Federal Surveys Provide Picture of Private Schools

Reports released this summer on two federal surveys provide, from an array of angles, a penetrating look at the state of private education in the United States.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in August released selected findings from the 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a nationally representative survey of public and private school principals and teachers. The SASS project is an enormous undertaking, encompassing a sample size of 11,000 public schools and 3,000 private schools, and involving mailed questionnaires with telephone and in-person follow-up.

The survey offers a rich assortment of information about schools, the people who run them, and the students who attend them. It turns out, for example, that 64 percent of graduates from all private high schools and 81 percent of graduates from Catholic high schools go on to a four-year college. The same is true for 40 percent of graduates from traditional public schools and 81 percent of graduates from all private high schools. Seventy percent of Catholic schools have students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and 16 percent (identical to the total for all private schools) have English proficient (LEP). Eighty percent of Catholic schools have students with an IEP, and 16 percent (identical to the total for all private schools) have LEP or LEP students.

Influential Principals

Private school principals see themselves as having more influence over the establishment of curriculum and performance standards than do principals in public schools, reflecting a greater degree of local autonomy in private schools.

Seventy percent of private school principals say they have a major influence on establishing curriculum at the school, compared to 43 percent of public school principals. Eighty-one percent of private school principals and 74 percent of public school principals regard themselves as influential in “setting performance standards for students.”

But regardless of their influence, private school principals on average receive an annual salary ($65,300) that is considerably less than that received by their public school counterparts ($90,500). Not surprisingly, the salary differential also holds true for teachers, with regular full-time private school teachers receiving an average annual base salary of $40,200, compared to $53,100 for public school teachers.

Private School Universe Survey

In July, NCES released its first look at results from the 2011-12 Private School Universe Survey (PSS), a comprehensive count of the number of private schools, students, and teachers in the United States. Unlike the SASS, which seeks data from a sampling of schools (albeit a very large sampling), the target population of the PSS is every private school in the country.

The massive outreach starts with letters inviting schools to complete an online survey. Follow-up correspondence, phone interviews, and visits by field representatives help ensure a high response rate—a tad over 92 percent this year.

The PSS estimates that in the fall of 2011, there were 30,861 private elementary and secondary schools in the United States, serving 4,494,845 students in grades K-12 and employing 420,880 full-time equivalent teachers. The enrollment figure represents a drop of 4 percent since 2009 and 16 percent since 2001.

As for basic demographics, 51 percent of private school students are male; 49 percent are female. Ten percent of students enrolled in private schools are Hispanic; 9 percent are black; 6 percent Asian, and 71 percent white.

Private education is mostly faith-based, with 80 percent of students attending 21,086 schools with a religious orientation.

Schools tend to be small. Sixty-eight percent have enrollments under 150 students, and only 6 percent enroll 500 or more students. The data suggest that class sizes are small, too, in that private schools have an average of 10.7 students for every teacher.

All-boys schools account for 2.3 percent of the private school pool, and all-girls schools account for 1.8 percent, leaving nearly 96 percent coeducational.
Senators Sponsor School Choice Forum

Four prominent Senate Republicans beamed a bright light on the value of school choice during a roundtable forum they hosted July 30 on Capitol Hill. The event featured more than a dozen parents, students, and school leaders, collectively witnessing to how the opportunity to attend a successful school can change the course of a child’s life and strengthen education for the country.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (KY) and Senators Lamar Alexander (TN), Rand Paul (KY), and Tim Scott (SC) hosted the “Success for Our Children” forum, billed as “a conversation about advancing education by encouraging the ideals of school choice.”

Senator Paul, who chaired the event, described himself as “a big believer that choice is good for kids.” He called for “thinking outside the box” and said education should incorporate principles from the marketplace, where competition and choice fosters success.

Drawing upon his own schooling as a child, Senator Tim Scott said, “The theory that education leads to freedom cannot be more true.” He described education as a “power” that helped him achieve his goals, and said alternative schools offer “exactly the same power” to students. Flexibility, creativity, and empowering parents with the opportunity to make choice for their kids are elements that provide youngsters with the chance to succeed.

He said supporting school choice would be better than having the current battery of federal programs and telling people “where to go and what to do.”

Indeed, Alexander likened the current system of assigning students to schools with the military draft. He called that assignment system “the most coercive thing in American life,” except for the draft. “We got rid of the draft but we still have the pupil assignments. So why not borrow from colleges the same idea that they have, and use it for schools with school choice?”

Justice Department Sues Louisiana Over Voucher Program

The U.S. Justice Department in August asked a federal court to stop the State of Louisiana from awarding vouchers in the 2014-15 school year to students in districts that are under federal desegregation orders unless authorized to do so by “the appropriate federal court overseeing the applicable desegregation case.” The suit charges that in 2012-13, nearly 600 students in such districts received vouchers and “many of those vouchers impeded the desegregation process.”

The lawsuit sparked immediate reaction. American Federation for Children (AFC), said White “thought it ironic that rules set up to combat racism were being called on to keep black students in failing schools.”

Kevin Chavous, executive counsel to the American Federation for Children (AFC), said the “assault on educational options is unprecedented and directly impacts low-income families.” He said the AFC will continue to fight to ensure that students “trapped in failing schools are not left behind.”
The mayor’s support for vouchers has roots. In a speech at the Manhattan Institute in 2000, when he was a member of the Newark City Council, Booker described his journey toward choice. “I have always been, up until maybe four or five years ago, a strong advocate for the old-fashioned way of educating children. I supported public schools only….But after four or five years of working in inner-city Newark, I began to rethink my situation, rethink my philosophy, rethink my views on public education, simply because of the realities I saw around me. Being outcome-focused started to change my view in favor of options like charter schools, contract schools and, yes, vouchers.”

With the primaries behind him, the latest blows against Booker are no longer that he supports choice, but that his position on the issue is neither clear enough nor strong enough.

Attacking Booker from the other side of the voucher issue, businessman and former Bogota (NJ) Mayor Steven Lonegan charges that Booker “has not been aggressive” on school choice.

Claiming that Booker has not introduced a voucher program in Newark, Lonegan states in a news release, “It is time for Cory Booker to man up and say once and for all whether he will support school vouchers if he is elected to the U.S. Senate or will he join President Obama in shutting down school voucher programs.”

On his campaign Web site, Lonegan is described as “a strong supporter of school voucher and tax credit ideas that put parents in charge of their children’s education.”

The special election to determine who will fill the U.S. Senate seat of Frank Lautenberg, who died in June, is scheduled for October 16. But one way or another, it looks like New Jersey will soon have a senator who supports the right of parents to choose a child’s school.
CAPEnotes

★ Two recent polls reveal that parents have a favorable opinion about private schools.

The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 20 percent of parents of school-age children consider private schools in the United States to be excellent and another 41 percent regard them as good, amounting to an excellent/good combination of 61 percent. Just 4 percent of parents rate public schools in the U.S. as excellent, while 34 percent say they are good, for a combined total of 38 percent.

Taking another angle, the poll found that 91 percent of parents with children in private schools say their child’s school is good or excellent, compared to 75 percent of parents with children in public schools.

Meanwhile, the Education Next-PEPG (Program on Education Policy and Governance) poll shows that 76 percent of parents give an “A” or “B” grade to private schools in their community, while 55 percent give the same grades to public schools in their community. African Americans in general (not just parents) have similar high regard for local private schools (74 percent give them an “A” or “B”) but much lower regard for public schools. Only 30 percent of African Americans award local public schools with an “A” or “B.”

Be sure to check out CAPE’s new infographic (capenet.org/infographic.html) depicting the AP-NORC data and more.

★ Peter M. Flanigan, investment banker, policy advisor, and staunch supporter of school choice, died July 29. He was 90.

Mr. Flanigan’s broad involvement in the school choice movement included service in 1993 on the New York State Blue Ribbon Panel on Catholic Schools. Charged by the state commissioner of education with recommending “creative ways” to address the “current pattern of Catholic school closings,” the panel’s recommendations included state tax credits not only for private school tuition, but also for donations to schools, programs, and scholarship funds. Flanigan at the time was managing director at the investment house Dillon, Reed & Company.

Flanigan’s stellar commitment to school choice included establishment of the Patrons Program, which matched sponsors with needy schools; Student Sponsor Partners, which linked donors with individual students; and the School Choice Scholarships Foundation, which helped students with the costs of tuition. He served as chair of Children First America and was a founding board member of the Alliance for School Choice.

“Few in America have done more over the past two decades to advance educational choice for children than Peter Flanigan,” said John Kirtley, vice chair of the American Federation for Children.

★ As part of the U.S. Department of Education’s Equitable Services Implementation Plan (ESIP) to help improve the delivery of federally funded services to students in religious and independent schools, the department’s Office of Non-Public Education (ONPE) has been very busy this summer producing a series of in-depth webinars. Each session features department specialists covering everything school officials need to know to have their students and teachers participate in the highlighted program.

All webinars have been recorded and are (or soon will be) available for viewing on the department’s Web site at http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/nonpublic/technical.html#webinars>.