



# CATO Institute study demonstrates negative impact of charters on private schools

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The **CATO Institute** yesterday released a study documenting what many of us already knew, namely that **charters are having a disastrous effect on private schools**. The report, completed by **Rand Corporation** researcher Richard Button, finds that overall charters attract between 7 and 11 percent of private school students. However, in the inner city such as Washington, D.C. the numbers are much higher. In extremely urban settings charters pull 32 percent of their elementary school students from private schools. That number goes to 23 percent for middle school and 15 percent for high school.

Of course, the loss of tuition payments are forcing many private schools to close. We have seen this locally with the conversion several years ago of a group of catholic schools to charters. But the CATO study also mentions other unintended consequences of the growth of the charter movement.

Fewer private schools reduce the diversity of educational choices. For example, charters cannot teach religion because of the U.S. Constitution's separation of church and state. And only charters that are approved by an authorizing body, in our case the PCSB, are permitted to operate, which inherently reduces the variety of schools we would find in a true educational free market.

Also important is the increase in public funding tied to demographic changes in where kids are taught. Mr. Button estimates that the siphoning of private school students by charters has increased public spending on education in this country by \$1.8 billion. He points out that this tab is usually picked up by state governments which can rarely afford any increase in costs. We have also seen this in the nation's capital. In the past I've been critical of **BASIS**, a new charter whose founders explained to me that the school's focus is not teaching students on the lower end of the academic scale. It would be interesting to see how many of their pupils previously attended private school. If the charter had a student body of which half had been

enrolled in private schools and has 400 students then the additional cost to D.C. is about \$2.4 million.

This line of reasoning is especially significant in light of the fact that BASIS just announced that the organization is moving forward on opening a line of private schools. **Commenting on this decision** in a press release co-founder Michael Block stated, “Our schools compete with the best schools in the world, yet there are only a few cities where we can operate using public funds.”

**Charter schools** have played a crucial role in Washington, D.C.’s educational landscape. They have provided quality instruction when little could be found and when numerous **DCPS** facilities were not a safe place to be. The competition for students they have driven has forced the traditional public schools to improve. But as the movement has grown I think we have to be extremely careful about making sure that, just like our voucher system, we are supporting public educational institutions that are targeting those that do not have other means for acquiring a quality education. This is the civil rights struggle to which many of us in the educational reform movement are drawn.