



PRIVATE SCHOOLS ARE HOSTILE TO TOLERANCE AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Private schools do a better job of promoting civic values like tolerance and volunteerism to their students than public schools. Empirical research shows that students in private schools and in voucher programs are more likely to engage in political activities, volunteer in their communities, and be tolerant of the rights of others than students in public schools.

The Myth: Private Schools Are Hostile to Tolerance and Democratic Values

Many people believe that private schools, especially those operated by religious groups, fail to teach values like tolerance for others or the importance of civic duties. Opponents of school choice claim that voucher programs therefore undermine the values of democratic society and could even threaten social stability. One critic even told a state legislature that “voucher programs could end up resembling the ethnic cleansing . . . in Kosovo.”¹

Public schools, on the other hand, are perceived as institutions where children learn good civic values. Because public schools are government-run, many people assume that they must be more devoted to teaching the values of the community. As one social theorist put it: “Public schools are not merely schools for the public, but schools of publicness: institutions where we learn what it means to be a public.”² Often, public schools are described as the “foundation of democracy,” even though there were no public schools until the 19th century.

The Facts: Private Schools Do a Better Job of Instilling Civic Values

In reality, students at private schools are more tolerant of the rights of others, more likely to vote, and more likely to be volunteers than students at public schools. There are several possible reasons why private schools may be better at promoting democratic values. Research shows that private schools are simply better at teaching students than public schools; the same qualities that make them better at teaching subjects like math could also make them better at teaching values like tolerance.³ These schools may also provide a cultural base for students to develop and embrace their personal identities. Studies have shown that individuals who are secure with their cultural identities are more likely to tolerate those who belong to other cultures.⁴

Private schools also benefit from being legally permitted to have a point of view on controversial subjects, something that isn’t permitted in public schools. This allows private schools to handle controversial issues in a more straightforward manner, and may help convey a tangible sense of what tolerance and civic duty require in practice. While it may seem counterintuitive that private schools would provide stronger democratic values, the empirical evidence supports the conclusion that vouchers would benefit the teaching of civic values to America’s youth.

The Evidence: Studies Show Private School Students Are More Tolerant and Have a Greater Sense of Civic Duty

Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas conducted a systematic review of all empirical studies comparing civic values in public and private schools. Among 23 findings based on random assignment (using lotteries to admit applicants to voucher programs) or other highly rigorous methods, Wolf reports that 12 found better civic values in private schools, while 10 found no visible difference and only one found better civic values in public schools. Among

36 other, more basic findings, Wolf reports that 21 found private schools had better civic values, while 13 were neutral and two found better values in public schools.⁵

The most frequently studied issue was social tolerance; students were asked to identify their “most disliked” group and then asked whether members of that group should be allowed to hold public rallies, have books in the library sympathetic to their views, etc. Wolf reports that among 21 analyses of the effects of private schooling on tolerance, 11 showed benefits to private education, while nine were inconclusive and one showed benefits to public schools.

Regarding political participation, Wolf identifies six findings, five of which found a significant increase in political activity as a result of private schooling, while the other study was inconclusive. Wolf also reports on 14 analyses of volunteerism between public and private schools. Eight of these showed benefits from private schools, five showed no visible effect, and one found a benefit from public schools. A similar pattern emerges across findings on other subjects.

Some critics claim that these effects can be attributed to Catholic schooling, and therefore cannot be expected at all private schools. To address this concern, Wolf conducted a separate analysis excluding studies that focus exclusively on Catholic schools or on Latinos (who predominantly attend Catholic schools). This left 45 findings on civic values; 22 of which found a private school advantage, 20 of which found no visible difference, and three of which found that public schools have an advantage in teaching civic values.

The Bottom Line

Empirical research shows that private schools and voucher programs improve democratic values. By enabling students to attend private schools, vouchers help increase the importance of tolerance and civic duty among America’s youth.

STUDIES COMPARING CIVIC VALUES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS			
Subject	Studies Finding a Private School Advantage	Studies Finding No Difference	Studies Finding a Public School Advantage
Tolerance	11	9	1
Volunteerism	8	5	1
Political Knowledge	4	5	0
Political Participation	5	1	0
Other	5	3	1
Total	33	23	3

EMPIRICAL STUDIES FINDING . . .			
	. . . Better Civic Values in Private Schools & Voucher Programs	. . . No Visible Difference	. . . Better Civic Values in Public Schools
Top Quality Studies	12	10	1
All Empirical Studies	33	23	3

¹ David Berliner, quoted in *EIA Communique*, Educational Intelligence Agency, May 10, 1999.

² Benjamin R. Barber, “Education for Democracy,” *The Good Society*, Spring 1997, p.1.

³ See the Friedman Foundation research review “Vouchers Deliver a Better Education” for more information.

⁴ John L. Sullivan, James Pierson, and George E. Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

⁵ Patrick Wolf, “Civics Exam,” *Education Next*, Summer 2007.