



Comparing Student Achievement, Public and Private

May 08, 2014

By Dick Clark

The Platte Institute's latest policy study is "[Ending Nebraska's Achievement Gap: A First Look at Student Achievement in Omaha's Public and Catholic Schools](#)," by Dr. Vicki Alger. This study evaluates the performance of these two different Omaha school systems. From elementary school to middle school to high school, Dr. Alger finds there is a significant achievement gap between students enrolled in Omaha Catholic Schools (OCS) and Omaha Public Schools (OPS).

Private school performance often outstrips results from public schools, but this study is significant in showing that the variation in student achievement holds even when comparing students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. While there is a troubling minority achievement gap observed in public schools, minority and low-income OCS students actually outscore not only OPS averages but statewide and nationwide averages as well. These OCS students do not just log stronger performances during their early education; they are also more prepared for college. In ACT college readiness assessments, OCS students exceed national benchmarks in English, math, reading, and science.

This study offers only a first look at K–12 student performance in OPS and OCS, but it suggests that institutional rather than demographic factors are to blame for poor student performance in Omaha's public schools. Although it achieves better educational results on average, OCS spends only about 60 percent as much per student as OPS.^[1] One reason for this is that OCS pays fewer administrators per teacher than OPS, with teachers making up 58 percent of the Catholic school staff compared to only 51 percent in the public school system.^[2]

This important research sets the stage for a larger policy discussion about how to improve and expand the educational choices available to students and their families in Omaha and throughout Nebraska. Of the nearly 5 million private school students nationwide, approximately 1.5 million make it through the private schoolhouse door thanks to the assistance of programs that bolster parental choice and defray the cost of attendance.^[3]

The Empowerment Scholarship Program created by the Arizona legislature in 2011 is a targeted school choice innovation that gives parents more options. It allows parents to keep their children out of public school and instead elect for the state to deposit a percentage of their per pupil

funding amount in an education savings account. The program is currently open to nearly a quarter million students, including those with special needs, students whose schools have performed poorly, children adopted out of the state foster care system, and children of active-duty military personnel. The success of educational savings accounts in Arizona has prompted interest from legislators in other states, including Nebraska's neighbors in Iowa and Missouri.

School choice programs can be designed to specifically aid student populations that are in the greatest need of academic assistance. Of the 17 tax credit scholarship programs in 13 states, all but one are tailored to meet the needs of low-income and special needs students, or students whose local public schools are failing. Voucher scholarships that allow students to attend the school of their family's choice have also been effective in more than a dozen states. These programs have been shown to markedly improve math and reading achievement for students from failing public schools. Facilitating parental choice also means enhancing the involvement of parents, and this in turn results in greater parental satisfaction, particularly for those rearing children with special needs.

While they create student success stories, once these programs reach a critical mass in terms of participation they can also save serious tax dollars, more than making up for lost revenue. Expansion of Florida's tax credit scholarship program—the largest in the nation—is credited with saving \$23 million in public resources, or about \$1.49 for every dollar that the state gave up in revenue collection.^[4] In the meantime, nearly 60,000 students and their parents were afforded educational options that would have otherwise been out of reach.

With Dr. Alger's new research confirming the achievement gap between public and private schools in Omaha, it is also important that educators and administrators continue ongoing reforms, ranging from a rethinking of the teacher hiring process,^[5] to more detailed teacher evaluations, to improving family engagement in the education process. As OPS works to achieve the attendance and graduation goals set out in the school system's recently adopted strategic plan,^[6] policymakers should also finally take a serious look at school choice in Nebraska. The benefits of school choice do not accrue only to those students who move to a different school. Public school performance improves when educational choices abound.^[7] The latest Platte Institute policy study and many others tell the same story: school choice offers hope to the students with the greatest need. It is time for Nebraska to listen.

^[1] Alger, Vicki. "Ending Nebraska's Achievement Gap: A First Look at Student Achievement in Omaha's Public and Catholic Schools." Platte Institute for Economic Research. April 2014. p. 3. [URL: <http://www.platteinstitute.org/library/docLib/Ending-Nebraska-s-Achievement-Gap-042814.pdf>]

^[2] *Ibid.*

^[3] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

^[4] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[5] Duffy, Erin. “No more last-minute hiring of Omaha Public Schools teachers.” *Omaha World-Herald*. April 15, 2014. [URL: <http://www.omaha.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20140414/news/140419141>]

[6] Duffy, Erin. “OPS board passes school district's first strategic plan in 10 years.” *Omaha World-Herald*. April 22, 2014. [URL: <http://www.omaha.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20140422/NEWS/140429702/1707>]

[7] For a survey of recent studies finding that school choice programs improve public schools, see “How does school choice affect public schools?” The Friedman Foundation for Education Choice. 2012. [URL: <http://www.edchoice.org/getattachment/School-Choice/School-Choice-FAQs/How-does-school-choice-affect-public-schools.pdf>]