

Private Schools

What Are Private Schools?

Private or independent schools are those that are sponsored by non-government entities. Almost all private schools in the United States have non-profit status. This means that they are exempt from taxes and pursue an educational mission rather than profit. Although many people think of prestigious boarding schools when the term private school is mentioned, few private schools mirror this design. In fact, almost 50% of private school students attend Catholic day schools, usually located in urban centers, and about 80% attend religious schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). To attend any private or independent school, students must pay tuition. However, non-profit schools do not seek to make profits, but rather to cover their costs. All private schools are subject to state regulation, but usually under loose conditions, which free them to promote the beliefs, values, and practices they favor.

For further reading on private religious schools, see the following NCSPE articles:
Occasional Paper 30: Figlio, David and Jens Ludwig. 2001. "Sex, Drugs, and Catholic Schools: Private Schooling and Non-Market Adolescent Behaviors." http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/950_OP30.pdf
Occasional Paper 32: Sander, William. 2001. "The Effects of Catholic Schools on Religiosity, Education, and Competition." http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/727_OP32.pdf

Why are private schools controversial?

Public school advocates fear private schools promote inequality and encourage families to withdraw from the responsibilities of citizenship, although few would deny the right of parents to send their child to a private school. Controversy arises when non-profit schools are allowed to benefit from public dollars. For example, publicly-funded voucher programs allow families to use tax-payer money to pay for private school tuitions. Non-profit schools are often described as models for the privatization of public schools, and therefore remain central to current debates about public schooling. The potential advantages and disadvantages of private schools are listed below.

What are the possible advantages of private schools?

- **Innovation and Flexibility.** With reduced state regulations, non-profit schools can experiment to develop programs and practices best suited for their students.
- **Increased Choice.** Private schools offer parents an alternative to their local public school and the opportunity to find a community with similar values.
- **Increased Competition.** Private schools must attract their students. They are forced to improve and succeed, because of this competition.
- **Responsive to Clientele.** Private schools view parents and students as clients. Therefore, they must respond to their needs and concerns.

What are the possible disadvantages of private schools?

- **Increased Inequality.** Private schools require tuition and use selective admissions processes, which segregate student populations.
- **Lack of Social Cohesion.** Private schools work with an isolated student population and often promote specific values, which prohibit public discourse.
- **Limited Regulation.** Reduced regulation over private schools allows for the implementation of programs that educators may find objectionable.
- **Institutional Bias.** Private schools that have existed for a long time or are supported by established organizations may reject new ideas and practices.

For further consideration of the debate surrounding private schools, see the following NCSPE articles:

Occasional Paper 3: McEwan, Patrick J. 2000. "Comparing the Effectiveness of Public and Private Schools: A Review of Evidence and Interpretations."
http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/990_OP03.pdf

Occasional Paper 15: Geller, Christopher R., David L. Sjoquist, and Mary Beth Walker. 2001. "The Effect of Private School Competition on Public School Performance."
http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/816_OP15.pdf

Occasional Paper 31: Figlio, David N. and Joe A. Stone. 2001. "Can Public Policy Prevent Private School Cream-Skimming?"
http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/200_OP31.pdf

Occasional Paper 58: Cohen-Zada, Danny. 2002. "Preserving Religious Values through Education: Economic Analysis and Evidence from the US."
http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/618_OP58.pdf

What is the size of the private school sector?

Approximately 5,953,000 students attend 27,223 non-profit schools. This comprises 11% of all students and 23% of all schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Most non-profit schools are small, located in urban centers, and possess a religious affiliation. About 80% of non-profit schools enroll less than 300 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Achievement studies of private schools show mixed results, although some show a slight advantage over public schools with comparable students. The following two charts detail average tuition costs and common religious affiliations of non-profit schools.

Average Private School Tuition: 1999-2000

	All Levels	Elementary	Secondary	K-12 Schools
All Schools	\$4,689	\$3,267	\$6,053	\$6,779
Catholic	\$3,236	\$2,451	\$4,845	\$6,780
Other Religious	\$4,063	\$3,503	\$6,536	\$4,260
Non-Sectarian	\$10,992	\$7,884	\$14,638	\$12,363

Source: Table 61, *Digest of Education Statistics 2002*, National Center for Education Statistics

Where do Private School Students go to School?		
	89-90	99-00
Catholic	54.5%	48.6%
Non-Sectarian	13.2%	15.7%
Conservative Christian	10.9%	15.0%
Baptist	5.8%	6.1%
Lutheran	4.4%	4.3%
Jewish	3.2%	3.3%
Other	4.5%	4.5%

Source: Table 1, *Private School Universe Survey: 1999-2000*, National Center for Education Statistics.

Where can I find out more about private schools?

Information about private schools located on the NCSPE website can be found at <http://www.ncspe.org/inforead.php?mysub=3>

Books reviewing private schools are few; for an excellent review of private Catholic schools, see:

Sander, William. 2001. *Catholic Schools: Private and Social Effects*. Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

For additional information from internet resources see:

The National Center for Education Statistics at:

<http://nces.ed.gov>

The Council for American Private Education— an advocate for private education— at:

<http://www.capenet.org>