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AUTHOR Anderson, Karen M.; Resnick, Michael A.  
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ABSTRACT

Are private schools superior to public schools? This report presents the numbers, analyzes the arguments, and concludes that the answer is "no." All things being equal, a good school is a good school, whether it is public or private. The report provides information about school demography, school characteristics, student achievement, teachers and principals, and public opinion. Findings indicate that 11 percent of all school-age children attend private schools, and that the population of private school students is less diverse than that of public schools. Private and public schools have highly similar graduation requirements, although teachers at private schools believe that they have more influence over curriculum offerings than do public school teachers. Private schools as a whole have smaller class sizes than do public schools. Public school teachers earn higher salaries and are more likely to have an advanced degree than private school teachers. The data on academic achievement is mixed; however, parents' level of education and family income are strongly linked to student achievement, independent of school type. Private schools have lower dropout rates and higher college-attendance rates than public schools. This may be explained by the selective nature of private schools. Polling data show that the general public believes that private schools have higher academic standards, are safer, and are more likely to promote "honesty and responsibility." On the other hand, public schools provide a better education to special needs children and more diverse learning environments. Six tables and one figure are included. (Contains 30 references.) (LMI)

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# NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION SCHOOL BOARD ADVOCACY FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Advocacy Research Department  
Office of Advocacy  
National School Boards Association  
1680 Duke Street  
Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3493  
Phone: 703-838-6722  
Fax: 703-548-5613

**Excellence and Equity in Public Education through School Board Leadership**

This publication is the fourth in a series of research efforts being done by NSBA to provide reliable data, information, analysis, and comments on important problems and issues of concern to persons and organizations responsible for making decisions related to American education.

About the authors: Dr. Karen M. Anderson is Director of Policy Research, and Michael A. Resnick is Associate Executive Director, Office of Advocacy at the National School Boards Association.

**NSBA Mission Statement:** The mission of the National School Boards Association, working with and through all its Federation Members, is to foster excellence and equity in public education through school board leadership.

**NSBA Vision for Public Education:** The National School Boards Association believes local school boards are the nation's preeminent expression of grass roots democracy and this form of governance of the public schools is fundamental to the continued success of public education. Adequately funded, student-centered public schools will provide, in a safe and supportive environment, a comprehensive education for the whole child and will prepare all of America's children for a lifetime of learning in a diverse, democratic society and an interdependent global economy. America's school boards, by creating a vision of excellence and equity for every child, will provide performance-oriented schools that meet today's problems as well as the challenges of tomorrow.

This report was published and printed in September 1997.

# FOREWORD

School voucher initiatives. Attempts to cut funding for public schools. Inaccurate portrayals of public education on television, in newspapers, in advertisements. A widespread assumption on the part of the public that private schools in the U.S. are better than public schools.

Is it true that private schools are superior to public schools? This report presents the numbers, analyzes the arguments, and concludes that the answer is overall, no. All things being equal, a good school is a good school – whether it is public or private.

This report is one of a series analyzing the research findings regarding the quality of American public education. It is our hope that you will be able to use this report to present the facts about public education to your community, as well as to address the myths concerning the relative performance of public and private schools.

Towards that end, this report compares public and private schools on a variety of fronts, including demographics, student achievement, teachers, and expenditures. This effort is being conducted through NSBA's Advocacy Office, headed by Michael A. Resnick, Associate Executive Director. Karen Anderson, Director of Policy Research, authored this report.

As local school board members, you are leaders in your community. It's up to you to know the facts and to speak out on this debate. We look forward to working with you on these issues.

Sincerely,

William B. Ingram  
President

Anne L. Bryant  
Executive Director

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	4
Demographics .....	4
Schools .....	4
Students .....	5
Characteristics of Public vs. Private Schools .....	7
Curriculum Offerings .....	7
Class Size .....	8
Governance .....	8
Expenditures and Staffing Patterns .....	9
Student Achievement .....	11
Achievement Test Scores .....	11
ACT Exam Scores .....	12
Dropout Rates .....	12
Educational Expectations .....	13
College Attendance .....	13
Teachers and Principals .....	14
Teacher Salaries .....	14
Level of Education .....	14
Where Do Teachers Send Their Own Children to School? .....	15
Polling Data .....	16
Summary .....	17
How You Can Use This Information .....	18
References .....	19

**TABLES AND FIGURES**

Table 1: Public and Private School Enrollments by State, Fall 1993 . . . . . 21

Table 2: Number and Percent of Private Schools and Students by Religious and Non-sectarian Category, 1993-94 . . . . . 23

Table 3: Racial/Ethnic Background of Public and Private School Students, 1993-94 (%) . . . . . 24

Figure 1: Average size of all schools and public and private schools, 1993-94. . . . . 25

Table 4: Percentage of Private Schools Charging Tuition and Average Tuition, 1990-91, by Level and Affiliation . . . . . 26

Table 5: Average Base Salaries for Full-Time Teachers in Public and Private Schools, 1993-94 . . . . . 27

Table 6: Percentage of Public and Private School Teachers Who Received Various Benefits, 1993-94 . . . . . 28

# INTRODUCTION

One of the central tenets of the school voucher movement is that private schools in the U.S. are of much higher quality than public schools. According to voucher proponents, if individual students are given "vouchers" to use at private schools, they will receive a significantly better education.

But is this true? In some very limited geographic areas, there may be as many good private as public schools, but the available evidence suggests that private schools as a whole do not necessarily outperform public schools. Given the demographics of students attending public schools, our nation's public schools are doing an outstanding job of educating a highly diverse population of students. Our public

schools are graduating more students than ever before, and student achievement in many areas is rising.

In this report, we will look closely at research efforts that compare public and private schools, and suggest how you can address these issues in your community. Although NSBA supports the existence of private schools as one option for parents, we reject the misleading comparisons that are made to promote these schools at the expense of public education. We hope that by giving you the true facts, you can use this information to combat the myth that private schools are somehow better than public schools.

# DEMOGRAPHICS

This section presents basic demographic and descriptive information about the universe of private *schools* in the U.S. and the *students* who attend them.

## SCHOOLS

The total number of private elementary and secondary schools (all figures used in this report will refer to both unless otherwise noted) has not changed since the late 1980s. As of fall 1993, there were just over 26,000 private schools in the United States. According to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), 25% of all schools in the U.S. are private. (See Table 1 for state by state information.) However, the percentage of children enrolled in private schools is much lower (11%) because public schools are significantly larger facilities; the school size issue will be discussed in greater detail later in this report.

Private schools fall into one of three categories:

Catholic, other religious, or non-sectarian. The majority of private schools are in the other religious category, with private conservative Christian academies showing the greatest growth as a group since 1980. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data from the 1993-94 school year, Catholic schools make up about one third of all private schools (32%). Non-sectarian schools make up slightly more than 21% of all non-public schools, while the other religious schools category accounts for the remaining 47% (with conservative Christian schools, at about 9%, making up the largest group within this category). Enrollment has increased since the mid 1980s for private schools. (See Table 2 for a breakdown of the categories of private schools.)

Aside from the growth in the number of private conservative Christian schools, there has been growth in the numbers of new private schools for other categories as well. Although the conservative Christian schools have shown the greatest rate of growth

(nearly 32% since 1980), non-sectarian schools grew at a rate of just over 11%. The number of Catholic schools grew only at a rate of slightly more than 2% between 1980 and 1990.

*... Most private schools are elementary schools that serve children in grades K - 8.*

In looking more closely at the universe of private schools, it is also essential to note that most private schools are elementary schools that serve children in grades K - 8 (Cookson, 1997). This is important when considering expenditure factors — one of the commonly cited strengths of private schools is that they are more cost effective than public schools. As will be discussed later in this report, both public and

*Both public and private elementary education is less expensive than public or private secondary education.*

private *elementary* education is less expensive than public or private *secondary* education. (This point will be discussed in a later section focusing on expenditures and staffing patterns; see p. 9).

### STUDENTS

As of fall 1993, slightly more than 4.8 million students in the U.S. were enrolled in private schools, accounting for about 11% of the total population of elementary and secondary school students. Just over half (51%) of this 4.8 million are enrolled in Catholic schools (see Table 2 for additional enrollment figures, as well as Table 1 for state level enrollment figures). Enrollment is highest at the elementary school level (which is consistent with the point made above that most private schools serve students in grades K - 8).

In terms of racial composition, are the students who

attend private school similar to those who attend public school? The answer is no. Students attending private schools in the U.S. are predominantly white (78%), and the percentages of minority students attending private schools (with the exception of Asian/Pacific Islanders) is lower than that found in public schools. (See Table 3 for racial/ethnic breakdowns of public and private school students.) In fact, 16% of all private schools have *no* minority students (Private School Universe Survey, 1993-94). Therefore, one fundamental difference between

*Therefore, one fundamental difference between public and private schools can be seen in the populations served: At least in terms of racial makeup, the public schools in our nation are serving a more diverse population.*

public and private schools can be seen in the populations served: At least in terms of racial makeup, the public schools in our nation are serving a more diverse population. Additionally, as can also be seen in Table 3, private schools are also far less likely to serve limited English proficient students. In fact, as will be discussed later in this report, the general public believes that public schools do a much better job of dealing with diversity than do private schools.

Private schools are also attended by children from wealthy families. Although many private schools do offer scholarships, and many lower income families do sacrifice to send their children to a private school, the fact remains that private school students are from wealthier families. For example, a recent Education Week story regarding research conducted by Catholic University states that “over the past 20 years, the typical Catholic secondary school student in the United States has...become more likely to be financially well-off” (June 4, 1997, page 8).

Similarly, 1991 data from the Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census shows that over 43% of those attending private elementary schools, and over 49% of those attending private secondary



schools, come from high income families (defined as the top 20% of all family incomes). In contrast, only 4.7% of those attending private elementary schools and 4.3% of those attending private secondary schools are from low income families (defined as the bottom 20% of all family incomes). In other words, wealthy families are *overrepresented* in private schools. As will be seen in upcoming sections of this report, family income is a key variable that will influence comparisons between private schools and public education as a whole.

Considering the populations served by public and private schools, it is critical to note one additional essential issue: *Private schools have the ability to select — and retain — their students*, and they do so in a variety of ways. Public schools, by definition, do not.

In fact, many private schools require potential students to pass an entrance exam. Just under 25% of all private elementary schools and more than 36% of all private secondary schools rely on an admissions exam, while an additional 18% of elementary and 29% of secondary schools use some sort of standardized test as part of their admissions process, according to NCES. Still others rely upon an interview, let-

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ters of recommendation, and the child's previous academic record to screen students. Finally, some private schools link continued attendance to

parental involvement, maintaining good grades, or adherence to disciplinary codes — which public schools are prohibited from doing.

Urban students are also overrepresented among private school attendees. In urban areas, according to an analysis of urban schools conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, 17% of all students attend private schools (this compares to 13% of suburban students and 7% of rural students).

Analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) indicate that public school students tend to remain in the public school system for their entire educational careers — 98% of all public school 8th graders moved on to a public high school. In contrast, of the 8th graders attending private Catholic schools, more than one third transferred to a public high school. Thomas J. Kane (1996) reports that it is the “more academically inclined” (p. 209) Catholic elementary school students that continue on to a Catholic high school.

## KEY POINTS

- Public schools serve a more diverse population of students.
- Private schools tend to serve students from higher income families.
- Private schools also select their students.

In summary, public schools must serve *all* children. Private schools serve the children they *choose* to serve.

# CHARACTERISTICS OF PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE SCHOOLS

We have seen that public and private schools serve differing populations of students. In what other ways are public and private schools different? Hannaway, for example, (1991, p. 466) argues that the objectives of public and private schools are different, in that private schools focus on the interests of the individual student, while public schools “serve the wider interests of society.” In this section, we will review some of the structural differences between public and private schools.

## CURRICULUM OFFERINGS

In comparing private and public secondary schools, NCES data from the Schools and Staffing Survey found that there are few differences between the two in terms of general graduation requirements.

*Private schools at the secondary level typically have only an academic or college preparatory program, while public schools offer a range of curricular options (vocational, general, and academic programs) to their students.*

Private schools do require slightly more math (2.8 years) and science (2.5 years) courses, however, than do public schools (2.4 math, 2.1 science). One additional exception is that private schools are more likely to require an additional year of a foreign language (1.2 years at private schools vs. 0.3 at public schools). There are no differences in English, computer science, or social studies requirements.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that according to data gathered by NCES for the Private School Universe Survey (1993-94), private schools at the secondary level typically have only an academic or college preparatory program, while public

schools offer a range of curricular options (vocational, general, and academic programs) to their students.

In a NCES survey of public and private school teachers, respondents were asked to rate how much influence they had over various aspects of the school system. Private school teachers gave higher ratings than public school teachers to their own influence over curriculum offerings (4.3 vs. 3.6 ratings on a 6 point scale). Similar findings were found in surveys of high school principals; private school principals reported having more control over curriculum (86%) than did public school principals (57%). Principals at conservative Christian schools reported that their school boards are also highly influential in making curricular decisions.

Researcher Adam Gamoran (1996) compared course-taking patterns for students attending public magnet schools, private secular schools, or Catholic schools. He found that although all three types of schools were similar in terms of course-taking in English, public magnet schools lagged behind both types of private schools in mathematics course taking. Science course taking was highest in secular private schools. His findings are consistent with those of NCES, as described above.

Top notch public schools, however, are more likely to offer a range of Advanced Placement (AP) course offerings, according to a widely cited article compar-

*All public high schools are more likely to offer a range of AP classes: AP programs are in place at nearly 70% of all public high schools.*

ing public and private schools conducted by Money magazine. (Top notch schools are defined as being the top 10% of all public schools, those that are as “outstanding academically” as the nation’s elite private schools).

In fact, data from the College Board, which oversees the AP program, show that all public high schools are more likely to offer a range of AP classes: AP programs are in place at nearly 70% of all public high schools.

The author also points out that public schools also offer a more diverse assortment of extracurricular activities such as arts and sports programs. This is important because survey data from the 1996 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1996) show that when asked whether they would prefer that their child get A grades versus receiving average grades while being active in a range of extracurricular activities, 60% of those surveyed chose the latter. Only 28% of this national sample said they preferred that their child get A grades. Clearly, then, here public schools have an advantage over private schools – and it is an advantage that the public supports.

In short, according to author Dennis Topolnicki, “you get the best value for your education dollars at a top public school” (p. 110). (For further information about this article, see the Reference List at the end of this report.)

### CLASS SIZE

Data from the NCES Schools and Staffing Survey show that private school teachers report having fewer students (average class size = 19.6) than do public school teachers (average class size = 23.2). Research does indicate that small class size produces an improvement in student learning. Public school systems have, however, in recent years made strides in decreasing class sizes by hiring additional teaching staff. California, for example, is making a

statewide effort to reduce class size to 20 students per classroom.

What about the size of the school as a whole? Private schools are, on average, quite a bit smaller than public schools (see Figure 1). Does this lead to differing student outcomes? One educational researcher, George Conway (1994), argues that small school size positively influences the overall culture of the school, which in turn could lead to a variety of positive outcomes for students attending private schools. Other research (Finn & Voelkl, 1993) supports the conclusion that smaller school size is positively associated with a number of school engagement variables (such as active participation in class, keeping up with school work, involvement in clubs or community activities, and so on) for minority children attending public schools.

### GOVERNANCE

Private school principals believe that they have more control over hiring policies (93%) than do public school principals (84%). This belief was particularly strong for conservative Christian schools and other, non-Catholic schools.

According to NCES, “decisions about organization policy related to the educational functioning of the school tend to be more influenced by on-site personnel in private schools than in public schools.” In

*Public school boards believe they have more overall influence over aspects of school such as curriculum, hiring of teachers, and so on than do Catholic school boards.*

other words, in public schools, decisions are less likely to be made at the local school level than at the district level, as compared to private schools. However, the trend in public education is toward increased site level decisionmaking. In fact, Hannaway (1991)

found that public school boards believe they have more overall influence over aspects of school such as curriculum, hiring of teachers, and so on than do Catholic school boards.

### EXPENDITURES AND STAFFING PATTERNS

Public schools in the U.S. are often wrongly criticized for the amount of money spent on administration. However, NCES data from the 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey indicate that public secondary schools actually have fewer administrative staff than private secondary schools (the ratio for public schools is 1.7 administrative staff per 10 teachers, while the ratio for private schools is 3.0). In fact, conservative Christian schools (3.0 per 10 teachers)

*... Public secondary schools actually have fewer administrative staff than private secondary schools. . . . In fact, conservative Christian schools and unaffiliated religious schools have the highest ratio of administrators to teachers.*

and unaffiliated religious schools (4.0 per 10 teachers) have the highest ratio of administrators to teachers. (Teacher staffing patterns will be discussed in a separate section later in this report.) Further, public schools are more likely to offer student services that may be classified as administration (such as school nurses, special education aides, or bus drivers), but are not as commonplace in private schools.

One obvious difference between public and private schools is their sources of revenue. Public schools in the U.S. rely upon a combination of federal, state and local funds to operate. Private schools, on the other hand, are supported by a combination of tuition payments, organizational support, and some local, state and federal support. The highest tuition is charged by military schools and certain non-Catholic secondary schools. The lowest tuition, on the other hand, is charged by Catholic and conserv-

ative Christian schools. (See Table 4 for more information.) Tuition rates have risen at a rate higher than that of the rise in median family income, according to NCES, making it difficult for some parents to keep up with the often high expenses of private education.

Because private schools have substantial non-tuition based revenue sources, differences between private school tuition and public school expenditure rates are inaccurate comparisons (in addition to the obvious basic differences in the nature of the school, the student body, staffing patterns, and so on).

For many religious private schools, much of the cost associated with financial administration, building maintenance, and so on is typically paid by the sponsoring church via church offerings, endowment income, private fundraising efforts, and so on (Hoxby, 1996). This can end up being a quite large financial boost for a private school.

It is difficult to ascertain just how much public support in terms of actual tax dollars is received by private schools, and there is most likely a great deal of variability from state to state. *However, it is clear that public funds do go to support private schools in the U.S.* For example, federal funds must be used to educate special education students who attend private

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schools. Similarly, private school students who are eligible for Title I must be served, thereby transferring funds away from the local public school. Transportation costs (about 10% of educational expenditures) for private school students are directly absorbed by public school systems in some states (for example, Maryland).

According to a recent Washington Post article, 28 states provide transportation for private school students, and 17 states (for example, Pennsylvania), assist with private school textbook costs.

Other state funding sources also go to support private schools in some states. In Ohio, for example, all private schools chartered by the state board of education are eligible to participate in state funded programs. These programs include funds used by private schools to purchase textbooks, computer software, science equipment, and so on. According to the American Education Finance Association, "in 1993-94, 226,629 nonpublic school pupils were served" (p. 506) in Ohio.

Finally, the point was made earlier in this report that the vast majority of private schools serve students in the elementary grades (K - 8). This point is essential because elementary schools are much less costly to operate than are high schools. For example, the salary difference between private elementary and private secondary teachers is quite pronounced (\$19,977 vs. \$24,896). Secondary schools also have a much wider range of programs that may include dropout prevention, school-to-work training, after school athletics, and so on. Finally, secondary school facilities are far more costly to maintain (science labs, athletic facilities, etc.).

In conclusion, then, one of the commonly cited strengths of private schools – that they are more cost

effective – is substantially due to basic differences between how public and private schools are funded and supported, and the kinds of students (e.g., those needing bilingual and special education services; K-8 students vs. all students) that are enrolled – and how their special needs are being met.

### SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- In the area of curriculum offerings, public and private schools are really not all that different.
- In comparing public school and private school costs, all private school sources must be considered – not just tuition. In addition to tuition, private schools frequently receive funding or services from other institutions, and in many instances, the state government.
- Private schools are less costly to operate in part because they educate less costly students (e.g., fewer special education students; more students in grades K-8), and do not offer the diversity of programs and services that are the tradition and expectation of a public school system. They typically serve younger students, students who are in an academic track, and they serve few at-risk children.



# STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

## ACHIEVEMENT TEST SCORES

One of the arguments heard in support of private schools is that students who attend these schools perform better on measures of academic achievement. Is this true?

One of the classic pieces of evidence that is mentioned in support of the superiority of private schools is a 1982 study by James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore. According to their analysis, private school 10th graders performed at much higher levels than public school 10th graders.

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Coleman's study, however, has been criticized for a number of reasons. In general, critics point out that student achievement is heavily affected by variables such as family income, the demographics of the student body at a school, and the kinds of academic course offerings. Coleman's research did not factor out those key variables that distinguish private and public education students – thereby not making true comparisons of the schools they attend. *All things being equal, a good school is a good school whether it is public or private.*

Patrick Welsh, a public school teacher, reports that when looking at results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, there is no difference in the performance of public and private school students when family income is taken into account. What *does* appear to affect scores

on achievement tests is “opportunity to learn,” or having access to advanced courses in the subject matter being tested. Therefore, when private school students do score higher on achievement tests such as NAEP, it is because they have a greater opportunity to take advanced courses (see Berliner & Biddle, 1995, for a more detailed discussion of this point).

Likewise, numerous studies conducted over the past twenty years show that children attending Catholic schools do, on the whole, perform better on standardized tests (see, for example, Hanus & Cookson, 1996). Again, however, Hanus & Cookson point out that private school students are more likely to select college prep courses (78%) than are public school students (52%) – and it is this factor that leads to the higher test scores.

A number of studies also indicate that minority students attending Catholic schools also appear to perform better on tests of both verbal and math achievement, particularly those in urban areas. Education researcher James Coleman found that the achievement gap between white and minority students in Catholic schools is significantly smaller than the gap found in public schools. Additionally, this gap increases with the age of the student (3.7 points for sophomores at Catholic schools, 5.1 for public schools; 3.2 points for Catholic seniors, 5.8 for public school seniors). His explanation for this difference is that private schools are able to create high academic expectations for children, while at the same time provide a safer environment for instruction.

An alternative explanation is that there are additional factors, such as parental motivation and involvement, that distinguish public and private school minority students. This explanation is supported by research demonstrating that minority parents participating in voucher programs are more involved in

*The point is, where private schools do excel, the strategy should be to replicate successful practices in public schools – rather than assume that public schools cannot do it.*

their children's schools than similar parents not participating in a voucher program, and have higher educational aspirations for their children (information obtained from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Study Description Web Site, 1996).

One recent study, described earlier in this report, compared private, public magnet, and Catholic high school students on proficiency in math, social studies, reading and science skills (Gamoran, 1996). The author found that although Catholic schools do have a positive impact on math skills, the magnet school students had higher social studies, reading and science skills. Gamoran uses these data to argue against the establishment of private school choice programs. At the same time, his data argue that there should be room for creative new types of public school options. The point is, where private schools do excel, the strategy should be to replicate successful practices in public schools – rather than assume that public schools cannot do it.

Other data cited by Bryk (1993) from the Department of Education's High School and Beyond study indicate that parents of Catholic school students have higher average levels of education (15 years) as compared to public school parents (14 years), with averages being based on the higher education level of the two parents. Children attending Catholic schools are far less likely to come from a single parent family (16%, compared to 28% of public school children). Both of these factors affect a child's academic achievement.

Finally, Witte (1996) emphasizes that "private school enrollment is related to higher family socioeconomic status...and greater educational resources in the

home" (p. 157). This issue of educational resources in the home is also essential to the differential results on tests of student achievement. For example, data from the Milwaukee Choice Program indicate that children enrolled in private schools had parents who had higher levels of educational expectations for their children than did public school parents at the same income level. These variables undoubtedly also affect overall levels of student achievement. Clearly, too, the public schools face a challenge in duplicating these factors in a public school setting.

### ACT EXAM SCORES

A 1996 doctoral dissertation conducted by Thomas A. Sunderbruch at the University of Iowa compared ACT college entrance exam scores for public and Catholic school students in the state of Iowa who were matched on a range of non-school based individual variables (gender, family income, and so on). In Iowa, 64% of the state's graduating seniors take the ACT exam. He found that when controlling for these individual variables, there were no significant differences in scores on the ACT between the public and Catholic school students. This study provides important further evidence that private schools are not necessarily "better" than public schools.

(We need to keep in mind, however, that these results may not generalize to other states. For example, Iowa is not a typical state in that a much larger percentage of their high school graduates go on to college than the national average.)

### DROPOUT RATES

Catholic schools lead all other schools in terms of low school dropout rates (3.4%), as compared to either public schools (14%) or other private schools (12%). Even when controlling for family income and other variables, the Catholic schools appear to do a better job of keeping kids in school until grad-

*Undoubtedly the smaller size of the Catholic schools overall contributes to their success rates in discouraging dropping out, as does their ability to screen out or reject students who might be more likely to drop out in the first place.*

uation. Undoubtedly the smaller size of the Catholic schools overall contributes to their success rates in discouraging dropping out, as does their ability to screen out or reject students who might be more likely to drop out in the first place. Additionally, for all of the reasons outlined in the section above on student achievement (higher parental expectations and involvement, the unlikelihood that lower achieving or non-college bound students will attend Catholic high schools, and so on), it is not surprising that Catholic schools have lower dropout rates than do public schools.

## EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

The NELS data offer the opportunity to look more closely at other differences between public and private school students. One of the questions asked of the 8th graders was about their expectation as to the highest educational degree they would obtain. Here, the differences are striking. Eighth graders attending Catholic (59%) or other private schools (68%) were far more likely to expect to obtain a graduate degree than those students attending public high schools (34%). However, once again, this analysis does not control for family income or other family background variables that influence educational aspirations, such as parental level of education.

## COLLEGE ATTENDANCE

NELS data indicate that public school graduates are somewhat less likely to attend a postsecondary institution (a public or private four-year institution, public two-year institution, or a trade/technical program) full time (85%) than are either Catholic (91%) or other private school (89%) graduates. Additionally, in general Catholic high schools send more students to college than do public schools. This is particularly true when considering enrollment figures for four year institutions; Catholic school graduates are about twice as likely to attend a four year school as are public school graduates. Again, however, it is important to note that these figures do not control for family income and the other student background variables already discussed in this report that might help explain the differential college enrollment rates.

## KEY POINTS

- Use care when comparing public and private school students in terms of test scores. Many studies do not control for family background variables, such as family income, when making these comparisons.
- In fact, family income and other family background variables such as parents' level of education are strongly linked to student achievement.
- The size of a school may help explain differences in dropout rates, educational expectations, and college attendance rates.

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# TEACHERS & PRINCIPALS

According to the NCES Schools and Staffing Survey, there are no differences between public and private school teachers in terms of the number of hours they work each week, either during the actual school week (33 hours for public school teachers, 34 hours for private school teachers) or in their spare time (9 hours for both public and private school teachers).

## TEACHER SALARIES

As has been well documented in previous research and media reports, public school teachers make a great deal more money than private school teachers (see Table 5). These differences hold true for both new and experienced teachers. Public schools also offer better benefits to their teaching staff (as measured by health insurance and pension plan contributions). See Table 6 for more information.

*Public school teachers make a great deal more money than private school teachers. . . Public schools also offer better benefits to their teaching staff.*

Why pay attention to salary differences? Clearly, higher salaries are important in attracting — and keeping — high quality teachers. Additionally, high salaries are also linked to higher levels of education and experience (see following section for a discussion of levels of education).

## LEVEL OF EDUCATION

One clear difference between the staffs of public and private schools is in their levels of education. Public secondary school principals, for example, are

*Public secondary school principals are far more likely to have an advanced graduate degree than their private school counterparts.*

far more likely to have an advanced graduate degree than their private school counterparts. To quote from the NCES report, *How Different? How Similar?*, “almost one-third of private school principals have a bachelors degree or less, while few public school principals have less than a graduate degree” (p. 11). However, Catholic secondary school principals are more likely to have graduate degrees than other private secondary school principals (Catholic secondary school principals are about equal to public secondary school principals in percentages who have obtained graduate degrees).

Similar results are found when comparing teaching staffs. Private school teachers are less likely to be certified, and are less likely to have obtained a graduate degree. Private school teachers, as a group, are also less experienced than public school teachers. Private school teachers are also more likely to leave the teaching profession than are public school teachers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1988-89, just over 5% of public school teachers left the profession, while nearly 12% of private school teachers left. Additionally, those private school teachers who left the profession were far more likely to find work outside of education (26%

*Private school teachers are less likely to be certified, and are less likely to have obtained a graduate degree. Private school teachers, as a group, are also less experienced than public school teachers. Private school teachers are also more likely to leave the teaching profession than are public school teachers.*

for elementary, 50% for secondary) than were public school teachers (8% for elementary, 27% for secondary). Public school teachers, in contrast, were more likely to leave due to retirement (37% for elementary, 22% for secondary) than were private school teachers (6% elementary, 5% secondary).

In short, the professional staff at public schools is better educated, more experienced, and better paid than at private schools. Because previous research has demonstrated that outstanding teachers have 16-20 years of experience and an education level equal to or beyond the masters degree level (Shanoski & Hranitz, 1991), we can conclude that public school teachers are likely to be more effective teachers.

### WHERE DO TEACHERS SEND THEIR OWN CHILDREN TO SCHOOL?

One of the most pervasive myths about the presumed superiority of private schools concerns where public school teachers send their own children to school. According to this myth, public school teachers are more likely to send their own children to private schools.

Is it true? No, according to Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers (see Nelson, 1996). Based on data collected by Denis Doyle, he wrote that public school teachers choose public schools far more often than other families in the same income bracket. For families in the \$30,000 - \$70,000 income bracket, 12% of public school teachers vs. 15% of all families have a child in a private school. For families above the \$70,000 figure, 15% of public school teachers send a child to private school, compared to a figure of 24% for all families at this income level.

More generally, public school teachers also choose private schools less often than the general public (12% vs. 13%). Additionally, of those teachers who do send a child to private school, one third of them also have a child attending a public school. According to Shanker, "that means that 92% of all public school teacher families send some or all of their children to public schools, compared with 90% of the public." Polling data from Public Agenda indicate that 66% of public school teachers view public schools as being superior to private schools.

Where do private school teachers send their children to school? Again according to Mr. Shanker, 3/4 of all private school teachers send at least one of their children to public schools; 2/3 of all private school teachers send all of their children to public school.

In conclusion, then, there is no evidence to support the myth that teachers are more likely to send the children in their own families to private schools.

### KEY POINTS

- Public school teachers and principals exceed private school teachers and principals in terms of salaries, benefits, level of experience, and level of education. In other words, public school teachers are more academically qualified and better credentialed than their private school counterparts, and accordingly receive more compensation.
- Public school teachers, contrary to the myth, are very likely to send their children to a public school.

## POLLING DATA

What does the general public think about public vs. private schools? Survey data from a 1995 study conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation (Johnson, 1995) indicate that the public does think that private schools have higher academic standards (53% vs. 24% for public schools), are safer (51% vs. 20%), and are more likely to promote "honesty and responsibility" (54% vs. 17%). On the other hand, the general public saw public schools as far more likely to provide a better education to special needs children (51% vs. 23% for private schools), and to provide kids with experiences with people from diverse backgrounds (53% vs. 22%). Additionally, only 1/3 of all respondents believe that private school teachers are better than public school teachers.

The same questions were asked of parents in the Public Agenda survey. Although the margins were narrower than those found with the general public, parents nonetheless also believe that private schools

*The general public saw public schools as far more likely to provide a better education to special needs children, and to provide kids with experiences with people from diverse backgrounds.*

are more likely to promote honesty and responsibility (46% vs. 19%), and to provide a safer environment for learning (same percentages). In greater numbers, parents also thought that public schools do a better job of educating special needs kids (49% vs. 22%) and teaching children how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds (54% vs. 19%).

Clearly, then, although the public schools are seen as doing some things well, there are other places where private schools are seen as superior by parents and the general public.

# SUMMARY

- 11% of all school age children attend private schools. The population of private school students is less diverse than that in public schools — in part because private schools have the ability to accept and reject any students they choose, while public schools cannot.
- Private and public schools have highly similar graduation requirements, although teachers at private schools do report believing that they have more influence over curriculum offerings than teachers at public schools. Public schools, however, offer a wider range of Advanced Placement classes to their students, as well as a broader range of vocational education/work preparation classes.
- The data regarding class sizes at public and private schools are conflicting. However, private schools as a whole are smaller than public schools, which may positively affect student outcomes.
- Public and private schools have very different sources of revenue, with private schools charging tuition and receiving institutional support (for example, from the parent church). Additionally, private schools also receive public funds for transportation costs, special education costs, and so on. That makes tuition alone a misleading indicator of private school expenditures.
- Public school teachers earn higher salaries and are more likely to have an advanced degree than teachers at private schools, making them more effective teachers.
- Public school teachers are also more likely to send one or more of their own children (92%) to a public school than to a private school. So are private school teachers (75%).
- The issue of whether private school students perform better on achievement tests is unclear. Some studies indicate that there are no differences between public and private school students. Others show that private schools produce higher test scores. However, this is related to the fact that private school students come from more advantaged backgrounds (higher family income, higher levels of parent education, and so on).
- There are other academic indicators where private schools do appear to be ahead of public schools, such as dropout rates and college attendance rates. Private schools, however, are selective by nature – and this helps explain the differences.
- Polling data indicate that the general public believes that private schools are stronger on academics, but that public schools are more diverse learning environments that provide better options to special needs children. Parents share the same views on both points, although not as strongly as those held by the general public.
- In looking at the data that compare public and private schools, there are two variables that seem to account for the presumed superiority of private schools over public schools. These two variables, family income and school size, are what matter — not whether a school is public or private. In fact, we believe that where we do see benefits to private education, they can — and should — be replicated in our nation’s public schools.

# HOW YOU CAN USE THIS INFORMATION

- 1. Get to know the students, families and staff associated with the private schools in your community.** Strong relations with private schools may help if instances of “public school bashing” occur — private schools can be important allies.
- 2. Discover the potential sources of funding available in your community and state for private schools.** This is an important qualifier when someone suggests that private schools are better or more cost effective than the public schools.
- 3. Look at socioeconomic and demographic trends in your community.** Who attends private schools? Who does not? How is this population different from that attending the public schools? Even if your community attempts to initiate a voucher plan, would such a voucher be adequate to meet the costs of attending a private school in your area? Make sure to get the word out!
- 4. Show how the public schools are an integral part of the community.** Public school buildings are typically used by other community groups, and public school students (like private school students) are often involved with community service projects. The role of public schools, then, is quite different than that of private schools, in that public schools serve as focal points for the community.
- 5. Focus on the special programs that are a part of your public school system, and highlight their successes.** Does your high school have an outstanding vocational education program? Is your district doing innovative things to help low income students? What about extracurricular and social service programs in your schools? Make sure the public knows about these programs, as they are not likely to exist at private schools.
- 6. Don’t allow debates about the merits of private schools to build support for voucher programs.** One of the arguments given in support of voucher plans is that the education a child receives at a private school is better than that received at a public school. Know what the data say about this issue – be able to profile the diversity of needs among your student body.
- 7. Look at the laws regulating public schools and private schools in your state.** Both the Kansas Association of School Boards and the Ohio School Boards Association have done this (see reference list for more information) in order to highlight the fact that there are dramatic differences in how states fund and regulate the two types of schools.
- 8. Change the terms of the debate.** The fundamental conflict should not be public vs. private schools — it should be good vs. bad schools. Reframe the debate in your community.

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**TABLE I**  
**PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS**  
**BY STATE, FALL 1993**

State	Public School Enrollment	Private School Enrollment	Number of Public Schools	Number of Private Schools
United States	43,464,916	4,836,442	85,393	26,093
Alabama	734,288	72,630	1,294	410
Alaska	125,94	85,884	496	66
Arizona	709,453	41,957	1,133	263
Arkansas	444,271	29,011	1,070	179
California	5,327,231	569,062	7,734	3,145
Colorado	625,062	53,732	1,419	391
Connecticut	496,298	70,198	1,000	360
Delaware	105,547	22,308	177	90
District of Columbia	80,678	15,854	173	80
Florida	2,040,763	233,743	2,615	1,262
Georgia	1,235,304	97,726	1,755	580
Hawaii	180,410	30,537	241	121
Idaho	236,774	8,019	603	78
Illinois	1,893,078	293,038	4,195	1,347
Indiana	965,633	91,986	1,912	619
Iowa	498,519	50,602	1,556	290
Kansas	457,614	37,045	1,482	206
Kentucky	655,265	58,058	1,372	296
Louisiana	800,560	145,512	1,459	458
Maine	216,995	16,999	706	140
Maryland	772,638	112,481	1,271	522
Massachusetts	877,726	126,744	1,791	648
Michigan	1,599,377	187,741	3,356	1,075
Minnesota	810,233	86,051	2,083	542
Mississippi	505,907	58,655	1,009	221
Missouri	866,378	117,466	2,217	719
Montana	163,009	9,111	900	82
Nebraska	285,097	39,564	1,427	223
Nevada	235,800	10,723	407	58



**TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)**  
**PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS**  
**BY STATE, FALL 1993**

State	Public School Enrollment	Private School Enrollment	Number of Public Schools	Number of Private Schools
New Hampshire	185,360	18,386	461	130
New Jersey	1,151,307	195,921	2,287	878
New Mexico	322,292	20,007	709	166
New York	2,733,813	473,119	4,082	1,985
North Carolina	1,133,231	69,000	1,958	463
North Dakota	119,127	7,577	640	59
Ohio	1,807,319	246,805	3,818	1,016
Oklahoma	604,076	25,837	1,820	190
Oregon	516,611	34,092	1,219	250
Pennsylvania	1,744,082	342,298	3,193	1,846
Rhode Island	145,676	23,153	311	112
South Carolina	643,696	51,600	1,094	297
South Dakota	142,825	9,575	777	96
Tennessee	866,557	84,538	1,523	496
Texas	3,608,262	211,337	6,324	1,353
Utah	471,365	9,793	718	66
Vermont	102,755	9,107	400	85
Virginia	1,045,471	84,438	1,828	515
Washington	915,952	70,205	2,030	486
West Virginia	314,383	13,539	907	145
Wisconsin	844,001	141,762	2,032	954
Wyoming	100,899	1,919	409	35
Am. Samoa	14,484		31	
Guam	30,920		35	
N. Marianas	8,188		25	
Puerto Rico	631,460		1,584	
Virgin Islands	22,752		32	

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Note: Private school data not available for territories.

TABLE 2  
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS  
BY RELIGIOUS NON-SECTARIAN CATEGORY  
1993-94

Characteristics	Schools		Enrollment	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	26,093	100.0	4,836,442	100.0
Religious orientation				
Roman Catholic	8,331	31.9	2,488,101	51.4
Amish	405	1.6	12,100	0.3
Assembly of God	507	1.9	69,992	1.5
Baptist	1,990	7.6	271,931	5.6
Calvinist	145	0.6	40,856	0.8
Christian (unspecified)	2,416	9.3	341,305	7.1
Church of Christ	178	0.7	41,875	0.9
Church of God	123	0.5	13,190	0.3
Episcopal	349	1.3	88,079	1.8
Friends	69	0.3	14,839	0.3
Greek Orthodox	29	0.1	5,402	0.1
Islamic	71	0.3	7,514	0.2
Jewish	647	2.5	171,214	3.5
Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod	1,042	4.0	155,168	3.2
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	108	0.4	15,022	0.3
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	373	1.4	36,538	0.8
Other Lutheran	57	0.2	4,206	0.1
Mennonite	470	1.8	27,028	0.6
Methodist	106	0.4	17,420	0.4
Pentecostal	425	1.6	28,985	0.6
Presbyterian	125	0.5	26,922	0.6
Seventh-Day Adventist	1,072	4.1	67,034	1.4
Other	1,511	5.8	172,771	3.6
Non-sectarian				
Exceptional children (disabled)	713	2.7	55,203	1.1
Montessori	693	2.7	45,303	0.9
Other non-sectarian	4,136	15.9	618,255	12.8

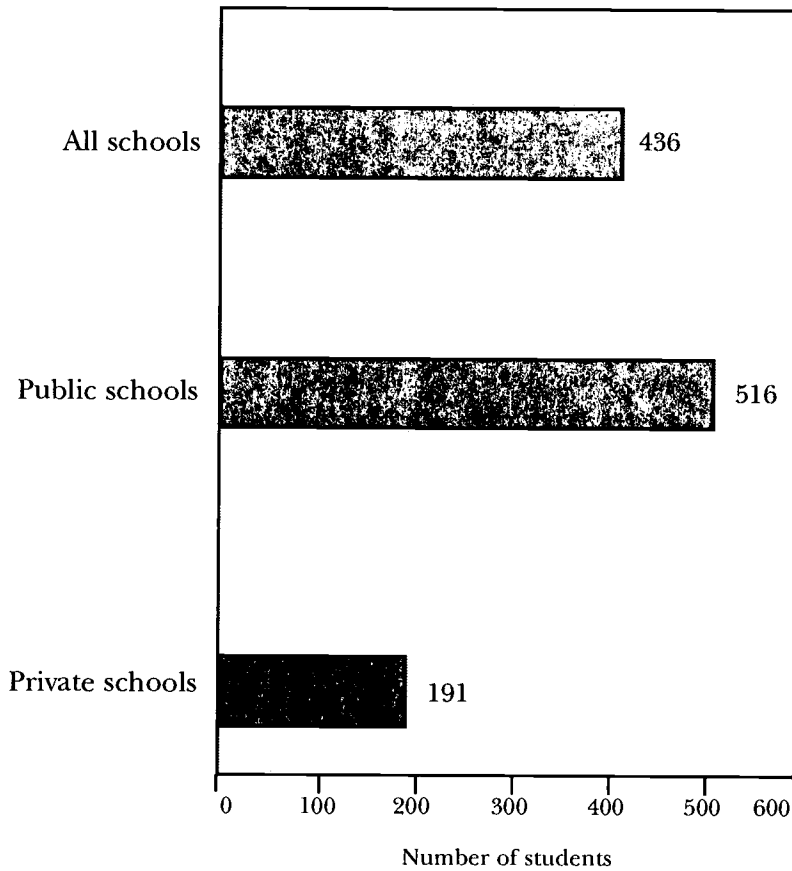
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Private School Survey, 1993-94.

**Note:** Details may not add to totals due to rounding or missing values in cells with too few sample cases.

**TABLE 3**  
**RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF**  
**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOL STUDENTS**  
**1993-1994 (%)**

	<b>Public</b>	<b>Private</b>
White	67.3	77.9
Black	16.3	9.3
Hispanic	11.9	8.0
Native American	1.1	0.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.4	4.1
<hr/>		
Limited English Proficient	5.1	1.0

FIGURE 1  
AVERAGE SIZE OF ALL SCHOOLS AND  
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS: 1993-94



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993-94 (School Questionnaire).

**TABLE 4**  
**PERCENTAGE OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS CHARGING TUITION**  
**AND AVERAGE TUITION 1990-1991, BY LEVEL AND AFFILIATION**

Category	% Charging Tuition	Average Tuition		
		Elementary	Secondary	Combined
Total Private	94.5%	\$1,780	\$4,395	\$3,524
Catholic	98.9%	\$1,243	\$2,878	n/a
Episcopal	100.0%	\$2,686	\$9,368	\$5,503
Friends	100.0%	\$4,093	n/a	\$7,811
Seventh-Day Adventist	98.9%	\$1,280	\$3,557	\$1,989
Hebrew Day	100.0%	\$3,895	\$4,730	n/a
Solomon Schechter	100.0%	\$4,419	n/a	n/a
Other Jewish	100.0%	\$4,200	\$4,681	\$3,928
Christian Schools International	100.0%	\$2,116	\$3,008	\$2,862
Association of Christian Schools International	99.9%	\$1,866	\$2,831	\$1,827
Lutheran, Missouri Synod	98.1%	\$1,824	\$2,912	n/a
Lutheran, Wisconsin Synod	94.5%	\$1,020	n/a	n/a
Evangelical Lutheran	96.9%	\$1,795	n/a	n/a
Other Lutheran	92.5%	\$1,283	n/a	n/a
Montessori	99.4%	\$3,760	n/a	\$3,710
Schools for Exceptional Children	70.7%	n/a	n/a	\$12,105
Military	100.0%	n/a	\$8,008	n/a
Other Private Schools	86.3%	\$2,034	\$7,235	\$3,094
Other Religious	93.4%	\$1,738	\$4,039	\$2,037
Conservative Christian	95.4%	\$1,797	\$2,848	\$1,707
Affiliated	98.2%	\$1,932	\$4,215	\$2,295
Unaffiliated	84.2%	\$1,326	\$4,365	\$2,625
Nonsectarian	89.0%	\$3,748	\$9,625	\$8,010
Regular	94.5%	\$3,438	\$7,891	\$5,289
Special Emphasis	93.5%	\$4,005	\$9,277	\$4,986
Special Education	66.9%	n/a	\$17,906	\$14,248

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Surveys: 1990-91.

Note: n/a = too few cases for a reliable estimate.

TABLE 5  
AVERAGE BASE SALARIES FOR FULL-TIME TEACHERS  
IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS, 1993-1994

	Public	Private
Total	\$34,153	\$21,968
Elementary	\$33,517	\$19,977
Secondary	\$34,815	\$24,896

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1993-1994.

**TABLE 6**  
**PERCENTAGE OF**  
**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOL TEACHERS**  
**WHO RECEIVED VARIOUS BENEFITS**  
**1993-1994**

	<b>Public</b>	<b>Private</b>
Medical	84%	60%
Dental	62%	36%
Group Life	58%	36%
Pension Contributions	61%	47%
[None	7%	18%]

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1993-94.

## about NSBA...

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. NSBA achieves its mission by amplifying the influence of school boards across the country in all public forums relevant to federal and national education issues, by representing the school board perspective before federal government agencies and with national organizations that affect education, and by providing vital information and services to Federation Members and school boards throughout the nation.

NSBA advocates local school boards as the ultimate expression of the unique American institution of representative governance of public school districts. NSBA supports the capacity of each school board — acting on behalf of and in close concert with the people of its community — to envision the future of education in its community, to establish a structure and environment that allow all students to reach their maximum potential, to provide accountability for the people of its community on performance in the schools, and to serve as the key community advocate for children and youth and their public schools.

Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. NSBA represents the nation's 95,000 school board members. These board members govern 15,025 local school districts that serve more than 40 million public school students — approximately 90 percent of all elementary and secondary school students in the nation. Virtually all school board members are elected; the remainder are appointed by elected officials.

NSBA policy is determined by a 150-member Delegate Assembly of local school board members from throughout the nation. The 24-member Board of Directors translates this policy into action. Programs and services are administered by the NSBA Executive Director, assisted by a professional staff. NSBA is located in metropolitan Washington, D.C.

### NSBA Programs and Services

- **National Affiliate Program** — enables school boards to work with their state association and NSBA to identify and influence federal and national trends and issues affecting public school governance.
- **Council of Urban Boards of Education** — serves the governance needs of urban school boards.
- **Large District Forum** — serves the governance needs of large but non-urban boards.
- **Rural and Small District Forum** — serves the governance needs of rural and small enrollment districts.
- **Federal Relations Network** — school board members from each Congressional district actively participate in NSBA's federal and national advocacy efforts.
- **Federal Policy Coordinators Network** — focuses on the administration of federally funded programs.
- **Award Winning Publications** — *The American School Board Journal*, *School Board News*, and special substantive reports on public school governance throughout the year.
- **Institute for the Transfer of Technology to Education and Technology Leadership Network** — advances public education through best uses of technology in the classroom and school district operations.
- **Council of School Attorneys** — focuses on school law issues and services to school board attorneys.
- **Annual Conference and Exposition** — the nation's largest policy and training conference for local education officials on national and federal issues affecting the public schools in the United States.
- **National Education Policy Network** — provides the latest policy information nationwide and a framework for public governance through written policies.
- **Training/Development and Clearinghouse Information** — for the policy leadership of state school boards associations and local school boards.



National School Boards Association  
1680 Duke Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone: 703-838-6722  
Fax: 703-683-7590

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National School Boards Association  
1680 Duke Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314-3493  
(703) 838-6722  
Fax: (703) 683-7590

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