



# Private Schools Aren't What You Think They Are

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By: Michael Q. McShane

Summer fading into fall and children heading back to school . . . it can mean only one thing: Football is about to come back. In addition to my annual tradition of watching *Rudy* before the first Notre Dame game of the year, I usually find myself trawling through YouTube looking for funny football bloopers and press conference awkwardness.

There are some great NFL press conference moments. Jim Mora's incredulous "Playoffs? Playoffs? I hope we can just win a game." Herman Edwards' punctuated "You play. To win. The game." Mike Ditka's forlorn "If I was fired, I'd quit right now."

But perhaps the most emotional press conference moment came from Arizona Cardinal's coach Dennis Green, who, after losing a game to the Chicago Bears, angrily pounded the press conference podium and shouted "They are who we thought they were, and we let them off the hook!"

I was reminded of this exhortation last week when NCES released the [results of the 2015-16 Private School Universe Survey](#), an exhaustive analysis of the landscape of private schooling across America. I spend a lot of time in Missouri and across the country talking about private school choice programs, and hearing people's opinions about private schools and their potential as options for children. Based on people's perceptions, I'd like to invert Dennis Green's shouts and say that private schools aren't what you think they are.

When they hear the words “private schools,” many people think about toney suburban campuses speckled with lacrosse fields and tennis courts. Others think about single-sex Catholic schools run by the Christian Brothers or Sisters of St. Joseph.

Neither of these images is fully representative of the diverse set of private schools in our nation today. So what do we know about private schooling in America today?

The 34,576 private elementary and secondary schools are, on average, quite small. The average enrollment was only 142 students across all schools, 100 students in elementary schools and 263 students in high school. Forty-six percent of private schools enrolled fewer than 50 students.

Single-sex schools are extremely rare. Only 4 percent of private schools in America were single-sex, evenly split between 2 percent all girls and 2 percent all boys.

Catholic schools only make up 20.3 percent of all private schools, though it should be noted that they enroll 38.8 percent of all students. A full 32.7 percent of private schools are nonreligious.

Perhaps surprisingly (though not as surprising if you read this great [Brookings Institution](#) paper on the geography of school options across the country), 30.2 percent of private schools were located in rural areas or in small towns.

As to racial demographics, private schools do differ from traditional public schools in meaningful ways. While public schools are roughly 50% white, 16% Black, 25% Hispanic, and 9% all other races, private schools are 69% white, 9% Black, 10% Hispanic, and 12% all other races.

One last data point worth mentioning; private school enrollment is on a serious decline. In just 15 years, it has dropped from 6.3 million children (in 2001–12) to just 4.9 million (in 2015–16).

I’d offer three short reflections.

**1.It’s time we update our understanding of what private schools looks like.** There is an incredible amount of variation within private schools. On average, they are small, more likely to be religious, and are probably located within a city or suburb. But that’s about all we can say. If you have a mental picture of what a private school looks like and assume they all look like that, you’re probably guessing wrong.

**2.School choice risks being too little, too late.** As I have argued for years, private schools, and particularly the urban Catholic schools that have a proud tradition of serving low-income and minority students, are closing by the hundreds. School choice is a way to stanch the bleeding—but without a greater sense of urgency, there will be no schools left for children to choose. We cannot be surprised to see private schools serving fewer and

fewer minority children when all of the schools that have served them in the past are closing.

**3.Private schools should do a better job of reaching out to minority communities.** If private schools want to grow, reaching out to growing populations is the way to make it happen. I'm heartened by efforts like Notre Dame's [Task Force on the Participation of Latino Children and Families in Catholic Schools](#) , but we need many more organizations working to connect minority children to educational opportunities in private schools. School choice is also an indispensable part of this effort, as it is perhaps the only tool that can help bridge the gap between what people can afford and where they can go to school.

Private schools are not a monolith. They are a part of the diverse landscape of education in America, and their decline should trouble all of us.

## About the Author



*Michael McShane  
Senior Fellow of Education Policy*

*Mike McShane is Senior Fellow of Education Policy for the Show-Me Institute. He is a former high school teacher and earned his PhD in Education Policy at the University of Arkansas. Before coming to the Show-Me Institute, Mike worked at the American Enterprise Institute as a research fellow.*

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[3] <https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-could-benefit-from-school-choice-mapping-access-to-public-and-private-schools/>

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5297 Washington Place      3645 Troost Avenue  
Saint Louis, MO 63108      Kansas City, MO 64109  
Phone: (314) 454-0647      Phone: (816) 287-0370  
Fax: (314) 454-0667

Email: [info@showmeinstitute.org](mailto:info@showmeinstitute.org)

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