

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Private Schools Promote Civic Values

Private schools promote civic values in students as well as, or better than, traditional public schools, according to a recent analysis of research on the topic.

In a piece published in the summer 2007 issue of *Education Next*, a journal of opinion and research in education, University of Arkansas professor Patrick J. Wolf, examined 21 studies that collectively yielded 59 findings relating to the effects of school choice on civic values.

While three of the studies included results for students in public charter schools or public magnet schools, most of the findings centered on comparisons between students in private schools and traditional public schools.

The studies—which measured traits such as political tolerance, voluntarism, political knowledge, political participation, social capital, civic skills, and patriotism—qualified for inclusion in Dr. Wolf’s methodical review by being “a quantitative analysis that controlled for observed differences in the backgrounds of the students attending different schools.” The studies that used the methodology of an experiment or sophisticated statistical techniques to control for what is called “selection bias,” which is the “tendency of students and families to sort themselves into different schools and school sectors based on unobserved factors,” were given a privileged classification called “rigorous” (see the first section of the accompanying table).

Positive, Neutral, Negative

All 59 findings were categorized in one of three ways. If the evidence indicated that attendance at a school of choice (as compared to a traditional public school) produced a positive effect in the given civic

value, the finding was classified as signaling a school choice advantage (“positive” in the accompanying table). If the data suggested no difference in the manifestation of the civic value between students in the schools of choice and those in traditional public schools, the finding was labeled “neutral.” And if the finding favored an advantage for traditional public schools (which is to say the trait was less evident among stu-

strong disagreements to engage in certain activities such as free speech or public assembly. Eleven findings showed students in schools of choice to be more tolerant than students in traditional public schools, while nine findings indicated no significant difference between the two groups. Only one finding—and that from the less rigorous studies—concluded that students in traditional public schools demonstrated higher degrees of political tolerance. Wolf writes that “one experimental voucher study in Washington, D.C., found that nearly one-half of the students who switched to a private school said they would permit a member of their disliked group to live in their neighborhood, compared with just over one-quarter of the students in the public school control group.”

Voluntarism

Of the 14 findings surrounding the extent to which students or parents volunteer for community service, eight favored schools of choice, five were neutral, and one favored traditional public schools. One of the rigorous studies found that among eighth-

graders in New York City and Dallas-Fort Worth, “private school students are 21 percent more likely to volunteer—and dedicate more hours to community service—than comparable public school students.”

Dr. Wolf speculates about why schools of choice produce comparatively positive results when it comes to civic values. He suggests several possible reasons, including strong educational communities, an emphasis on value-based instruction, well-

Distribution of 59 Findings from Studies on Civic Values by Whether Schools of Choice Have a Negative, Positive, or Neutral Effect

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Studies That Are Experimental/Statistically Rigorous			
Political Tolerance	5	8	0
Voluntarism	3	0	1
Political Knowledge	2	1	0
Political Participation	1	0	0
Social Capital	1	1	0
Studies That Use Basic Statistical Methods			
Political Tolerance	6	1	1
Voluntarism	5	5	0
Political Knowledge	2	4	0
Political Participation	4	1	0
Social Capital	2	0	0
Civic Skills	2	2	0
Patriotism	0	0	1

dents in schools of choice), it was put into a third category. In all, 33 findings proved positive at statistically significant levels for schools of choice; three were positive for traditional public schools, and 23 findings showed no reliable difference between the two kinds of schools.

Political Tolerance

Twenty-one findings focused on political tolerance, which is generally gauged by asking students whether they would permit groups with which they have

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Parents Happy with Choice in DC

A study released in May by Georgetown University shows that parents in the District of Columbia who have been participating in the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) “by and large are very satisfied with their school choice experiences.”

“This qualitative study provides unprecedented insight into the early-stage experiences of families participating in the first federally funded voucher program,” said Georgetown University assistant research professor Stephen Q. Cornman, co-author of the study.

Data for the report came from personal interviews and focus group discussions with parents and students from about 100 families. The scholarship program currently serves more than 1,800 low-income students who attend 58 participating private schools.

According to the report, “Most parents cited changes in their children’s attitudes about learning as the main source of their satisfaction.” As one parent told researchers: “The first thing I noticed when my son started going to [school was that] when I went to pick him up, he was not ready to go home.... I have never seen a system where...you have to pull them off the playground to go home in the evening.”

The report also found that “one of the most positive consequences of the OSP is that parental involvement with their child’s education has increased.” In the words of one parent, “I can really say my interactions with my child and his school changed tremendously.”

In the course of their interviews and discussions, researchers discovered that the factors that families looked for in selecting a private school included “smaller class size, a more rigorous curriculum, and safety.” One parent told researchers, “I wanted structure,...safety, a better environment, a better learning system for her, and I got that, through the scholarship program. I love the school she’s in.”

“It comes as no surprise that parents know

what’s best for their children. Programs like the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program give families the power to choose the school that’s right for them,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in a statement following the report’s release. “The promising results and positive feedback in this report underscore the importance of giving families options.”

In the course of their interviews, some parents raised concerns about the program. “By far, the greatest concern of participating families was that increased earnings might make them ineligible for their Opportunity Scholarships,” said co-author Patrick J. Wolf of the University of Arkansas, noting that Congress has amended the law to limit the number of families in danger of “earning out” of the program.

Another member of the research team, Thomas Stewart, senior research associate at Georgetown’s School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), said that families in the program observed “measurable improvements in their children’s attitudes and behaviors towards learning.”

Other key findings in the report include:

- In searching for the right school for their children, parents considered the “individual attention the child received,” the “academic orientation” of the school, and communication between parents and educators.

- “Approximately 90 percent of parents interviewed and participating in the focus groups indicated that they were certain to remain in the program for at least another year.”

Congress will soon have to decide whether or not the program will continue, and in connection with that decision, House Republican Leader John Boehner (R-OH) said, “Every member of Congress has an obligation to consider the results of this study.”

The report, titled “The Evolution of School Choice Consumers,” is available at <<http://www.georgetown.edu/research/scdp/>>.

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inevitably undermines the fostering of civic values” but also suggest “that private schooling and school choice often enhance the realization of the civic values that are central to a well-functioning democracy.”

ordered and safe educational settings that enhance a sense of security and confidence within students, and effective instruction.

But regardless of the reasons why students in some schools exhibit above-average levels of civic values, Wolf is convinced that the studies not only “counter the claims of school choice opponents that private schooling inherently and

Dr. Wolf’s article, published in the summer 2007 issue of *Education Next*, is available on the journal’s Web site at <<http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/7460537.html>>.

New Study: School Choice Programs Save Money

Besides allowing more parents to direct the education of their children—a worthy outcome in itself—school choice programs between 1990 and 2006 have saved taxpayers an estimated \$444 million, according to a major study released last month by the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation.

“School choice saves. It saves children, and now we have empirical evidence that it saves money,” said Robert Enlow, executive director and chief operating officer of the foundation. “In the face of \$444 million in savings, another excuse to deny children a quality education has vanished before our eyes.”

First Comprehensive Analysis

“Education by the Numbers: The Fiscal Effect of School Choice Programs, 1990-2006” provides what the foundation calls “the first comprehensive analysis of how the nation’s school choice programs have affected state and public school districts.”

According to the report, in the 2005-06 school year 108,610 students participated in 10 voucher or tax-credit scholarship programs created since

1990 (see chart). And with eight more such programs slated to start in 2006 or 2007, the report predicted that “the number of participants can only be expected to grow.” (The study did not include in its count the more than 10,000 students in tuitioning programs in Vermont or Maine that date back to the 19th century, nor did it cover programs in Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota that provide education tax-credits or deductions to families.)

Bringing Evidence to the Debate

“Programs giving parents freedom to choose in their child’s education are growing rapidly in number and size,” said Dr. Susan Aud, author of the study and a Friedman Foundation senior fellow. “And a program’s fiscal impact has become

an important political issue. This brings empirical evidence to that debate.”

Indicative of the rapid growth in school choice initiatives are eight programs so new that they could not be included in the report. Arizona has initiated a voucher program for disabled students, a voucher program for foster children, and a corporate tax-credit scholarship program; Utah has approved a general voucher program; and new programs were passed by legislatures in Georgia, Iowa, Ohio, and Rhode Island.

The report notes that in “nearly every school choice program, the dollar value of the voucher or scholarship is less than or equal to the state’s formula spending per student.” Of the nine voucher programs and three tax-credit scholarship programs analyzed in the study, five resulted in fiscal savings for state budgets, four were fiscally neutral for state budgets, and three resulted

in costs to the state. But when state budgetary costs were combined with the fiscal impact on local districts, nine of the programs produced substantial savings ranging from \$1 million to \$144 million each, while the Vermont and Maine programs were determined to be revenue neutral, and

a third program lacked the data to calculate its combined revenue effect.

Per-Pupil Spending Increases

Another fascinating finding in the report is that in all the public school districts affected by the school choice programs, per-pupil spending for instruction has gone up. According to the report, “This shows that, even with the redirection of some revenue to parental control under school choice programs, states and districts were able to spend more on the students that remained in the public schools.”

The study is available on the Web site of the Friedman Foundation at <<http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/research/ShowResearchItem.do?id=10079>>.

History and Civics

American students know more about their country’s history today than anytime since 1994, according to a report released last month by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

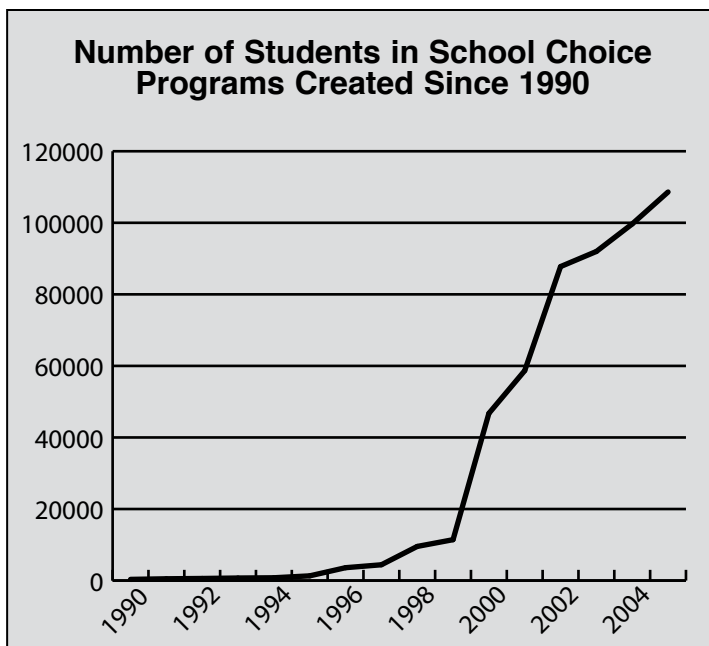
“The U.S. history assessment measures how well students know the specific facts of American history, how well they evaluate historical evidence, and how well they understand change and continuity over time,” said NCES Commissioner Mark Schneider at a news conference May 16 to release the history report and a companion report on civics education.

The history test, part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), was administered to representative samples of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in 2006, and results were compared to assessments given in 1994 and 2001.

A separate assessment of how well students are being prepared to be good citizens showed an increase in civics knowledge since 1998 (the last time that test was given) for students in grade 4, but not for students in grade 8 or grade 12.

Because of insufficient participation rates, results representing the performance of all private school students were not available for any grades in the civics assessment and were available only for grade 4 for in the history assessment. According to the report, “The average scores in 2006 for fourth-grade private school students (227) was higher than the score for students in public schools (210).”

Participation rates, however, were high enough in Catholic schools, the largest component of the private school community, to yield results in grades 4 and 8 in both assessments. Those results showed that Catholic school students significantly outperformed their public school peers.



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CAPE notes

★ **Fast Fact About Private Schools:** In 1998, 2000, and 2004, private high school graduates were more likely than their counterparts in public schools to have completed advanced courses in science, mathematics, and foreign language, according to a report released May 31 by the National Center for Education Statistics. Supporting the claim of advanced course-taking in science and math, the report notes that “in 2004, a greater percentage of private school graduates than public school graduates completed at least one advanced course in science (85 vs. 67 percent) and a calculus-level course (25 vs. 13 percent).” Source: *High School Coursetaking: Findings from The Condition of Education 2007* (NCES 2007-065).

★ Sidwell Friends Middle School in Washington, DC, has been recognized by the American Institute of Architects as one of the “top ten green projects” of 2007. The school was also awarded a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum rating by the U.S. Green Building Council, which, according to the school’s [Web site](#), makes it “the first Platinum-rated K-12 school in the world and the first Platinum building in Washington, DC.”

School officials see the green building as “an outstanding level of integration between the curriculum, values, and mission of the school.” Shaped by Quaker tradition, the school community is committed to “practicing responsible environmental

stewardship” and “teaching students about the natural world and their relationship to it.”

The building features a “constructed wetland” to treat waste water, a green roof for growing vegetation, gutters and downspouts that guide rainwater to a biology pond, and a sophisticated lighting system that, through maximum use of natural light, reduces the energy needed for lights to that of only 10 to 15 percent of a “comparable code compliant building.”

The Sidwell community is sharing its new setting with students in Phoebe Hearst Elementary, a District public school. A recent article in the *Washington Post* reports that Sidwell Middle School students “will mentor the elementary school students from the District who study across the street, using the green roof to teach lessons about plants and food and the environment.”

★ Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and other cabinet officials are engaging citizens in a dialogue on ways to prevent the type of school-related violence that took place in April at Virginia Tech. The secretary is interested in getting advice on the following questions:

In what ways can technology help to communicate with students and school professionals—before, during, and after a crisis situation?

How can the various institutions involved in protecting students—schools, colleges, law enforcement agencies, the

medical and mental health community, and others—share critical information in a way that protects individuals’ privacy but doesn’t sacrifice public safety?

What are the most effective programs and best practices for preventing school violence and managing crises at U.S. schools and college campuses?

To respond to these questions and to provide other advice on school safety, visit: <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/dialogue.html>.

★ The month of May brought two developments in the school choice movement. Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue signed into law the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship program, which provides funds to allow children with disabilities to attend the type of school that best meets their needs. In Nevada, the state Senate passed similar legislation, and the bill (SB 158) is awaiting action in the Assembly.

Reacting to the breakthrough in Georgia, Charles Hokanson, president of the Alliance for School Choice, said “We want to congratulate the governor and the legislature for putting the needs of children first. Now every child with special needs in Georgia will be able to attend the school their parents believe will help them reach their potential.”

★ Now is the perfect time to renew your subscription to *Outlook* for the 2007-08 school year. Renew online at <http://www.capanet.org/outsub.html>.