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New York only No. 10? Ouch! That smarts

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Surveys. We love them when we do well, we hate them when we don't.

So when the 2005-06 findings of the Education State Rankings, or the so-called "smartest state award," ranked New York No. 10 out of 50, no one should be feeling any love.

The company -- the Kansas-based Morgan Quitno Press which is also known for state rankings on health and safety, among others -- calls this award its most controversial. And if they're going to rank New York behind our neighbors Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Jersey (scoring one through four respectively), then they're going to get controversy.

Come on, New York, we can do better. We have done better. Last year, we were ranked No. 6. So it's time to get back on track, climb the ladder and be the aggressive, hard-working, relentless people we are often stereotyped to be.

And who better to advise us than smart people -- Mensa members, educators, quiz show producers. We asked them how to bump past our neighbors and climb the rankings. A Massachusetts representative, Neil Chyten, president of the private tutoring company Chyten Educational Services in greater Boston, says New Yorkers need to eat more "chowda" and "lobsta" to improve our scores. He may be onto something, after all, since his state does whomp us.

Apparently New York's state fruit -- the apple -- isn't enough to nourish our brains. Not that Quitno was looking at food consumed. Instead, they look at hard numbers, taking 21 factors into account -- such as various academic test scores, student achievement and attendance, positive outcomes (like graduation and retention rates) and strong student-teacher relationships, among other things.

Actually, the fact that New York did so well is a bit of a surprise to Scott Morgan, the president of Morgan Quitno. He says New York is a diverse state, so it has some of the same issues as New Mexico and Arizona (No. 48 and 50 respectively). Thing is, New York has assimilated many immigrants, he adds, and it's big state.

Morgan suggests New Yorkers "keep doing what you're doing, and try and send dumb people to Vermont to gain ground on them." He then admits some people have said this study is "squirrely." He even calls out a Dave Barry piece written back in 2002 that totally mocks his survey. He's OK with that, though, because people are talking about it.

So while plucking out those who are bringing us down, and shipping them off, may not be so easy, we got a few other suggestions on how to whip us in to shape.

Greg Bobbitt, producer of Masterminds, a local televised quiz show on Time Warner Cable station TW3: "Play along with Masterminds. It's built to be that kind of a program."

He also says you can't beat life experience. Exposure to anything and everything and constantly challenging yourself can't hurt. Never be afraid to try things -- and try them yourself -- but ask questions when necessary.

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And who better to ask those questions than one of New York's own smart people ...

Dennis Viscanti, Latham-based Mensa member: "It's the parents caring as much as the teachers. Not over-caring, but caring. Everyone is capable of learning something about anything as long as it's taught or communicated in a language they understand."

He says he and his wife always offered to help their kids with homework and studying and asked about the school day. They let the children know they were there for them, but didn't "interfere" with the teachers.

To learn from our enemies, er, neighbors why not drive across the border to get a taste of a smart state's sports ...

Chyten: Aside from the nutrition factor, he says, "We in Massachusetts spend more on education than we do on baseball players," he says, referring to former Red Sox center fielder Johnny Damon who accepted a four-year, \$52 million contract with the Yankees. "Maybe New York needs to start doing the same."

Or, he says, "We have a much shorter drive to the cape. We spend less time sitting in traffic, so we have much more time to dedicate to education and more time to spend with our children."

That's funny, even if he is from Massachusetts, but on a serious note about education, nothing beats some good old New York-based smarts.

Patrick Allen, dean of the School of Education at the Graduate College of Union University in Schenectady: "Increase the number of national board certified teachers we have in the state. It's the only national assessment that is independent of accomplished teaching. There are several research studies that show national board certified teachers do produce higher quality instruction and better student learning."

Some states, like Florida, North Carolina and California have thousands of teachers with this certification. In New York, we have 488 -- although more than a quarter of them are in the Capital Region.

And for a final word, we turn to our esteemed state Education Department, for, perhaps, the smartest approach to the Quitno survey: ignore it ...

Tom Dunn, Education Department spokesman: "The highly respected publication, Education Week, released its annual Quality Counts survey" last week. The survey looks at educational standards, assessments and finances and teacher quality.

"New York's accountability system was once again ranked at the very top of their list, scoring a perfect A."

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