

StarTribune

Ditching private schools

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A study released last week by the libertarian Cato Institute showed that students are transferring in unexpectedly large numbers from private schools to charter schools, but it framed the shift as a largely negative development.

It's true, as the study reported, that such transfers cost states and taxpayers more; unlike private schools, charter schools get most of their funding from state tax dollars. Still, we see a lot to celebrate.

For years, urban public school systems such as the Los Angeles Unified School District have tried, with limited success, to lure private school families as a way of bringing in more enrollment and resources. The state funds public schools largely on the basis of how many students attend, so higher enrollment means more money for school districts.

And private school parents tend to have more education and more money that they might use to help out at their schools, helping all students there. They might also become involved in lobbying for more funding for education, which would be good for public schools and charters alike.

The move to charter schools shows that private school parents can be persuaded to enter - or return to - the public system if the programs are attractive, the campuses safe and the staffs responsive. That's something public schools should take note of, and imitate.

Charter schools were developed in the early 1990s to give families a choice. Largely, that choice was intended to help impoverished families whose neighborhood schools were failure factories and who could not afford to move to different neighborhoods or send their children to private schools.

But not all private school families are wealthy, so charters appeal to them as well. Some families go into debt to send their children to private schools because local public schools are so bad that they see themselves as having no other option. And transfers have been particularly high from Catholic schools, the report noted, including low-priced parochial schools, many of whose students come from families without much money.

There's long been an assumption that white parents in urban areas have turned to private schools in part to separate their children from the growing black and

Latino populations in the public school system. But when white students transfer from private schools to charters, the study notes, they're moving from more segregated schools to more ethnically diverse ones. That too is a good thing.