

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 a democratic society.

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... empirical studies find stronger civic values in public schools.

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... empirical studies find stronger civic values in voucher participating private school students.

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 for this: private schools are simply better at teaching students than public schools; the same qualities that make them better at teaching subjects like math also make them better at teaching values like tolerance.

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 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 reviewed 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.

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

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.