



## Multiple Choice: How Public School Leaders in New Orleans' Saturated Market View Private School Competitors

*Huriya Jabbar*



*Dongmei M. Li*

The University of Texas at Austin  
United States

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**Abstract:** School choice policies, such as charter schools and vouchers, are in part designed to induce competition between schools. While several studies have examined the impact of private school competition on public schools, few studies have explored school leaders' perceptions of private school competitors. This study examines the extent to which public school leaders in New Orleans, which already has a robust public school choice system, perceived competition with private schools, and the characteristics that predicted competition between the two types of schools. We find that while over half of principals reported competing with private schools for students, there was a wide range of the number and percentage of possible competitors reported. Furthermore, the results suggest that school voucher policies did not play a major role in influencing why schools competed with private schools. In addition, public school leaders who did lose students to private schools through the voucher program reported that they often recouped those losses, when parents returned to public schools unsatisfied or facing additional unexpected costs.

**Keywords:** charter schools; private schools; voucher; competition; New Orleans

### **La opción múltiple: Como líderes de escuelas públicas compiten con el mercado saturado de escuelas privadas en Nuevo Orleans**

**Resumen:** La política de elegir escuelas, como escuelas *charter* y becas para ir a escuelas privadas o *vouchers*, existen para causar competencia entre escuelas. Aunque muchos estudios han examinado el impacto de la competencia de escuelas privadas en las escuelas públicas, muy pocos estudios han explorado las perspectivas de los líderes en educación sobre la competencia de escuelas privadas. Este estudio examina el alcance al cual líderes de escuelas públicas en Nuevo Orleans, cual ya tienen una gran ventaja en la elección de escuelas públicas, como ellos divisan las características entre la competencia de estos dos tipos de escuelas. Mientras la mitad de los directores de escuelas reportaron competencia entre escuelas privadas para estudiantes, encontramos un gran número de competidores reportados. Además, los resultados sugieren que las políticas de becas para escuelas privadas no influyen en la manera en la cual escuelas privadas compiten. También, los líderes de escuelas públicas que pierden estudiantes porque existen los programas de becas para escuelas privadas reportaron que con el tiempo recuperan estudiantes, después de que los padres regresan sus niños insatisfechos porque las becas no cubren todos los costos adicionales inesperados.

**Palabras-clave:** *charter schools*; escuelas privadas, becas, competencia, Nuevo Orleans

### **Múltipla escolha: Como líderes de escolas públicas veem escolas privadas como competidores em um mercado saturado de Nova Orleans**

**Resumo:** Políticas de escolha da escola, tais como escolas privilegiadas e "vouchers", estão, em parte, concebidas para induzir a concorrência entre as escolas. Embora vários estudos tenham examinado o impacto da concorrência de escola privada sobre escolas públicas, poucos estudos exploraram a percepção de líderes escolares em escolas particulares concorrentes. Este estudo examina a medida em que os líderes da escola pública em Nova Orleans, que já têm um sistema de escolha de escola pública robusto, percebeu concorrência com escolas particulares, e as características que predisseram a concorrência entre os dois tipos de escolas. Enquanto mais da metade dos diretores relataram concorrência com escolas particulares para estudantes, encontramos uma grande variedade de número e porcentagem de possíveis concorrentes. Além disso, os resultados sugerem que as políticas de "voucher" na escola não desempenham um papel importante em influenciar por que as escolas competiram com as escolas privadas. Além disso, os líderes de escolas públicas que perderam alunos para escolas privadas através do programa de "vouchers" relataram que muitas vezes recuperaram essas perdas, quando os pais retornaram às escolas públicas insatisfeitos ou que enfrentam custos inesperados e adicionais.

**Palavras-chave:** escolas privilegiadas; escolas particulares; bolsas de estudo; concorrência; Nova Orleans

## **Introduction**

School choice policies, such as charter schools and vouchers, are in part designed to induce competition between schools. Voucher programs, for example, generate competition between public and private schools when per-pupil funds follow students from a public school to a private school. School leaders are expected to respond to the loss of students and their associated funding by improving their educational programs to attract or retain those students (Howell & Peterson, 2002). Several studies have examined the impact of private school competition on public schools (e.g., Hart,

2011; Hoxby, 1994; Winters & Greene, 2011), finding small to moderate effects of competition from private schools on public school student achievement (see Belfield & Levin, 2002, for a review). However, few studies have examined how traditional public and charter schools view private school competitors, and what accounts for whether a public school is aware of and reports a private school as a competitor. To understand the conditions under which school voucher policies might generate positive outcomes through competition, policymakers and researchers need to know whether public school leaders perceive private schools as competition, and the types of private schools with whom they compete. For example, school leaders might view some private schools as competitors, but not others, based on certain school characteristics. Furthermore, charter schools, which are also subject to competition from vouchers, may perceive more competition from private schools than public schools given that they may have similar types of autonomy and flexibility. Understanding these competitive dynamics on the ground in choice-based settings sheds light on how market-driven policies actually influence school leaders' perceptions.

Few studies have explored school leaders' perceptions of private-school competitors, particularly in areas that also have extensive school choice policies. This study examines the extent to which public-school leaders in New Orleans, which already had a robust public school choice system, perceived competition with private schools, and the characteristics that predicted competition between the two schools. While charter schools were significantly expanded post-Katrina, and have grown to make up the vast majority of the public school system in New Orleans—over 90% of public-school students attend charter schools in New Orleans—the city has also long had a sizable number of families who sent their children to private and parochial schools. In 2008, the state funded a school voucher or “scholarship” program as a pilot in New Orleans, which was subsequently expanded in 2012–2013. Given the coexistence of school voucher and charter school policies in New Orleans, and the competition between all three types of schools (charter, private, and traditional public), we explore how these multiple choice policies interact to shape the perceptions of school leaders. Specifically, we ask: To what extent do charter and traditional public school leaders view private schools as competitors? What characteristics of public schools make them more or less likely to perceive competition with private schools (e.g., charter, school performance, etc.)? And what characteristics of private schools make them more or less likely to be viewed *as* competitors (e.g., accepting vouchers, student demographics)?

To answer these questions, we used multiple methods. We draw on a survey of over 90% of the public school leaders in New Orleans, asking them to rate from a list of all private schools in the city, the extent to which they competed with each school. We combined the survey data with administrative data that included basic school demographics for public and private schools, school performance data for public schools, and the number of students that exited each public school to participate in the voucher program. We also draw on interview data from over 75% of the public school leaders in New Orleans, as well as interviews with district and state leaders.

We find that while over half of the principals reported competing with private schools for students, there was a wide range of the number and percentage of possible competitors named by these school leaders. Furthermore, the results suggest that school voucher policies did not induce public schools to compete with private schools in a city with an already existing tradition of private and parochial schools. In addition, public school leaders who did lose students to private schools through the voucher program often reported that they recouped those losses, when parents returned to their schools unsatisfied or facing additional unexpected costs.

These findings have implications for research and policy. First, because little is known about how public school leaders view private school competitors, this study helps us to understand conceptually how competition sparked by school voucher policies actually influences the everyday

work of school leaders. Second, this study provides insights into how charter school leaders perceive competition with private schools, given that they are both alternative school forms, and how this compares to competition between traditional public and private schools. Finally, this study has implications for the role of school voucher policies in already saturated schooling markets, like those in many large urban cities in the US. While some policymakers and advocates push for multiple schooling options for parents, including a mix of public and private, it may be the case that in districts that already have high charter-school market shares, the introduction of voucher programs has a more limited impact on school leaders' work.

## Previous Literature

A large number of studies, in the US and abroad, examine the impact of private school competition on public school students' outcomes and have found small positive effects of competition on test scores (Arum, 1996; Belfield & Levin, 2002; Chakrabarti, 2008a, 2008b, 2013; Couch, Shughart, & Williams, 1993; Figlio & Hart, 2011; J. P. Greene & Winters, 2003; Hart, 2011; Hoxby, 1994, 2000, 2003; Sandström & Bergström, 2005; Winters & J. P. Greene, 2011), on public high school graduation rates in public schools (Dee, 1998; Filer & Munich, 2013; Hoxby, 1994), and on the percentage of students receiving diplomas (K. V. Greene & Kang, 2004).

Other studies have found null effects of private school competition on public school students, sometimes after replicating previous studies (Anderson & Serritzlew, 2007; Caldas & Bernier, 2012; Egalite, Wolf, Mills, & J. P. Greene, 2014; Figlio & Rouse, 2006; Geller, Sjoquist & Walker, 2006; J. P. Greene, 2006; Jepsen, 1999; Nannestad, 2004; Newmark, 1995; Simon & Lovrich, 1996; Smith & Meier, 1995; Usher & Kober, 2011; Wrinkle, Stewart, & Polinard, 1999). For example, Jepsen (1999) and Sander (1999) concluded that private school competition did not have a consistently positive and significant effect on graduation rates or college attendance. Similarly, Figlio and Rouse (2006) also did not find that voucher sanctions improved student performance. A study by Bowen and Trivitt (2014) found no impact of the Florida A+ Accountability Program, which included the threat of a voucher program, on public school students' math scores. Other studies have found mixed results depending on the type of statistical analyses (e.g., Thapa, 2013).

Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated negative effects of private competition on student achievement (e.g., Bowen & Trivitt, 2014; Maranto, Milliman, & Stevens, 2000; Marlow, 2010; McMillan, 1999; Smith & Meier, 1995). In Florida, Smith and Meier (1995) found that the passing rates in tests of certain subjects were lower when there was higher private school enrollment across Florida districts. Using federal data, McMillan (1999) found small negative effects of private school enrollment on public school eighth-grade scores. Re-estimating Smith and Meier's Florida data, Maranto et al. (2000) found significant negative effects in low-income districts and ambiguous impacts for high-income districts. Bowen and Trivitt's (2014) research on the Florida A+ Accountability Program, which included a voucher component, also showed a significant decrease in reading tests (and a null effect on math scores).

Competition for students, generated either from public or private schools, may be associated with outcomes other than test scores, such as neighborhood housing values (Brasington, 2000), increased teacher pay (Hensvik, 2012; Hoxby, 1994; Vedder & Hall, 2000), changes to staff qualifications (Hart, 2011), decreased teacher-student ratios (Arum, 1996), improved racial integration (Egalite et al., 2014), increased marketing (Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011; Lubienski, 2005), or instructional policy changes (Hart, 2011). Other studies have examined the impact of competition on public school expenditures with mixed findings (Belfield & Levin, 2002). Some found no effect of private schools on per-pupil spending in public schools (Hoxby, 1994; Lovell,

1978), and some found that private-school competition was associated with a reduction in non-instructional spending in New York (K. V. Greene & Kang, 2004). Others noted that private school enrollment led to small increases in public schools' per-pupil expenditures in the US (Arum, 1996; Hoxby, 2000; Schmidt, 1992), in Denmark (Andersen & Serritzlew, 2007), in the post-communist Czech Republic (Filer & Munich, 2013), and in one case, large increases in public schools' per-pupil expenditures in the US. (Goldhaber, 1999).

Despite this growing body of evidence on effects of vouchers on public schools, there is less research on how and why competition leads to various outcomes, which may help to explain some of the variation in results. The mixed findings of the effects of competition, as Maranto et al. (2000) begin to unpack, may be due to the variation in the types of public and private schools that compete with one another under a voucher scenario. In one study of the impact of private competition on public school student test scores in Florida, Hart (2011) not only found positive effects, but also concluded that the positive effects were more distinct in elementary and middle schools than in high schools and grew over time. Other studies have found that the effects of private school competition might become smaller as programs continue or end (e.g., Gray, Merrifield, & Adzima, 2014). Similarly, different types of private schools may have different competitive effects. For example, Carattini, Dills, Mulholland, and Sederberg (2012) reported that competition from Catholic schools improved public school students' test scores. Finally, there are numerous other "local conditioning factors" (Ni & Arsen, 2010) that might shape competition under voucher schemes, such as overall enrollment trends in the city or other competing choice policies, such as charter schools.

In particular, there has been less research on how schools respond to multiple choice policies. One qualitative case study compared urban schools' responses to multiple choice policies in Texas, including charter schools and choice opportunities that arose from No Child Left Behind, and found that competition did not always lead to significant or productive change in low-performing schools, and depended on school leaders' awareness, motivation, and capacity to respond to competition (Holme, Carkhum, & Rangel, 2013). In Milwaukee, Loeb et al. (2011) used surveys to examine how private-school competition played out in an environment with charter-school choice as well, focusing on the strategic actions of school leaders, who focused primarily on improving marketing efforts rather than educational programs. Other qualitative studies have found similar responses to public school competition (e.g., Hess, 2002).

Furthermore, most existing studies measure competition using objective measures, such as the percentage of students that enrolled in or transferred to private school (see Goldhaber & Eide, 2003, for a review), but studies of charter-school competition have found that school leaders' subjective views of competition are also important for understanding how competition affects schools (e.g., Jabbar, 2015a; Levacic, 2004; Loeb et al., 2011). In other words, school leaders might lose students to private schools through vouchers, but it is important to know whether they are aware of this phenomenon. In order for leaders to develop productive responses to competition, they must first be aware of competition (e.g., Holme et al., 2013). This study uses a different measure of competition—school leaders' perceived rivals—to examine competition. We use multiple methods to illustrate how public school leaders perceive private competition and what accounts for their perceptions.

## **Data and Method**

### **Policy Context**

This study was conducted in New Orleans, Louisiana, which not only has the highest charter-school market share in the country, but was also the site of Louisiana's pilot voucher

program, which began in 2008. The Recovery School District (RSD) was created in 2003, before Hurricane Katrina, which allowed the state to take over failing schools. At that time there were a handful of charter schools operating in the city. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed approximately 80% of New Orleans's public school buildings, key political leaders pursued reforms that would make charter schools the primary vehicle for rebuilding and reopening schools in New Orleans, as well as other reforms, such as heavy reliance on temporary teachers from outside the local area, who were recruited through programs like Teach For America and The New Teacher Project (Buras, 2011; Jabbar, 2015b). While the hurricane's destruction of schools created a policy window for the expansion of such reforms, they were in line with national education reform efforts to promote school choice and competition in general, and charter schools in particular. While in 2004-2005, only five out of the 127 schools in New Orleans were charter schools, in the year of the study, 65 out of the 87 schools were charters (Hassel, Brinson, Boast & Kingsland, 2012). The RSD's public goal was to charter all of its schools. While it used to operate direct-run, or traditional, public schools, including in the year of this study, today the RSD is 100% charter. However, a handful of direct-run schools are still operated by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), which also oversees a number of charter schools.

The voucher program expanded statewide in 2012, the year of this study. New Orleans has a long history of students attending private and parochial schools. In part, the desegregation of New Orleans public schools coincided with, and may have accelerated, the increasing numbers of white students attending the city's private and parochial schools (Fairclough, 2008). There is a large network of private Catholic schools, and access to these schools expanded under a statewide voucher program in 2012, which was expected to create additional competitive pressures on schools. However, the Catholic school population is in decline, and the Archdiocese has closed some schools and downsized others (Williams, 2014). The presence of a robust charter and private school market in New Orleans, with school choice policies that enable access to both types of schools (e.g., voucher programs, open-enrollment charter schools), makes it an ideal site to study how school leaders perceive competition in such "mixed markets" with multiple choice policies.

There are two voucher programs in Louisiana: the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP, also known as Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program) and Louisiana's School Choice Program For Certain Students with Exceptionalities (Egalite, 2016a; Friedman Foundation, n.d.). Both programs require private schools to obtain approval from the state in order to participate. As the state's first voucher initiative, LSP started in the city of New Orleans in 2008 as a pilot program, and enabled low-income students in under-performing public schools to enroll in participating private schools at the state's expense (Egalite, 2016b). In 2012, this program was expanded statewide, allowing about 1,000 eligible students to transfer into private schools that year (Egalite, 2016a, 2016b; Egalite & Mills, 2014). Researchers have noted that the statewide expansion created a policy shock and might have increased competitive pressure for public schools (Egalite, 2016a). Yet, as the pilot site for LSP, it is less likely that the expansion produced more competitive pressure for surrounding charter or public schools in New Orleans. Furthermore, parents must provide their own transportation for children to attend private schools in Louisiana, which may limit their access to schooling options, and thus reduce the threat of exit from public schools.

As of the 2015-16 academic year, LSP had 121 participating schools and 7,110 participating students (Friedman Foundation, n.d.). The average voucher value of \$5,856 was 56% of the public school per-student spending (Friedman Foundation, n.d.). The voucher is worth approximately 90% of the total state and local funding per student in his or her home school district (Friedman Foundation, n.d.). Average tuition at private schools participating in the voucher ranged from \$2,966 to \$8,999 (Mills, Egalite, & Wolf, 2016). To participate, schools must accept the voucher amount as

the full tuition payment and have open-enrollment admissions policies (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, & Walters, 2015; Friedman Foundation, n.d.). Students that require special educational services are eligible for additional voucher funds comparable to the federal special education funding in their home districts (Friedman Foundation, n.d.). Students are eligible if their family income is within 250% of the federal poverty line and they either attended a category “C,” “D,” “F,” or “turnaround” school, under the Louisiana School Performance Score ratings system in the previous year or are entering kindergarten (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2015; Friedman Foundation, n.d.). Oversubscribed private schools must hold lotteries (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2015) and prioritize students from category D or F public schools (Friedman Foundation, n.d.). Finally, the state requires that private schools administer state tests to voucher students in grades 3 to 8 and 10, which will determine their eligibility to enroll new students (Mills et al., 2016).

In the year of the study, 2012–2013, there were 55 private schools in New Orleans, and 24 of these schools accepted vouchers. Private schools are spatially distributed across the entire city of New Orleans, but there are fewer schools, private and public, in some areas, such as those affected most by Hurricane Katrina and the resulting flooding. While the vast majority of public schools in New Orleans are charter schools, a handful of traditional public schools operated under the Orleans Parish School Board. See Table 1 for additional characteristics of the schools in New Orleans.

Table 1  
*Characteristics of New Orleans Schools*

Characteristics	Public Schools	Qualitative Sample	Survey Sample	Private Schools
Grade level				
Elementary	16.16% (16 schools)	12.16% (9)	16.85% (15)	9.09% (5 schools)
Elementary/Middle	51.51% (50)	52.70% (39)	47.19% (42)	50.91% (28)
Middle/High	9.09% (9)	6.76% (5)	8.99% (8)	16.36% (9)
High	23.23% (23)	28.38% (21)	25.84% (23)	5.45% (3)
Elementary/Middle/High	1.01% (1)	0% (0)	1.12% (1)	18.18% (10)
Type				
Charter	80.81% (80)	83.78% (62)	80.90% (72)	--
Direct Run	19.19% (19)	16.22% (12)	19.10% (17)	--
Demographics (School)				
Black	87.3%	85.87%	86.79%	48.46%
White	6.92%	7.84%	7.66%	45.79%
Other	5.78%	6.29%	5.55%	5.75%
Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible	84.50%	81.83%	83.6%	--
Total Schools	99 schools <sup>1</sup>	74 schools	89 schools	55 schools
Total Enrollment	43,000			18,560

<sup>1</sup> Our calculation of the number of schools differs from official reports because we counted each geographic location as a separate school (e.g., a school split across two buildings or those with two different leaders for lower and upper grades were counted as two schools).

## Data Collection

We collected all data simultaneously during the 2012–2013 school year. The data collected included surveys, interviews, and administrative data available from private and public schools.

**Surveys.** To understand the structure of competition in the district, we asked school leaders to report and rate the schools they perceive as competitors from a list of all schools, public and private, that served overlapping grade levels. The computer-based questionnaire was distributed to these principals within the context of an in-person or phone interview. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Small financial incentives were added to the study in order to encourage a high response rate. This, combined with survey request follow-ups, boosted the response rate for the survey to 91%, a respectable response rate for such surveys (see Jabbar, 2015a, for more details regarding methodology.)

**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted with a randomly sampled set of 30 case schools. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted anywhere from 30–60 minutes each. While most interviews took place on site during field visits, we conducted some interviews by phone when necessary. We interviewed leaders at case schools ( $N=30$ ) once for 30–60 minutes in the fall, and almost all of them were available for shorter follow-up interviews in the spring ( $N=25$ ). We audio-recorded and had all interviews transcribed. Principals were asked about their perceptions of competition within the district, the schools they view as competitors, and their competitive behaviors. In addition to this core set of 30 schools, we conducted shorter interviews with principals at 44 other schools in New Orleans, resulting in coverage of over 75% of schools in the city. For consistency across interviews, we created protocols based on Patton's (1990) framework, using informal, open-ended, and more formulated questions. Pilot research, previous studies, and theory informed these protocols.

**Administrative data.** In addition, we drew on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics Private School Survey and obtained a list of private schools participating in the New Orleans voucher program from the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) website. Finally, we obtained data from LDOE on the number of students exiting each New Orleans public school to participate in the voucher program from 2011–2013. We also drew on publicly available data, such as the School Performance Scores (SPS) for public schools, which were determined primarily by student performance on state tests. These served as proxies for school quality because they are widely reported to parents, used for state accountability sanctions and school closings, and serve as the basis for school “letter grades” of A–F, which are highly visible to parents. Unfortunately, given limitations in data availability for private schools, we had a much richer set of variables for public schools, but not for private schools. While we could see how many students public schools lost to private schools, we could not observe which private school they attended. For private schools, we included student–teacher ratio as a proxy for school quality since achievement data for voucher students was not available in the year of the study, and private schools do not receive an SPS score.

## Data Analysis

We drew from multiple data sources to inform the analysis for this study. We simultaneously analyzed the quantitative data and explored themes and patterns in the qualitative data, iteratively going back and forth to ask further questions of the data. We then looked for areas where the two



types of data sources agreed, as well as where they disagreed, and we present each below, drawing connections between the two. In particular, we draw on the interview data to address the shortcomings of the survey data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), which had a higher response rate, but could not help us unpack why we might see the patterns observed. Throughout the findings section, we draw on both the qualitative and quantitative data to help illuminate and unpack findings including, in some cases, the limited or unexpected findings from the survey data.

**Analysis of competitive ties.** A key question was what predicted the report of a competitive tie between two schools. When predicting the formation of ties in a network, there are three elements that are of interest: attributes of the *sending* school (e.g., in this case, the public school completing the survey), attributes of the *receiving* school (e.g., in this case, the private school listed as a potential competitor), and dyadic attributes that are shared or relational (e.g., geographic distance between the public and private schools). We conducted dyad-level analyses, where the goal is to measure the existence of a tie and examine the factors associated with it (Daly, 2010), or what variables appear to explain the competitive relationships that occur between schools. Using the principal questionnaires, we analyzed the full set of dyadic ties. We used a cross-classified model (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008; Snijders & Kenny, 1999) to test hypotheses regarding these covariates and to account for the interdependence in the data. While previous studies have often used geographic variables to measure competition, we combined those measures with school leaders' perceived competitors to see when physical measures of competition correspond to their perceptions. We also examined the characteristics of schools that fell into a given principal's set of identified private-school rivals. The crossed random-effects model is able to control for dependencies related to the repetition of schools in the data.

The dependent variable was the existence of a reported competitive relationship between two schools, public and private, as reported by principals on the questionnaire. Review of the literature and analysis of the qualitative data revealed several factors that might predict the existence of a competitive relationship between two schools, including individual school characteristics (e.g., school performance for public schools, whether the private school accepts vouchers), as well as relational or dyad-level characteristics, such as distance between the two schools. A list of all included measures is in Table 2. Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for the variables of interest.

Table 2  
Measures and Definitions

Level	School Type	Category	Measures
School	Public	Principal characteristics	<i>principalfemale</i> , a binary measure of whether the respondent was female; <i>principalyears</i> , the number of years the leader had been at the school in the principalship position since the reforms began in 2005
		Districts and authorizers	OPSB, a binary measure of whether the school was in the Orleans Parish School Board, the traditional school district.
	Private	School performance	SPS, the school's performance score as given by the state of Louisiana in 2012
		Demographics	<i>netgainloss</i> , the net gain and loss of students transferring to a private school in year prior to study; <i>africanaamerican</i> , % of African American students; <i>charter</i> , whether the school is charter school; <i>count</i> , size of public schools; <i>legacyname</i> , whether the school name existed prior to Katrina; <i>extendedday</i> , the school has a longer than average day; <i>extendedyear</i> , the school has a longer than average year; <i>high</i> , whether the school serves any high school grades 9 to 12.
Dyad	Public and Private	School characteristics	<i>voucher</i> , a binary measure of whether private schools participated in voucher program in 2012-2013; <i>count</i> , total enrollment or school size; <i>africanamerican</i> , % of black students in private schools; <i>religion</i> , a binary measure of private school's religious orientation and affiliation; <i>student-teacher ratio</i> , the ratio of students to teachers in private schools; <i>annualhours</i> , annual hours of instruction in private schools; <i>high</i> , whether the school serves any high school grades 9 to 12.
		Dyad characteristics	<i>Rating</i> : public school principals' rating of competition toward private schools <i>Distance</i> : the distance, in miles, between school <i>i</i> and school <i>j</i> . <i>Grade Overlap</i> : % of grade levels offered at school <i>i</i> that were also offered by school <i>j</i> <i>Both High Schools</i> : when both the sender and receiver offered high school grades

Table 3  
*Descriptive Statistics for Dyads*

Variable				
Continuous Variables	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	Min–Max
Grade Overlap (%) b/w Public and Private	3523	91.95	17.85	10-100
Distance (miles) b/w Public and Private	3523	4.68	2.90	0.12–14.04
Private Count of Students	3523	332.09	320.18	5-1290
Private % African American	3470	48.61	38.81	0-100
Private Annual Hours of Instruction	3435	157.06	111.75	990-1638
Private Student-Teacher Ratio	3523	11.66	4.80	1.92-21.83
Public Net Gain / Loss to Voucher Program	3476	-2.31	4.96	-23-18
Public % African American	3241	86.99	20.45	9.4-100
Public School Performance Score	3070	88.21	26.81	27.3-197.6
Public Count of Students	3372	523.64	276.06	40-1709
Public Principal Years Experience	3333	2.013	2.16	0-7
Categorical variables	<i>N</i>	Value	%	Min–Max
Competitive Rating (Public-Private)	3523	0-Not a Competitor	92.53%	0–3
		1-Rated a Competitor	7.47%	
Private Accepts Voucher	3523	0-No	56.88%	0–1
		1-Yes	43.12%	
Private Religion	3523	0- nonsectarian	14.5%	0–1
		1-catholic and other religions	85.50%	
Public Principal Female	3476	0-no	35.99%	0–1
		1-yes	64.01%	
Public in OPSB	3476	0-no	78.71%	0–1
		1-yes	21.29%	
Public Charter	3476	0-no	19.16%	0–1
		1-yes	80.84%	
Public Legacy Name	3476	0-no	37%	0–1
		1-yes	63%	
Public Extended Day	3365	0-no	24.75%	0–1
		1-yes	75.25%	
Public Extended Year	3365	0-no	67.46%	0–1
		1-yes	32.54%	
Both High Schools	3476	0-no	85.33%	0–1
		1-yes	14.67%	

**School leaders' perceptions of private-school competition.** We coded the interview data in Nvivo 10, a qualitative software program, using a hybrid coding method (Miles & Huberman, 1994), where we first developed deductive codes from the literature on competition for students. For the purpose of this analysis, we began with low-inference descriptive codes, such as “perception of competition” or “mention of private schools.” We also coded for evidence of themes arising from the theoretical and empirical literature (e.g., “geographic distance,” which is thought to be key in predicting competition). Then, while coding, we created subcodes and new codes inductively (e.g., “recouping loss”). We defined boundaries between subcategories through a constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through dialogue between the data and literature, we modified and omitted deductive codes as necessary, replacing or expanding upon them. For this analysis, we created a matrix to examine school leaders' perceptions of private school competitors by school, creating categories for school characteristics (e.g., “charter”) and developing categories for the strength of competition reported in the qualitative responses. We synthesized findings across cases. Using the data matrix, we wrote memos about key patterns and themes that arose from the coding, comparing them to the findings in the survey data analysis. Through memo writing, we connected our findings and emerging themes to the previous literature to elaborate and extend our understanding of private-school competition.

### **How Public School Leaders View Private School Competitors**

Despite the high levels of competition already existing in the public-school market, with the large number of charter schools present, most public school leaders in New Orleans also viewed private schools as competitors. In our interviews, several school leaders pointed out that New Orleans parents have a strong tradition of sending children to parochial and private schools, and that public and private schools that were historically important, or where the children's parents' attended, still had a draw. Out of 88 public schools that responded to the survey regarding private school competitors, 47 (53.41%) named at least one private-school competitor, although there was a wide range of the number and percentage of possible competitors named by school leaders. On average, school leaders only reported competing with 8.4% of their potential competitors, but this ranged between naming anywhere from just 1 private-school competitor to 43 private-school competitors. Out of the 54 private schools in the city that we had data for, 24 (44%) of them accepted vouchers in 2012–2013.

Despite the expansion of the Louisiana voucher system in the year of the study, school leaders did not view private or parochial schools as rivals as often as they did other public-school competitors. According to principals, the primary reason was that vouchers did not take many students away from public schools. In fact, 21 school leaders reported in interviews that they did not compete with private schools at all, often because they did not think private schooling was a realistic option for the students they served, given tuition and unforeseen costs associated with attending those schools. One principal said that families might choose a private school if they had the funding to do so, but because the school didn't “share data with them” and was “not compared with them as far as the state,” they viewed it as an entirely separate entity and didn't view private schools as competitors. Similarly, another principal that did not view private schools as competitors said that private schools were competing amongst themselves for graduates from her charter school, when they completed eighth grade and were about to enter high school, but not competing with her school directly. In part, this was because students who ended up attending private and parochial schools did so because of the tradition of legacy rather than the voucher program: “So if your dad went to Jesuit then you're likely to go to Jesuit. If your mother went to De La Salle, you're likely to

go to De La Salle.” Another principal said, “I haven’t heard of any parent leaving us because of the voucher program.”

However, many other principals reported that private schools were competitors, but were “not a huge threat” or took only a few students—“it’s a small percentage,” one principal said. One school, for example, noted that her school lost only two children to a private school. She speculated that the “underlying costs” at private schools could be a reason. Another principal said that she had anticipated losing more students, but ended up losing “maybe 1 or 2 kids.” As she said, “The voucher program didn’t really hurt us as much as we were really nervous about.” Some schools noted that they lost students to legacy schools that historically served African American students. For example, one high school principal said that they only had one private-school competitor, which served a “primarily African-American population,” and she saw “kids switch back and forth” to and from that school. The school was also “not as expensive as other schools,” which also made it a draw for families. One elementary school leader said that she had lost a few students to private schools particularly one that was “a huge African American school and church.” She said that the year of the voucher expansion was the only year she felt competition with private schools, and she lost anywhere from 10 to 20 students that were initially enrolled.

Others perceived the competition to be asymmetric; private schools competed with them, but they did not view private schools as competitors: “I don’t look at it as me against competing with them, I think they’re competing with us now because we have raised public education to a level that’s making the middle-class person return to public schools” (Principal, Merton Elementary). Similarly, another principal said that since Katrina and associated reforms, “there are people now that I think are finally looking at public schools that never would have.” The principal did, however, say that some private schools “do a run for us,” and expressed concern that some private school contracts locked parents into tuition for several years, preventing them from leaving even if their children were accepted into a high-performing public school.

To explore what factors are associated with the existence of a competitive tie between a public school and a private school in New Orleans, we turn next to the results of the cross-classified logistic regressions (Table 4). The models progressively added more explanatory variables, beginning with a simple model that examined just grade overlap, student enrollments, and geographic variables (1); adding a host of school characteristics (2); and principal or respondent characteristics (3). Each model yielded a higher log likelihood, indicating that the additional variables created better models of the phenomenon. We focus primarily on model 3 in our discussion.

Table 4

*Crossed Random Effects Model Predicting Competitive Rating between Public and Private Schools*

	1	2	3
<b>Structural Variables</b>			
Distance (Miles)	0.90*	0.89*	0.90*
	0.04	0.04	0.04
Accept Vouchers (Receiver)	1.00	0.71	0.71
	0.35	0.33	0.33
% of Overlapping Grades	1.03**	1.03**	1.03**
	0.01	0.01	0.01
Public Gain/Loss (Sender)	0.94	0.88	0.87
	0.08	0.08	0.08

Table 4 cont'd

*Crossed Random Effects Model Predicting Competitive Rating between Public and Private Schools*

Size (Receiver)	1.00**	1.00	1.00
	0.00	0.00	0.00
Size (Sender)	1.00	1.00	1.00
	0.00	0.00	0.00
<b>School Characteristics</b>			
Public Charter (Sender)		13.78*	7.80°
		14.49	8.41
Public OPSB (Sender)		3.44	2.57
		4.24	3.11
Public Extended Day		0.42	0.70
		0.45	0.74
Public Extended Year		0.43	0.50
		0.49	0.54
Public Legacy Name		0.54	0.55
		0.59	0.60
Private Annual Hours		1.00°	1.00°
		0.00	0.00
Private Religion		0.61	0.61
		0.35	0.35
<b>Academics</b>			
SPS/School Performance in 2012	1.02	0.99	0.99
	0.02	0.02	0.02
<b>Student Population</b>			
% African Americans (sender)		0.99	1.00
		0.02	0.02
% African Americans (receiver)		1.00	1.00
		0.01	0.01
Student-Teacher Ratio (receiver)		1.11*	1.11*
		0.05	0.05
Both High Schools		3.38*	3.34*
		1.77	1.76
<b>Principal Characteristics</b>			
Principal Female (Sender)			0.58
			0.41
Principal Years of Exp. (Sender)			1.25
			0.26
Constant	0.00	4.43	5.87
	0.00	0.00	0.00
N	3069	2867	2730
log likelihood	-533.33	-478.32	-476.17

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Note: \*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05. °p < 0.10; Coefficients are odds ratios

Our results suggest that several factors explain competition between public and private schools, some of which are related to characteristics of the *sending* school (e.g., the public school reporting competition), some are related to the *receiving* school (e.g., features of the private school that is being rated), and some are related to shared characteristics (e.g., distance between the public and private school in miles).

### **Structural Factors: Geography, Grade Overlap, and Student Enrollment**

We find that distance between the two schools was predictive of competition. Specifically, for every mile increase in the distance between the public school and private school, the odds that the two schools would compete decreased by 10%. This is in line with previous literature on competition, much of which uses geographic proximity or density as a proxy for competition. One school board member at a charter school located in a more isolated neighborhood in the city noted that they competed with parochial schools in the local area, but although they were expecting some “slippage” due to vouchers, which did occur—they lost 25 to 30 students to vouchers—it was largely recouped, and the principal reported that they “actually have people returning from the Catholic schools.” Similarly, another charter school principal noted that her school was beginning to compete with neighborhood Catholic schools, and she had been “drawing back from [her] neighborhood, which is predominantly middle class.” Another charter-school leader noted losing a few students to a private school that was located “right up the street.” Therefore, where private schools were located was a factor in whether public-school principals viewed them as competitors.

For every increase in the number of grades overlapping between the two schools, the greater the odds of the public school naming the private school as a competitor. This is likely because there are more students and seats to compete over if the schools serve similar grade configurations. However, we did find differences across grade configurations, which we describe below.

Features related to the public school (the sending school) were important for predicting competitive ties. However, we did not find that the net loss or gain of students from a public school to voucher programs in the previous year predicted competition between the two schools. The reason for this finding is likely that we were unable to identify which private schools students were leaving the public school to attend, or which they were coming from. School leaders’ perceived rivals would likely be related to losing students to particular private schools, not necessarily the total number of departures. Some schools lost up to 23 students to private schools overall through the voucher program in the year prior to the study, but other schools gained up to 18 students from the private school system (students who had previously used a scholarship or voucher, but then returned to public school either mid-year or between academic years). The qualitative results reflect this movement back and forth. Several schools reported parents returned from the private schools due to unforeseen costs or a lack of focus on intervention, as illustrated in the net gain/loss figures. One principal said:

We lost a handful of kids to it, and then we’ve seen a lot of them come right back because, like, one family just came back, it’s like, they’re not keeping up, that’s your problem, and there’s not a lot of an intervention mindset.

Similarly, one school leader described how he receives more parents who say that the private school “isn’t working for our kids.” He believed that this was because parents didn’t always realize that in

private schools, “they’re teaching to one level and the majority of the time our kids are not at that level yet.” Another charter school leader said:

I had a parent receive the voucher last year, so she took her child out and she brought her child to the parochial school last year, received the voucher, and well two weeks later she was back begging us to take her child back.

Other principals reported students returning after trying out a private school using a voucher. Another school leader said that many parents came back after trying out vouchers due to unforeseen costs or because they only received a voucher for one of their children. She said, “often, I can fill the slots with another kid,” but then if they returned, she sometimes did not have spots for them. Therefore, she concluded that the voucher program negatively affected parents, not her school.

### **School Characteristics: Public and Private School Features**

We find marginally significant effects of charter status on perception of competition. If a school was a charter, its odds of competing with a private school were between seven and 13 times higher than non-charter schools. However, this was only marginally significant in one of the models. In the qualitative interviews, when school leaders were asked about whether they competed with private schools, seven out of the eight traditional public school leaders who responded to that question directly said they did not or that they ended up recouping those losses. One of the principals said she lost a “small amount” to vouchers, and lost other students primarily to charter schools. Charter school leaders more often reported competing with private schools: while 20 school leaders reported that private schools were not competitors (or if they did lose families, they returned), 16 charter school leaders reported that they did experience some competition with private schools. Many of the elite, selective-enrollment charter leaders described competing with elite private schools. One charter-school principal said: “We compete for students. There are private schools like [School A], which is an outstanding school. There’s [School B]. There’s [School C] in the Catholic school system, it’s a wonderful school.” Similarly, another selective-enrollment charter school leader said of parents choosing his school among others: “It’s in between whatever the strongest local public and whatever the strongest two or three local privates are, your parochial or private... kind of the high end of private/parochial cohort.” Non-selective charter schools also described some competition with private schools, often citing their strict discipline policies or, in the case of high schools, their tendency to offer more extracurricular activities and athletics. However, they often described the losses being relatively small.

Other school characteristics (e.g., school performance in terms of academics, extended year or day) did not appear to predict competition with private schools, even though these are important factors when parents select schools (Harris & Larsen, 2015). We anticipated, for example, that school performance would influence the degree to which schools viewed private schools as competitors (e.g., low performing schools might feel a greater threat), but this did not appear to be the case in the quantitative data. We also examined characteristics of the private schools (receiving schools) that might make them more likely to be selected/reported as competitors. For example, we explored whether a school accepting vouchers would be more likely to be viewed as a competitor, but found no statistically significant relationships, and the coefficients appear to be opposite the expected direction (e.g., schools accepting a voucher have lower odds of being reported as competitors). We did find that school size was significant and slightly positive, which suggests that public schools are more likely to view private schools that are larger as competitors, perhaps because



they have more seats available. We also, surprisingly, found a positive and statistically significant relationship between student–teacher ratio in private schools and the odds of being reported a competitor. The odds of a public school viewing a private school actually increases with a rise in student–teacher ratio. There are many aspects to school quality that are not captured in the publicly available data, but this was a surprising finding. Finally, we find that there is a small positive relationship between private schools’ annual hours and the odds of being named a competitor. This was another proxy for school quality, and we found marginally significant, very small increases in the odds of a public school naming a private school as a competitor as the annual hours of instruction increased in the private school.

## **Student Demographics**

The racial demographics of the school were not significant in the quantitative analysis. Having a larger percentage of African American students did not influence whether schools perceived greater competition with private schools, nor did the racial make-up of the private school competitor seem to matter.<sup>2</sup> Principals, however, did believe they were serving a different population. One principal said that because her student population was 98% free-and-reduced-lunch-eligible, she did not believe they would be able to afford attending a private or Catholic schools, even with a voucher: “I would say for my current students, private school is not an option.” Similarly, another principal said that her school did not compete with private schools—“Different population.” Another principal said that for some families, Catholic schools were viewed as desirable because of “discipline structures that are in place,” but he still “could count on one hand who we’ve lost.” Similarly, another charter leader noted that a couple of students did end up applying to the voucher program, but for most students (97% free-and-reduced-lunch-eligible, as he noted), “because of finance...private schools are usually not on the horizon until 9th grade when students are hopefully looking for scholarships.” Others suggested that not as many parents were eligible as anticipated. In reference to students using the voucher, one principal said:

There weren’t a ton because quite honestly a lot of kids just didn’t qualify for whatever reason or weren’t chosen. There were three students who received vouchers and took them and transferred out, which is not a lot. It was a lot less than I initially thought were going to receive them. I think that’s just because in general, a lot less people received vouchers than they thought.

Therefore, while many principals reported not competing with private schools at all, most schools that did compete with private schools did not lose many students to them as a result of the voucher program, and thus did not view them as a major threat. This could change in future years, however, since the city has adopted a common enrollment application that combines private schools accepting the voucher and public schools.

Some leaders of public high schools said that there was little competition because vouchers had just been expanded to the high-school level that year. But one of them anticipated it might be more of a concern in the future. For example, one high school principal said that he had lost only one student to the voucher program, but that it “verifies to me that there is competition out there. It’s not just the public schools situation now.” He also noted that the reason they lost students to

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<sup>2</sup> We could not include both percentage of African American and of free-and-reduced lunch eligible due to collinearity.

some of the private schools was due to athletics. Many of the private high schools offered full athletic programs, such as football or basketball. Another very high-performing high school reported *only* competing with other private schools, but did not believe the voucher policy played a role as much as the affluence of the families who chose to attend. Other leaders also noted significant competition with private schools, not as a result of the voucher policy, but due to the population they serve. The leader of a magnet school said that his school “compete[d] with private, parochial, and other public schools.” In fact, they became a magnet school to stem the loss of students to private and parochial schools. After examining a list of private schools, he said, “We’d be a competitor with most of them.” Indeed, the quantitative results support this; when both schools offered high school grades (any grade 9 to 12), the odds of the public school naming the private school as a competitor was three times higher. From the qualitative comments described earlier, however, it appears that while there was always higher competition among public and private high schools, the voucher program did little to alter that.

Some leaders also expressed concern about the lack of accountability for private schools under the voucher system, and did not view the competition as fair. One leader, mentioned above, did not view private schools as true competitors for that reason—they were not evaluated by the state in the same way. Others were frustrated by the lack of accountability. For example, one charter school leader said:

The accountability, they might have to take the LEAP test, but they don’t get the same score, they don’t get an SPS [school performance score] score like I get. That’s terrible, there’s no accountability! So in my mind, it’s funneling public dollars to private.

He believed the competition with private schools was unfair on these grounds—his school was still rated an “F” based on its SPS, even though it had made major gains, and yet private schools were not receiving the same ratings.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to understand the extent to which school leaders in a competitive school-choice setting perceive competition with private schools. New Orleans already had a large charter-school presence, and expanded a voucher program in 2012, which caused some rifts in the school choice advocacy coalitions there (DeBray, Scott, Lubienski, & Jabbar, 2014). Charter-school advocates represent a diverse set of beliefs about schooling, but many of their leaders do not believe that private schools should receive public dollars or that vouchers are the best way to improve schooling. As the principal of one charter school said, he knew that charter schools were accused of privatization, but viewed it as less extreme than privatization in the private school sector. In light of these policy conflicts, and the assumption that expanding choice through vouchers would compel public schools to compete with privates, we wanted to explore the extent to which school leaders in New Orleans even perceive private schools as competitors.

We found that over half of public-school leaders surveyed did view at least one private school as a competitor. We then examined what accounted for this competition. We found that private schools that were in closer proximity to the public school were more likely to be viewed as competitors. This was expected, given that location is a key factor for families choosing schools in New Orleans (Harris & Larsen, 2015). Indeed, this has implications for cities that enact school voucher policies. In Louisiana, for example, the voucher policy is targeted towards low-income

families attending “failing” schools. If policymakers desire to provide equal access to these schooling options for low-income families, they may need to provide free transportation or require private schools receiving vouchers to do so.

We also found that a private school accepting a voucher does not predict greater competition with that school. We would expect public schools to view schools that could more easily draw their students as competitors (e.g., by providing education at a reduced or free cost), but this was not significant in the quantitative findings. One reason for this finding could be that private schools have existed long before the voucher and New Orleans has always had a fairly high share of students in private and parochial schools. It may be that private schools have always been competitors, and this did not change with the voucher program.

We do find that charter schools are more likely to view private schools as competitors, which we would expect given that they are similar in terms of the flexibility and autonomy afforded to them under policy and law. However, this was only marginally significant. Better measures of private-school quality are needed. Under Louisiana state law, private schools that enroll voucher students will be required to participate in state tests; these data were not available in the year of the study, but will be available in future years.

Insights from the qualitative data helped to explore these competitive relationships further. We concluded that the ambivalent relationship some principals reported with private schools was because they either did not lose many students to private schools through the voucher or because when they did lose those students, they returned soon thereafter. These findings have important implications for policy. Student mobility is disruptive, and if students are moving to and from private schools, this could be harmful both to students who are mobile as well as their classmates. In the qualitative interviews, private schools were rarely viewed as strong competitors, despite an expanded voucher program, suggesting that private schools were largely in a market of their own, often competing with the highest performing, elite or magnet public schools.

This study contributes to the literature on private-school vouchers and competition by examining multiple choice policies (e.g., private and charter school choice). Most studies of private-school competition have examined competition between traditional public and private schools. Our study adds to this work by examining charter schools as well. Other studies have found that the effects of private school competition might become smaller as programs continue or end (e.g., Gray, Merrifield, & Adzima, 2014), but some of our qualitative findings suggest there is limited competition even at the start, at least as recognized by the school leaders. It may be that when voucher programs are introduced into already “saturated” choice markets, they have a smaller competitive effect. Further research would need to study this over time; we only had a cross-sectional sample in this study. This may be an indication that “local conditioning factors” (Ni & Arsen, 2010) shape how competition under voucher schemes occurs, such as overall enrollment trends in the city or other competing choice policies, such as charter schools. Some research has suggested that variation in the types of private schools might predict competition. For example, Carattini et al. (2012) reported that competition from religious schools improved public school students’ test scores. However, we found no difference between how public schools viewed religious and non-religious private schools in the quantitative results.

Furthermore, most research examining competition has examined its effects. While this is important to study, it is also important to understand the process or the mechanisms by which school vouchers influence school leaders. If policymakers believe that competition will have an impact on schools, school leaders should perceive competition in the first place. While many did report competing to some extent with private schools, the qualitative data suggested this

competition was not viewed as a serious threat to most schools. It is unlikely that a voucher program will generate competitive effects if leaders are not recognizing these schools as competitors.

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## About the Authors

### Huriya Jabbar

The University of Texas at Austin

[jabbar@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:jabbar@austin.utexas.edu)

Huriya Jabbar, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Educational Policy and Planning Program in the Department of Educational Administration in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research examines the social and political dimensions of school choice and other market-based reforms across elementary, secondary, and postsecondary contexts.

### Dongmei M. Li

The University of Texas at Austin

[dongmei\\_li@utexas.edu](mailto:dongmei_li@utexas.edu)

Dongmei M. Li is a doctoral candidate in the Educational Policy and Planning Program in the Department of Educational Administration in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research examines education access and equity issues in the US and China, educational accountability, reform, and their impacts.

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