

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Survey Identifies Why Parents Choose Private Schools

Consider it a reason to press the pause button in the push to judge schools solely by test scores. A new survey of parents shows that assessment results are not even among the top ten reasons why families choose private schools.

Released last month by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, the survey of parents participating in the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program found, "Student performance on standardized test scores is one of the least important pieces of

information upon which parents base their decision regarding the private school to which they send their children."

Since 2013, parents in Georgia have been able to take advantage of scholarships offered by student scholarship organizations (SSOs), contributions to which are eligible for state tax credits. The GOAL program is the largest of the state's SSOs, accounting for roughly 32 percent of all taxpayer contributions to scholarship organizations. In 2013, surveys were distributed to 2,685 families receiving GOAL scholarships, and 754 of those families completed all the questions in the survey.

One question asked parents about their level of satisfaction with the private school they had chosen. As the report puts it, "Surveyed parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their private school choice, with 98.6 percent of parents being 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their decision to send their children to a private school."

Respondents were also asked the following question: "There are many possible

reasons why families send their children to a private school rather than to a public school. Please select each of the following reasons you had for sending your child to a private school (you may mark as many or as few reasons as applied to your situation)." Respondents were given 21 possible reasons.

According to the report, more than 85 percent of parents said they chose a private school for a "better learning environment" for their child, whereas 81.3 percent said the choice

was made for a "better education." The next two most common responses were "smaller class sizes" (80.5 percent) and "more individual attention for my child" (76.4 percent). Other reasons cited by a majority of parents were "religious education" (64.1 percent), "better preparation for college" (62.9 percent), "better student discipline" (61.7 percent), "more responsive teachers and administrators" (60.3 percent), and "improved student safety" (52.9 percent)."

"Higher standardized test scores" was the 15th highest-rated reason, with only 34.6 percent of respondents listing it at all, and only 10.2 percent listing it among

their top five reasons.

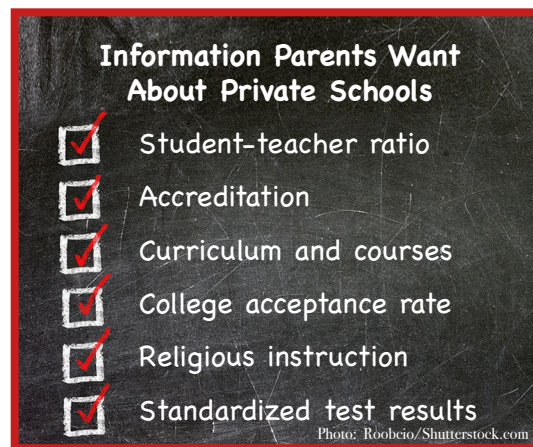
"These results should dissuade lawmakers from forcing standardized tests on private schools, including those with school choice students," Benjamin Scafidi, co-author of the Friedman report and professor at Georgia College & State University, said. "Parents want to evaluate schools based on their children's needs, not the government's."

Asked what information they would seek to help them decide which private school to choose, 84.2 percent of parents identified the "ratio of students per teacher and the average class size" as important. Other factors identified as important included "school accreditation (70.2 percent), curriculum and course descriptions (69.9 percent), college acceptance rate (61.3 percent), and the availability of religious instruction (56 percent)." In addition, 52.8 percent of respondents identified "average performance on standardized tests" as important.

The Friedman report called the sixth-place ranking of standardized tests on this question "a somewhat low ranking relative to the disproportionate emphasis that many educators, politicians, policymakers, business leaders, and the media are placing on national standards and standardized testing."

More Than

Scores: An Analysis of Why and How Parents Choose Private Schools is available for download from the Friedman Web site at: <http://www.edchoice.org/CMSModules/EdChoice/FileLibrary/1031/More-Than-Scores.pdf>.



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a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
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NAEP Report Cards in Math and Reading Released

Students in religious and independent schools showed a substantial performance advantage over students in government schools, according to the **latest report cards** in math and reading from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

The average reading scale score for eighth-graders attending private schools (285) was 19 points higher than the overall score for students attending public schools (266). The private school score fell at roughly the 69th percentile of test takers. In fourth grade, the public/private difference in reading was 14 points (235 vs. 221).

In math, the private school advantage was 12 points in grade 8 (296/284) and 5 points in grade 4 (246/241).

The report also presents results as percentages of students meeting various achievement levels. As the accompanying charts demonstrate, a significantly higher percentage of private school students scored at or above the proficient level than public school students. Fifty-seven percent of private school eighth-graders reached that mark in reading, compared to 34 percent of eighth-grade students in public schools. In eighth-grade math, 47 percent of private school students and 34 percent of public school students reached or exceeded the proficient level.

According to the report, “Students performing at or above the proficient level on NAEP assessments demonstrate solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter.”

The NAEP assessments were administered to 377,000 fourth-graders and 342,000 eighth-graders in early 2013. With the 2013 release, the National Assessment of Education Statistics (NCES) introduced a new Web-based reporting format with interactive charts and graphs.

NAEP math assessments cover five content

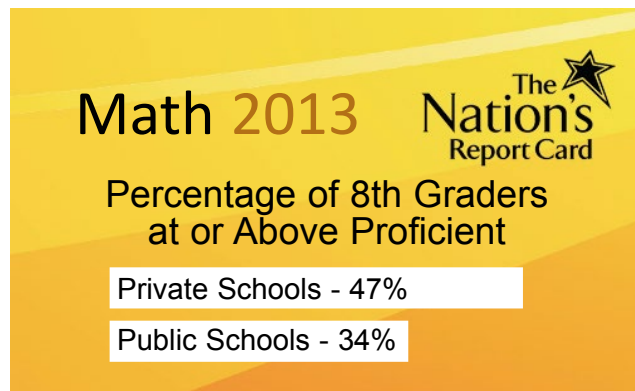
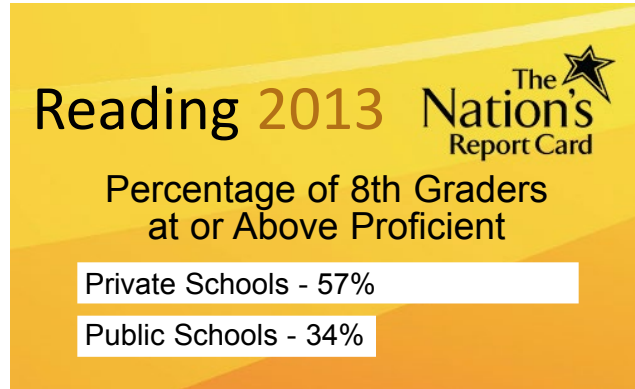
areas: number properties and operations; measurement; geometry; data analysis, statistics and probability; and algebra. Questions can be challenging. For example, an eighth-grade math student at the proficient level is expected to answer the following question: “Points A and B are on a number line. The coordinate of point B is 3 and the coordinate of the midpoint of segment AB is -5. What is the coordinate of point A?”

In reading, which covers literary text and informational text, students are asked to locate and recall, to integrate and interpret, and to critique and evaluate. Proficient students in eighth grade “should be able to provide relevant information and summarize main ideas and themes. They should be able to make and support inferences about a text, connect parts of a text, and analyze text features.” They should also be able “to fully substantiate judgments about content and presentation of content.”

In announcing the results, NCES Commissioner Jack Buckley noted that math scores “were higher in 2013 than in any previous year, going back to 1990.” In reading at grade 8, Buckley said “scores were higher in 2013 than in any previous year, going back to 1992.” At grade 4, “scores were higher in 2013 than in all previous years except 2011.”

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan echoed Buckley’s comments about record achievement levels: “In 2013, reading and math scores edged up nationally to new highs for fourth and eighth graders. It is particularly heartening that reading scores for eighth graders are up, after remaining relatively flat for the last decade.”

Duncan said the 2013 NAEP report “provides encouraging but modest signs of progress in reading and math for U.S. students.”



“Prepare for Real Life” Campaign Captures Public Attention

Private schools have a remarkably positive story to tell. They teach the lessons that count most in life; instill enduring traits of character; develop not only the mind and imagination, but also the heart and soul. Their extraordinary record of preparing students for success in life is indeed a story well worth telling. The problem, however, is that the story is not always told well.

Prepare for Real Life

Cue the fairytale princess—the focal point of a recent advertising campaign for an all-girls high school in Louisville, KY. Combining

soft childhood memories with a contemporary strong-woman message, the captivating campaign has caught the attention of media outlets across the country. It’s a textbook example

of how to convey the private school story with imagination and intelligence.

“Life’s not a fairytale,” a billboard proclaims, “Prepare for real life.” Banners, cinema displays, and bus-stop posters repeat the theme: “You’re not a princess.” “Don’t wait for a prince.” In other words, take charge of your life, blaze your own path, and start with a high-powered education to set the stage.

The message resonated quickly in media circles, resulting in pieces in the *Huffington Post*, *AdWeek*, *Business First*, and even a featured spot on NBC’s *Today Show*, where hosts Natalie Morales, Willie Geist, and Al Roker discussed the ad campaign over coffee.

Developing Strong Female Leaders

Mercy Academy, the real-life beneficiary of all this attention, turned to Louisville-based ad agency Doe-Anderson to develop the campaign. “Mercy’s curriculum teaches girls how to react to situations in the world outside of the classroom,” said Erin Spalding, Doe-Anderson’s account manager for the campaign. “It challenges young girls to become strong female leaders and encourages them to drive their own success. It’s the heart of what makes Mercy special, which is why it became the core of our campaign.”

According to Doe-Anderson, the “Prepare for Real Life” campaign “communicates Mercy’s mission of feminine empowerment by challenging the very source of unrealistic, damsel-in-distress thinking: fairytales.”

“As little girls, we’re filled with the notion

that we’re princesses in search of our handsome prince,” said Courtney Kempf, Doe-Anderson Associate Art Director. “Through fairytales, we’re being fed that the only way to live happily ever after is to do so. That, however, is not reality for most.”

According to the agency, “Kempf and colleagues designed a campaign that starkly contrasts soft, fairytale images with bold, pointed copy. The creative is intended to make people stop and think, to spark conversation around an issue that needs to be addressed.” The campaign, encourages girls “to become their own rescuers

and dream of ruling the real world, not a fictional one.”

Catching Fire

One of the campaign’s components is a six-foot display designed to appear in movie

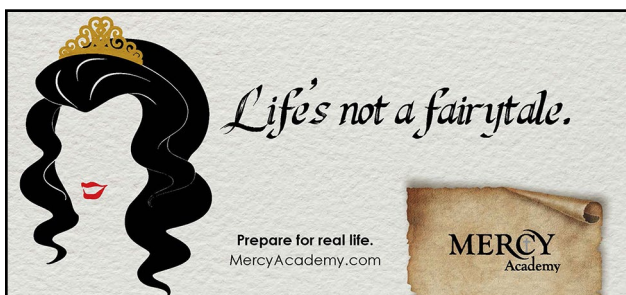
theater lobbies in connection with *Catching Fire*, a movie that, according to the agency, appeals to the campaign’s target of young girls and features a strong, successful female and Louisville native, Jennifer Lawrence.” The display’s crisp message is, “Be more than just the fairest of them all.”

“When we first met with the leadership at Mercy, we were immediately taken with their vision of preparing girls for the real world that awaits them once they are finished with their education,” said David Vawter, Doe-Anderson Chief Creative Officer. “As the father of an eight-year-old daughter, I want every girl—and their parents—to know that there’s no limit to what they can achieve if they have the right frame of mind and the right preparation. That’s the idea at the center of this campaign.”

Lessons for Others

So what lessons does the campaign carry for other private schools? Its success seems to stem from three elements: identifying unique attributes about the school; identifying a deep contemporary aspiration (the empowerment of women), and then connecting the two with an imaginative message. Indeed, the message’s foundation in fairytales—a primal narrative in forming some fundamental views about life—could hardly be more captivating.

Private schools have a number of unique attributes that simply cannot be duplicated in other schools. In many ways, society longs for those qualities. What will be the next imaginative message to link attributes and aspirations?



Proud History Perilous Future

Despite deep roots in our nation’s history, despite a long and proud record of accomplishment, despite enormous contributions to the common good, faith-based schools in the United States “are currently under severe financial strains that threaten the existence of many of them.” That’s the core message of a new document from the American Center for School Choice that calls religious schools “an essential element in the mosaic of American education” that deserve “support for their contributions and protection for their distinctiveness.”

Religious Schools in America: A Proud History and Perilous Future provides data and research establishing that private schools are more racially integrated than public schools and serve nearly the same percentage of English language learners and children with individualized education plans (IEPs) as the national average. Students from faith-based schools are more likely “to exercise civic skills” and display “a higher level of tolerance than their public school counterparts.” What’s more, the performance advantage of students in faith-based schools “is 1.7 grade levels ahead for black students, 2.5 grade levels ahead for Hispanic students, and 1.6 grade levels ahead for low-income students.”

Still, faith-based schools have closed at alarming rates. “Since 1990, more than 1,300 Catholic schools have closed, affecting some 300,000 students,” according to the report, which goes on to estimate that the loss “represents an additional cost to taxpayers of more than \$20 billion a year.”

The paper calls on “states and the federal government to empower parents with choices not limited to ZIP codes and traditional public schools.”

The full report is available at: www.amcsc.org/conference/ReligiousSchoolsInAmerica.pdf.

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CAPE notes

★ Who says government is aloof and unresponsive? Students at St. Maria Goretti School in Westfield, IN, asked U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan a direct question last month, and he responded right away.

The exchange took place November 19 during the 2013 National Blue Ribbon Schools awards luncheon at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington. Duncan was there to honor the 236 public and 50 private schools that received the award.

His keynote address was streamed live to schools across the country, and during a Q & A session, eighth graders at the Indiana school got their principal, Vince Barnes, to ask Duncan what's being done in Washington "to provide leadership programs" for middle school students throughout the country.

The secretary talked about the importance of providing leadership development in schools and opportunities for students to serve their communities. He said the department offers internships for high school and college students and partners with school districts and nonprofit organizations to help advance service and leadership opportunities. As a measure of his support, he reported that when he had worked in Chicago, he put together a service-learning program that resulted in some students offering hundreds of hours of community service.

But the students in Indiana got the last word. When Duncan was finished, principal Barnes, relying on a text-message relay

from the school, reported that his eighth-graders were grateful for the secretary's response.

★ In other remarks at the Blue Ribbon ceremony, Secretary Duncan called on public schools and private schools to share best practices. "We're all in this together," he said, adding, "I think publics can learn so much from non-publics, and non-publics can learn so much from publics." Calling any contention between the two communities "a false debate, a false competition," Duncan said that while there were some distinctions between the sectors, "there's a heck of a lot more in common than there are differences." Department officials want to help bridge any divide, he said.

★ "There is a legitimate diversity of views on what constitutes a good education. We should be no more willing to impose the 'right' kind of education on people than we would impose the 'right' religion or the 'right' political preference." So writes Jay P. Greene, department head and 21st Century Chair in Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, in a recent essay titled "[Stop Requiring Choice Programs to Take State Tests.](#)"

"Reasonable people disagree about what constitutes the good life, and the government in a free society should not be in the business of severely restricting that range of disagreement," says Greene. Countering the position that students in

publicly funded choice programs should take state tests geared toward state standards, Greene asks, "[W]hat if we want something other than the state vision of a good education?"

Greene believes that "the clear goal of the standards-based reform movement is to drive particular instructional changes," thus restricting "the range of differing visions of a good education much more than is desirable in a free society."

He calls the claim that state funding demands state accountability "shallow and false," citing other state-funded programs that have no formal accountability. "Pell Grants, Stafford Loans, and the Daycare Tuition Tax Credit do not require state testing for people using those funds. We just trust that the public purpose of subsidizing education will be served by people pursuing their own interests." Indeed the nation's largest domestic program does not require that "seniors account for the use of their Social Security checks."

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