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“Public” Schools in Name Only?

2,800 U.S. Public Schools Serve Virtually No Poor Students, reports Fordham Institute

WASHINGTON - More than 1.7 million American children attend “*private* public schools” where low-income pupils make up less than 5 percent of the student body, a new analysis finds. In some metropolitan areas, as many as one in six public-school students—and one in four white youngsters—attends such schools. Nationwide, more children attend “*private* public schools” than attend charter schools.*

“By serving only well-off children, these schools are arguably more private than many private schools,” said Michael J. Petrilli, a co-author of the report and vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the nonpartisan education policy think tank that published it. “Perhaps they should stop calling themselves ‘public’ schools, because they are hardly open to the public.”

The analysis examined public elementary, middle, and high schools, using information from the federal government’s Common Core of Data for 2007-2008. Among the national findings:

- 2,817 “*private* public schools” exist across the United States.
- While 17 percent of public school students nationwide are African-American, that’s true of just 3 percent of the pupils in “*private* public schools.” Hispanic students account for 21 percent of the nationwide public school population, but 12 percent of the students in “*private* public schools.”
- On the other hand, Asian students comprise 5 percent of public school students nationwide but 10 percent of students in “*private* public schools.” And white students account for 75 percent of the “*private* public school” population, compared to 56 percent of public school students nationwide.

Among states and major metropolitan areas, there’s great variation:

- More than one child in ten attends “*private* public schools” in Connecticut (18%), New Jersey (17%), South Dakota (16%), Arizona (14%), and Massachusetts (12%).
- In twenty-three other states, however, no more than 1 percent of the public school population is enrolled in “*private* public schools.” These include Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico, and North Carolina.
- The metro areas with the largest shares of students in “*private* public schools” include Boston (16%), New York (13%), Phoenix (11%), San Francisco (10%) and Denver (9%).

*Note: Among the 2,817 “*private* public schools” we identified nationwide we found 73 charter schools.

- In some metro areas, a high percentage of white students in public schools attend “*private public schools*.” New York (27%), San Francisco (21%), Boston (20%), Philadelphia (14%), Denver (14%) and Los Angeles (13%).

“Taxpayers willingly spend billions of dollars on these exclusive public schools,” said Chester E. Finn, Jr., Fordham’s president, “though they are, in practical terms, off-limits to poor kids. And few if any elected officials raise any fuss. It’s hypocritical if not discriminatory of them to turn around and oppose charters, vouchers and other school choice programs that would give truly needy children a shot at a comparable education.”

For more information about this analysis and the Fordham Institute visit www.edexcellence.net.

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