

Why Indiana Voucher Parents Choose Private Schools

Introduction

In 2011, Indiana enacted the broadest school voucher program in the country.

In the program's first year, almost 4,000 families used vouchers to attend participating private schools, with the number of students applying for vouchers more than doubling in each of the following two years, to 9,324 students in 2012–13, and 19,809 in 2013–14. The state's other private school choice program, the School Scholarship Tax Credit, also has grown over time, from 978 students in 2011, to 2,890 in 2013.

Who is using vouchers and tax-credit scholarships? The latest data from the program's second year are clear. Eighty-one percent of students using vouchers qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. Sixty-six percent came from metropolitan areas, almost half (48 percent) were minority, and 11 percent have special needs. Enrollees chose from among 313 participating private schools, up from 242 in 2011.

But why are those parents leaving one school and choosing another school? How important is academic quality, safety, or transportation to their decisions? And how easy is it for parents to find the right private school for their child?

To better understand those questions, Indiana's legislature established a legislative study commission on private school choice in 2013 via HEA 1003. Policymakers wanted to know "Why parents choose to enroll a child in a choice scholarship school."

Survey Overview

To assist policymakers to better understand why a parent chooses a different school for their child, a consortium of Indiana organizations—the Indiana Non-Public Education Association, School Choice Indiana, and the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice—sponsored and administered a survey of private school parents, including parents who use vouchers and tax-credit scholarships.

The result is a first-ever parental satisfaction survey of families using Indiana's school voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs.

Specifically, this survey's data give a snapshot of the experiences of voucher and tax-credit scholarship parents choosing private schools in Indiana. These data will allow state policymakers to peer into the window of the private school experiences shared by thousands of Hoosier families, allowing for better-informed policies and decision-making with respect to Indiana's school voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs.

Key Results

- Choice parents were dissatisfied with their child's previous public school and cited academic quality as the main reason they decided to switch schools.
- In general, public schools did not deter a parent's choice, but almost one in four said their previous public school did not support their decision and one in six reported the public school actively tried to discourage their choice.
- Choice parents found it very easy to access and find private schools for their children.
- Choice parents overwhelmingly were satisfied with their chosen private school.
- Better academics was the top reason why parents picked private schools.

Survey by the Numbers

- 4,072 Indiana parents completed surveys covering 6,129 total private school students.
- 1,397 of 4,072 parents surveyed indicated they used school vouchers or tax-credit scholarships, representing 2,254 choice students.
- 1,588 of 4,072 parents reported having two or more children attending the given private school.
- 90.4 percent completion rate for parents who started the web survey.

Survey Methods and Limitations

Between September 17 and November 6, 2013, the Indiana Non-Public Education Association (INPEA), School Choice Indiana (SCI), and the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice administered a web survey of Indiana private school parents. SCI sent email invitations three separate times to more than 4,000 parents directly from its parent database. INPEA distributed the survey through its School Jurisdictional Network; specifically, a survey link was emailed to all 13 jurisdictional heads (e.g., diocesan superintendents) who then were asked to forward it to all of their school principals who were asked to send it to their parent networks.

Respondents were told their responses would remain anonymous, unless otherwise directed, and that the results would be tabulated by an independent third party. We assume all schools that received the survey forwarded the invitation to parents, and therefore we estimate 266 private schools distributed invitations to their parents. Additionally, we report only the results obtained from parent surveys

covering the oldest or only child attending the given private school who had sent the survey invitation to the family.

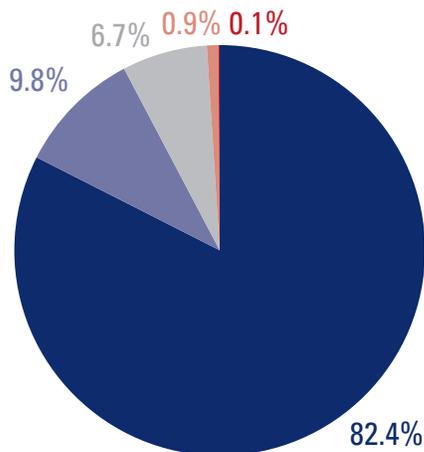
The web survey results should be interpreted with some caution because we can't be certain about the exact population of private school families who received the survey invitation either from INPEA or SCI. Hence, there are three limitations to the data collected. First, respondents self-selected to take this survey, and no statistical adjustments have been made with respect to probability or demographics. Second, we were unable to survey parents whose children may have participated in one of Indiana's school choice programs, but who no longer use a voucher or scholarship. Finally, we did not ask demographic questions in the questionnaire.

Regardless, at this point in time, and with the current survey data collection, we can make a reasonable assumption these survey results provide an accurate reflection of the experiences of choice families who attend private schools within the networked jurisdictions of INPEA and the parent network of SCI.

Finding #1: Choice parents found it easy to access private schools.

Nine out of 10 (92 percent) Hoosier choice families (using a school voucher or tax-credit scholarship) found it easy to find the right private school for their child—82 percent said it was “very easy” (see Figure 1).

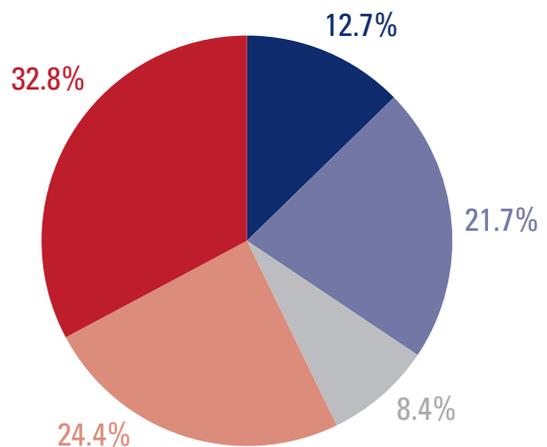
FIGURE 1 How easy was it for you to find the right school for your child under the voucher program or tax-credit scholarship program? Would you say it was:



Finding #2: Almost six in 10 parents were dissatisfied with their previous public school.

Of families who previously enrolled their child in a public district or charter school, 57 percent reported dissatisfaction with the previous school; only 34 percent said they were satisfied (see Figure 2). There is also a very large gap (-20 points) between the proportions saying “very satisfied” (13 percent) versus “very dissatisfied” (33 percent).

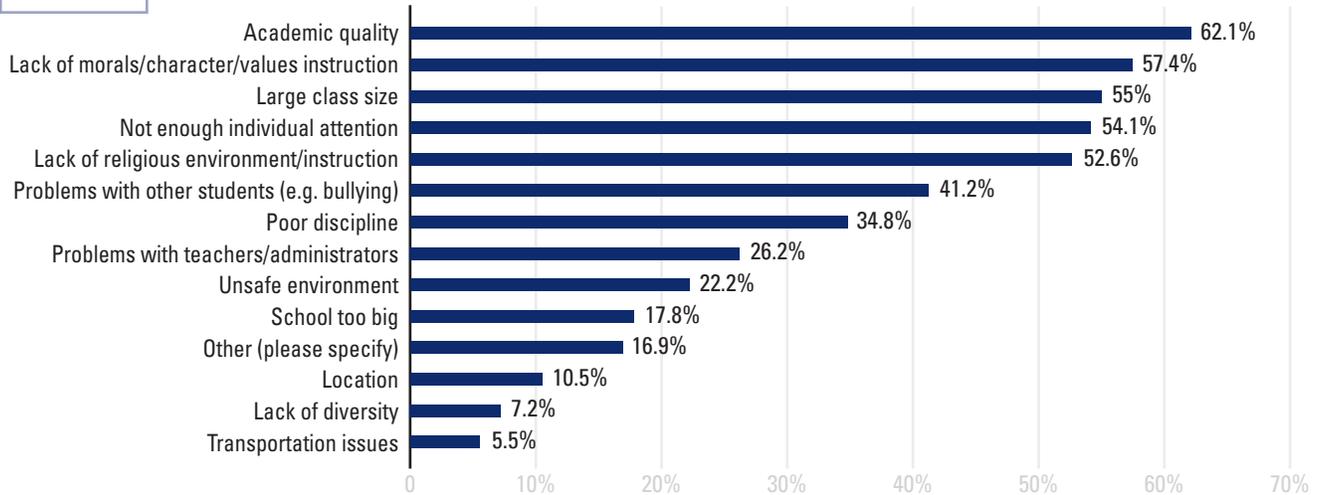
FIGURE 2 Thinking about your child's previous [public school/charter school]... Please tell us how satisfied you were with that school. Would you say you were:



Finding #3: Academic quality is the main reason why parents switched schools.

Choice parents most frequently (62 percent) pointed to “academic quality” as the key reason for switching from public to private schools (see Figure 3). Other key reasons were: “lack of morals/character/values instruction” (57 percent), “large class size” (55 percent), “not enough individual attention” (54 percent), and “lack of religious environment/instruction” (53 percent).

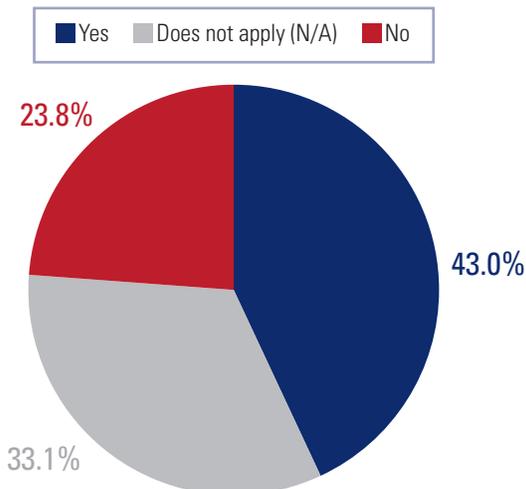
FIGURE 3 What are the main reasons for why you left your previous [public school/charter school]? Please check all that apply.



Finding #4: Almost one in four parents said public schools did not support their switching schools.

Based on parent responses—specifically those switching from public to private schools—public schools were more likely to support the decisions of parents to enroll their child in another school (see Figure 4). However, almost one in four said public schools did not support their decision to switch schools.

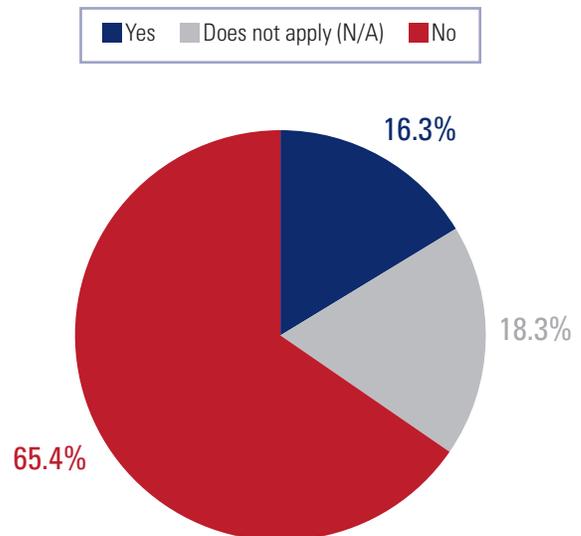
FIGURE 4 The next two questions ask about the reaction of your previous [public school/charter school] when you expressed interest in placing your child in a different school... Did they support your decision to switch schools?



Finding #5: One in six parents said their previous public school actively tried to discourage choice.

Generally speaking, public schools did not try to persuade parents against switching schools (see Figure 5). However, one out of six parents (16 percent) reported their previous public school actively tried to discourage their move to a private school.

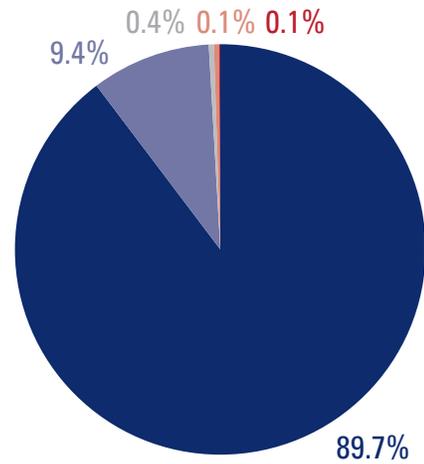
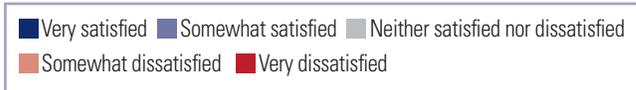
FIGURE 5 Did they try to persuade you not to switch schools?



Finding #6: Choice families were overwhelmingly satisfied with their chosen private school.

Nine out of 10 parents (90 percent) said he/she was “very satisfied” with their private school (see Figure 6). By comparison, just 13 percent of public-private switchers said they were “very satisfied” with their previous public school.

FIGURE 6 Now thinking about your current private school... Overall, how satisfied are you with this school? Would you say you are:



Finding #7: Better academics was the top reason why parents picked private schools.

There were three reasons—much more frequently cited than others—why choice families selected their private school (see Figure 7): “better academics” (78 percent), “morals/character/values instruction” (73 percent), and “religious environment/instruction” (67 percent).

FIGURE 7

What are the main reasons you chose this current private school for your child?*

*Percentages below reflect aggregate responses (regardless of priority) based on the following question: What are the top three reasons you chose this current private school for your child? Please rank: 1=most important, 2=second important, 3=third important

