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Private Elementary and Secondary Schools and Students: Numbers and Characteristics

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Patricia Osorio-O'Dea
Analyst in Social Legislation
Domestic Social Policy Division

James B. Stedman
Specialist in Social Legislation
Domestic Social Policy Division

Abstract

The 106th Congress is considering various legislative proposals to provide federal assistance for school choice, including enrollment in private schools. An important part of the context for the congressional debate over such proposals are the attributes of private elementary and secondary schools and students. This report considers such questions as how many private schools and private school students there are, the extent to which they are religiously affiliated, where they are located, and the racial, ethnic, and economic characteristics of private school students. This report will not be updated.

Private Elementary and Secondary Schools and Students: Numbers and Characteristics

Summary

The 106th Congress is considering various legislative proposals to provide federal assistance for elementary and secondary school choice, including enrollment in private schools. An important part of the context for the congressional debate over such proposals are the attributes of private elementary and secondary schools and students. This report considers such questions as how many private schools and private school students there are in the country, the extent to which they are religiously affiliated, where they are located, and the racial, ethnic, and economic characteristics of private school students. Comparison to public schools and students helps to characterize the private elementary and secondary sector.

In general, findings include the following:

- Private schools and students make up a relatively small portion of elementary and secondary education — only 1 in 4 schools is private and only slightly more than 1 in 10 students is enrolled in a private school.
- The private sector is predominantly religiously affiliated (sectarian) — 84.3% of all private enrollment is found in sectarian schools. Schools affiliated with the Catholic Church make up well over half of sectarian enrollment.
- Compared to public schools, private schools and students are much more likely to be found in central cities. Close to half of all private enrollment is in central cities while less than a third of public enrollment is in that type of location.
- Private schools and private school enrollment are more concentrated in central cities than are public schools and public school students. For example, close to half of all private enrollment is in central cities while less than a third of public enrollment is in that type of location.
- Whites are over twice as likely as blacks or Hispanics to enroll in private schools; in 1997, only 4.9% of blacks and 4.9% of Hispanics were enrolled in private schools, compared to 11.4% of whites.
- In comparison to public school enrollment, private enrollment comes to a greater degree from higher income families — over half of private enrollment is from families with income of \$50,000 or more, less than a third of public enrollment is from families in that income range.

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Private Elementary and Secondary Schools and Students: Numbers and Characteristics

Introduction

The U.S. Congress has been considering school choice initiatives that would provide federal financial assistance for children and youth attending private elementary and secondary schools.¹ Questions relevant to consideration of such initiatives include the following: To what extent are elementary and secondary school students currently enrolled in private schools? To what extent is the private sector religiously affiliated? Where are private schools and students located? What are the racial, ethnic, and income characteristics of private school students? To help provide answers to these questions and provide a context for policy debates over the federal role in this area, this report analyzes some of the broad characteristics of private schools and students. The descriptive indicators analyzed below include the following:

- the number of schools and students,
- the religious affiliations of schools,
- the geographic distribution of schools and students,
- the racial and ethnic characteristics of students,
- the income characteristics of students, and
- the grade level distribution of students.²

The section immediately below provides brief information about the sources of data used in preparing this report. It is followed by consideration of each of the indicators listed above.

¹ See, for example, CRS Issue Brief IB98035, *School Choice: Current Legislation*, by Wayne Riddle and James Stedman.

² Although the quality of private education is an integral aspect of the policy debates over federal activity with regard to private school enrollment, it is not considered in this report. There is no consensus among researchers with regard to key statistical questions concerning the academic quality or student outcomes of private education, foremost among them the following: what are the appropriate measures of academic achievement; what background characteristics of students should be controlled for and how; and what level of change in academic outcomes is statistically significant. (Debate over the academic impact of the Milwaukee voucher program is a clear case in point. See, for example, Bob Davis. Dueling Professors Have Milwaukee Dazed Over School Vouchers, *The Wall Street Journal*, October 11, 1996.)

Data

The data presented in this report are drawn primarily from three national surveys — the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS),³ the Private School Survey (PSS),⁴ and the Current Population Survey (CPS).⁵ The first two are funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED); the last is funded by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Census Bureau). The SASS is a survey of a nationally representative sample of schools and the teachers within those schools, conducted only in selected years. Its latest data are for school year 1993-1994.⁶ The PSS is conducted biennially and is the most comprehensive set of data available on the universe of private schools; the most recent data are for 1997-1998.⁷ The CPS is administered monthly to a nationally representative sample of households, with the October iteration of the survey focused particularly on education data.⁸ The October CPS is the source for the CPS-based statistics analyzed here; the latest CPS data presented are for the fall of 1997. As a result of the differences in the reporting dates of these surveys, data presented in the analysis may be for different years. Where relevant, trends in these data are described below.

Data from these surveys should be used carefully. Each survey is subject to various kinds of errors — sampling errors (differences between what is obtained from the sample survey compared to what would have been reported from a complete universe survey) and nonsampling errors (errors due to the design of the survey instrument, the reporting of the data gathered, the processing of the data, and nonresponse to the survey). In general, comparisons made in the text below between and among statistics were determined to be statistically significant at either the .05 or .10 levels.⁹ Further, given that each of these surveys was administered to different

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993-1994*, 1996 (Hereafter cited as ED, *Schools and Staffing*).

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Private School Universe Survey, 1997-1998*, Tables 2 and 4 (Hereafter cited as ED, *Private School Universe Survey*).

⁵ The CPS data were obtained from the U.S. Department of Education (*October 1997 Current Population Survey Electronic Codebook*, produced by Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc. for the National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

⁶ These SASS data cover public and private schools that provide services for at least one grade of the 1-12 grade range.

⁷ Data from the PSS do not include information on homeschools. These data come from private schools that have at least one grade in the K-12 grade range.

⁸ CPS data presented in this report come from the October CPS surveys between 1981 and 1997. They generally apply to individuals ages 3 through 24 who were enrolled in private elementary and secondary education (grades K-12) for that survey year. In some instances, public school enrollment data, including pre-kindergarten enrollment, are also discussed for purposes of presenting private school data in the context of overall school demographic trends.

⁹ At these levels, one can be either 95% or 90% confident that the reported differences are not
(continued...)

populations and has sampling and nonsampling errors, the same statistic (e.g., private school enrollment) may vary somewhat from survey to survey. To minimize confusion over such differences, data for the individual aspects of private schools and students considered below are usually drawn only from a single source.

Number of Schools and Students

This section presents general data on private schools and their enrollment. It should be noted that one educational sector not captured by the data presented below is that of the homeschool. Data on the extent to which school-aged children and youth are being schooled at home are difficult to obtain. One analysis from the U.S. Department of Education concluded that, in 1995-1996, between 700,000 and 750,000 children were being home schooled and that the number could have risen to about 1 million by the 1997-1998 school year.¹⁰

Private schools and students make up a relatively small portion of elementary and secondary education in this country. Only 1 in 4 (24.1%) of all elementary and secondary schools in this country is private. As shown in the figure below, slightly more than 1 in 10 students (11.3% of total enrollment) is enrolled in a private elementary or secondary school.¹¹ This also suggests that the average private school is considerably smaller than the average public school.

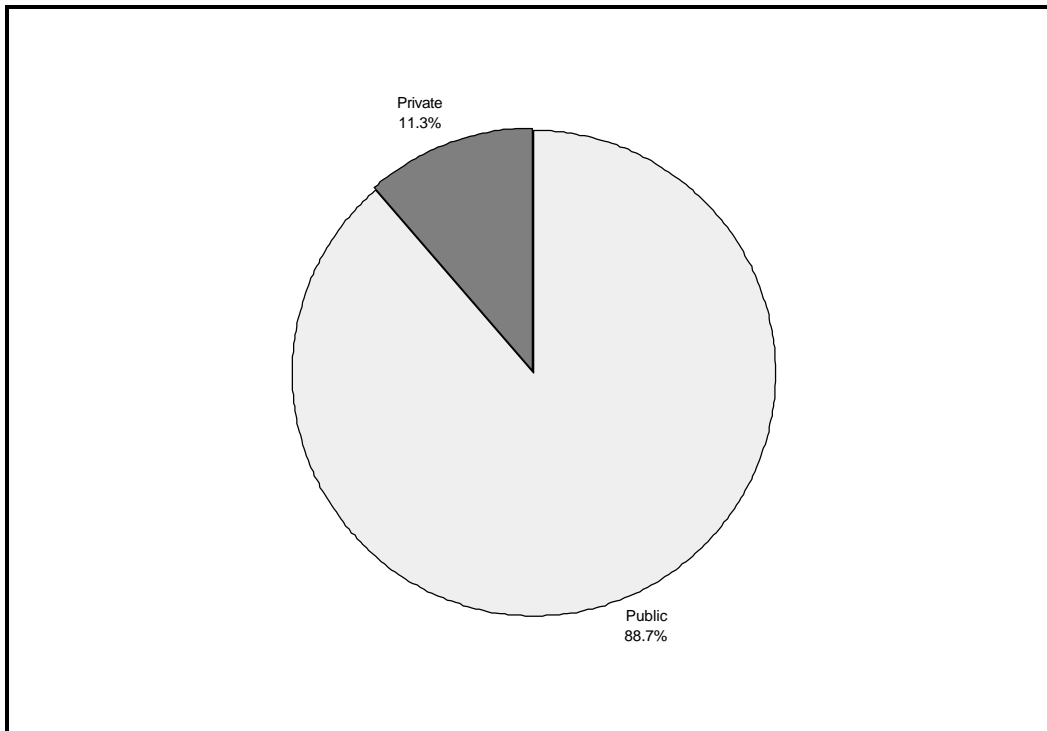
⁹(...continued)

due solely to sampling fluctuation. For explanations of sampling errors and significance testing of the SASS, PPS, and CPS data see: ED, *Schools and Staffing*, Appendix C; ED, *Private School Universe Survey*, Technical Notes; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *CPS Source and Accuracy Statement*. Available online: [<http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/school/smethdoc.htm>]. The SASS and PSS data were tested for significance at the .05 level; the CPS data were tested for significance at the .10 level.

¹⁰ Patricia M. Lines. *Homeschoolers: Estimating Numbers and Growth*, U.S. Department of Education, web edition issued spring 1999. p. 1.

¹¹ ED, *Schools and Staffing*, Table 2; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 1998*, Table 3 (Hereafter cited as ED, *Digest of Education Statistics 1998*).

Figure 1. Public and Private Shares of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment, 1996



Source: U.S. Department of Education. *Digest of Education Statistics, 1998*, Table 3.

In 1997-1998, an estimated 5.1 million students were enrolled in approximately 27,400 private schools.¹²

Looking at trends in this area over time, it is evident that the share of all elementary and secondary schools that are private and the portion of all students who are enrolled in private schools has not changed appreciably over the past 2 decades.¹³

Religious Affiliation of Schools and Students

Over three-fourths (78.0%) of all private elementary and secondary **schools** are religiously affiliated; while less than a fourth (22.0%) of private schools are non-sectarian. Within the sectarian portion of the private school universe, the largest single religious affiliation is Catholic (38.3%). The remainder are distributed among a wide variety of other faiths.¹⁴

As shown in **Figure 2** below, the distribution of **students** among these schools differs from the distribution of schools. An estimated 84.3% of private school students are enrolled in sectarian schools; 15.7% are in non-sectarian schools. The

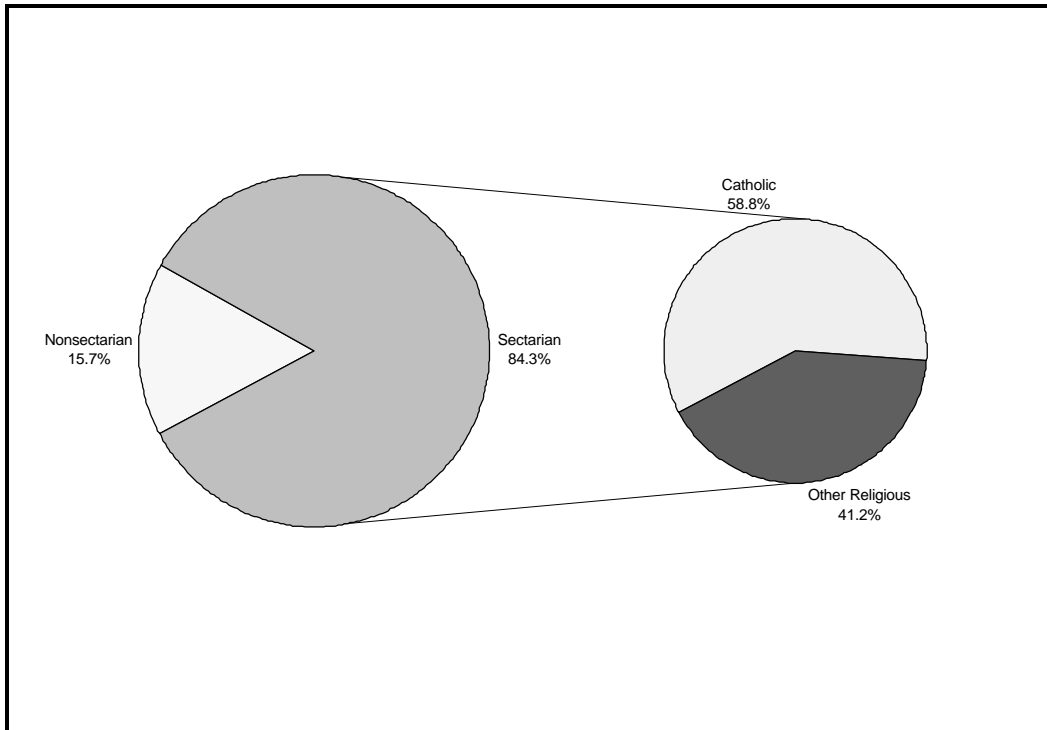
¹² ED, *Private School Universe Survey*, Tables 2 and 4.

¹³ ED, *Digest of Education Statistics 1998*, Tables 3 and 5.

¹⁴ ED, *Private School Universe Survey*, Table 3.

Catholic sector predominates with regard to enrollment. Enrollment in Catholic schools accounts for nearly half (49.5%) of all private school enrollment and a large majority of the enrollment in sectarian schools (approximately 58.8%).¹⁵

Figure 2. Distribution of Private School Enrollment by Religious Affiliation, 1997-1998



Source: ED, *Private School Universe Survey*, Table 19.

Geographic Distribution

Private schools and private school students are much more likely to be found in central cities than are public schools and students. Based on 1993-94 data, it is estimated that approximately 37.2% of private **schools** are located in central cities while only 23.8% of public schools are similarly located. A still greater share of **enrollment** in the private sector is found in central cities (45.5%) in comparison to public enrollment (29.2%).¹⁶ In contrast, only 29.9% of private schools and only 18.1% of private enrollment are located in rural areas, while nearly half of public

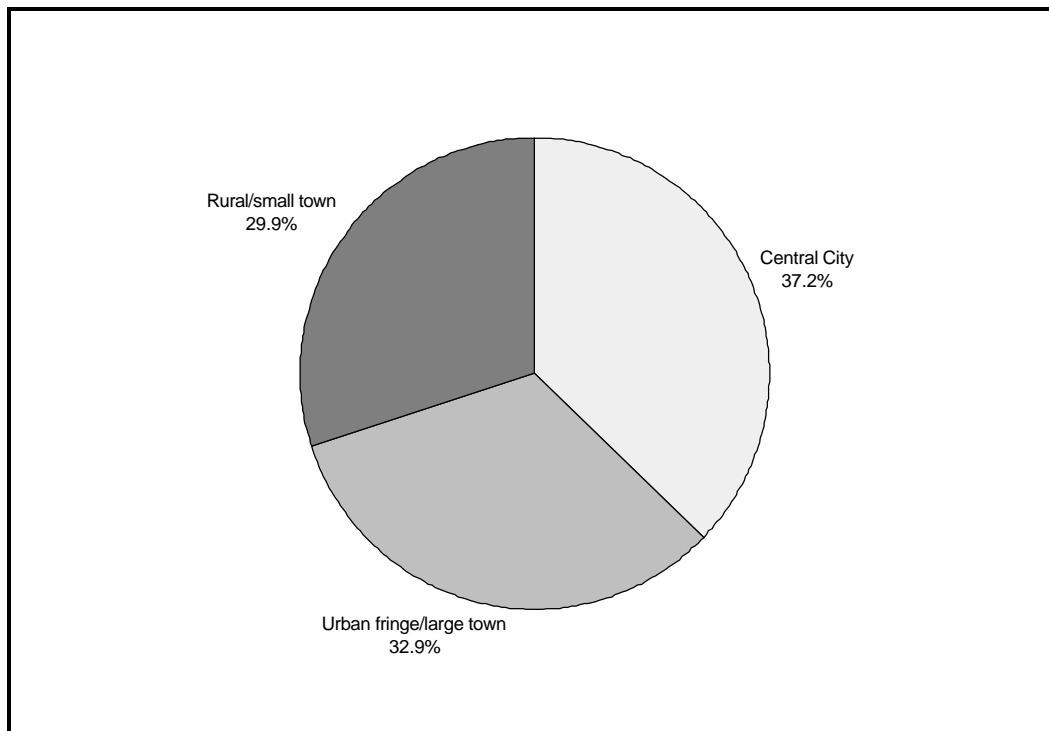
¹⁵ ED, *Private School Universe Survey*, Table 19. The substantially greater percentages of enrollment accounted for by Catholic schools compared to the number of schools is a result of significantly larger enrollment in individual Catholic schools in contrast to other sectarian and nonsectarian schools. In 1997-1998, over 80% of all Catholic schools had 150 or more students, while only 20% of other religious schools and 25% of nonsectarian schools had enrollments of that size.

¹⁶ ED, *Schools and Staffing*, Table 2.1. The designations used in this survey are derived from Census Bureau definitions of urban and rural status for places in which schools are located.

schools (49.1%) and over a third (38.2%) of public school students are considered to be in rural areas.

Figures 3 and 4 below depicts the distribution of private schools and students among three types of locations — central city, urban fringe/large town, and rural/small town.¹⁷

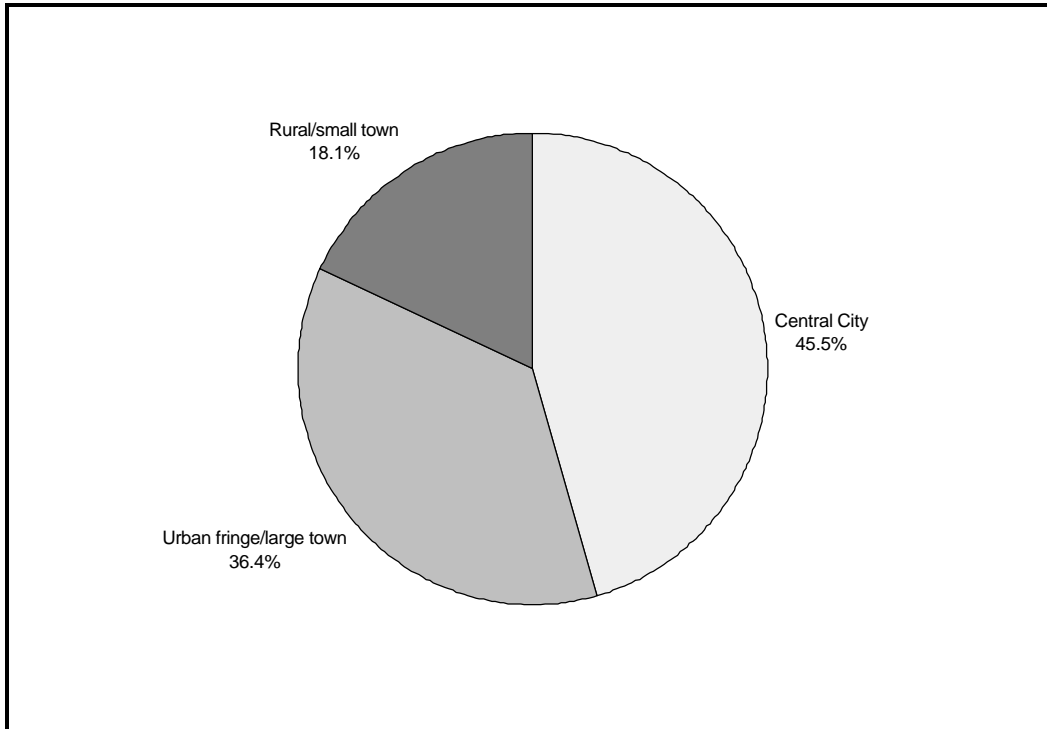
Figure 3. Distribution of Private Schools by Type of Location, 1993-1994



Source: ED, *Schools and Staffing*, Table 2.1.

¹⁷ A **central city** is defined as a “large central city,” a central city of a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) with at least 400,000 people or with a population density of at least 6,000 per square mile, or a central city of an SMSA that is not a large central city. An **urban fringe/large town** is a place within an SMSA of a large or mid-sized central city that is defined as urban by the Census Bureau, or a place not within an SMSA, but with a population of at least 25,000 and defined as urban. A **rural/small town** is a place with less than 2,500 people and defined as rural by the Census Bureau, or a place not within an SMSA with a population of at least 2,500 but under 25,000 and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.

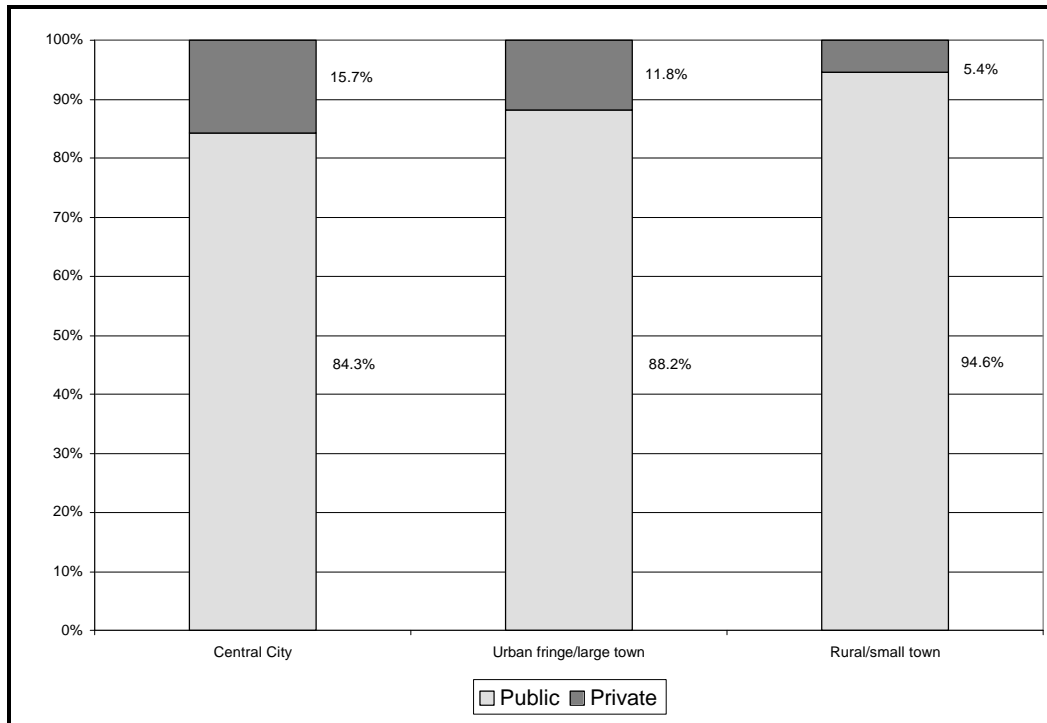
Figure 4. Distribution of Private School Enrollment by Type of Location, 1993-1994



Source: ED, *Schools and Staffing*, Table 2.1.

Finally, the central city focus of private school enrollment is also reflected in **Figure 5** below, which provides the percentage of elementary and secondary school students in each kind of location that is enrolled in private schools. As shown, the percentage of total enrollment that is private is nearly three times larger in central cities than it is in rural areas (15.7% compared to 5.4%).

Figure 5. Public and Private School Enrollment Shares by Type of Location, 1993-1994



Source: ED, *Schools and Staffing*, Table 2.1.

Turning briefly to enrollment patterns within different regions of the country, it is estimated that, in 1997, 10.0% of elementary and secondary students in the Northeast, 10.5% of students in the Midwest, 8.1% of students in the South, and 8.0% of students in the West were enrolled in private schools.¹⁸ None of the differences across regions is statistically significant.

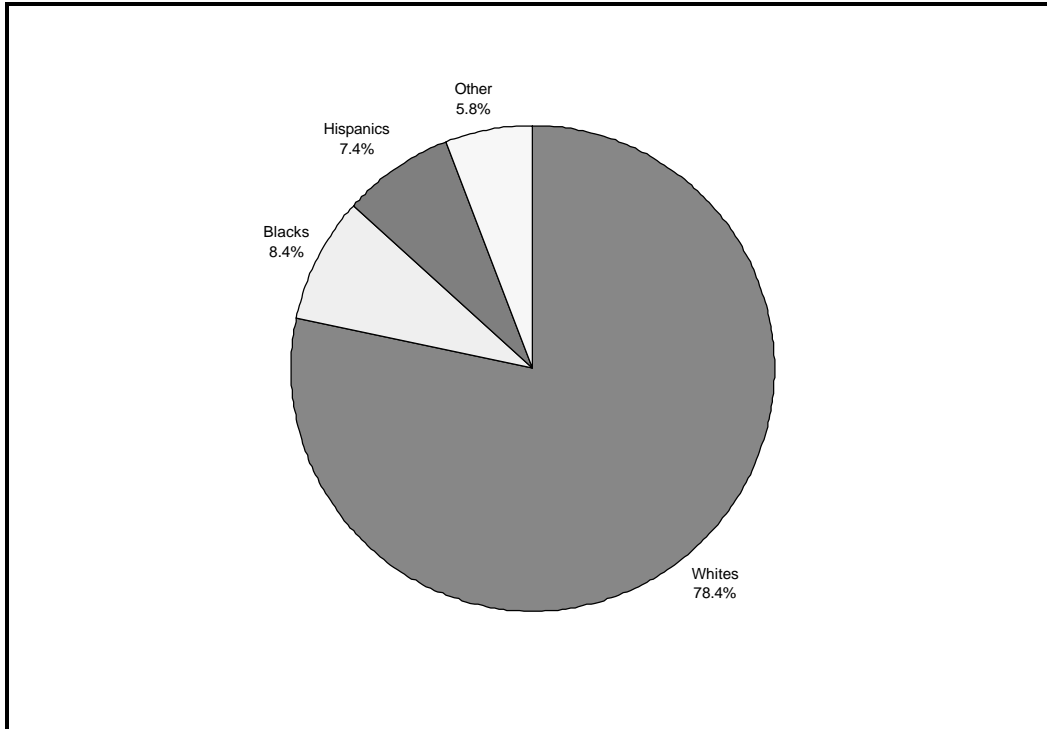
Racial and Ethnic Characteristics of Students

Private school enrollment is made up substantially of white students. The figure below shows that whites made up over three-fourths (78.4%) of private school enrollment in 1997. Blacks accounted for 8.4% of private enrollment, while Hispanics

¹⁸ CPS data. The composition of these regions is as follows: The *Northeast* region includes: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The *Midwest* region includes: Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The *West* region includes: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Wyoming, and Washington. The *South* region includes: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

constituted 7.4%.¹⁹ In contrast, whites comprised only 63.1% of public enrollment in 1997. The public shares for blacks and Hispanics were 16.9% and 14.9%, respectively.

Figure 6. Private School Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 1997



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *October Current Population Survey*, various years.

Over the past 2 decades, the relative shares of private enrollment by racial or ethnic group have not changed appreciably. The current figure for white enrollment in private schools represents a slight decline from 83.0% in 1981. The proportion of black enrollment has increased over the last 2 decades (from 7.0% to 8.4%), however this increase is not statistically significant. The share of Hispanic enrollment in private schools increased slightly, but not significantly, from 7.1% in 1981 to 7.4% in 1997.²⁰

Looking more in depth at school enrollment trends **within** various racial and ethnic groups, **Table 1** indicates that whites enroll in private schools at higher rates than do blacks or Hispanics. In 1997, 11.4% of whites were enrolled in private schools compared to 4.9% of blacks and 4.9% of Hispanics. The share of Hispanics enrolled in private schools represents a decrease from 8.5% in 1981; the proportion

¹⁹ These CPS data separately identify Hispanics, regardless of their racial grouping. As a result, these data describe white non-Hispanics, black non-Hispanics, and Hispanics.

²⁰ Multi-year data for Native Americans and Asian and Pacific Islanders are not presented because of inconsistent classification over the years and lack of available data until 1989. Therefore, these groups are included in the overall totals when calculating percentages, but not in the detailed discussions.

of whites and blacks enrolled in private schools appear relatively unchanged over the last 2 decades.²¹ It should be noted that total Hispanic elementary and secondary school enrollment nearly doubled over the last 2 decades, however, the vast majority of these new students are enrolled in public schools.²²

Table 1. Percentage Enrollment in Private Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Race/Ethnicity, 1981-1997

Year	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics
1981	11.6%	4.8%	8.5%
1985	12.9	4.1	7.2
1990	10.5	4.6	5.3
1995	12.5	6.3	6.5
1996	12.4	6.1	6.3
1997	11.4	4.9	4.9

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *October Current Population Survey*, various years.

Enrollment in private schools is roughly evenly divided between male and female students. Over the last 2 decades, there has been little fluctuation in these percentages.

Income Levels

Private school enrollment is positively correlated with family income — as income rises, the portion of children age 3 through 17 enrolled in private schools rises. As seen in **Table 2** below, in 1997, over 15% of children with family incomes of \$50,000 or above were enrolled in private schools, compared to less than 10% of children in any of the family income brackets below \$40,000.

Table 3 shows that a much higher portion of private school enrollment is from higher income families than is true for the public sector. In 1997, children with family incomes of \$50,000 and above made up over 50% of total private school enrollment, but only roughly 30% of public enrollment.

²¹ These difference were not statistically significant at the .10 level.

²² For further information on the Hispanic school-age population see: CRS Report RL30293, *Demographics of the U.S. School-Age Population*, by Patricia Osorio-O’Dea and Richard N. Apling.

Table 2. 1997 Enrollment in Public and Private Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Family Income

	Below \$10,000	\$10,000- \$19,999	\$20,000- \$29,999	\$30,000- \$39,999	\$40,000- \$49,999	\$50,000 and above	Not reported
Private	3.0%	3.4%	5.6%	9.2%	11.3%	15.3%	10.2%
Public	97.0	96.6	94.4	90.8	88.7	84.7	89.8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3. 1997 Percent of Overall Enrollment in Private or Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Family Income

	Below \$10,000	\$10,000- \$19,999	\$20,000- \$29,999	\$30,000- \$39,999	\$40,000- \$49,999	\$50,000 and above	Not reported	Total
Private	3.2%	4.4%	7.1%	12.2%	11.4%	52.0%	9.8%	100%
Public	11.1	13.3	13.1	12.8	9.6	30.9	9.2	100%

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *School Enrollment — Social and Economic Characteristics of Students*. Current Population Report P20-615. October 1997.

Enrollment by Grade Level

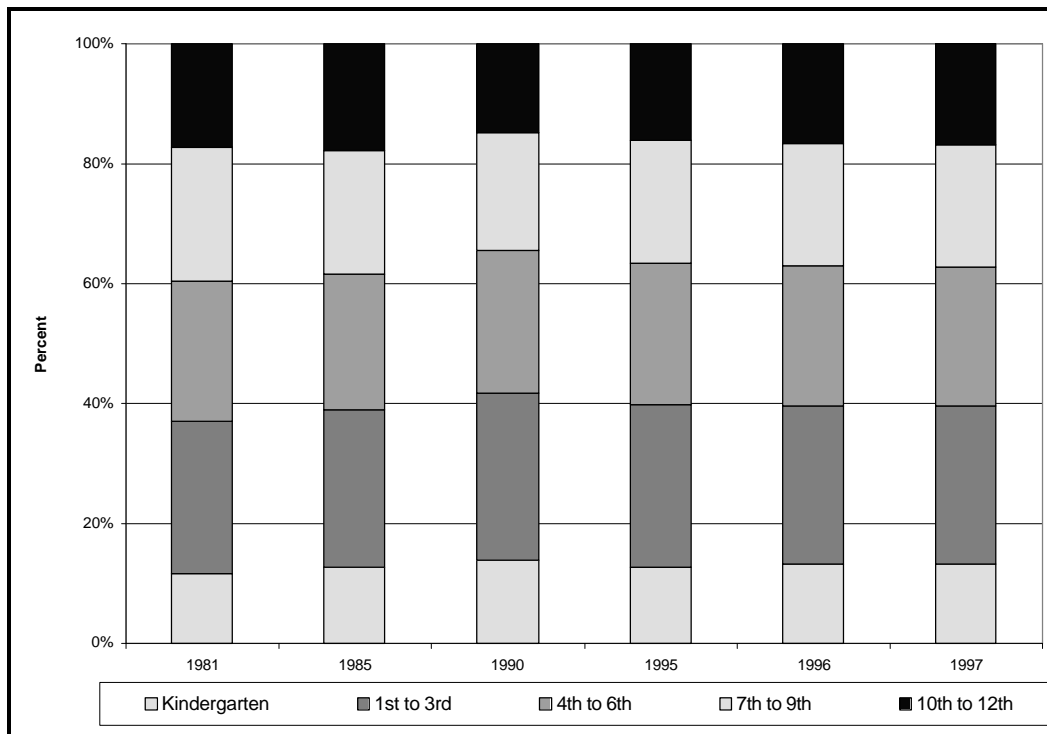
Three-year rolling averages²³ in the figure below illustrate total private school enrollment by grade levels (K-12) for selected years since 1981. Lowest grades account for significantly more of private enrollment than do highest grades; with some variation across years, roughly 40% of private enrollment can be found grades K-3. Much of this difference appears to be due to substantial kindergarten enrollment. In 1997, 39.6% of private enrollment was in grades K-3 (13.3% in kindergarten and 26.3% in grades 1-3). The portion of private enrollment in the highest grades (10-12) has been consistently smaller than for any other grade range (in 1997, it was 16.8%).

In contrast, a smaller portion of public enrollment is in the lowest grades, apparently due to a smaller portion enrolled in kindergarten. In 1997, about 31.2% of public enrollment was in grades K-3 (7.0% in kindergarten and 24.2% in grades 1-3). Further, according to Census data, the share of public enrollment in the highest grades (10-12) is not appreciably lower than the shares in earlier grade ranges (1-3, 4-6, 7-9).²⁴

²³ A 3-year rolling average is calculated using 3 years of data (e.g., 1980-1982, 1981-1983, etc.). They help reduce sharp fluctuations in year-to-year changes in the data due in part to sample size and revised definitions of the data collected. For 1997 and 1981, only 2 years of data were used in calculating the rolling average.

²⁴ Nevertheless, a Department of Education survey of public schools found a decline at the 10th through 12th grade level. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics 1998*. NCES 1999-036. Table 43.

Figure 7. Share of Private School Enrollment by Grade, 3-Year Rolling Averages, 1981-1997



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *October Current Population Survey*, various years.

Conclusion

As the 106th Congress debates school choice initiatives that include private schools, it is important to consider the characteristics of schools and students in that sector. The preceding analysis considered a limited number of broad characteristics of these schools and students. Several of the policy-relevant attributes of private schools and students that emerged from this analysis include the following:

- Private schools and students make up a relatively small portion of elementary and secondary education.
- The private sector is predominantly sectarian.
- Private schools and private school enrollment are more concentrated in central cities than are public schools and public school students. For example, close to half of all private enrollment is in central cities while less than a third of public enrollment is in that type of location.
- Students enrolled in private schools are much less likely to be minority than is true of public schools. Whites are substantially more likely to enroll in private schools than are blacks or Hispanics.
- In comparison to public school enrollment, private enrollment comes to a greater degree from higher income families.