



## Voices: Is choice killing off private schools?

Written by Jennifer Holladay on Sep 12th, 2012. | Copyright ©  
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*DPS mom and fan of school choice Jennifer Holladay isn't crying over a new study showing private schools are threatened by growing public school enrollment.*

A recent report from the Cato Institute raises an alarm about the impact of charter schools on private school enrollment, which is declining nationally as charters are attracting more families to public schools.

Families attended a Denver Public Schools “choice expo” last year. Photo courtesy DPS.

As the Cato Institute summarizes its argument: “Charter schools take a significant portion of their students from private schools, causing a drop in private enrollment, driving some schools entirely out of business ... potentially diminishing competition and diversity in our education system overall.”

To my ear, this sounds more like whining than it does an alarm.

After all, private schools take all of their students from public schools, causing a drop in public enrollment. Heaven forbid that public schools, of any ilk, become so competitive that private schools must compete actively to attract families.

## DPS becoming Cato's worst nightmare

My guess is that Denver Public Schools are the Cato Institute's worst nightmare. As a parent in the district, I can choose my daughter into our neighborhood school or participate in the district-wide lottery to choose her into any district school, with only a few exceptions, such as the Denver School of the Arts. As a DPS parent of an early grades child, I literally have dozens of public options from which to choose. Indeed, in the pilot year for the common enrollment system in DPS, 83 percent of families received seats in one of their top three schools.

None of this negates the existence of the many, many private schools across our city.

Now that public schools are “winning” the enrollment competition, the Cato Institute pushes us to advance “private choice reform,” by which it means taxpayer subsidies for private school tuition.

It builds this case by asserting that all of this new public school enrollment is raising taxpayer costs significantly – by \$1.8 billion, or an estimated \$13,000 per student nationally, based on the institute’s calculation of per pupil investment. (In DPS, we’ll spend just \$6,868.29 per student this year, which is shameful, but the subject for another essay). Any new or existing tax dollar revenue, the institute argues, would be better directed to private schools, not public ones, in order to “increase competition.”

The research report goes to great lengths to marginalize charter schools as competitive performers in terms of student achievement: “[S]tudies generally found that charter students were keeping pace with their peers in traditional public schools, but charter schools were generally not having a direct effect of improving student achievement.” (This is untrue in Denver, where charter schools are significantly impacting the district’s overall growth and achievement scores).

## **Why assume private schools are better?**

More importantly, the institute’s researchers embrace the implicit assumption that private schools are somehow inherently better than public schools and willfully ignore the reality that it is impossible to assess a private school’s performance against a public school’s performance in an apples-to-apples, data-driven way.

At this point in the school reform era, incredibly robust public accountability systems surround public schools. It’s easy for a parent or guardian to identify a public school that is a super performer, or an under-performer, or somewhere in between. In Denver, parents and guardians can look at state standardized test results, the district’s performance framework score cards and [ColoradoSchoolGrades.com](http://ColoradoSchoolGrades.com) for each and every school — just as a way to get started. We also have access to individual school websites and to third party, social media websites that can tell us a little more about non-academic “culture.”

And for private schools? Parents and guardians can look at their websites, and maybe take a spin around [privateschoolreview.com](http://privateschoolreview.com). Common accountability measures – the kind that can be used to compare schools, even between private schools, much less between private and public schools – are absent. Are there great private schools? Sure. There are great public schools, too, and I can back that assertion up with meaningful data.

That private schools may be getting a little comeuppance in the enrollment competition makes me weep not. No, it makes me smile just a tad: Public schools are bouncing back.