweek* list but that meet your high standards for dropout rates and achievement gaps. If so, I look forward to seeing which schools those are and writing stories about them. I think many of the inner city schools that are on the *Newsweek* list have created a special atmosphere that gives more kids a reason to stay and may show up on your list too. But I suspect that your list will have only relatively affluent schools, those with no more than a third of the students qualifying for free and reduced lunch subsidies. The only way to produce a list based on the measures you prefer that includes any significantly low-income schools would be to exclude thousands of middle class schools from consideration, which severely weakens your point.

The *Newsweek* list is designed to distinguish between inner city schools like Garfield and other low-income schools that do not challenge even their best students. They pat them on the head, give them A's for little work and fill them full of dreams of college where they are going to discover that because of the lack of emphasis on AP, IB or any demanding course, they are not going to be ready.

I have looked at the numbers carefully, and those schools with a few kids who take lots of tests do not usually score high on the *Newsweek* list. What gets you on the list is a policy that opens AP or IB to all and tries to get all those kids, even poor kids like the ones at Garfield, ready for the test. What also gets you on the list is being in a region where there are almost no poor students so that even when you restrict access to AP or IB you still have enough tests to make the list. That is *my* biggest complaint about the list I invented—schools winning my game with one hand tied purposely and harmfully behind their back. But I have to be fair, and on this simple measure, they meet the standard. Some of their students complain, however, about being lower in rank than schools they consider their social inferiors. I hope that will lead their schools to open up AP and IB to all of their students.

Your analysis is intriguing and well intended, but I don't think changing the index in the way you suggest would serve the readers of *Newsweek* or *The Washington Post*. The list is journalism, not

scholarship. It is designed to help readers in the same way the Dow Jones index helps readers of our business section or the earned run average rankings help readers of our sports section. Scholars dismiss both the Dow Jones and the ERA as limited ways of viewing the worlds of business or baseball, but those lists help readers differentiate between companies and pitchers that are performing well in ways that are important to them, and companies and pitchers that are not.

The real point of the *Newsweek* list, at least to me, is not which schools made the top 100 but why the vast majority of public high schools did not make the top 1,069 and cannot reach even the modest standard of one college-level test, on average, for every graduating senior. Most of those seniors are going to college, and they need more help than they are getting from their schools.

—Jay Mathews, February 2006.