

Good Citizenship

By Patrick J. Wolf

Do assigned public schools have a comparative advantage over public schools of choice and private schools in steeping their charges in the civic values necessary for democratic citizenship? The theoretical argument in favor of such an advantage is both intuitive and popular. As free government schools, open to all on equal terms, public schools make an important statement about equality, a fundamental democratic value. Former education secretary Richard Riley aptly captured this perspective, noting that civic values are “conveyed not only through what is taught in the classroom, but by the very experience of attending [a public] school with a diverse mix of students.”

Many supporters of school choice argue that neighborhood assignment to public schools results not in what public school advocates celebrate but in just the opposite: schools that are less likely to contain a diverse mix of students and that are more internally segregated along racial lines than are schools of choice. In recent years, a number of empirical studies of the effects of school choice on civic values have been published. As the extent of school choice in American education continues to grow—the latest data from the Department of Education show that 26 percent of American students attended a school other than their closest neighborhood public school—it is time to take stock of the evidentiary record on whether assigned public schooling better prepares students for their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy.

Studying the Effects of Choice on Civic Values

For this review, I examine the results of 21 quantitative studies regarding the effects of school choice on seven civic values that relate to the capacity of individuals to perform as effective citizens in our representative democracy. The values, in order from the most studied to the least studied, are political tolerance, voluntarism, political knowledge, political participation, social capital, civic skills, and patriotism.

The 59 findings from existing studies suggest that the effect of private schooling or school choice on civic values is most often neutral or positive. Among the group of more-rigorous studies, 12 findings indicate statistically significant positive effects of school choice or private schooling on civic values and 10 suggest neutral results. Only one finding from the rigorous evaluations indicates that traditional public schooling arrangements enhance a civic value.

The studies that employ only basic adjustments for likely self-selection paint an even rosier picture of the positive effects of school choice on civic values. Of the 36 findings, 21 indicated a school choice ad-

vantage in promoting preparation for citizenship. Thirteen neutral results appear in this collection of analyses, and two findings show benefits from traditional public schooling. The reader is cautioned not to draw strong conclusions from these studies, however, since they employed only rudimentary methods for addressing the problem of selection bias.

We now consider the specific civic values that appear to be affected by school choice arrangements.

Studies of Political Tolerance

With one exception, the findings regarding the effect of school choice on political tolerance are confined to the neutral-to-positive range. Eleven findings—five of them from the more-rigorous studies—indicate that school choice increases political tolerance. For example, one experimental voucher study in Washington, D.C., found that nearly one-half of the students who switched to a private school said they would permit a member of their disliked group to live in their neighborhood, compared with just over one-quarter of the students in the public school control group. Three studies that used sophisticated non-experimental techniques to control for selection bias also found positive effects of choice arrangements on political tolerance.

Studies of Voluntarism

The ideal citizen not only tolerates dissent but also actively serves the community. With one exception, studies regarding the extent to which private schooling or school choice affects the likelihood that students or parents will volunteer their time in community enterprises range from neutral to positive.

Studies of Political Participation, Social Capital, Civic Skills, and Patriotism

Beyond being tolerant, community minded, and well informed, we also expect well-trained citizens to be politically active possessors of social capital with civic skills who are loyal to their country. Unfortunately, relatively few studies have queried the extent to which school choice arrangements foster such attributes. One rigorous study, by Thomas Dee, concluded that Catholic schooling increases voter turnout as adults. Jay Greene and his colleagues conducted less-sophisticated studies that found that Latinos who received all of their K–12 education in private schools were 16 percent more likely to say they voted in the last presidential election than comparable Latinos who were educated exclusively in public schools. They also reported that Texas adults who were educated at least partly in private schools were 9 percent more likely to have voted recently, all else being equal. An observational study by Christian Smith and David Sikkink found that parents who enroll their children in private religious schools or who home school them are more politically active than are otherwise comparable parents who enroll their children in public schools. Parents of students

in private secular schools do not differ significantly from public school parents in political participation.

Discussion

In summary, the empirical studies to date counter the claims of school choice opponents that private schooling inherently and inevitably undermines the fostering of civic values. The statistical record suggests that private schooling and school choice often enhance the realization of the civic values that are central to a well-functioning democracy. This seems to be the case particularly among ethnic minorities (such as Latinos) in places with great ethnic diversity (such as New York City and Texas), and when Catholic schools are the schools of choice. Choice programs targeted to such constituencies seem to hold the greatest promise of enhancing the civic values of the next generation of American citizens.

(Dr. Wolf is professor of education reform and 21st century chair in school choice at the University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions. Excerpted with permission from Education Next, Summer 2007. The complete article is at www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/7460537.html.)