

FIRM GIVES CITY SCHOOLS HIGH MARKS

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By **AMELIA BRUST**

HARRISONBURG — From academics and school safety, to cafeteria food and diversity, Harrisonburg City Public Schools is a standout among surrounding divisions.

That's according to the latest Niche K-12 Rankings, a database for public and private schools from kindergarten to college throughout the United States.

Based on its ranking, HCPS scored 26th out of 132 districts in Virginia, the best among surrounding divisions.

Among other central Valley divisions, Rockingham County Public Schools ranked 32nd in the commonwealth, Shenandoah County was 46th, Augusta County 54th and Page County ranked 62nd.

Niche ranked the city seventh in the state for facilities, ninth for best public school teachers, and 10th for both district diversity and for in-school food options. The division also placed 13th in Virginia for "best outcomes," a category based on student responses about preparedness for college and careers upon graduation; enrollment in advanced classes; and achievement on AP and SAT/ACT tests.

The ranking also measures whether districts have a "positive culture with a student body that represents a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities."

"I know that so many publications use different criteria ... but, this one seemed to be a little bit more comprehensive," Harrisonburg Schools Superintendent Scott Kizner said. "I wasn't really surprised that we ranked well."

Niche, which also manages student-written review site CollegeProwler.com, used 2011-12 academic information from the Virginia Department of Education as well as student responses to compile its rankings.

First place in the state went to Arlington County Public Schools, followed by, in decreasing order, Falls Church City, Loudoun, Fairfax County and Albemarle counties. The average free and reduced lunch participation rate for these divisions was about 23 percent, according to data from the Virginia Department of Education.

Harrisonburg schools had greater free and reduced lunch participation — about 71 percent — than any of the 25 school divisions ranked above it as well as the five divisions ranked immediately below the city.

“I think that’s just another very positive thing for our school division,” Kizner said. “We’ll do whatever’s necessary to make sure students succeed.”

In order, Harrisonburg surpassed Fauquier County Public Schools, Patrick County, Winchester City, Manassas Park County and Scott County.

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