

# America's *Private* Public Schools

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# introduction

**ASK AMERICANS IF THEY SUPPORT “PUBLIC SCHOOLS,” AND YOU WILL GET A RESOUNDING “YES.”** At the heart of our abiding commitment to the *idea* of public education is Horace Mann’s *ideal* of the “common school”: a place whose doors are open to everybody, and where all children, regardless of social class or race or ethnic heritage, can come to learn and play and grow up together.

This is a genuinely compelling vision. But do all public schools live up to it?

In this report, we identify public schools whose doors are effectively closed to poor children. These institutions—generally found in wealthy urban enclaves or well-heeled suburbs—educate many of the children of America’s elite while proudly waving the “public school” flag. But they hardly embody the “common school” ideal. In fact, by exclusively serving well-off children, they are arguably more private—certainly more exclusive—than many elite private schools, which, after all, generally offer at least *some* scholarships to low-income students. In these pages, we examine what are, in effect, “*private* public schools.”

Such schools do not happen by accident. In a country where more than 40 percent of K-12 pupils are poor enough to qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch from the federal government, it is not exactly random when a school serves few or none of those kids. That is not to say that these schools declare an unwillingness to educate needy girls and boys. But their demographics generally *are* products of public policies and community decisions. Some schools are located in areas once ruled by neighborhood covenants that kept blacks and other minorities out. Many more are in communities where zoning restrictions disallow affordable housing. And precious few opt to participate in public school choice programs that would enable poor children to cross school (or even district) boundaries to take advantage of what they have to offer. On the contrary, some are in districts that hire “border guards” to ensure that only those who pay property taxes there are permitted to enter their schools.<sup>1</sup>

These schools are “public” in that they are funded by taxpayers and accountable to elected officials. But they scarcely serve the larger “public” of American society. If a child’s parents cannot afford a home in their attendance zones, that child simply cannot attend them. Call us naïve if you like, but we find it difficult to countenance why someone would support spending taxpayer dollars on such “public schools” for their own kids while opposing “private” school choice options for other people’s children. Feels to us like a double standard—and just plain unfair.

This is also a sorely understudied topic, and we wanted the answers to some basic questions. How many of these “*private* public schools” exist nationwide? How many children do they serve? Are they clustered in certain states or metropolitan areas? What are their racial demographics? We hoped others would be interested in these findings, too—and in learning how many of these schools exist in their own states or metropolitan areas.

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<sup>1</sup> See Gerald Grant’s book, *Hope and Despair in the American City: Why There Are No Bad Schools In Raleigh*, for an excellent discussion of how discriminatory real estate practices (such as “redlining” city blocks and restricting Section 8 vouchers) and suburban resistance to integration led to mostly segregated schools in Syracuse, NY.

To find out, we dove into the federal government's Common Core of Data for 2007-2008<sup>2</sup> and started counting. At the elementary level, we defined "*private* public schools" as those where low-income students (i.e., those eligible for the National School Lunch Program, or NSLP, which provides free or reduced-price student lunches) make up less than 5 percent of the student population. Because these data are less reliable at the middle and high school levels (where many self-conscious adolescents choose not to participate in the program), we used an even tougher threshold for those schools: to qualify, fewer than 3 percent of their students were reported to be poor. We were also sensitive to the fact that a non-trivial number of schools themselves choose not to participate in the federal free-lunch program, and thus do not provide reliable data on the number of eligible youngsters attending them. We took pains to exclude these schools from our calculations.<sup>3</sup>

What did we find?

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<sup>2</sup> Free and reduced-price lunch data were not available for the state of Ohio for 2007-2008; we looked at CCD 2006-2007 Ohio data instead.

<sup>3</sup> Due to overwhelming numbers of schools in many states reporting zero free-lunch eligible students, we suspect that a number of schools that do not participate in NSLP incorrectly reported serving zero eligible students. Therefore, we did not include in our tallies any school which reported serving zero free-lunch eligible students. This most likely excluded a number of schools which *do* in fact serve no free-lunch eligible students; as such, our counts should be taken as underestimates of the true totals. In addition, we only included schools with sixty or more students (except in Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, where over 10 percent of schools enroll less than 60 students); often these schools are exceptions to the traditional school model (i.e., detention centers, early childhood centers, and special education schools) and their small samples can skew larger averages.

# national findings

AS OF 2007-2008, IN A COUNTRY WITH MORE THAN 90,000 PUBLIC SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE, THERE WERE AT LEAST 2,817 “PRIVATE PUBLIC SCHOOLS” (I.E., SCHOOLS THAT SERVE VIRTUALLY NO POOR STUDENTS). This includes 2,194 elementary, 304 middle, and 319 high schools. Altogether, these schools serve approximately 1.7 million students, or 4 percent of the total public-school population (see Table 1). To put that in perspective, 11 percent of all U.S. students attend private schools, and just 3 percent of public school students attend charter schools.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 1: “Private Public Schools” Nationally

	Number of “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of All Public Schools	Student Population of “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of All Public School Students
Elementary	2,194	4%	1,140,411	5%
Middle	304	2%	222,377	2%
High	319	2%	368,063	3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,817</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>1,730,851</b>	<b>4%</b>

Perhaps not surprisingly, few black students attend these schools. While 17 percent of public school students nationwide are African-American, just 3 percent of the students in “private public schools” are. Furthermore, the percentage of Hispanic students in these schools (12 percent) is just half that of public schools as a whole. (See Table 2.)

TABLE 2: Student Demographics

	Percentage White	Percentage Asian	Percentage Black	Percentage Hispanic	Percentage Low-Income
“Private Public Schools”	75%	10%	3%	12%	2%
All Public Schools	56%	5%	17%	21%	44%

<sup>4</sup> According to the Council for American Private Education, <http://www.capenet.org/facts.html>, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, <http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/page/overview/year/2009>. Also, note that we identified seventy-three charter schools nationwide that are “private public schools.”

# state findings

**THE NATIONAL FINDINGS MASK LARGE DIFFERENCES AMONG STATES.** While 4 percent of public school pupils nationally attend “*private* public schools,” in a handful of states, the number is much greater: Connecticut (18 percent), New Jersey (17 percent), South Dakota (16 percent), Arizona (14 percent), and Massachusetts (12 percent). Meanwhile, there are almost no students in such schools in more than twenty states: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Six states—Arizona, California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Texas—account for over half of all the “*private* public schools” in the country. (See Table 3 and Figure 1.)

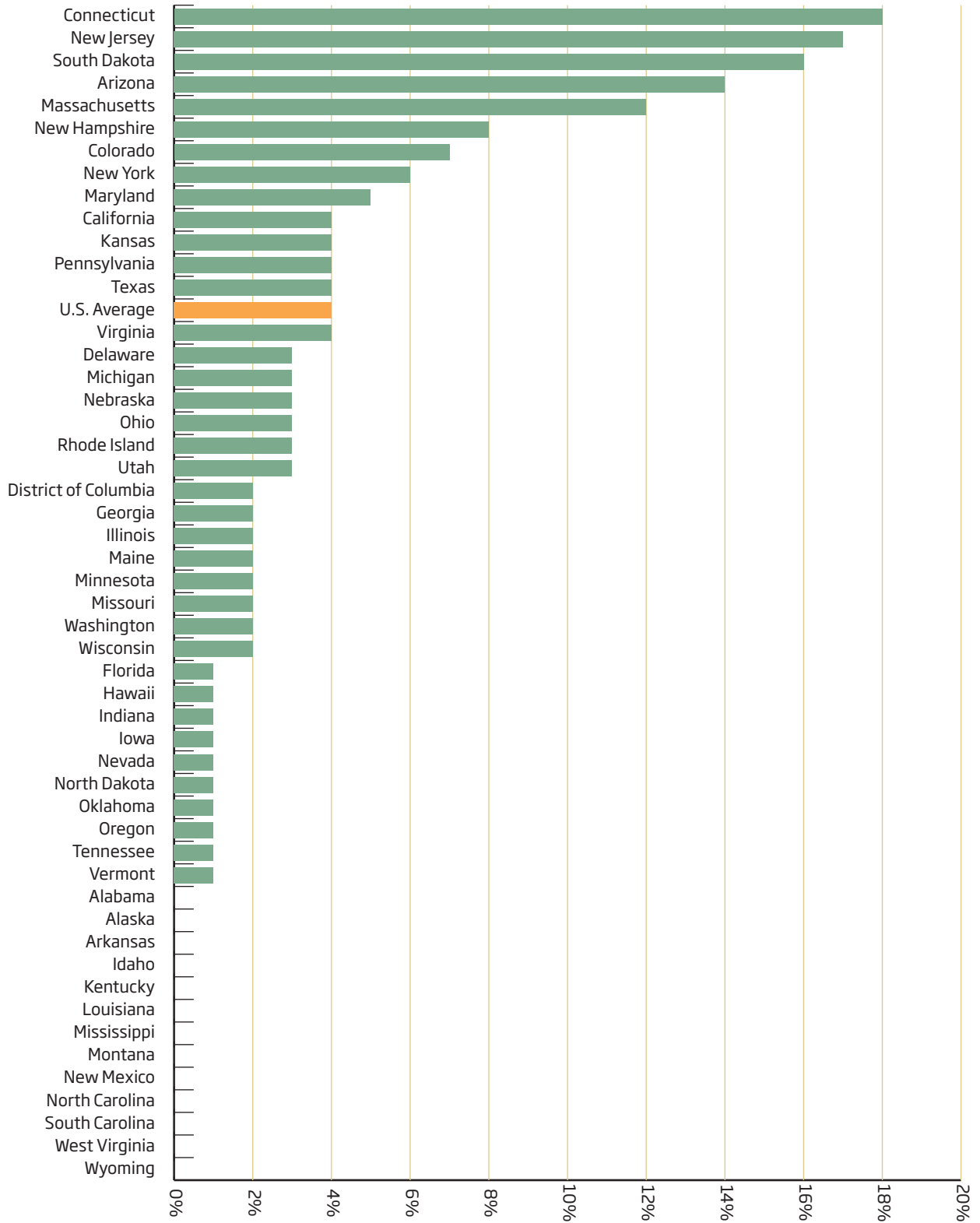
TABLE 3: “*Private* Public Schools” by State

	Number of “ <i>Private</i> Public Schools”	Percentage of All Public Schools	Student Population of “ <i>Private</i> Public Schools”	Percentage of All Public School Students
Alabama	2	0%	1,567	0%
Alaska	2	1%	317	0%
Arizona	185	12%	137,772	14%
Arkansas	0	0%	0	0%
California	298	4%	198,048	4%
Colorado	90	6%	54,360	7%
Connecticut	178	17%	98,690	18%
Delaware	4	2%	3,629	3%
District of Columbia	3	2%	1,371	2%
Florida	33	1%	20,807	1%
Georgia	32	2%	31,210	2%
Hawaii	6	2%	2,279	1%
Idaho	2	0%	884	0%
Illinois	70	2%	38,934	2%
Indiana	20	1%	13,308	1%
Iowa	8	1%	3,857	1%
Kansas	31	2%	19,414	4%
Kentucky	7	1%	3,153	0%
Louisiana	1	0%	287	0%
Maine	7	1%	3,469	2%
Maryland	62	5%	37,569	5%
Massachusetts	226	13%	112,170	12%
Michigan	96	3%	47,166	3%
Minnesota	36	2%	16,880	2%
Mississippi	0	0%	0	0%
Missouri	34	2%	20,499	2%
Montana	1	0%	427	0%
Nebraska	19	2%	7,784	3%

TABLE 3: "Private Public Schools" by State ...Continued

	Number of "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of All Public Schools	Student Population of "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of All Public School Students
Nevada	8	2%	3,596	1%
New Hampshire	33	8%	15,011	8%
New Jersey	402	18%	227,184	17%
New Mexico	6	1%	1,531	0%
New York	230	6%	149,525	6%
North Carolina	6	0%	3,638	0%
North Dakota	3	1%	516	1%
Ohio	73	2%	46,031	3%
Oklahoma	5	0%	3,301	1%
Oregon	15	1%	4,549	1%
Pennsylvania	109	4%	67,421	4%
Rhode Island	13	4%	4,327	3%
South Carolina	6	1%	2,234	0%
South Dakota	36	6%	17,689	16%
Tennessee	18	1%	13,162	1%
Texas	243	4%	190,454	4%
Utah	18	2%	14,442	3%
Vermont	1	0%	469	1%
Virginia	70	4%	52,734	4%
Washington	31	2%	19,059	2%
West Virginia	0	0%	0	0%
Wisconsin	37	2%	17,900	2%
Wyoming	1	0%	227	0%

FIGURE 1: Proportion of "Private Public School" Students by State





## Do demographics drive these disparities?

Not surprisingly, the states with the highest proportion of “*private* public schools” are relatively wealthy (like Connecticut, New Jersey, and Massachusetts), while those with few such schools tend to be relatively poor (like New Mexico, South Carolina, and West Virginia). The scatter plot (Figure 2) and table (Table 4) below show something approaching an inverse relationship between a state’s low-income student population and its percentage of students in “*private* public schools.”

But also note the outliers. Arizona in particular stands out. Forty-one percent of its students are poor, which is just below the national average (44 percent). One would therefore expect its percentage of students in “*private* public schools” to be near the national average of 4 percent. Yet fully 14 percent of Arizona students attend “*private* public schools”—indicating a high degree of socio-economic segregation. In other words, to a greater extent than in other states, middle-class students in Arizona are cordoned off from their poorer peers, and vice versa.

On the other hand, Minnesota serves fewer low-income students (32 percent) than the national average, but also has a below-average number of students attending “*private* public schools” (2 percent). Compare that to Connecticut, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, which serve similar proportions of poor students but whose “*private* public school” populations are in the double digits. Something is happening in Minnesota to encourage school integration across class lines.

**FIGURE 2:** Percentage of “*Private Public School*” Students in Relation to Percentage of Poor Students by State

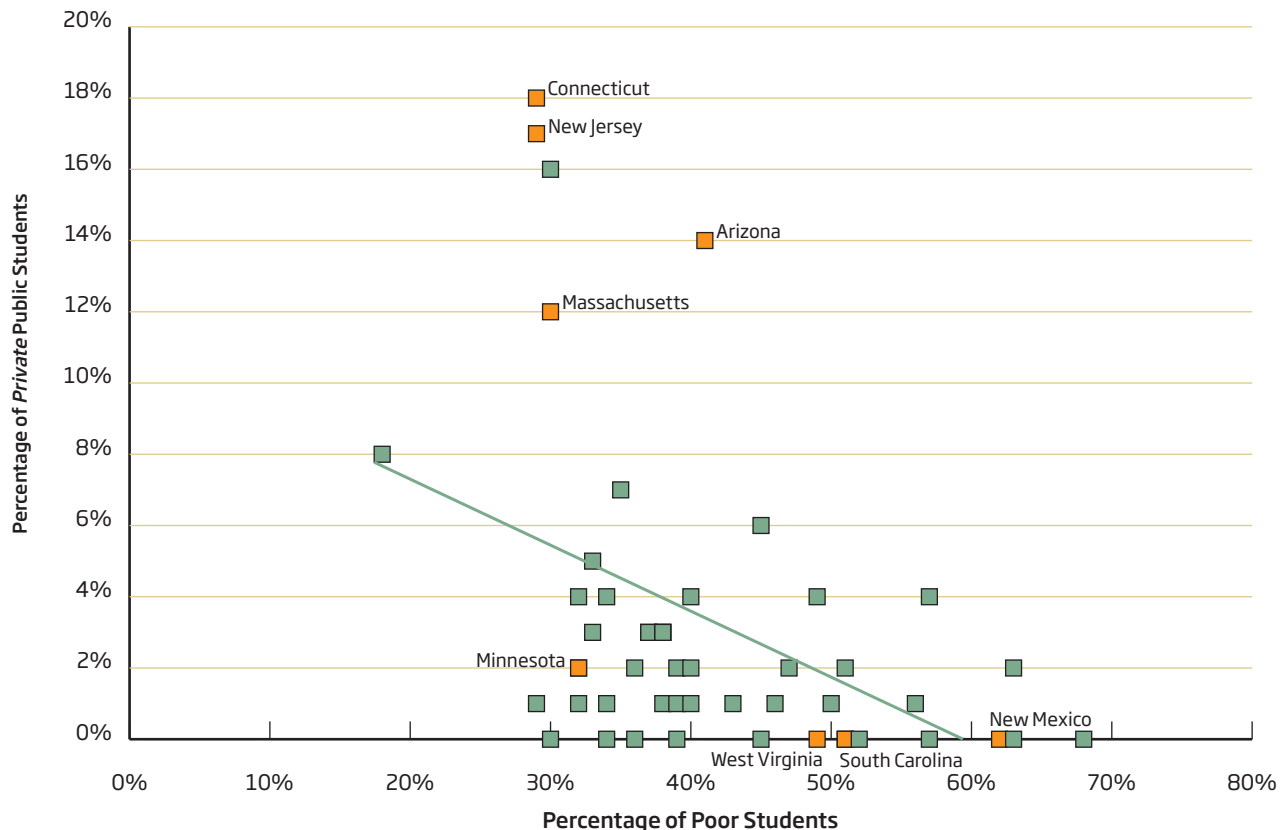


TABLE 4: Percentage of "Private Public School" Students and Low-Income Students by States

	Percentage of Public School Students Attending "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Connecticut	18%	29%
New Jersey	17%	29%
South Dakota	16%	30%
Arizona	14%	41%
Massachusetts	12%	30%
New Hampshire	8%	18%
Colorado	7%	35%
New York	6%	45%
Maryland	5%	33%
California	4%	57%
Kansas	4%	40%
Pennsylvania	4%	34%
Texas	4%	49%
Virginia	4%	32%
U.S Average	4%	44%
Delaware	3%	37%
Michigan	3%	38%
Nebraska	3%	38%
Ohio	3%	37%
Rhode Island	3%	38%
Utah	3%	33%
District of Columbia	2%	63%
Georgia	2%	51%
Illinois	2%	47%
Maine	2%	36%
Minnesota	2%	32%
Missouri	2%	40%
Washington	2%	39%
Wisconsin	2%	32%
Florida	1%	46%
Hawaii	1%	38%
Indiana	1%	39%
Iowa	1%	34%
Nevada	1%	40%
North Dakota	1%	32%
Oklahoma	1%	56%
Oregon	1%	43%
Tennessee	1%	50%
Vermont	1%	29%
Alabama	0%	52%

TABLE 4: "Percentage of "Private Public School" Students and Low-Income Students by States ...Continued

	Percentage of Public School Students Attending "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Alaska	0%	34%
Arkansas	0%	57%
Idaho	0%	39%
Kentucky	0%	51%
Louisiana	0%	63%
Mississippi	0%	68%
Montana	0%	36%
New Mexico	0%	62%
North Carolina	0%	45%
South Carolina	0%	51%
West Virginia	0%	49%
Wyoming	0%	30%

Another way to examine state-by-state variation is to consider the percentage of white public school students (compared to Asian, Hispanic, and black students) who attend "private public schools." As Table 5 shows, a remarkable 28 percent of white students in the District of Columbia, 26 percent of white students in New Jersey, and 24 percent of white students in Connecticut attend such schools. Compare that to Florida, where just 1 percent of white students attend "private public schools."

TABLE 5: Percentage of Students in "Private Public Schools" and All Public Schools by Race

	Percentage of State's White Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of State's Asian Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of State's Black Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of State's Hispanic Students in "Private Public Schools"
District of Columbia	28%	11%	0%	1%
New Jersey	26%	25%	2%	3%
Connecticut	24%	21%	2%	3%
Massachusetts	15%	14%	2%	2%
South Dakota	15%	32%	53%	36%
Arizona	14%	17%	18%	14%
Colorado	10%	11%	3%	2%
New York	10%	5%	0%	1%
California	8%	8%	1%	0%
New Hampshire	8%	10%	4%	3%
Maryland	7%	11%	1%	2%
Virginia	6%	11%	1%	2%
Kansas	5%	11%	1%	1%
Pennsylvania	5%	10%	1%	1%
Texas	5%	9%	1%	5%
U.S. Average	5%	8%	1%	2%

TABLE 5: Percentage of Students in "Private Public Schools" and All Public Schools by Race ...Continued

	Percentage of State's White Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of State's Asian Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of State's Black Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of State's Hispanic Students in "Private Public Schools"
Delaware	4%	14%	1%	1%
Illinois	4%	5%	0%	1%
Michigan	4%	10%	1%	1%
Rhode Island	4%	3%	0%	0%
Georgia	3%	8%	0%	1%
Missouri	3%	7%	1%	1%
Nebraska	3%	5%	1%	1%
Ohio	3%	11%	0%	1%
Utah	3%	2%	2%	2%
Wisconsin	3%	2%	0%	1%
Hawaii	2%	1%	1%	1%
Maine	2%	4%	0%	1%
Minnesota	2%	2%	1%	1%
Nevada	2%	1%	0%	0%
Tennessee	2%	5%	0%	0%
Washington	2%	4%	0%	0%
Florida	1%	1%	0%	1%
Indiana	1%	7%	0%	0%
Iowa	1%	2%	0%	0%
Kentucky	1%	2%	0%	0%
New Mexico	1%	2%	0%	0%
North Dakota	1%	0%	0%	0%
Oklahoma	1%	1%	1%	1%
Oregon	1%	2%	0%	0%
Vermont	1%	1%	0%	1%
Alabama	0%	1%	0%	0%
Alaska	0%	0%	0%	0%
Arkansas	0%	0%	0%	0%
Idaho	0%	0%	0%	0%
Louisiana	0%	0%	0%	0%
Mississippi	0%	0%	0%	0%
Montana	0%	0%	0%	0%
North Carolina	0%	0%	0%	0%
South Carolina	0%	1%	0%	0%
West Virginia	0%	0%	0%	0%
Wyoming	0%	0%	0%	0%

# metropolitan area findings

## A COMPARISON OF MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS REVEALS EVEN GREATER DISPARITY.

We examined the twenty-five largest “Metropolitan Statistical Areas” (MSAs), as defined by the Census Bureau. (Together, their schools serve over one-third of all public school pupils in the United States.) The Boston and New York City metropolitan areas top the list with the greatest proportions of public school students attending “*private* public schools” (16 and 13 percent, respectively). In a number of other metropolitan areas—Denver, Philadelphia, Phoenix, and San Francisco—about 10 percent of all public school students attend such schools. But almost no students attend “*private* public schools” in the Miami, Portland (Oregon), or Tampa areas; the same is true of California’s “Inland Empire.”<sup>5</sup> (See Table 6.)

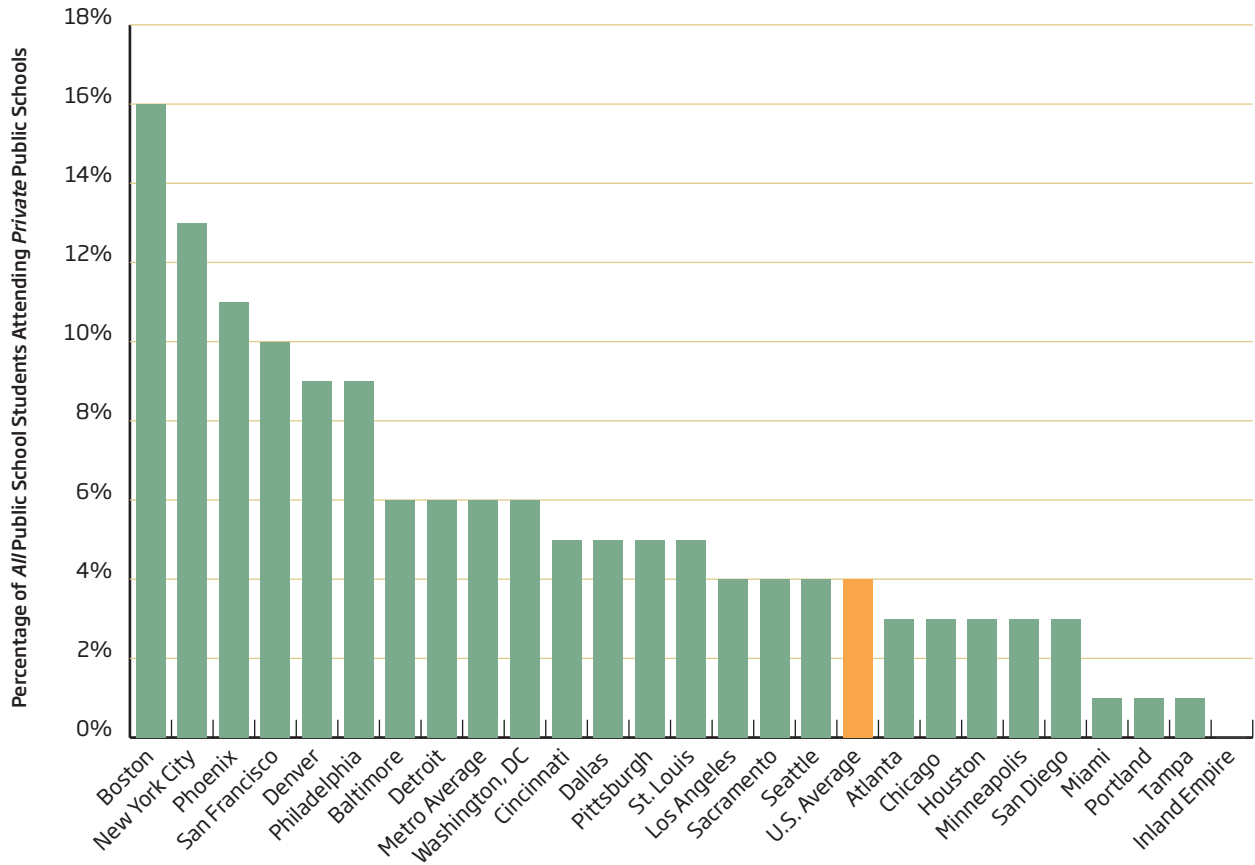
TABLE 6: “Private Public Schools” by Major Metro Area

	Number of “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of All Public Schools	Student Population of “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of All Public School Students
Atlanta Metro Area	32	3%	31,210	3%
Baltimore Metro Area	39	6%	21,971	6%
Boston Metro Area	201	17%	99,145	16%
Chicago Metro Area	60	3%	34,814	3%
Cincinnati Metro Area	19	4%	12,826	5%
Dallas Metro Area	80	5%	54,621	5%
Denver Metro Area	57	9%	33,237	9%
Detroit Metro Area	75	6%	40,423	6%
Houston Metro Area	30	2%	30,346	3%
Inland Empire Metro Area	3	0%	1,531	0%
Los Angeles Metro Area	107	4%	78,182	4%
Miami Metro Area	8	1%	5,018	1%
Minneapolis Metro Area	37	4%	17,068	3%
New York City Metro Area	551	15%	330,195	13%
Philadelphia Metro Area	117	10%	72,141	9%
Phoenix Metro Area	77	9%	73,112	11%
Pittsburgh Metro Area	22	4%	13,898	5%
Portland Metro Area	12	2%	4,186	1%
Sacramento Metro Area	22	4%	13,261	4%
San Diego Metro Area	19	3%	13,364	3%
San Francisco Metro Area	79	9%	50,572	10%
Seattle Metro Area	29	4%	18,244	4%
St. Louis Metro Area	33	4%	19,389	5%
Tampa Metro Area	7	2%	2,795	1%
Washington, D.C. Metro Area <sup>6</sup>	73	6%	52,063	6%
<b>All Metro Areas</b>	<b>1789</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>1,123,612</b>	<b>6%</b>

<sup>5</sup> Also known as Riverside and San Bernardino Counties in Southern California.

<sup>6</sup> The Washington, D.C. Metro Area mentioned here is distinct from the District of Columbia referenced previously in our... (Continued on page 14)

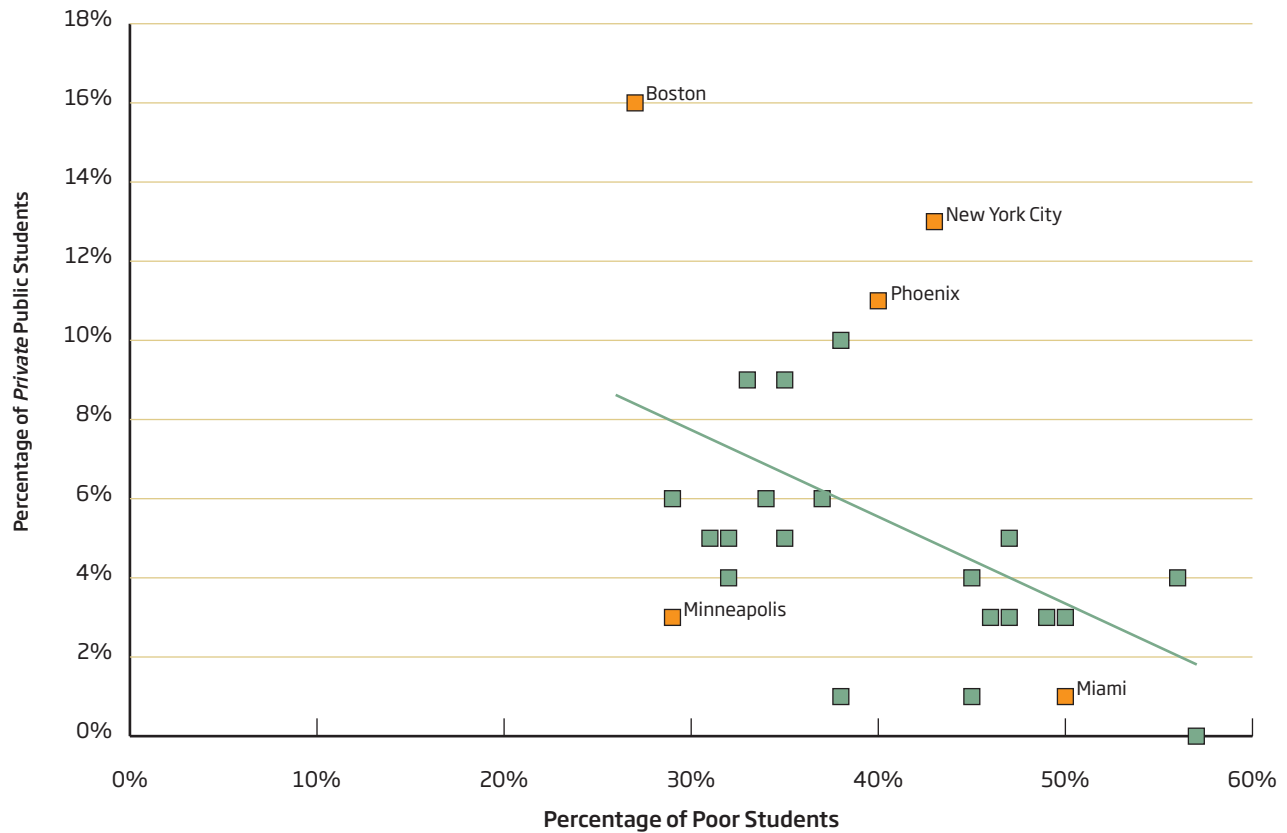
FIGURE 3: Proportion of “Private Public School” Students by Metro Area



Again, as with the states, the metro areas with the highest proportion of students in “private public schools” tend to be relatively wealthy (like Boston), while those with few such schools tend to be relatively poor (like Miami). That makes sense. It is harder to avoid concentrating affluent students together in places (like the Boston area) without many poor students. But there are exceptions here, too. The scatter plot on page 15 (Figure 4) notes the clear outliers: New York City and Phoenix stand out as metro areas with large populations of low-income students (43 and 40 percent, respectively) but also with large “private public school” enrollments (13 and 11 percent, respectively). Compare them to the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, which has a much smaller proportion of students in “private public schools” (just 3 percent) even though it is significantly wealthier (fewer than 30 percent of its public school students qualify as low-income). The point is that demography is not always destiny; New York City and Phoenix have more “private public schools” than one would expect, while Minneapolis has far fewer. (See Table 7.)

<sup>6</sup> (Continued from page 13) ...State Findings. The District of Columbia count includes only those schools within the city limits (just as a state would only include those schools within its boundaries). But the Washington, D.C. Metro Area count includes schools located both in the city and in the entire metropolitan statistical area surrounding the city, which encompasses suburban counties in Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia.

**FIGURE 4:** Percentage of “Private Public School” Students in Relation to Percentage of Poor Students By MSA



**TABLE 7:** Percentage of “Private Public School” Students and Low-Income Students by Metro Area

	Percentage of All Public School Students Attending “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of All Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Boston Metro Area	16%	27%
New York City Metro Area	13%	43%
Phoenix Metro Area	11%	40%
San Francisco Metro Area	10%	38%
Denver Metro Area	9%	35%
Philadelphia Metro Area	9%	33%
Baltimore Metro Area	6%	34%
Detroit Metro Area	6%	37%
Washington, DC Metro Area	6%	29%
Cincinnati Metro Area	5%	31%
Dallas Metro Area	5%	47%
Pittsburgh Metro Area	5%	32%
St. Louis Metro Area	5%	35%
Los Angeles Metro Area	4%	56%
Sacramento Metro Area	4%	45%

TABLE 7: Percentage of "Private Public School" Students and Low-Income Students by Metro Area ...Continued

	Percentage of All Public School Students Attending "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of All Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Seattle Metro Area	4%	32%
U.S. Average	4%	44%
Atlanta Metro Area	3%	46%
Chicago Metro Area	3%	50%
Houston Metro Area	3%	49%
Minneapolis Metro Area	3%	29%
San Diego Metro Area	3%	47%
Miami Metro Area	1%	50%
Portland Metro Area	1%	38%
Tampa Metro Area	1%	45%
Inland Empire Metro Area	0%	57%

There is also substantial variation from one metro area to the next when looking at the percentage of white public school students (compared to Asian, Hispanic, and black students) who attend "private public schools." As the table below shows, 27 percent of white students in the New York City metro area, 21 percent of white students in the San Francisco metro area, and 20 percent of white students the Boston metro area attend such schools. Compare that to 11 percent of white students in the Washington, D.C. metro area, 6 percent in Atlanta, and just 1 percent in Portland (Oregon). (See Table 8.)

TABLE 8: Percentage of Students in "Private Public Schools" and All Schools by Race

	Percentage of Metro Area's White Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of Metro Area's Asian Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of Metro Area's Black Students in "Private Public Schools"	Percentage of Metro Area's Hispanic Students in "Private Public Schools"
New York City Metro Area	27%	13%	1%	2%
San Francisco Metro Area	21%	10%	2%	2%
Boston Metro Area	20%	15%	3%	2%
Denver Metro Area	14%	10%	2%	2%
Philadelphia Metro Area	14%	13%	1%	2%
Los Angeles Metro Area	13%	7%	1%	0%
Phoenix Metro Area	12%	13%	13%	10%
Washington, DC Metro Area	11%	11%	1%	2%
Baltimore Metro Area	9%	14%	1%	3%
Dallas Metro Area	9%	13%	1%	1%
Detroit Metro Area	8%	16%	1%	2%
Houston Metro Area	7%	6%	0%	1%
Sacramento Metro Area	7%	3%	0%	1%
Atlanta Metro Area	6%	10%	0%	1%
Chicago Metro Area	6%	5%	0%	1%
San Diego Metro Area	6%	5%	1%	1%



**TABLE 8:** Percentage of Students in “Private Public Schools” and All Schools by Race ...Continued

	Percentage of Metro Area’s White Students in “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of Metro Area’s Asian Students in “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of Metro Area’s Black Students in “Private Public Schools”	Percentage of Metro Area’s Hispanic Students in “Private Public Schools”
St. Louis Metro Area	6%	12%	2%	4%
Cincinnati Metro Area	5%	15%	1%	3%
Pittsburgh Metro Area	5%	20%	0%	8%
Seattle Metro Area	5%	5%	1%	1%
U.S. Average	5%	8%	1%	2%
Minneapolis Metro Area	4%	3%	1%	1%
Miami Metro Area	1%	1%	0%	1%
Portland Metro Area	1%	3%	0%	0%
Tampa Metro Area	1%	1%	0%	1%
Inland Empire Metro Area	0%	1%	0%	0%

# conclusion

**“PRIVATE PUBLIC SCHOOLS” MAKE UP A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF THE AMERICAN EDUCATION LANDSCAPE, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING THAT MORE CHILDREN ATTEND THEM THAN ATTEND CHARTER SCHOOLS.** In some metropolitan areas, such as Boston, they are ubiquitous, with close to one in six students attending them. And in eight metropolitan areas—Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.—more than 10 percent of white students attend such schools. Yet these “*private* public schools” receive almost no attention from the media or from scholars. This report has attempted to make their existence less of a secret.

As a simple descriptive exercise involving a little-known phenomenon in American public education, this paper obviously begs some important questions. For example, why does Minnesota in general, and the Minneapolis metro area in specific, have so few “*private* public schools”? Do Minnesota’s public school choice programs—especially its “open enrollment” law that allows kids to cross district boundaries—make it easier for low-income children to access affluent schools? Why do just 1 percent of Florida’s white students attend “*private* public schools”? Is there something the Sunshine State could teach others? And why do the New York City and Phoenix metro areas have so many of these schools? What could their local school districts do to open their doors wider? What might the state do? While we did not investigate these schools’ relationship to academic achievement or effectiveness, we hope this report spurs additional research which might shed some light on these and other issues.

Until then, we hope we have at least opened some eyes. After all, many people voice opposition to school voucher or tax credit programs because they object to public funds supporting “exclusive” private schools. Would these same folks oppose public funding for America’s 2,800 “*private* public schools”—funding that runs in the tens of *billions* of dollars?<sup>7</sup>

Consider this: When the state of Ohio enacted a school voucher program in Cleveland in the 1990s, it explicitly allowed low-income students to use their scholarships at suburban public schools, along with private and religious ones. Not a single district bordering Cleveland would allow these poor (mostly black) students to enroll in their schools. Yet scores of Catholic schools and other private schools did.<sup>8</sup>

So which schools are public, and which are private? From the point of view of the “public” that our schools are meant to serve, it is not a difficult question.

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<sup>7</sup> “*Private* public schools” serve 4 percent of the nation’s public school students. We spend more than \$500 billion on K-12 education every year. So if “*private* public schools” consume funds at the average rate that amounts to \$20 billion being spent on them annually.

<sup>8</sup> This became a Constitutional issue, resolved by the Supreme Court’s *Zelman* decision, because voucher opponents complained that almost all voucher recipients attended religious schools. Of course they did—the public schools would not let them in.



# about us

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